

*A Playful Splash into
the Feminist Movement*

Olivia W 



Just know:

I am finding it difficult to articulate what I wish to say because I fear the risk of offending. Feminism is the subject: the advocacy for equality between the sexes. I don't think the act of voicing hope for equality should offend someone, but yet the feminist movement is one of controversy. If feminism were widely thought of in the form that I just described it, I don't think anyone would be offended, but it seems that feminism has taken on the burden of negative associations gradually over recent years. What I have noticed in my research is that feminism is defined and interpreted differently by each individual. I personally feel inclined to study the topic, because I am a woman to whom feminism directly applies, but also because it is a topic that I feel I have not yet fully understood. Every perspective has its own opinion, but I want to draw conclusions that are grounded in fact. I chose to define feminism as I did (the advocacy for equality between the sexes) because I think this definition does it justice: it is simple. I wish to articulate in this research paper that feminism at its core really is simple. I would argue that this is where the controversy comes in: everyone has a unique opinion and everyone believes that his/her opinion is correct. Personally, I feel internal controversy within this idea. I really do respect the individual opinions and therefore I feel hypocritical for thinking that another's viewpoint is invalid. However, I also feel conflicted with the idea that the entire structure of the society that I dwell in is based on an opinion. I cannot feel at peace with the knowledge that another has the lingering opinion that one gender should have overpowering control over the other. Who decided this to be the way society is structured, and what concrete reasons do they have to support it?

If feminism is defined as the advocacy of equality between the sexes, then I think it is logical to say that a person who believes in this can be titled a "feminist." And if that is what it means to be a feminist, then I do not see any reason for there to be a presence of shame. What I have noticed, for whatever reason, is that many young women make the conscious effort to be considered "not a feminist," indicating that there is associated shame in being one. But then by removing the title of a feminist they are taking away their own liberties and actively undercutting the women's rights movement. I think feminism is misinterpreted. The feminist movement is hushed in the present age of 2014. Women are less outspoken about it than they were in the twentieth century. Women have had the right to vote for almost a century and more women hold seats in congress than ever before, but these few successes do not mean that global success has been reached.

A misconception is that feminism is obsolete, which I suppose is why there is such a negative stigma around modern feminists—the stigma that labels feminists as bitter men-hating butches. The argument is made that women's freedom has been reached and asking for more rights is simply selfish, but I make the argument that the feminist movement is not over. I think it will not be over until full liberties are achieved globally, not only on the surface. We have a long way forward.

Oppression had to first exist in order for feminism to come about; the concept of freedom only exists with the idea of inequality. Some reason that men naturally dominate women; they reason that according to the laws of human nature, men are meant to rule over and be aggressive towards females in terms of rape and sexual abuse. The problem with this argument is that its accuracy in truth relies fully on assumptions about human nature. Like I mentioned, it is all a matter of opinion¹. No one can know the origin of human nature for certain. I believe that the

¹ Mill, John Stuart. *On the Subjection of Women*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1971. Print.

answer to some questions really is “just because,” but when we are dealing with the freedom of roughly half a population and the basis of societal structure then I feel that there needs to be more explanation to be at all justified. There was no deliberation to decide that it would be beneficial for everyone to have society be structured this way. Modern conservatives believe that feminism is outdated; but I believe that inequality is outdated. People accept the principles that were fed to them from birth. The existence of oppression is only the result of failure to question the popular viewpoint. The viewpoint is only popular because no one is questioning it. The people on the spectrum of oppression who benefit from it have no reason to change things, and the people who are oppressed have no voice to change things. I might be making assumptions, but I think that in a lot of instances, those that are oppressed think they do not deserve equality because of the society’s teachings that they have always been surrounded by.

To believe that male hierarchy is part of nature requires studies of primitive societies. To say that humanity has always been this way requires one to know how other societies were structured. Anthropologists claim that males contribute the more important duties to a society, also that menstruating women are isolated by their society. However, there is fault in this because found studies are subjected to the researcher, which leaves a wide spectrum of bias; in other words, the researcher is one who benefits from male hierarchy and has the power to support it historically. In instances like this, the researcher is usually a male directing his work towards other males. They are more likely to reveal evidence to support the dominance of men, rather than evidence to liberate women. Levi Strauss claims that men have shown acts of aggression towards women since the beginning. These claims do not fully capture the reality of primitive societies. In Native American cultures, women were liberated and there was no need for social hierarchy, as is true in hunter-gathering societies. To understand the research, we must understand the researcher; for instance, the book that I am getting this information from takes on feminism from a female socialist standpoint, which is more likely to be biased toward the perspective of an educated white, male capitalist. Social inequality originated with serfdom, which instated a serf entitled to the power of the master. Since then, inequality has changed forms and now we know it in the form of capitalism.²

Most arguments against feminism are non-materialist assumptions that originate from the Church. Materialism is a philosophy of Marxism, which states that reality is based on physical matter, meaning that much of the Church’s philosophy is irrelevant because it originates from abstract material. Feminism is such a sensitive topic because it closely touches upon subjects that are controversial and heavily debated in religion, which then carries on to circulate in politics. On the subject of abortion, pro-life advocates believe pregnancy is in God’s right, which they are completely entitled to believe. However, making abortion illegal strips women who don’t share those religious beliefs from having control over their own bodies. I wish not to linger on personal political views, but I think the insensitivity that comes along with men in charge restricting women’s power over their sexuality is deeply obsolete with having religion as the only defense. Though abortion affects many people, it is ultimately the individual who carries the child that is left with the consequences of unwanted childbirth. It is she who has to care for and fund the child, and in instances where the woman is unable to do so, abortion should be an option. Though the life of a child should not depend on money, exactly that is what leads some women to abortion. The cost of a child is hugely expensive, especially for a woman who has

² Smith, Sharon. *Women and Socialism: Essays on Women's Liberation*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2005. Print.

significantly lower wages than a man. I know this is only a matter of my opinion, but I do not think the people holding the power to make abortion legal or illegal should be held responsible with such a consequential decision. There are a lot of factors, besides moral that influence someone in power to make such a decision, i.e. money: pro-lifers are not the majority, however they are well funded. Though officials are elected into their position, they still hold power over the people, which they wish to preserve. What we know is based on what we don't know. Anti abortion was mostly popular with conservatives, but after John Kerry's loss to the Republican party in the presidential campaign, Democrats began to side more with anti-abortion for popularity.² According to John Stuart, current society holds too much faith in custom. People are born into the principles of the church that they were born into, blindly loyal to the state of current affairs without knowing why. In order to achieve equality between genders, there is a requirement for those who oppose the movement to loosen their grip on the principles they were born and bred. The cycle will only continue until the individual begins to question.¹

I feel the need to acknowledge that I realize that we have made a lot of progress towards equality. What I have unsettled feelings about is that it is considered a historical movement, as in "done," over. Yet, there is still much more work that is to be done. Outwardly explicit freedoms have been achieved such as women earning the voting right, and women having a wide presence in the work force; however oppression is still there but it has taken a silent form. Freedom has been achieved in written laws, but there is still the mental oppression that coincides with the sexual objectification of women's bodies. In the coming age of Maybelline and Playboy, women are displayed as objects of beauty, whatever that means in the media's narrow sense of the word. In the 1970s feminism was popular, because there were laws still to be changed. As a result of loud voices, abortion became legal. But now women face new boundaries, not only by being women, but how well they fit the image of femininity that comes from women's portrayal in media.

A girl can have everything, but if she doesn't *feel* free, then what's the point? With the booming cosmetic industry, women are subconsciously taught insecurity. The fad of diets and cosmetic surgery only suggests that women in their natural state are not beautiful. Women are no longer excluded from the work force, but with that freedom only yields another oppression. The beauty industry sells products that are meant to make women feel beautiful and secure. But like any other industry, they wish to reach economic success more than anything else. If you buy product X, you'll look hot; but what this implies is that if you don't buy product X, you won't look hot. The beauty industry is supposed to benefit women, however it really just makes women feel less secure. The consumers of beauty are at loss to the people who market it. The beauty industry is one of the most economically successful; coincidentally, men are the ones who rule the economy. In a twisted sense, men rule the beauty industry that markets women's bodies as a commodity, which leads to women's oppression. Women want to be beautiful because men want beautiful women and women want to be wanted. Being beautiful is empowering, but the expectations of being beautiful are purposely unreachable as society creates them. This relates back to how I mentioned that females are gradually disassociating themselves from being feminists. There is a negative stigma around feminists, a stigma that condemns "feminists" as not feminine or liked by men. In this way, women are the ones actually stalling their own liberation by condemning themselves to the obsession over beauty, which is ultimately created men who

control the industry.³ I mean not to dwell on the subject of pressure to be beautiful because I feel like it is already exhausted and not in the best approach. I do not mean in what I am saying that women should not wear makeup, I am saying that women should have the power to do either without obligation.

While I do think that the socialist standpoint explains the root of women's issues from a well-reasoned perspective, I feel that it prohibits space for opposition. In order for the source of the issues to evaporate, those individuals would need to change their opinions completely, which is out of our control. What we can control is ourselves. Progress towards an equal future should focus on changing oneself, not the "other." I do believe that women's issues really are issues, but I also believe that the responsibility should not be blamed on the mysterious figures in charge. Pointing fingers is ineffective and a waste of time. Freedom is a mental state; therefore it must come from the mentality of the individual. I think the future of women's liberation comes from women liberating themselves, not waiting for someone else to give it to them. Women as a whole have not yet achieved universal justice, but there is a lot of progress to be celebrated. We should strive to focus on positivity because lingering on negativity only adds to the problem. I felt uneasy at the close of my research, because I felt that I was made aware of issues imbedded in the world around me, involving me (as a dweller of the planet, everyone is involved) without any closure on how it was or is to be resolved. This I believe the reason for feminism having a bad rap—because of the anger and complaint that is associated with it. I declare that it is time to stop complaining and time to start celebrating the beauty of womanhood. Whether the beauty that womanhood entails is marketed, packaged, or skewed, it is still beautiful. The world is beautiful, though it may be poorly organized. I love you, but I can't give you freedom because you have to give it to yourself.

³ Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*. New York: W. Morrow, 1991. Print.