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The Pros and Cons of Abandoning the Word 'Feminist'

Abigail Rine

When I was a senior in college and a recent convert to feminism, I bought one of those "This is What a FEMINIST Looks Like!" t-shirts, and it quickly became my favorite item of clothing. The lettering was pink—ironically pink, of course—and I liked to push that irony further by pairing the shirt with a skirt, and maybe even some knee-high boots with flowers embroidered around the top.

When I got married a year after graduation, I wore the shirt proudly on the first day of my honeymoon, while holding the hand of my new husband, our flea-market wedding bands gleaming. I enjoyed the confused looks from people who would stare at my shirt and then at me; I could almost see their brains whirring, trying to process the mismatch between the person in front of them and the shrill, angry, neo-Amazon that a feminist is supposed to be. I loved challenging that misconception, with almost evangelistic zeal.

Seven years later, I still have the t-shirt, but it now lives in a box of old clothes in the attic. I can't bring myself to give it away, but I also can't remember the last time I wore it. We are at an impasse, the shirt and I, and this stalemate mirrors another growing ambivalence of mine, one I have only recently admitted harboring: an ambivalence about the word "feminism" itself.

This is a surprising admission for someone like me. Feminism wasn't just a passing college fad. I have two advanced degrees in feminist studies, not to mention a book on feminist literary criticism coming out later this year. I am now a college professor and regularly teach courses in our women's studies program. And I still feel that new-convert fervor when it comes to naming and opposing forces of sexism in our society.

And yet, in my professional and personal life, I increasingly find myself talking about feminist ideas without actually using the word "feminism." Why? It is exhausting to preface every conversation about combating misogyny with winsome, disarming anecdotes about how I actually do like men—enough to even marry one!—and how I actually haven't burned any bras (and probably never will, because they are so expensive). I'm tired of doing this myth-debunking dance, and, weirdly enough, the conversation often goes more smoothly if I just avoid the "F-Word" entirely.

This trend makes sense in the context of a recent study conducted by HuffPost/YouGov, which concluded that only 20 percent of Americans identify as feminists, even though a whopping 82 percent believe that "men and women should be social, political, and economic equals." Unsurprisingly, some of my fellow self-identified feminists, like Feministing's Samhita Mukhopadhyay, have responded to this survey by lamenting feminism's serious brand problem and analyzing why we're such a misunderstood bunch. Not long ago, that would have been my response, too.

But now I find myself wondering: Why are we so hell-bent on salvaging the label? A generation ago, no survey would have offered such a resounding affirmation of equality, so why don't we read studies like this and feel heartened that some of the core values of feminism have taken root in the American mind, despite our persistent brand problem? Could it be time, for the sake of progress in the war on sexism, to ditch the feminist label?

I recently gave a guest lecture in a colleague's classroom on feminist theology. As usual, I had to spend half the class period in myth-busting mode, trying to redeem the word "feminist" enough for the students to listen. This meant I covered only a fraction of what I'd prepared. Still, I felt good about the talk, mainly because none of the students responded with overtly hostile questions. As I was leaving, a student came up to thank me and said, offhandedly, "It's too bad we have to waste so much time clarifying misconceptions about feminism. I wish we could have spent the whole hour talking more about the ideas."

As soon as she spoke, I realized how much I agreed. I had viewed the class session as a success because there was a marked absence of hostility. Is this what it means to have a successful talk about feminism now, disarming the audience while barely touching on substantive issues? This student's passing comment sparked a realization that has stuck with me: When I speak, write, and talk about feminism to a non-feminist audience, I often feel more like a beleaguered PR rep than someone creating productive discussion about how to cultivate social equality between men and women.

In my experience, using the feminist label is an asset only when preaching to the feminist choir. My ambivalence disappears in those contexts; I feel as though we are all speaking the same language, so we can relax and high-five each other in our feminist t-shirts, because, yes, we get it. But when I step beyond that insular crowd, the term has a consistently alienating effect. In conversations with non-feminists—which are arguably the most important—using the word "feminism" rarely opens doors to deeper dialogue. Instead, it often acts as a barrier to the very ideas that word represents. This is a serious problem, one that I wish more feminists were talking candidly about.

If I'm honest with myself, I realize the feminist conversation does not feel productive anymore. The revolution seems to have stalled out. Despite the massive gains we've made, thanks to our feminist foremothers, we've barely dented the veneer of sexism on our culture. And it's the most insidious inequality that remains, the misogyny that is coded into our words and behavior, that fuels rape culture, and the sex trafficking pandemic, and the mainstream "pornification" of sexuality. Some forms of sexism have actually worsened since the second wave. There is more pressure than ever on women to starve and despise their bodies in mimicry of a false, fantasized ideal. There is much work to be done, which is why I am concerned that feminists are too preoccupied with making our brand more palatable. Perhaps that energy could be better spent forging partnerships with potential allies in the struggle toward equality, whether they feel an affinity with the label or not.

And yet, when I get to the point of ditching the word "feminism" entirely, something holds me back. I think of myself as that college student again, just waking up to the pervasiveness of sexism. My world was cracking open and in that tumult, feminism, as both word and ideal, became a life raft for me. I clung to it.

Every semester, young women come into my office in tears. Much as I did, they are first becoming conscious of how terribly the world views and treats women. In this vital, fragile stage

of life when they are just beginning to craft a self and envision a future, these students are simultaneously bombarded with damaging cultural myths about gender. They feel silenced, unheard, diminished.

In moments like these, feminism feels like a gift than I can offer, a word that represents the antidote to what wounds them. A word that can open new ways of thinking and living, not to mention a vault of incredible writers, philosophers, activists, and ideas. I can still remember those initial flashes of discovery, and the way the label used to feel before I became exhausted trying to defend it, how it was strong and new and whispered a promise of change. Yet, as life-giving as it has been for me, the word "feminism" comes with a lot of baggage, and I know that if these young women and men choose to embrace the label, they will also inherit its stigma and the burden of trying to maneuver around it to improve our world.

I wish I had more to give them, more than a galvanizing but hopelessly divisive word for them to cling to, but, for the moment, it's the only word I have. So until I have something better for them—and I want something better—I will hold onto my t-shirt and keep using the label.

Sometimes.