

What Feminism Means to Me

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It would be ignorant for any woman to undermine the work countless women, from 100 years ago to today, have put into creating the reality we live in today. American women can wear pants, own a house and their own money, vote and have power in our government, but the fight is far from over. From being told my shoulders are distracting in class when I was ten years old to having to be on high alert anytime I walk alone in my twenties, it became very clear that the patriarchal system is unbreakable. Women have been and have continued to not just fight for equal rights between men and women, but also for equal treatment. While so much progress has been made, the feminist movement is still here and more important than ever, and we cannot let America take back what so many women fought their entire lives for. There will never be a concrete definition of feminism, as every individual holds their own beliefs, and those beliefs are ever evolving.

The dictionary currently defines feminism as “the belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests,” while bell hooks says that feminism is a “movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.” Both have similarities and both have been critiqued countless times. Drawing from my 21 years of life, feminism is a concept and movement that fights for the betterment of all sexes through attempting to reform a society rooted in patriarchy to reach a point where everyone feels not just safe but confident to be themselves without bias or negative repercussions. Unfortunately, the word feminism itself carries different connotations for everyone, and I believe it is time to rename the movement.

First-wave feminism fought for equal rights, the second wave challenged gender norms, and the third wave allowed women to freely express themselves. Some still question if we are in the third wave or have transitioned to a fourth. With the progress made through the first three, feminism now lives hand in hand with humanism and the fight for true equal treatment for all humans no matter the sex, gender expression, race, religion, etc., that someone identifies with. It's devastating to watch people think we have made it but that is simply not the case. The fight for equal treatment in all aspects of life for everyone is still underway.

Contrary to popular belief, feminism is not anti-man. Sexism is not solely a male trait but can be seen in women toward other women and even directed at men. Bell hooks points out that although patriarchy benefits men, those benefits do not come without consequence. The domination and exploitation required to maintain a patriarchal society is often difficult for most men. They are bothered by the oppression but afraid of what change will bring. They remain passive and while maybe not participating in bad behavior, they are certainly not fighting against it. Believing in feminism is for everybody and it gives men the chance to also escape the hold of patriarchy.

The differences in how society defines feminism can also be seen in the appearance of Hugh Hefner and feminist Susan Brownmiller on [*The Dick Cavett Show*](#). Hefner made it clear that he believed feminism at its core to be anti-man. He argued that the opportunities presented by

Playboy gave women financial freedom and actual power over men. Hefner failed to see the irony that he was perpetuating the female stereotype that her worth is tied to her sexuality and appearance alone. Brownmiller argued that feminism is not about male bashing but rather about challenging the status quo anchored in sexism. When women ask for equality, it is interpreted as accusatory and hating men. What it really is, is women demanding the end to a systematically sexist society. This argument is still ongoing as even today the main critique of feminism is that it is about only women and hating men and is used in attempts to maintain male dominance.

In his essay *[Patriarchy, the System](#)*, Allan Johnson details the importance that feminism and feminists need to focus on systems and society and not just individuals. Johnson defines patriarchy as a society where men hold all the power, and this belief is widely reinforced. He says the “patriarchy is not simply another way of saying that all men are oppressive or that all women are oppressed. It is a kind of society organized around certain kinds of social relationships and ideas. It is a system, and men and women participate in it.” To put an end to sexism, it is extremely important that the focus be on the society rather than person to person. Like bell hooks, Johnson also believes that men suffer in a patriarchal society. They keep their emotions hidden, tire themselves out by constantly working for dominance and through this become less empathetic and angrier. Over time this pursuit of masculinity causes mental health issues and begins to negatively affect relationships and self-worth. This further supports the idea that feminism is not anti-man but pro-human.

I am a feminist. I am not afraid to say that. I am also a humanist and a supporter of equality, justice, rights, and the freedom to be yourself. As a woman that has been shaped by social media and its influences and having grown up in the digital age, I have been exposed to so many messages both positive and negative on feminism, its meaning and what it means to be a woman. But who decided and continues to decide what that is? Isn't being a woman whatever the individual makes it out to be? In a society that cannot be sustained without women, it is astonishing to me that patriarchy even exists. That we have continued to perpetuate the belief in male dominance and viewed women as anything other than what they are and should be – a human part of the world that should co-exist among other humans to sustain a society that is considerate of the whole to better serve the individual. Feminism is more than just a movement to end sexism, and it is most definitely not anti-man. It is an opportunity to collectively come together to end patriarchal societies that do more harm than good and to create a path to freedom and equality not just for women but for everyone.

Abigail Pilgrim is a Senior acting major here at UNC and enjoys writing in her free time! She believes it's time for feminism and humanism to walk hand in hand to hopefully one day have a more loving and accepting world. This essay was written for GS 101 class!