



OCTOBER CHALLENGE: THE F WORD

You can't talk about making things better here on the planet without discussing women's rights. Yep, that's right - feminism, the new F word. While it's annoying that feminism has become such a dirty word, that very fact proves how much we still need it.

For this challenge, the best place to start is to examine your own reactions to the word 'feminist'. Would you deny being a feminist? Why? Do you know what feminism is? If you're flailing a bit, here's the definition:

Feminism: the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men.

If you are reluctant to call yourself a feminist (one who supports feminism), what is it about that belief that you don't agree with? In order to be considered a feminist, you only need to be on board with one idea: All humans, male, female or anywhere on the gender spectrum, should have equal political, economic and social rights.

Denying women the same rights, power, and opportunities as men doesn't just strip women of the freedom to achieve their full potential - it sets us all back. Think of what could be achieved if all women had access to the same opportunities as men do. As Malala Yousafzai, activist and 2014 Nobel prize winner, said,

"We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back."



Part 1: Why We ALL Need Feminism

One of my favourite essays about feminism is ‘We Should All Be Feminists’ by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It’s a tiny book and packs a proper punch. She has a [TED talk](#) by the same name as well, if you prefer to watch rather than read. Here is an excerpt of the transcript of that talk that gets right to why the word ‘feminist’ is important:

“Why the word feminist? Why not just say you are a believer in human rights, or something like that?” Because that would be dishonest. Feminism is, of course, part of human rights in general – but to choose to use the vague expression ‘human rights’ is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender.

It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women. That the problem was not about being human, but specifically about being a female human. For centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group. It is only fair that the solution to the problem should acknowledge that.”

There are some people who agree with the aim of feminism, but think that we don’t need it anymore, that we’ve achieved equality. There was even a social media campaign centred around the hashtag, “I don’t need feminism because...”.

One of the sad things about the women participating in this campaign is that they are mostly either feminists who don’t understand what the term means, or women who can’t see how they’ve benefited enormously from the work of feminists.



Here are just a few reasons as to why we still need feminism:

- *Because women serve as Heads of State or Government in only 22 countries, and 119 countries have never had a woman leader. At the current rate, gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years.*
- *Only 21 percent of government ministers were women, with only 14 countries having achieved 50 per cent or more women in cabinets. With an annual increase of just 0.52 percentage points, gender parity in ministerial positions will not be achieved before 2077.*
- *Because we teach women how to prevent rape, instead of teaching people to not view women as objects.*
- *Because women are told that walking alone at night makes them “an easy target.”*
- *Because our bodies are still being legislated.*
- *Because McDonald’s still asks us if we want a girl or boy toy.*
- *Because the kids’ departments of too many clothing stores feature girls’ clothes with ‘Princess’ written on them and boys’ clothes with ‘NASA’ written on them. Which do you think is a more inspirational career aspiration?*
- *Because we use terms like “bitch” and “pussy” to imply weakness but “grow some balls” to mean strength. Um... we push entire humans out of our vaginas. Balls can’t withstand the slightest bump.*
- *Because FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), the act of cutting off and restitching female genitals to prevent pleasurable sex — and can happen to girls as young as 5 months old — is still practiced in 29 countries.*



- *Because more than 120 countries don't have laws against marital rape, and still allow child brides — some as young as 6 years old.*
- *Because infanticides, the act of killing children within a year of birth, can be attributed to millions of fewer females than males in Middle Eastern countries, and because in Afghanistan women going to college can be considered justifiable grounds for disfiguring.*
- *Because men are criticised for showing emotion and expressing their feelings.*
- *Because the sexualization, objectification and constant critiques of women's bodies are a normal recurrence in society. A woman's worth is still based on what she looks like.*
- *Because women are made to feel guilty for having a family and a career. Men are rarely asked, "How do you balance your work and family life?"*
- *Because it's still considered "weird" for a man to be a stay-at-home dad even if he's an excellent parent.*
- *Because so many girls across the globe are denied an education because of their gender.*
- *Because sexism in the workplace is a very real thing. There are more men named James running Fortune 500 companies than there are women¹.*
- *Because, worldwide, women only account for 3-4% of company CEOs.*
- *Because most movies still don't pass the Bechdel test. Did the last movie you watch feature at least two named women talking about something other than a man?*
- *Because men are still generally supposed to be the breadwinner in the family.*
- *Because most women feel unsafe alone at night.*
- *Because most dress codes primarily target the appearance of women.*

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/24/upshot/women-and-men-named-john.html>



- *Because "taking care of the home" is still seen primarily as a female responsibility.*
- *Because women's sports teams don't get nearly as much coverage or funding.*
- *Because career experts advise women not to report sexual harassment - in many fields, it is the death of your career.*
- *Because, in the USA, Viagra has been covered by health insurance for a while, but some companies still won't cover the cost of birth control.*
- *Because, in many countries, women, but not men, are expected to change their last name upon getting married.*
- *Because 1 in 4 women in the U.S. report experiencing domestic violence yet, in domestic abuse situations, we ask why she stayed so long but not why he abused her.*
- *Because women who don't want kids are seen as strange.*
- *Because women are expected to wear makeup, but it's odd if men do.*
- *Because girls are told that when a boy picks on you it means he likes you.*
- *Because women who are promiscuous are called sluts, but men are deemed legends*
- *Because jobs are still categorized as "women's work" or "men's work."*
- *Because women with kids are less likely to be hired than men with kids.*
- *Because we still say a woman "must be on her period" if she expresses passionate emotions.*
- *Because women's prefixes (like Miss, Ms. and Mrs.) define women by their marital status, yet men only use Mr.*
- *Because until 1920, women in the US did not have the right to vote.*
- *Because until about 100 years ago, women were still considered property in the US.*
- *Because about 3 million women are currently enslaved in the sex trade.*



- *Because, yes, there is also sexual assault against boys and men, but 70% of sexual assault against boys and men is perpetrated by... boys and men.*
- *Because, in the USA, only 20% of Congress is women. 80% of the people making the laws that rule the country are men.*
- *Because, in 2019, the ratio of women's to men's median weekly full-time earnings was 81.5 percent, leaving a wage gap of 18.5 percent².*
- *Because, in 2019, the World Economic Forum predicted that at current rates of progress, it would take 257 years to close the economic gender gap.*
- *Because over 400 studies have shown that Covid-19's economic impact was worse on women³ than men.*
- *Because research shows that investment in female education can yield a "growth premium" in GDP trends⁴. Where women's participation in the labor force grew fastest, the economy experienced the largest reduction in poverty rates.*

Because, perhaps most importantly, women don't need to be dying senselessly at the rate that they are... As [Allison Berkowitz writes in the Huffpost](#),

"As of 2013, 289,000 women a year were dying from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth. Is some man directly responsible for the death of each of these women? Of course not. But, research is very clear. As the World Health Organization so eloquently put it, "unavailable, inaccessible, unaffordable, or poor quality care is fundamentally responsible." They also go on to state that the majority of these deaths and injuries are preventable. I just can't help but think that if this many men were being

² <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020-Weekly-Wage-Gap-2020-FINAL.pdf>

³ <https://www.devex.com/news/hundreds-of-studies-confirm-women-hit-hardest-by-covid-19-99598>

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/24/opinion/verveer-abeywardena-women/>



affected annually via something borne of their genitalia, that there would collectively be a far stronger sense of urgency to figure this out.”

Why do we still need feminism? For the same reason screenwriter John Whedon gave when asked why he writes such strong female characters:

“Because you’re still asking me that question.”

Part 2: Myths About Feminism

There are so many ridiculous myths about feminists - that they’re hairy, bra-burning, man-hating, joyless, sexless creatures is just the tip of the iceberg.

Although, thankfully, more people are taking the time to understand the true definition of feminism and openly identifying with it, there has always been a negative stigma attached to feminism.

Part of this problem is the way our media sensationalizes things, trying to pass the most radical and extreme versions as the standard. This has happened since the beginning - you need only take a look at the cartoons mocking the suffragettes to see that this is not a new trick.

It’s these false assumptions that cause anti-feminist campaigns, such as the recent “Women Against Feminism,” which consists of people posting photos of themselves with statements such as: “I don’t need feminism because I don’t choose to ignore the fact



that men have issues too” and “I don’t need feminism because I already have equal rights.”

Reading through the majority of these posts quickly brings forth a glaringly obvious problem: how misguided people are about what being a feminist actually means. As Lena Dunham pointed out, “Feminism isn’t a dirty word. It’s not like we’re a deranged group who think women should take over the planet, raise our young on our own and eliminate men from the picture.”

So here are some things that being a feminist does NOT mean:

Being a feminist does not mean you think women can’t speak for themselves, it means you realize that, even though some may be lucky enough to, there’s still many who can’t.

Being a feminist isn’t about telling women what to do, it is giving them the ability and freedom to be able to choose to do whatever they want to do — whether that be a stay at home mom, electrical engineer, or business CEO. The purpose is to create a society of equal say, to provide people with the freedom of choice, rather than limited choices of assumption.

Being a feminist has nothing to do with how you look, what you wear, who you date, or how often you have sex.

Feminists don’t believe women should look or behave a certain way, it means they want women to have the freedom to look and behave however they want — unapologetically.



Feminists do not believe women are better than men, or that women deserve special privileges. They do, however, understand that equity is necessary to bring about genuine equality. Equality treats everyone the same regardless of need, while equity achieves fairness for all groups by treating them differently depending on need.

Feminists do not see women as weak. Feminists are not aiming to make women stronger; they already know they're strong. They just want society to see that, too.

Empowering women does not mean belittling or punishing men. Men, too, suffer from gender role assumptions that place expectations upon them to live and act a certain way. Feminists believe each person should be viewed based on their individual strengths and capabilities as a human being, not the strengths and capabilities assumed of their gender.

Feminism is not about telling women what they need - it's about ensuring they have the right to choose what they need. More than that, feminism goes beyond our own individual wants and needs - it's about what we as a society need. As Joseph Gordon-Levitt so eloquently worded it, "I'm a believer that if everyone has a fair chance to be what they want to be and do what they want to do, it's better for everyone. It benefits society as a whole."

Part 3: Feminism And Climate Change

When you start to read into it, it soon becomes clear that climate change is a feminist issue and vice versa. This excerpt from [Mary Fitzgerald's article](#) gets right to the crux of the issue:



“However world leaders might try to spin this problem, nearly all the ways of tackling climate change involve taking rights away from people — be it their right to fly, to drive, or to heat their patios. The one thing that would do the opposite, that would empower human beings, would be to give women across the world control over their own bodies. Plenty of them want it: according to the UN, there are currently more than 200 million women worldwide wanting but unable to get contraception.[...]”

Wherever women have adequate access to contraception, education, the right to work, equality before the law, the birth rate plummets. And this is where western liberal proclivities towards cultural relativism start to break down. However much we might want to respect other cultures, those that deny women these rights are directly harming all of us, even if our own society is an equitable, gender-blind utopia. Unless we want a world ravaged by droughts and floods, we are going to have to start demanding women be treated as equal citizens — everywhere. In fact, you don’t even have to call it feminism. You could call it calculated self-interest.”

Feminism - ensuring women have equal rights - is clearly necessary for tackling climate change. On the flip side of the coin, climate change disproportionately affects women, especially women of colour. Advancing women’s rights and tackling climate change go hand-in-hand.

As [Nicole Greenfield](#) writes for the Natural Resources Defence Council, “The United Nations [estimates that 80 percent of people](#) displaced by climate change are women. And it’s not just storms that affect them; researchers in India have found that [droughts, too, hit women the hardest](#), rendering them more vulnerable than men to income loss, food insecurity, water scarcity, and related health complications.

“The climate crisis is not gender neutral,” says [Katharine K. Wilkinson](#), coeditor of the anthology [All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis](#), a book of essays and poems written entirely by women contributors. “It grows out of a patriarchal system that is also entangled with racism and white supremacy and



extractive capitalism. And the unequal impacts of climate change are making it harder to achieve a gender-equal world.”

As Ireland’s first female president Mary Robinson said, “Climate change is a man-made problem - with a feminist solution.”

Part 4: Feminism And Racism

There’s no denying that within the feminist movement, women of colour have experienced racism. Similarly, these women have also experienced sexism within various antiracism and civil rights movements. The women who are experiencing the double pain of race and gender oppression have oftentimes found this prevents them from fully partaking in the feminist movement. However, due to this, unique forms of feminism have arisen such as Black feminist theory, multiracial feminism, and intersectional feminism - movements that actively work against both gender and race oppression.

I strongly recommend reading UN Women’s explanation of intersectional feminism and why it matters [here](#).