

Research Project 2

More than just Bra Burners: How Feminists Fight Against Inequality and Negative Perceptions

The Seneca Falls Convention was the start of the first-wave of feminism and would pave the way for future feminists to not stop until the ideology outlined in the Seneca Falls Declaration was reached. Anyone who has taken an American History course would have encountered this topic, but I bet very few men and women could explain what happened at the Seneca Falls Convention and why it was so important to women in America. According to Lisa Marsh Ryerson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott started the Seneca Falls Convention on July 19, 1848 (327). These two women were ready to stand up against the inequality of women and did just that by gathering women and men together to draft what would be known as the Seneca Falls Declaration. This declaration discussed the grievances of women and the ways in which equality should be achieved. Ryerson discusses that around three hundred men and women met at the Seneca Falls Convention and “worked collaboratively with other like-minded women to define issues and ultimately take action” (328). The attendees of the convention were able to agree upon several sentiments and resolutions that are now found within the Seneca Falls Declaration. One of the founders of the convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, claimed that one of the main reasons women deserve equality in all aspects of life “is because of her birthright to self-sovereignty; because, as an individual, she must rely on herself” (qtd in Ryerson 328). All women today should be forever grateful to the influential people who attended The Seneca Falls Convention and started the feminist movement that carries on to this day. The founders of this movement should be known as the true definition of the feminist ideals due to the way they

recognized an issue within their society, they gathered the opinions and theories of others, and then acted by peacefully requesting change via the Seneca Falls Declaration and peaceful protests. When people think of feminism, they should think of the actions of those involved in the Seneca Falls Convention and not the negative perspectives that are being spread around today. These misconceptions of feminism are what completely overshadow the hard work of Mott and Stanton back in 1848. It is important to recognize the false perceptions of feminism that are prevalent today in order to find out for one's self the true definition of feminism. Instead of looking at feminism in a positive light, many individuals today believe the mythologies that feminism is only made up of women and these women all believe they are better than men and want to be superior to them. They also believe that all feminists are against marriage. But the main misconception related to feminism is that there is equality between everyone today, so feminists are simply angry people looking for something to complain about.

Although feminism is becoming more popular in the world today, people are surprisingly uneducated on what feminism truly is. This ignorance due to simple lack of interest in the topic or lack of formal education on women's studies can lead to the mythologies about feminism that are present in the world. Due to the complexity of feminism, it is understandable that people can have varying perceptions of what they think it means. I will be using the Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology's definition which claims that "feminism, in the broadest sense of the protest of women against a subordinate social status, is both global and takes different forms in different cultures. Where feminism stands universally united is on issues of the valid claim of women to education, to a public voice, and to equality with men in law." To me, this means that feminism can vary depending on who is practicing the feminist ideology, but all forms of feminism are the same in their desire to gain equality for everyone in political, social, and economic aspects of

life. It is also important to note that feminism has changed over time and will continue to change going into the future. There are three waves of feminism that represent the different time periods in history that are highlighted by important events for the rights of women. Nancy A. Hewitt suggests that the first-wave of feminism started with the “Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention of July 1848, where Elizabeth Cady Stanton demanded women’s enfranchisement, and ended with ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment” (659). The first-wave of feminism was dominated by women’s suffrage and mostly included white women. Hewitt adds that the Second Wave of feminism which occurred between the 1960’s and 1970’s differed from the first-wave by being “more inclusive and more transformative” (661). Although this wave was still dominated by middle-class, white women, it was more inclusive to ideas that strayed away from just voting. The second-wave began to focus on issues of economic and social equality. Hewitt writes that the third-wave of feminism “announced its emergence in the United States in the early 1990’s...” and still continues today (659). It is important to note that this wave included women of different races and women of lower classes. Third-wave feminists are determined to help normalize the queer culture, as well as traditionally sexualized topics. This wave also wants to focus on recognizing that due to differences in race, gender, or sexuality, people have varying experiences in life. I will be focusing on the third, most modern wave of feminism in my analysis of the mythologies of feminism.


Feminism comes in all different forms and one of those is known as extremist feminism. Although this doesn’t represent feminism as a whole, it does give feminism a bad name when certain tactics cross the line from a fight against inequality to just a fight against men. Extremist feminism can be found in the United States and around the world. One group that is prevalent in the United States is known as the Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist or TERF for short. This group advocates against the inclusion of transsexual people in society which goes against

feminist ideologies about equality for all. Danelle Wylder and Corrie Westing discuss how extremist groups like TERF view society: “They believe that men are innately the oppressors of women, and that all things masculine are the source of the problems in the world.” The ideology of extremist feminists causes people to have false perceptions about feminism. Although this is just a small sect of feminism, it has caused feminism to be overshadowed by the notion that all feminists blame all men for the inequality in the world today. That belief is false though because the root of inequality does not stem from just the male species, it comes from the society as a whole. Extremist feminist groups like TERF are known for their writings about men that can be extremely offensive. One writer known as witchwind writes, “All men at least above 15 (or younger if very asocial) should live separately from women and children, on their own in small huts or studios, isolated from one another and scattered around so that women can keep an eye on them...” These are just a few examples of the outrageous thoughts that extremist feminists have. These thoughts are completely against men and not what feminism is all about. Due to this, it is understandable how the mythologies about feminism began because a small group of feminists embody those harsh perceptions. Other extremist feminist groups around the world fight against the male population with more than just words. Groups like the Gulabi Gang in India are known for their militant strategies they use when expressing their extremist feminist ideologies. The idea that feminist wish to cause violence to men is a common perception that is false for feminist ideology as a whole, but the Gulabi Gang is one group that causes this idea to exist. Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff discusses that “they [Gulabi Gang] have attacked men who have abandoned or beaten their wives” (4). She also claims the Gulabi Gang “stormed a police station and beat a police officer in protest against the arrest of a poor untouchable man” (4) These violent acts committed by the Gulabi Gand are an example of the extremist side of feminism that causes the misconception that all feminists believe in this kind of violence. Feminist ideology does not accept these violent acts as part of their code for creating equality in the world. Although I believe using violence against men is wrong to gain equality, I understand why the

Gulabi Gang are using these tactics. Every place is different, and India often condones violence against women and even encourages it in some scenarios. Due to this, the Gulabi Gang is essentially fighting fire with fire and doing to the men what they've been doing to the women for centuries. Whether one believes groups like TERF and the Gulabi Gang are an acceptable form of feminism or not, the ideologies of these groups are what cause the mythologies about all feminists that are prevalent today.

One of the main perceptions that is often associated with feminism is that feminists are only uptight, white, middle-class women. This perception is false because feminists can truly be anyone and everyone no matter what their race, gender, or social status is. Feminists can also dress any way they want or have any sexual preference they desire. There are no set standards to what one must look like or act like to consider themselves a feminist and believe in equality for all. This idea has been engrained in the minds of people for so long that it is hard to consider yourself a feminist without being exactly like the stereotypical feminist people think of when they hear that word. Louise Gannon shares famous singer KT Tunstall's feelings about being a feminist: "I always worried that I couldn't have integrity, I couldn't be intelligent, I couldn't be a feminist if I wore tight clothes and wrote sensual songs" (12). This shows that KT Tunstall had the misconception that a feminist was against things like tight clothes and sensual songs. Feminism embraces all individuals from all walks of life because there is no code that says to be

a feminist one must have a certain appearance or act in a specific way. This makes the idea of feminism much more welcoming to those who were skeptical about it before. If more people knew they didn't have to fit certain parameters or change anything about themselves to embrace the ideology of feminism, then I believe more people would confidently call themselves feminists. The perception that feminism encompasses such a small range of people is false because it actually encompasses anyone who believes in equality. A study on feminism done by Berry College notes that feminism does not have restrictions on who can be a feminist:

Feminism encompasses a huge variety of people and positions. Feminists are religious, atheistic, and somewhere in between; we're Black, White, Latino, Asian and any combination of the above. We are married, single, dating, in open  relationships and in polyamorous relationships; we're LGBTQIA, straight and asexual. We're transsexual, female, male and gender queer; we're feminine, masculine, all of the above and none of the above. We're pro-choice, pro-life, politically liberal and politically conservative. We're young, young at heart and old. ("Myths")

This shows that to be a feminist one does not have to be boxed into a specific category. Third-wave feminism has become so inclusive that there are no longer limitations on who can identify as a feminist. The reason for this inclusion is due to feminism being about equality for all people and not just women. Feminism recognizes that individuals from different minority groups such as gays and lesbians or individuals from different ethnic backgrounds are still at a disadvantage in society today. By identifying as a feminist, these minority groups gain a voice to express their grievances so that one day they can gain the equality they rightfully deserve. Not only does the term feminist include minority groups, but it also includes men which many people believe

cannot be feminist. The idea that men cannot be feminists because feminism is seen as attacking the male population is untrue. Men should consider themselves feminist if they side with the feminist ideology that everyone was created equal, so they should be treated equally. In an article about feminism from Berry College, writers identify that men should also be feminists because of the important women in their lives: "If you [men] care about equality for your mother, sister, grandmother, aunt, cousin, girlfriend, wife, or friend who is female, then feminism should be important to you [men]." Men should always look at the important women in their lives and want the equality for them that they deserve because of the love they have for them. Fathers should want their daughters to grow up in a world where they are treated equally to their male counterparts. Husbands should want to see their wives treated as an equal in the workplace. Ultimately, any man can consider himself a feminist if he sides with the belief that equality for the women in his life is important and should be reached. This misconception that men can't be feminists because they aren't female is wrong because feminism is about so much more than just women. An article about the myths of feminism from Villanova University claims, "Feminism doesn't just liberate women; it also liberates men by breaking down the standards which society has put in place for both women and men." Men are looked to in society as strong and leaders. They are not supposed to show their feelings because it makes them look weak. This puts a lot of stress and pressure on men to constantly act strong and like they are okay when maybe they are not. Villanova University's article suggests that men don't always have to live up to this idea of masculinity because "feminism says it's okay for men to show weakness, be followers, and to show their emotions." If men are interested in this idea, then they too should consider themselves a feminist. By siding with the feminist ideology that men do not always have to be these powerful beings with walls built around themselves so that they never show their true emotions,

then men can call themselves feminists too. If more men knew that feminism was all inclusive to men and that it stood for ideas that were beneficial to them, then I believe more men would be proud to call themselves feminists. The term feminist should not be shied away from just because someone doesn't believe they fit the stereotypical image of a feminist the media often makes us believe there is. If more people were willing to stand by their beliefs in feminist ideals, then the stereotype of what a feminist should look like might disappear. Considering people often associate feminism with being strictly female, they believe all feminists have a negative image of men in their minds.

Another perception of feminism is that all feminists think they are better than men and want to be superior to them. I believe the reason many people feel this way is because they do not truly see the inequality there is today, so they think women are on a quest to be the superior sex. The truth is feminists do not think they are better than men in any way, they just want things to be equal so that men are not seen as better than women. E.B. Adeleke explains in her critical analysis of two Nigerian dramas about gender inequality that the reason people perceive feminists as hating men is because there is no set way to counteract the inequality between the sexes. Adeleke explains, "This lack of coherence in terms of methodology is responsible for the different styles of feminism depicted in contemporary African drama. Radical feminism, the variant of feminism deployed by Utoh and Oyedepo's female characters, is presented in the plays as extreme, irrational and even destructive" (128). This statement shows that feminists are not all radical to the point where they want to harm men. Often times outside sources, such as the African dramas, do not know the methodologies of feminism since they are not set in stone, so they use the extreme, radical feminist ideas as the framework for all feminists in their stories. By doing this, feminists are looked at as man-haters who are out to get all men. Adeleke further

analyzes one of the African dramas and discusses how the women in the story “form an informal interest group seeking to rearrange society to give women dominance by all means possible, including acts of physical violence” (127) These types of dramas help to engrain the misconceptions of feminism into the minds of their readers by suggesting that to overcome inequality the roles must be reversed and done so by violent acts against men. It is important to note that although there are some radical feminists in the third-wave, the majority are not in favor of violent acts against men. African dramas are a good example of how feminist ideologies are misconstrued by depicting the polar ends of the spectrum and not the majority in an attempt to be more interesting. Although this idea of radical feminism is used to portray the overall idea of feminism, true feminist ideology is not about being superior to anyone. According to a Berry College article about feminism, “Feminists don’t want women to be more powerful than men any more than we want men more powerful than women. What may seem like a discriminatory act against men is actually an attempt to level the playing field between men and women.” This statement shows that the idea women want to be superior to men is truly a mythology. The idea of feminism is equality for all; therefore, no sex should be more powerful or have more control over the other. Since feminism is all about equality, women do not think they are better than men in any way. All they are asking for by protesting the inequality present today is a fair chance to be an equal to their male counterparts in areas such as the workforce, the home, and educational institutions. Since people tend to assume feminists think they are superior to men, this causes them to believe feminists don’t want to get married to a man.

When thinking about a feminist, one might assume that all feminists are against marriage and being stay at home moms. This perception of feminism is not true because nowhere in the ideology of feminism does it declare that marriage is a bad thing and that mothers should not

stay with their children. Sam Schulman disagrees with the notation that feminists hate the idea of marriage, he suggests however that “rather than disposing of marriage, feminism made it more important to women than ever” (26). During the first-wave of feminism, marriage could be seen as a way of taking one’s identity away due to the strict expectations that a married woman must not have a career, stay at home and cater to the wants and desires of her husband and growing family. This idea of marriage has disappeared in the third-wave of feminism and lots of feminists still desire a long-term relationship with another person. I think the perception that feminists hate marriage due to more women opting not to get married in the 21st century is just an uneducated statement. Being a feminist does not correlate with not having a desire for partnership. The decrease in marriage among young women has come from other societal changes like women furthering their education and acquiring more demanding professions. This misconception of feminism should be erased because more people need to realize that feminists are not against marriage. In fact, Schulman states that “the preservation of marriage became, in a way, the movement’s chief if wholly unintended accomplishment” (25). This statement shows that it is important to associate feminism with marriage in a positive light because feminism is actually a major contributor to revitalizing the overall idea of marriage. Feminism is responsible for the new form of marriage that we see today. A marriage that has two breadwinners in the family and that splits up household chores. Marriages today that have stay at home dads and working mothers can thank feminism for crushing some of the gender roles that there once were. Although feminism has made great strides in changing the idea of marriage, everyone and everywhere is different and could be changed in varying degrees. Another reason that feminists are actually in favor of marriage is because of the good family dynamic that can be beneficial to children. According to Hanna Rosin and Michel Martin, “It’s really important for people at the

lower end of the socio-economic spectrum - for them even more than people at the upper end - to have those intact families that are the cradle of good habits, good character, good upbringing.” Intact families usually contain two loving parents that help to mold a child into a positive member of society. These families are not limited to just being between a man and a woman, but it is the idea of a married family that can be beneficial to a child. In a perfect world every marriage would work out and be full of happiness, but that is not always the case. Rosin and Martin suggest that it is important for a child to see love and commitment modeled by their parents, so they can have successful relationships in the future. Due to this reason, feminists are in favor of marriage because of the positives it has to offer their children. Feminism is a strong supporter of marriage due to the many benefits it can offer and due to how it has changed over time. Because of this, the misconception that feminists are against marriage should be eliminated. Although feminists are not against marriage, they are against some of the inequality often existing within marriage. Due to this, some feminists opt not to get married which ends up being viewed as simply hating marriage because people do not realize that there are still inequalities present today.

The most overwhelming perception of feminism is that there is equality for all in the world today, so feminists of the third wave just want something to complain about. Although there have been massive strides for women, feminism persists because there is not yet complete equality in areas like the workplace. Vivian Gornick points out, “In the 21st century, women in STEM fields now encounter more subtle forms of discrimination since outright sexual discrimination is now illegal due to Title IX” (qtd in Stroud, 123). This shows that laws like Title IX have made it more challenging for women to face discrimination in the workplace, but nonetheless, the patriarchy will find a way. This discrimination can be seen through the ever-

present pay gap between the sexes. Another way this discrimination is taking place is through hidden bias that still exists when hiring takes place. Employers are more likely to accept a male over a female simply based on the name because they feel as if men are more fit for jobs in STEM-related fields. This idea is highlighted in a study done by Corinne Moss-Racusin and other colleagues. Pearce Stroud states that the study was a “randomized double-blind study that measured life science and physical science faculty’s decisions regarding competence, hireability, salary, and mentoring for an identical male or female undergraduate student applying for a laboratory management position...” (125). Everything about the undergraduate’s application was the same except for the name that appeared on it. The name was either John or Jennifer to denote male or female. Stroud illustrates the results of this study: “The participants rated the male applicant as significantly more competent and hireable. The male applicant was also awarded on average a higher salary and more mentoring” (125). Studies such as this one continue to show how feminism is still very relevant in the world today. In order to overcome this hidden bias found within STEM-related jobs, feminists must continue to push for equality for all in aspects of life like the workplace. This bias could have many causes, but I believe that it has been engrained in the minds of many individuals that men are a better fit for jobs in STEM-related fields, so those that do the hiring unconsciously choose male applicants due to the hidden mindset that they are more qualified just because of their sex. An article about feminism from Berry College notes that women still experience inequality in ways like “the gender pay gap, access to reproductive healthcare, protection against sexual assault and violence and gender representation in media, among other issues.” These are just a few of the ways women in not only America, but around the world are still at a disadvantage and often neglected. It is important to continue to strive for greater action to be taken on these issues because most of them are

essential to the well-being of all women. For issues that are on the rise today, such as sexual assault, it is important feminists continue to fight for appropriate actions to be taken in order for common targets of sexual assault to feel safe. Claude A. Mellins claims that “existing evidence suggests that most sexual assault incidents are perpetrated against women...” (3). Mellins also suggests that there are “indications that lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB), and gender non-conforming (GNC) students at high risk” (3). This study shows that the main groups feminists represent are the most common victims of sexual assault. Due to this, there is not complete equality in the world today like some may suggest. Until issues such as this one are resolved, then feminists have reasons to fight for those that often feel like they lack a voice. Even though equality is on the rise for women and other minorities, feminists are needed still today to continue pleading for total equality. Feminists all around the world are campaigning for feminist causes, but a big one today that is still at the forefront is violence against women. Violence against women is often due to the ideology that women are lesser than men and that men have control over them. Even though feminists are continuing to advocate against this violence, Hazel Healy points out that “the [violence] rates are steady or increasing” (13). Since there are increasing rates of violence against women, feminists are needed now more than ever to stand up for these women facing these violent acts at the hands of their oppressors. Due to this reason, one can see why the perception that feminism is not needed because there is equality is false. There will not be equality for these women until they no longer fear violence against them simply because they are a woman and the male members of society think it is acceptable to assert the power they believe they have over women in an aggressive manner. Nikki van der Gaag discusses ways inequality is still present: “Men still hold the majority of positions of power. Men’s violence against women, which cuts across race, class and geography, shows no sign of

decreasing. And women and girls in many countries continue to be seen as second-class citizens, especially if they are poor, or come from a black or minority ethnic background” (2). Until issues like Gaag has identified subsided, feminism should continue to be on the rise. Feminists are needed not only to fight for inequality to disappear, but they are also needed to make sure certain advances for women don't get reversed.

Feminism in America is needed now more than ever as the rights of women, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community are being stripped away. To increase the following and support of the third-wave feminists it is essential that the false perceptions of feminism that exist today are abolished. By destroying the notion that a feminist hates men and marriage, as well as the idea that you must fit a specific stereotypical description to be a feminist, more people will happily align themselves with this movement and help stand up for equality for all. It is also important that the inequality still going on today is recognized to understand why feminists are still fighting for what they believe in and not just complaining to complain. Third-wave feminists must continue to battle the inequality there is today to honor women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and

Without these women and the amazing work they did during their time, women wouldn't be Lucretia Mott that started the feminist movement at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. where they are today. Although the fight is not over and there are still several wrong perceptions about feminism, women and men alike should be proud to call themselves feminists. One should always be proud of standing up for inequality to change a system full of misogyny. Feminists should not only continue to request the equality they rightfully deserve, but they should also educate others on the ideology of feminism to gain their support and to end centuries-old misconceptions about feminism. The world needs more feminists if we are ever going to see a

day where people are not judged based on their sexual organs, but on their intellect, character, and morals.

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