

WHAT FEMINISM ISN'T

By
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Pop Culture



I'm amazed at how often people employ the term feminism where it doesn't apply. So, in order to begin to set the record straight, this time let's explore some common examples of what feminism is not.

Myth #1

#1 Feminism Isn't Keeping Score

Last fall I went to see a horror film in which two female characters expose their breasts and a male character exposes his genitals. After the screening the director, present for Q and A, claimed he added the latter to maintain gender balance. For starters, his math appears flawed, unless two shots of female nudity are equal to one shot of male nudity. But that's hardly the point. A feminist-friendly film is not about keeping score; it's about fair representation. So, to effectively gauge it, said director should have instead considered the context of and motivations for each moment of nudity.

To set the record straight, let's consider them now.

The first moment of nudity occurs in the first scene where we meet three friends sharing a hotel room: a heterosexual couple and a single female. Within seconds of our first seeing her, the single female character removes her top in front of her two friends, claiming to do so as a means of retaliation for their having had sex in the other bed while she was trying to sleep the night before. Personally, I fail to see the logic. Maybe if we knew more about the characters this reasoning might make sense, but given this happens the first time we meet them, it comes across as a flimsy excuse to show a pair of naked breasts.

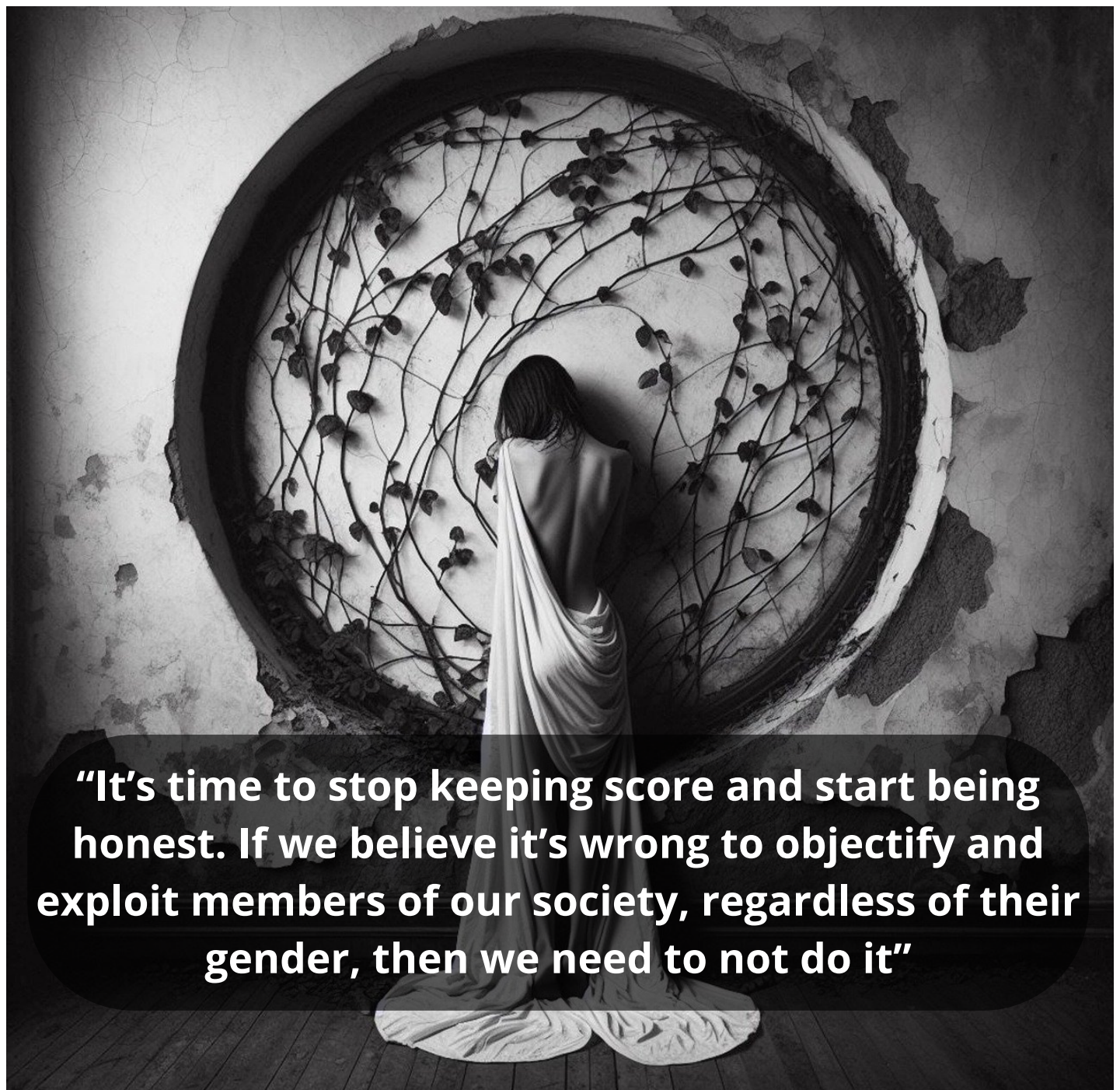
Shortly thereafter, another woman bares her breasts at a public book signing. She wants the author to sign them, which he does. After, the next man in line whips out his penis and balls, and when the author refuses to sign them, the man calls the author a "homophobe."

Now bad enough, we've got a homophobic comment. Why should we assume a man who exposes his genitals in public is gay? Especially when current events suggest this particular predilection is far more prevalent among straight men. But that's a whole other topic.

Likewise disturbing is that the film's director congratulated himself, explaining that at his test screening, many female spectators were, at first, up in arms about the two gratuitous moments of women baring their breasts but were appeased once the man bared his penis, deeming it "acceptable" because now everything was "fair and balanced."

Once again, any logic here eludes me.





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Gratuitous nudity is not a crime. Lots of movies employ it to appeal to certain demographics, primarily teenage boys or those with the mentality of one. But let’s recognize it for what it is, shall we? We mustn’t pretend it is acceptable to objectify women as long as we also objectify men. It’s time to stop keeping score and start being honest. If we believe it’s wrong to objectify and exploit members of our society, regardless of their gender, then we need to not do it. If we have no such qualms, let’s at least have the integrity to acknowledge it for what it is.

In a similar vein, we mustn’t compare number of lines or minutes on screen to determine the value of gender representation in a film. Keeping score is a cop out. We all know the difference. So let’s just keep it real.

#2 Feminism Isn't Gender-Swapping

Gender, unlike sex, is a social construct that begins to shape each of us starting from the time we're inside the womb. Studies indicate that pregnant women who know they're carrying a male fetus are more likely to drink, smoke or engage in reckless behavior than those informed their baby will be female. Once born, babies are likewise treated very differently. Males are more likely to be playfully tossed in the air and bounced around, whereas females tend to receive more baby talk and tender affection.



As we get older these gender disparities grow greater, extending to our clothes, our activities and what's considered acceptable behavior. It shapes how (and what) we learn in school and what occupations we're more likely to pursue. It affects how we interact with people of our own gender and those of the opposite.

Now, that's not to say there isn't wide variation in how individuals adapt to these gender norms. Many women prefer pants to skirts, sports to ballet, math to English. But it does mean they will be treated differently when making unconventional choices for their gender, and as such they will inevitably behave differently. And herein lies the problem with films that try to demonstrate gender equality by creating characters who are written as if they're members of the opposite sex.

For example, let's take Amy Schumer's **TRAINWRECK**. Now at the onset I had high hopes for this one. In the opening scene, a father (Colin Quinn) comically uses a doll to explain the fallacy of monogamy to his two young daughters. The scene not only provides humor but also does a convincing job of setting up the sexually promiscuous, party lifestyle the protagonist adopts as an adult. Her enculturation has taught her to embrace sex, fun and independence, while shunning monogamy and convention. In short, she's given free reign to "act like a guy."

The inciting moment comes when free-spirited Amy has a one-nighter with Aaron (Bill Hader), a doctor, who disapproves of her radical lifestyle and pressures her to settle down. He also regularly and openly discusses every nuance of his relationship and feelings with his best guy friend, LeBron James. In other words, to quote author **CARINA CHOCANO**, he "plays the girl" in keeping with conventional gender traditions.

I was interested to see where Schumer was going with this parody of genders, daring to hope it might mimic 1930s screwball films in which the romantic couple, inevitably two opposites, help each other strike the perfect balance to discover their best possible selves. Instead, it panned out like the majority of neo-traditional rom-coms (1980s and beyond): the male love interest gets everything he wants with little to no compromise whatsoever, while the female completely changes who she is for him, blindly embracing patriarchal values. After all, as the movie suggests, it's in her own best interest.

In other words, the movie wasn't a parody after all. Rather, it was a standard, contemporary rom-com with a gimmick: for a portion of the film: the males and females swap gender roles, but "normalcy" is restored by movie's end.

Such a missed opportunity!

Worse, still, it doesn't fulfill the promise of the premise. Amy's character was not raised to be a traditional female. And it would seem Aaron was likewise not raised to be a traditional male. Why then must they shed a lifetime of enculturation to present an ending that seems unworthy of either character? And worse, why must this story insist that gender is in our genes? **It's not.**

We can, and must, do better.



Myth #3

And here's yet another common myth about feminism that's due to be debunked:

#3 Feminism Isn't Lionizing Women

At a film fest several months back, I enjoyed a spirited dinner in the company of a male film critic, a male film director and a female producer. The men were discussing a film neither the producer nor I had seen, debating whether or not said film was “sexist.” The critic suggested it was not only sexist but borderline misogynistic, attributing its mean-spirited portrayal of the female protagonists as vicious and remorseless serial killers. The director argued that the very fact that these women were behaving in ways we usually only see men behave—i.e. violent, brutal and, yep, masculine—was precisely what made the film feminist. The producer and I sighed in unison. Both men were missing the point.

Without having seen the film, I felt certain from this discussion it was not one I'd be quick to consider **feminist-friendly** and not because the female characters came across as brutal or violent, but because it sounds like this film violates **Myth #2 (Feminism is not about Gender-Swapping.)** But let's consider why the critic equated sexism with the portrayal of a reprehensible female character. It's a common misconception that hails from absent voices in cinema and television—oh, yeah, and racism.

Watch a pre-80s flick or TV show with a body count and who's bound to be the first victim? You know it as well as I do, the Black dude! On the cop shows, who was the drug dealer, the thief, the felon? Why, the swarthy minority, of course! The scapegoat, the unflattering throwaway role was too often relegated to society's most oppressed.

Nice system, eh? Blame the victim.

Then the general populace got *semi-woke* by realizing, “Hey, maybe we should chill with all this nasty racist typecasting.” Since then, many writers and filmmakers have been afraid to cast minorities, especially African Americans, in unflattering roles for fear they'll be labeled racists.

Once again, people are missing the point.





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If we only see women and minorities in the same unfavorable roles time and time again, of course there’s bias, because we see no other representation of members from these communities. But the answer isn’t to take away all unflattering roles. Rather, we need to balance them out with a wider variety of three-dimensional roles to better represent genuine human diversity. After all, heroes and antagonists (and everybody in between) come in all shapes, sizes, colors, ages, genders and creeds.

So, please remember: feminism is not about being good, bad, admirable or deplorable. It’s not about putting women on pedestals. It’s about every woman’s right to be a first class citizen, to have the same right as a man to choose how she’s going to behave. Because, believe it or not, “bad girls” can be feminists, too.

#4 Feminism Isn't Demonizing Femininity

Friends and colleagues were often shocked to learn that I, a vocal feminist, enjoyed the TV series, *SEX IN THE CITY*. Of course, not one of them had seen it, assuming (wrongly) it centered solely around vacuous women shoe shopping and pining over men. And, while those activities do indeed occur in most every episode, more importantly, to quote Peter Travers at Rolling Stone, “Beyond the shoes, the cosmopolitans and the disloyal men, *Sex and the City* has always been about the bond among women.” I would argue, until recently, there were few TV programs that could boast this same claim and that there continues to be a dearth of mainstream films that can either. As such, I gladly embraced this rare depiction of female camaraderie. Frankly, it gave me hope.



On a not unrelated note, director James Cameron called Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* “a step backwards” for female protagonists, dismissing thespian Gal Gadot's portrayal of the character as an “objectified icon.” In the same interview with *The Guardian*, he boasted how, contrariwise, Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton), from his *Terminator* franchise “...was not a beauty icon. She was strong, she was troubled, she was a terrible mother, and she earned the respect of the audience through pure grit”—as if that is the only kind of woman who can be heralded as a feminist role model.

These misguided perspectives stem from the same bias. Director Patty Jenkins aptly addressed it: "... if women have to always be hard, tough, and troubled to be strong, and we aren't free to be multidimensional or celebrate an icon of women everywhere because she is attractive and loving, then we haven't come very far."

Author **Estelle Freedman**, in her recommended book ***No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*** likewise reminds us, "Diatribes against feminism often invoke images of fat, hairy, ugly women, suggesting that to become a feminist, to claim an identity as a powerful women, means losing all conventional appeal."

Feminism—first class citizenship—means having the freedom of choice to be the kind of person each of us wants to be. We need not adhere to the myopic expectations of others. We can shop and/or play sports. We can dress sexy and/or conservative. We can get married and/or have children, and/or careers and more. We can embrace conventional feminine aesthetics and/or forge all new ground in our choices. Nothing less will do. Ignore anybody who suggests otherwise. They're dinosaurs. It's time to move on.

Myth #5

On the flip side of demonizing femininity, many seem to equate feminism with exploiting female incompetence and messiness often times in ways considered more acceptable or at least forgivable in males—like, for example, incorporating graphic depictions of bowel movements in the name of so-called equality. I beg to disagree.



#5 Feminism Isn't Aggrandizing Female Dysfunction

I previously referenced James Cameron's self-congratulatory remarks about his strong female protagonists as opposed to what he considers a "step backward" with Patty Jenkins'/Gal Gadot's realization of WONDER WOMAN, whom he dismissed as a an "objectified icon." Within said boast he cited his TERMINATOR character, Sarah Connor, listing a plethora of her ostensibly feminist traits, among which he included that she was a "terrible mother."

I can only presume he did so to suggest the value of all women need not lie in her ability to be a mom, but in his misguided statement he revealed his own ignorance of what feminism is—and isn't.

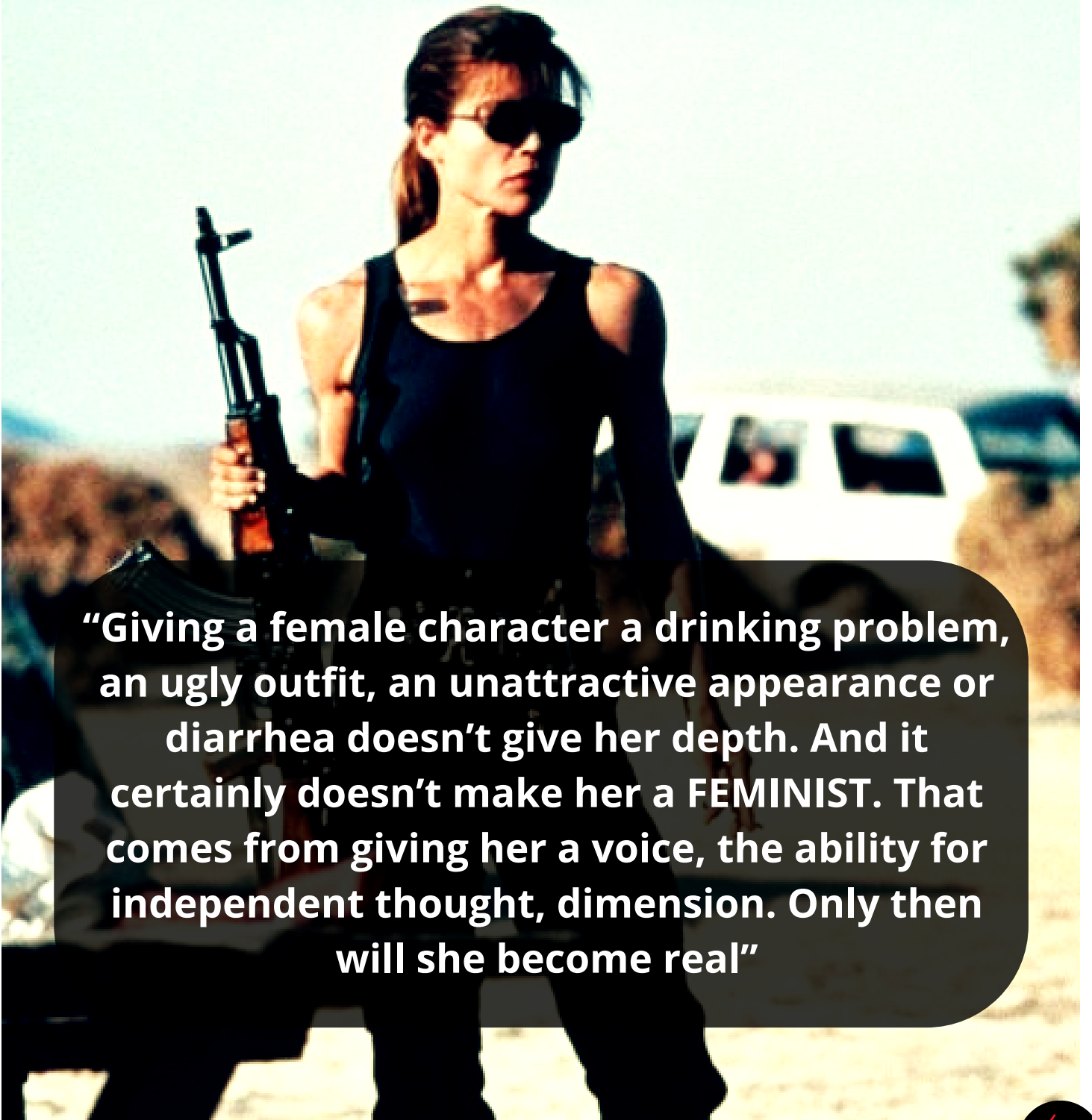
Being a bad mother does not make you a feminist, just ask Margaret White from CARRIE (who punishes her own daughter for the "sin" of menstruation.) That's not to suggest Sarah Connor is not a strong and admirable character—just maybe not for the reasons Cameron would have us believe.

Sarah Connor is three-dimensional, complete with strengths and flaws, wants and needs, many of which are revealed to us through her voice and actions. This is a wonderful starting point for any character, regardless of gender, race or creed. Upping the ante, when Sarah is put in extraordinarily horrendous circumstances, she rises to the occasion and does her part to save the world. But I'll reiterate, it's NOT her dysfunction that makes her feminist. Dysfunction simply makes her human. What makes her feminist is her defiance of patriarchal expectations. She doesn't let a man, a robot or even her own child (in the sequel) oppress her. She fights for what she believes is right and does so on her own terms. She asserts herself as a first class citizen.

More recently we saw another variation of what Cameron might label a "gritty" female protagonist in Gabriela Cowperthwaite's 's MEGAN LEAVEY, based on a true story about a remarkable female marine. At story's beginning, the drunk and disorderly Leavey gets in trouble for public urination. She has a drug history, has been living off her parents with no job and has no ability to connect with other people. She's emotionally incompetent. Needless to say, these traits are not what make her story FEMINIST—FRIENDLY It's not until she takes responsibility for herself, fights for her rights and earns her independence that she gains this additional recognition.



We are seeing more and more movies with female characters behaving badly, which is not a problem unto itself. All women, like all humans, do behave badly now and again, and we shouldn't shy away from depicting this bad behavior in movies—it's what make movies interesting after all. But we also mustn't mistake it for "feminism." Giving a female character a drinking problem, an ugly outfit, an unattractive appearance or diarrhea doesn't give her depth. And it certainly doesn't make her a FEMINIST. That comes from giving her a voice, the ability for independent thought, dimension. Only then will she become real.



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Myth #6

Last, yet anything but least in our feminism mythbusting quest, I want to explore big fat myth #6, perhaps the most detrimental one to the Women's Movement.

#6: Feminism Isn't Feminism Without Intersectionality

Early on, we explored the MEANING OF FEMINISM and how class, sexual and racial divides have led to distrust and vexation against this unfairly maligned word. A major culprit was, and remains, a disregard for INTERSECTIONALITY.

According to my beloved DICTIONARY.COM, intersectionality is “the theory that the overlap of various social identities, as race, gender, sexuality, and class, contributes to the specific type of systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual.”

For example, a wealthy white woman will not be subjected to the same scope of societal biases as a poor white woman, who will not be subjected to the same scope of biases as a poor woman of color, who will not be subjected to the same scope of biases as a poor woman of color who also identifies as LGBTQ—and so forth. At the same time, all of these women will likely be subjected to some of the same biases as will, say, minority and Queer men.

We must therefore remember that while the feminist movement specifically targets the rights of females, not all females are treated, or mistreated, in the exact same way and for the exact same reasons. And for that matter, many other communities—including people of color, religious minorities and LGBTQ people—share similar burdens of oppression.

As such, it's crucial to view feminism from a broader lens of social justice for all as well as from a female-specific lens that likewise accommodates intersectional considerations.

As I mention in a PREVIOUS POST, one of the most polarizing conflicts in the Women's Movement arose after the success of the SUFFRAGETTE MOVEMENT when a cluster of privileged white women penned an Equal Rights Amendment, failing to consider that the “equality” with men they demanded would undermine the efforts of many working class and minority women who had fought so hard for female-specific reproductive privileges that permitted them job security, a living wage and other allowances to accommodate their needs in regards to pregnancy and childcare. Making them “equal” to men who cannot bear children, nor confront the related demands of motherhood, would strip them of crucial support (for one example.)





With more communication and cooperation among an intersectional community of women, the original ERA might have been worded to better accommodate the needs of most if not all women. And with everybody's support behind it, our unified forces would likely have garnered more favorable results. Instead, feminists became more and more divided, each subgroup pushing distinct, and often conflicting, agendas that have held us all back. Consequently, we've arrived in 2018 no closer to passing the ERA.

We need to fix this. We're demanding that men listen to and learn from the women speaking out in the #METOO and #TIMESUP movements, but let us not forget, women also need to listen and learn from each other with a special regard to those who come from distinct circumstances than our own. Not one of us can speak for us all; we must first learn to speak with one other and proceed accordingly.

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