

WHEN DID
FEMINISM
BECOME A
FOUR-LETTER
WORD?

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SARAH ENGSTRAND *takes on one of the most contentious words in the lexicon and makes a case for why it should keep its name – bad reputation and all*

IT’S THE MOVEMENT that earned women the right to vote, the impetus that allowed fathers to have sole custody of their children and the force that broke gender stereotypes in the workplace for all. It’s feminism – and somehow, it has a bad reputation.

Nothing stifles a room or ruins a dinner quite as quickly as the word “feminism” (though “privilege” is a close second). But why? On a search for answers, I ask dozens of people from four countries. The answers are frightening.

“Feminists are overweight, lonely and unattractive women who hate men.”

“Feminists are just angry.”

“I’m not a feminist because I don’t hate men.”

“I’m not a feminist because I’m not a woman.”

“Feminism lets women falsely accuse men of rape.”

I ask them: “How would you feel about a movement that fights for equality for all?” I offer examples such as paternity leave, equal pay, mental health access and more. Everyone is in favour. Well, surprise, surprise – that’s feminism (albeit in a vastly condensed form). They all responded the same way: then feminism needs a new name.

But does it? In March, Harvey Weinstein was found guilty of felony sex crimes and rape, and was sentenced to 23 years in prison. This is one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, an intimate crony of America’s political elite, and he was led from a courtroom in handcuffs. It’s almost unprecedented.

Nearly three decades ago, in 1992, Woody Allen (another Hollywood elite) emerged relatively unscathed after allegedly assaulting one adopted daughter (Dylan Farrow) and literally marrying the other (Soon-Yi Previn). His partner at the time, Mia Farrow, did not. In fact, her career was essentially destroyed by the scandal.

The importance of the Weinstein verdict cannot be underestimated. It sets a precedent that powerful men will now be held accountable for their actions. It shows that the cultural tide is changing. Our culture is evolving; we’re beginning to listen to accusers and hold people accountable.

That’s feminism. That’s what gave the six accusers in the Weinstein trial (and at least 100 others who came forward, including celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Angelina Jolie and Ashley Judd) the courage to testify.

Feminism is what moved activist Tarana Burke to start the original Me Too movement in 2006. It’s what encouraged actress Alyssa Milano to amplify it on Twitter in 2017 with the hashtag #MeToo. Feminism is what gave Christine Blasey Ford the courage to testify before the US Senate against now-Supreme Court Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

Feminism is what inspired men to come forward about their own assaults. Men like actor Terry Crews, who was molested by a Hollywood executive in 2016. As he tweeted in 2017, Crews “decided not 2 take it further [at the time] becuz I didn’t want 2b ostracized – par 4 the course when the predator has power n influence”.



Top: Suffragists protest Woodrow Wilson’s opposition to women’s suffrage, October 1916

Border: The Women’s March on Washington, DC on January 21, 2017

Feminism is also what paved the way for men to become stay-at-home fathers, or male nurses or nursery schoolteachers. It’s an ally for the queer community and ethnic minorities in their fight for equality.

Of course, there’s still a long way to go. There are still those who vilify victims of sexual assault. They blame these victims for going to a man’s hotel room or question their decades of silence. Those who are brave enough to come forward and tell their stories can be labelled “attention seekers” – or worse. We’ve all heard someone say, “What did they expect was going to happen?”

What did they expect? Maybe they expected a business meeting with a producer, like they were promised. Maybe they expected their voice to be heard and considered in an important political appointment. Maybe they expected to not be molested or raped in the first place. Maybe after 20 years, they couldn’t stand to watch powerful people who did horrible things become more powerful.

“Feminist language talks about equality and justice for all, not just for the majority. It’s for everyone, especially people at the margin”

PETULA HO

It’s not to say that false allegations don’t exist. They do. Statistically, false allegations make up two to eight per cent of reported cases. However, since as many as 90 per cent of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported, this brings the actual percentage of false allegations to roughly .002 to .008 per cent, as stated in the *Minnesota Law Review* in 2018.

Feminism is powerful, complex and not infallible. There are groups, such as the trans and ethnic-minority communities, which deserve better than how they have been treated. But despite its shortcomings, feminism is needed – especially in the political sphere.

In Hong Kong, it’s “the most powerful critique available to tell whether a democracy project is really democratic,” explains Petula Ho, an activist and an associate professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong. “It’s a litmus test, because feminist language talks about equality and justice for all, not just for the majority. It’s for everyone, especially people at the margin.” It is, she believes, a vital power against authoritarianism.

In certain parts of the world, feminism has grown to become a brand of its own – think of the US\$860 Dior “We Should All Be Feminists” T-shirts worn by the likes of Rihanna, Kendall Jenner and Jennifer Lawrence. Or more recently, the outpouring of support for actress Natalie Portman’s Oscars outfit: a cape embroidered with the names of eight snubbed female directors. It’s a trendy, even lucrative, movement that stands in stark contrast to the stereotype of a masculine, aggressive “feminazi”. It’s feminine and palatable. It’s non-threatening.

But in Hong Kong, feminism is dangerous and often career-ending. Ho says that she is one of only a handful of active feminists in the city and that her beliefs make her a target for hate. “Just last night, I saw a post that targeted me and another feminist friend,” she tells me over the phone. “They say we deserve to be sent to the rubbish bin and sent to hell.”

Why? Because they spoke out against xenophobia towards mainland Chinese people, which has erupted since the outbreak of the coronavirus. “Discrimination against mainlanders by barring them from the city will not help with containing the virus, because mainlanders are not the virus,” she says. Ho believes in speaking out against all injustices

for all people. As a result, she no longer travels to China. She knows that she and her ideals are not welcomed there, and she fears the consequences.

When discussing Weinstein with *The New York Times*, Paltrow said, “We’re at a point in time when women need to send a clear message that this is over. This way of treating women ends now.” And hopefully, she’s right. But feminism extends beyond women.

In fact, feminism was never just about women at all. “Woman is symbolically taken to mean people who have been systematically devalued from society for their gender, class, age and social orientation,” explains Ho, whose tone has taken on a decidedly academic tenor. “It’s about intersectionality. It’s not about women as a unified category, but how gender interacts with different social variables to create a subordinate status and invalidate your suffering.”

Well, if it’s not just about women, then why don’t we change the name? Why don’t we rebrand it and separate the movement from its negative connotations of false-rape accusers, feminazis and bra burners? Really, what’s in a name?

A lot. According to Ho, we can’t change the name. “There is no other name available that speaks to the same thing,” she says. While it’s tempting to substitute words such as “humanitarianism” or “egalitarianism”, they simply don’t work. They are their own unique branches of philosophy with their own ideals.

And feminism has a century of history behind it. Feminism brought women the vote and paved the way for all people to pursue careers that they love. Feminism has given little girls the right of choice to be CEOs or mothers, or whatever they want to be. Feminism taught little boys that it’s okay to cry, and that it’s okay to be a homemaker or a nurse, or whatever they want to be. And feminism is continuing to shape a culture that protects people – of all genders and backgrounds – from oppression.

Feminism has a history. Feminism has a past. Feminism is the most important social movement of the last century, and it’s only getting stronger. Why should the name be changed now? To appease those who are uncomfortable with a more inclusive society?

Let them be uncomfortable. For too long women and minority groups have been conditioned to bend, to compromise and to appease. Not anymore.

Let’s keep the name. Let’s allow people to be curious and learn about feminism if they want to. And let the others be uncomfortable. Let them rage against a movement they don’t understand – and let them be left behind by a world that is evolving for the better. “All identity needs rebranding,” concludes Ho. “Rebranding doesn’t mean being tamed – we can sharpen our argument and make it more powerful.” #

IMAGE _ BURKE & ATWELL (SUFFRAGISTS)