

Full Frontal Feminism  
A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters  
Copyright © 2007 by Jessica Valenti

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To Miss Magoo.



This is what  
a feminist  
looks like

## YOU'RE A HARDCORE FEMINIST. I SWEAR.

What's the worst possible thing you can call a woman? Don't hold back, now.

You're probably thinking of words like slut, whore, bitch, cunt (I told you not to hold back!), skank.

Okay, now, what are the worst things you can call a guy? Fag, girl, bitch, pussy. I've even heard the term "mangina."

Notice anything? The worst thing you can call a girl is a girl. The worst thing you can call a guy is a girl. Being a woman is the ultimate insult. Now tell me that's not royally fucked up. Recognizing the screwed nature of this little exercise doesn't necessarily make you a feminist. But it should. Most young women know that something is off. And even if we know that some things are sexist, we're certainly not ready to say we're feminists. It's high time we

get past the "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." stuff. You know what I'm talking about: "I'm not a feminist or anything, but it is total bullshit that Wal-Mart won't fill my birth control prescription."

Do you think it's fair that a guy will make more money doing the same job as you? Does it piss you off and scare you when you find out about your friends getting raped? Do you ever feel like shit about your body? Do you ever feel like something is wrong with you because you don't fit into this bizarre ideal of what girls are supposed to be like?

Well, my friend, I hate to break it to you, but you're a hardcore feminist. I swear.

### Feel-Good Feminism

For some reason, feminism is seen as super anti: anti-men, anti-sex, anti-sexism, anti-everything. And while some of those antis aren't bad things, it's not exactly exciting to get involved in something that's seen as so consistently negative.

The good news is, feminism isn't all about antis. It's progressive and—as cheesy as this sounds—it's about making your life better. As different as we all are, there's one thing most young women have in common: We're all brought up to feel like there's something wrong with us. We're too fat. We're dumb. We're too smart. We're not ladylike enough—*stop cursing, chewing with your mouth open, speaking your mind*. We're too slutty. We're not slutty enough.

Fuck that.

You're not too fat. You're not too loud. You're not too smart. You're not unladylike. *There is nothing wrong with you.*

I know it sounds simple, but it took me a hell of a long time to understand this. And once I did, damn, did it feel good. Why go through your life believing you're not good enough and that you have to change?

Feminism not only allows you to see through the bullshit that would make you think there's something wrong with you, but also offers ways to make you feel good about yourself and to have self-respect without utilizing any mom-popular sayings, like "Keep your legs together," or boy-popular screamings, like "Show me your tits!"

Really, imagine how nice it would be to realize that all the stuff you've been taught that makes you feel crappy just isn't true. It's like self-help times one hundred.

But all that said, I really do understand the hesitancy surrounding the f-word. My own experience with the exercise that kicked off this chapter—"What's the worst possible thing you can call a woman?"—was presented by a professor on the first day of a women's literature class after she asked how many of us were feminists. Not one person raised a hand. Not even me. My excuse-ridden thinking was, *Oh, there's so many kinds of feminism, how can I say I know what they're all about? Blah, blah, blah, I'm a humanist, blah, blah, blah*. Bullshit. When I think back on it, I knew I was a feminist. I was just too damn freaked out to be the only one raising her hand.

Most young women *are* feminists, but we're too afraid to say it—or even to recognize it. And why not? Feminists are supposed to be ugly. And fat. And hairy! Is it fucked up that people are so concerned about dumb, superficial stuff like this? Of course. Is there anything wrong with being ugly, fat, or hairy? Of course not. But let's be honest: No one wants to be associated with something that is seen as uncool and unattractive. But the thing is, feminists are pretty cool (and attractive!) women.

So let's just get all the bullshit stereotypes and excuses out of the way.

### **But Feminists Are Ugly!**

Yawn. Honestly, this is the most tired stereotype ever. But it's supersmart in its own way. Think about it, ladies. What's the one thing that will undoubtedly make you feel like shit? Someone calling you ugly.

Back in fifth grade, the love of my life was Douglas MacIntyre, who told me I'd be pretty if only I didn't have such a big, ugly nose. I shit you not when I say that for months, every day after school I would stand in front of the three-way mirror in my bathroom, staring at the offending body part and trying to figure out how a nose could go so horribly, horribly wrong.

Ugly stays with you. It's powerful, and that's why the stereotype is so perfect. The easiest way to keep women—especially young women—away from feminism is to threaten them with the ugly stick. It's also the easiest way to dismiss

someone and her opinions. (“Oh, don't listen to her—she's just pissed 'cause she's ugly.”)

Seems stupid, right? I mean, really, what's with this *na-na-na-boo-boo* kind of argument? Have you ever heard of a Republican saying, “Oh, don't be a Democrat; they're all ugly”? Of course not, because that would be ridiculous. But for some reason, ridiculous is commonplace when it comes to the f-word.

For example, conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh says that feminism was established “to allow unattractive women easier access to the mainstream of society.” Okay—have you ever *seen* Rush Limbaugh? Yeah, enough said. Oh, and by the way—I think I'm pretty hot now. So screw you, Douglas MacIntyre.

### **But Things Are Fine the Way They Are!**

What do I know? Maybe things are fine for you. Maybe you're lucky and superprivileged and you wake up in the morning to birds chirping and breakfast in bed and all that good stuff. But chances are, that's not the case.

There are plenty of folks who argue that feminism has achieved its goal. The 1998 *Time* magazine article “Is Feminism Dead?” said, “If the women's movement were still useful, it would have something to say; it's dead because it has won.”<sup>1</sup>

There's no doubt that women have made progress, but just because we get to vote and have the “right” to work doesn't mean things are peachy keen. Anyone who thinks

women have “won,” that all is well and good now, should ask why the president of Harvard can say that maybe women are naturally worse at math and then have people actually take him seriously.<sup>2</sup> Or why a teacher can still get fired for being pregnant and unmarried.<sup>3</sup>

Seriously, are things really cool the way they are when so many of us are upchucking our meals and getting raped and beat up and being paid less money than men? And being denied birth control, and being told not to have sex but be sexy, and a hundred other things that make us feel shitty?

Methodinks not. It can be better. It has to be.

### Feminism Is for Old White Ladies

This one didn't come out of nowhere. The part of the feminist movement that has been most talked about it, most written about, and most paid attention to is the rich-whitey part. For example, back in the '60s and '70s, white middle-class feminists were fighting for the right to work outside the home, despite the fact that plenty of not-so-privileged women were already doing exactly that. Because they had to (more on this later).

Even now, issues of race and class come up in feminism pretty often. But unlike in days of yore, now they're being addressed. Besides, feminism isn't just about the organizations you see at protests, or what you hear about in the news. Feminist actions—particularly the kind spearheaded by younger women—are as diverse as we are. You'll see what I mean when you get to the end of this chapter: Young women

are working their asses off for causes they believe in. Which is why this next stereotype is so very annoying.

### Feminism Is So Last Week

Every once in a while, there's some big article about feminism being dead—the most famous of which is the aforementioned *Time* piece. And if feminism isn't dead, it's equally often accused of being outdated. Or a failure. Or unnecessary.

But if feminism is dead, then why do people have to keep on trying to kill it? Whether it's in the media, politics, or conservative organizations, there's a big old trend of trying to convince the world that feminism is long gone.

The argument is either that women don't need feminism anymore, or that those crazy radical feminists don't speak for most women. Never mind that recent polls show that most women support feminist goals, like equal pay for equal work, ending violence against women, childcare, women's healthcare, and getting more women in political office. Here comes that “I'm not a feminist, but . . .” stuff again!

The obsession with feminism's demise is laughable. And if the powers that be can't convince you that it's dead, that's when the blame game starts. Feminism is the media's favorite punching bag.

The horrors that feminism is supposedly responsible for range from silly contradictions to plainly ludicrous examples. In recent articles, feminism has been blamed for promoting promiscuity;<sup>4</sup> promoting man-hating; the torture at Abu Ghraib; ruining “the family”; the feminization of men; the “failures”

of Amnesty International; and even unfairness to Michael Jackson.<sup>5</sup> I'm not kidding. You name it, feminism is the cause.

My all-time favorite accusation: Feminism is responsible for an increase in the number of women criminals. You're going to love this. Wendy Wright of Concerned Women for America—a conservative anti-feminist organization—is quoted in a 2005 article, "Rising Crime Among Women Linked to Feminist Agenda," as saying it's pesky feminists who are to blame for the increase of women in prison.<sup>6</sup>

Wright claims that women are committing crimes because feminism has taught them that "women should not be dependent on others" and that "they don't need to be dependent on a husband," which inevitably forces them to "fend for themselves."<sup>7</sup>

Got that, girls? Without a husband to depend on, you'll be selling crack in no time!

For something that is so tired and outdated, feminism certainly seems to be doing a lot of damage, huh?

Obviously there's an awful lot of effort being put into discrediting the f-word—but why all the fuss? If folks didn't see feminism as a threat—and a powerful one—they wouldn't spend so much time putting it down, which is part of what attracted me to feminism in the first place. I wanted to know what all the brouhaha was about.

It's important to remember that all of these stereotypes and scare tactics serve a specific purpose. If you think feminism is all about big fat ugly dykes, or is dead or racist, then you'll stay far the hell away from it.

'Cause don't forget—there are a lot of people benefiting from your feeling like shit about yourself. Think about it: If you don't feel fat, you won't buy firming lotions and diet pills and the like. If you don't feel stupid, you might speak out against all the screwy laws that adversely affect women. It pays—literally—to keep women half there. And god forbid you get involved in anything that would make you wonder why in the world women are having surgery to make their vaginas "prettier."<sup>8</sup> (Sorry, I couldn't help but mention it; it's too freaky not to.)

The solution? Don't fall for it. If feminism isn't for you, fine. But find that out for yourself. I'm betting that you're more likely to be into something that encourages you to recognize that you're already pretty badass than something that insists you're a fat, dumb chick.

### Femi-wha?

There are so many stereotypes about feminism, and so many different definitions of it, that what feminism actually is gets insanely confusing—even for women who have been working on women's issues for years. But I always was a fan of the dictionary definition. And I promise this is the only time I'll be quoting the frigging dictionary:

#### fem-i-nism

- 1 Belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.
- 2 The movement organized around this belief.<sup>9</sup>

Hmm . . . don't see anything about man-hating in there. Or hairy legs. Obviously, there are tons of different kinds of feminism and schools of thought, but I'd say the above is enough to get you started. Besides, at the end of the day, feminism is really something you define for yourself.

### Sisterhood, My Ass

No matter how clear-cut (or how complex) feminism can be, not all women are feminists by virtue of having ovaries. And that's just fine by me. I realized this in a big way recently. I was quoted in Rebecca Traister's 2005 Salon.com article entitled "The F-Word,"<sup>10</sup> airing my feelings about the word "feminist"—and I got a little pissy. "Part of me gets so angry at younger women who are nervous about feminism because they're afraid that boys won't like them. . . . Part of me wants to say, 'Yeah, someone's going to call you a lesbian. Someone's going to say you're a fat, ugly dyke. Suck it up.'"<sup>11</sup> My attempt to strongly defend the word "feminism" didn't go over well with a lot of people. One woman actually posted a homophobic rant of a response to Salon.com:

☘ I'll call myself a feminist when the fat, mannish dykes who do run around calling themselves "Feminist" very loudly and constantly concede that my decision to groom and dress myself as a twenty-first-century professional woman is every bit as valid a choice as their decision to become stereotypical jailhouse bulldaggers. Ovaries only make you female, they do

not make you woman, and I am a woman. In other words, I will call myself a feminist when those man-nabees are as proud of and joyful in their womanhood as I am in mine . . . Until then, fuck off and take your hairy legs with you.<sup>12</sup>

Crazy, right? I didn't need much more than this to realize that feminism isn't for everybody. I never really bought the "We're all sisters" thing anyway. I've met enough racist, classist, homophobic women to know better. Feminism's power isn't in how many women identify with the cause. I'll take quality over quantity any day.

### Quality Women

So who are these elusive feminists? Like I've said—you are, even if you don't know it yet. Though I'm hoping by now you're at least slightly convinced. The smartest, coolest women I know are feminists. And they're everywhere. You don't need to be burning bras (actually, this never happened—total myth) or standing on a picket line to be a feminist. Chances are, you've already done stuff that makes you a feminist. You don't have to be a full-time activist to be an awesome feminist.

The work that young women are doing across the country is pretty goddamn impressive. Do they all consider themselves feminists? Probably not. But a lot of the work they're doing is grounded in feminist values. Just a few examples:

A group of high school girls in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, organized a "girlcott" of Abercrombie &

Fitch when the clothing company came out with a girls' shirt that read: WHO NEEDS BRAINS WHEN YOU HAVE THESE? After the group caused quite a ruckus in the media, A&F pulled the shirt.

Two young women in Brooklyn, Consuelo Ruybal and Oraia Reid, used their own money to start an organization called RightRides after a number of young women were raped in their neighborhood. Women can call the service anytime from midnight to 4 AM on the weekends and get a free ride home. Simple, but damn effective. Their motto is: "Because getting home safe should not be a luxury."

The documentary film *The Education of Shelby Knox* was inspired by a high school student in Lubbock, Texas, who took on her town's school board to fight for comprehensive sex education. Shockingly, the abstinence-only brand they were receiving wasn't quite cutting it.

A group of queer women, tired of seeing the art world bypass great women artists, started *riffRAG* magazine. The magazine features work that slips under the mainstream's radar.

Misty McElroy decided to start Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls as part of a class project at Portland State University. She expected about twenty girls to sign up—she ended up getting three hundred. Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls teaches young girls to play instruments, deejay, sing, and write songs and ends with a live performance. The camp was so popular in Oregon that there are now rock camps in New York City, Washington, D.C., Nashville, Tennessee, Tucson, Arizona, and various California locations.

This is just a small sampling of the amazing work young women are already doing (and they say we're apathetic!), and it doesn't even touch on all the women's blogs, online and print zines, and community programs that are out there. These women and their work prove that feminism is not only alive and well, but also energized and diverse. Not to mention fun.

You can be a feminist without making it your life's work. It's about finding the cause that works for you, and makes you happy, and doing something about it. (Trust me, getting off your ass can be more fun than you think.) For some women, that means working in women's organizations, fighting against sexist laws. For others, it means volunteering time to teach young girls how to deejay. It doesn't matter what you're doing, so long as you're doing something. Even if it's as simple as speaking up when someone tells a nasty-ass sexist joke.

There's a popular feminist shirt these days that reads: THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST LOOKS LIKE. Ashley Judd wore one at the 2004 pro-choice March for Women's Lives in Washington, D.C. Margaret Cho wore one on the Spring 2003 cover of *Ms.* magazine. I wear one, too; I love this shirt. Because you never really do know what a feminist looks like. And believe me, we're everywhere.