

**GIRLS
JUST
WANNA
HAVE
FUNDAMENTAL
RIGHTS**

Defining the modern feminist

By Alexis Faire

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Growing up, I always admired Oprah Winfrey. In fact, I wanted to be just like her. My friends in high school would call me "Oprah" as a nickname — not because I wanted to be a billionaire, not because I wanted to be famous and definitely not because I wanted to shout, "You get a car! You get a car! Everybody gets a car!" In my eyes, Oprah Winfrey was an example of the courageous and hard-working woman that I strived to become.

She spent the first few years of her life in rural Mississippi with her grandmother while her single mother searched for work, according to The Academy of Achievement. After her mother found work, she soon moved out-of-state and because of this, her mother was absent most of the time. Due to her mother's absence, Oprah was often left home alone and faced abuse from her male relatives from age nine to 13. She eventually left home and lived with her father in Tennessee. Although she faced living in poverty and mistreatment in the early years of her life, she continued to work hard, launched her career in journalism and eventually became the first and only multi-million-dollar black woman.

"Women can do just as much, if not more, than men can — as proven throughout history with strong women," said EJ Harrell, a junior majoring in interdisciplinary studies at The University of Alabama. "I mean, we see people like Michelle Obama today. We see Hillary Clinton. We see people that have progressed so far, and people still feel as though they are lesser. And that's weird to me. I know my mom is a strong woman, so when I look at her like, 'She does everything.' How are you going to say that she can't?"

Oprah Winfrey has been one of many to fight for women's rights and has maintained a strong persona as a woman in power. The idea of a strong woman who empowers other women and girls to fight for equal opportunities has always been a major factor

in history. From women, such as Harriet Tubman, Gloria Steinem and the fictional character Rosie the Riveter, to today's Michelle Obama, Malala Yousafzai and the fictional character Olivia Pope from *Scandal*, gender equality has been a hot-button topic within society.

The Other F-word

"Some people think negatively of feminists since they think of feminism as being anti-man, mean, ugly and so on, or they don't think feminism is relevant anymore because women are already 'equal,'" said Elise Wander, a law student at Yale University interested in public law. "Those people are misinformed, or they don't reason how deeply invested they are in societal values and stereotypes."

When people hear the word "feminism," they tend to either groan with frustration or attempt to avoid the conversation completely. Or maybe they'll say something along the lines of, "I believe that women deserve equal opportunities, but I don't identify as a feminist." And that's where the miscommunication begins.

According to Merriam-Webster, feminism is defined as the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes. The main idea of feminism is that everyone deserves equal opportunities despite a person's gender.

"That's what feminism is," said Nora Niedzielski-Eichner, a second-year law student at Yale University. "I don't know what people think feminism is, like it's some big secret cult or you know, 'I haven't made the secret handshake, so I'm not a feminist.' If you think that women should get to be equal, if you think that we should have the same opportunities, regardless of what gender you're born, then you're a feminist."

Many seem to believe that the feminist movement strives to help women overpower men and to make it seem as though women deserve more than their

male counterparts. A common myth, according to a study done by Villanova University, is that feminism only liberates women at the expense of men. This statement couldn't be further from the truth, yet it is still something people choose to believe.

"It [feminism] wasn't built on the backbone of breaking down another gender or saying that someone is lesser than," Harrell said. "Because that's what they're fighting against. That defeats the purpose, which is usually their argument."

"Waiting on the world to change..."

Campaigns like the UN Women's HeForShe encourages people of all identities to support gender equality and to unify the sexes. According to the HeForShe website, over 1.2 million people in the U.S. have committed to taking action to create a gender-equal world, and the U.S. is currently ranked second in HeForShe activity. The campaign gained popularity when actress and UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, Emma Watson, presented a speech about her journey into feminism and becoming an advocate for women's rights.

"I decided I was a feminist and this seemed uncomplicated to me," Watson said in her 2014 speech. "But my recent research has shown me that feminism has become an unpopular word. Apparently, I am among the ranks of women whose expressions are seen as too strong, too aggressive, isolating, anti-men and unattractive. Why is the word such an uncomfortable one?"

The HeForShe campaign is currently present with two institutions in the U.S. – Georgetown University and Stony Brook University – and has either a chancellor or president whom are participants for the initiative.

Kendyl Clausen, a recent graduate from Georgetown University and a law student at Yale University, is a supporter of the movement.

"From what I understand, the movement is committed to encouraging men to support feminist causes as well," she said. "One of the downfalls of feminist movements has been the 'other-ing' of men. The framing of the movement has often banded women together against men. This has led to things like the #notallmen movement in response to advocacy against sexual assault, etc."

She said the HeForShe movement seems like a good way to counter the negativity and to help the movement move forward.

"All the women, who are independent..."

The idea of a powerful woman comes with a long list of stereotypes. In Forbes' The 10 Worst Stereotypes About Powerful Women, the number one cliché is possibly the most common: Ice Queen. Think along the lines of Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*, as the article mentioned, or maybe Sandra Bullock in *The Proposal*. Powerful women that are stereotyped as an ice queen are depicted as unapproachable, mean and show no emotion in the workplace.

"Women in power in entertainment are often portrayed as cold and unemotional," said Lisa McKinney, professor of accounting at The University of Alabama. "There is a partial truth in this portrayal in that women must be less emotional and must be more aggressive to succeed in the workplace. The workplace is a competitive environment; women have to be able to compete with the men. The workplace requires a clear head, an attention to facts, and an ability to steer away from drama."

Lindsay Macher, a UA senior majoring in chemical engineering and president of the Feminist Caucus, said she believes commenting on a woman's emotions is a way to try to bring down a woman in power.

"As far as emotions, I think that's just an easy way to dismiss women,"

she said. "... I think as a woman, if you're in a position of power, you do kind of have to take an approach of either 'I'm gonna be kind of cold and hard, so that I'm taken kinda seriously from the get go,' or 'I'm gonna try and be nice and be really pleasant.'"

Despite the entertainment industry representing feminist ideals, the idea of strong and powerful women is often characterized in a negative light.

The topic of powerful women can't be discussed without bringing up the b-word. Over time, the connotation has changed, and depending on how it's used, can either be a compliment or an insult.

According to Merriam-Webster, the first definition of the word "bitch" means "the female of the dog or some other carnivorous mammals." The second definition of the word comes with two parts and is listed as, "a lewd or immoral woman" followed by "a malicious, spiteful or overbearing woman – sometimes used as a generalized term of abuse."

When a powerful woman knows what she wants, works hard to get it and doesn't need help from a man, that's when people want to categorize her as a bitch. In a 2008 *Saturday Night Live* skit, Tina Fey discussed Hillary Clinton's first campaign run for president. Tina stated that it bothered her when people called Hillary a bitch, which led Tina to coin the phrase, "Bitches get stuff done." To be honest, this is a phrase I live by every day. Women have embraced phrases like this and the word as a compliment to show that they're making a positive impact.

While the word may be making a transformation as time continues, it still tends to carry a negative connotation when depicting women in the entertainment industry — both fictional and real.

"... I also have an issue [on how they tend] to make the bitchiness more appealing," Macher said. "... They'll kinda label them as sexy, and they'll just



sexualize them. I don't think that you have to be beautiful, smart, skinny, etc. to be a strong woman in power."

Women in entertainment, despite their accomplishments or their journey, are always centered around appearance. Whether it's about her outfit, her sex life (or lack thereof) or even how she landed the position she currently has, a woman's looks always seem to be the topic of conversation.

"It bothers me that women in power necessarily need to be super attractive and fit a certain body image mold – often that's thin, white, very dressed up," said Marissa Medine, a third-year law student at Yale University interested in family law. "One of the more ridiculous [examples] I think of is the high-powered surgeon, doctor who's worked an 18-hour shift and still has impeccable makeup and is wearing stiletto pumps in the middle of the hospital."

"Work, work, work, work, work, work..."

According to the American Association of University Women (AAUW), working women in 2015 received 80 percent of what working men earned, which means there's a gap of 20 percent. That's not even including race,

ethnicity and age. AAUW stated that although pay for women has drastically increased since 1960, women are expected to reach pay equity with men by 2059.

"One aspect of the wage gap that I think doesn't get enough attention is that historically female-dominated fields are paid way less, and are considered way less prestigious, than their male counterparts," Wander said. "Public school teachers are paid less than professors, nurses are paid less than doctors, etc."

Despite the current challenges, Clausen said there are more ways to help women succeed today than there have been before.

"Women still face significant challenges, especially in male-dominated fields, but America is way more aware of these challenges than ever before," she said. "There are women's groups dedicated to pairing women up to help them network and succeed. There are books about how women can help each other succeed. There are men who are actively helping women get ahead."

The year 2016 brought another presidential election. Hillary Clinton ran a campaign yet again and earned the presidential nominee for the Democratic Party. She ran on a platform

that supported ideas such as gender equality, climate change, racial justice, LGBT rights, etc. For months, polls slated her to be the first female president of the United States. Ultimately, she lost to her opponent, now President-elect Donald Trump.

"I was very saddened by the fact that we would not have a first female president," Medine said. "I still remember the day of the election. I was home, looking at this book [from] when I was little called *First Ladies: Women Who Called the White House Home*, and I loved it since I was little. And I remember thinking that morning, 'Wow, we could really have a woman to call the White House home and who's not a First Lady.' And how incredible that would be to talk to my children about that and see this historical moment and see this book as a historical artifact and realize the progress we have made."

Although Hillary Clinton did not win the 2016 election and with the progress the country has made so far, Niedziel-ski-Eichner said she believes the U.S. will have a female president one day.

"Absolutely, without a question," she said. "I can't believe it's taken us as long as it has, but we absolutely will. We'll get there." *