Feminism Is Not a Bad Word

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Somewhere along the way, feminism became a dirty word.

Say you're a feminist today, and you may be met with an eye roll, an accusation of being a man-hater, or the assumption that you believe women should somehow be superior to men. For some, feminism has become synonymous with anger, hostility and a desire to swing the pendulum of discrimination in the opposite direction.

I find that deeply troubling. Not because feminism should be immune from criticism, but because we seem to have lost sight of what the movement was fighting for in the first place.
Feminism was never supposed to be about replacing male superiority with female superiority. It was about challenging the very idea that one gender should have superiority over another.

Let's remember our history: Women fought for the right to vote, to own property, to access education, to control their finances and to have a meaningful voice in decisions affecting their lives. Later generations challenged workplace discrimination, unequal pay, violence against women and restrictions on reproductive freedom. Feminism continued to evolve as women from different racial, cultural, economic and social backgrounds challenged the movement to recognize that inequality is not experienced in the same way by everyone.

These were not battles to take rights away from men. They were battles to ensure women could enjoy rights, freedoms and opportunities that men had historically been more likely to possess. That distinction matters. Especially today.

Somewhere in our increasingly polarized public conversations, advocating for women's equality has become confused with opposing men. And yes, there are individuals who use the language of feminism to express contempt for men, dismiss their experiences or suggest that equality can only be achieved by shifting power from one gender to another. We should be willing to challenge those attitudes wherever they appear.

But let's be equally clear: Misandry is not feminism. Just as misogyny is not masculinity.
Neither hatred nor superiority becomes acceptable simply because we change the gender of the person expressing it.

We cannot spend generations challenging harmful stereotypes about women only to embrace equally harmful stereotypes about men. We cannot demand that women's experiences of violence be believed while dismissing male survivors who find the courage to speak. We cannot challenge restrictive expectations placed on women while continuing to tell men that vulnerability is weakness, caregiving is not their responsibility or seeking help makes them less masculine. And we cannot speak meaningfully about gender equality while excluding transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse people from conversations about dignity and human rights.

Human dignity is not a limited resource.
Extending it to someone else does not reduce the amount available to us.
That sentence captures what I believe modern feminism must remember.

Perhaps reclaiming feminism requires responsibility on both sides of the conversation. Society must stop confusing advocacy for women's equality with hostility toward men. And those of us who believe in feminism must be willing to challenge attitudes expressed in its name that undermine the dignity of others. We cannot demand fairness while making exceptions for our own prejudices. Nor should we allow the most divisive voices to define a movement whose history is rooted in expanding human rights.

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A movement should not be defined by its loudest critics. But neither should it be exempt from examining its loudest supporters. This is not about suggesting that everyone bears equal responsibility for the misunderstanding of feminism. It is about recognizing that equality requires consistency, including when that consistency challenges our own assumptions.

Women continue to face significant inequalities. Gender-based violence, economic disadvantage, discrimination and barriers to leadership remain serious concerns in Canada and around the world. Acknowledging the challenges faced by men or gender-diverse people does not diminish those realities. Nor does recognizing women's continued disadvantage mean that every man enjoys privilege or that every woman experiences oppression in the same way.

We should be mature enough to recognize that more than one truth can exist at the same time.

Gloria Steinem and generations of feminist thinkers challenged society to question assumptions about gender that had become so deeply ingrained they seemed natural. That work remains unfinished. We still attach expectations to people based on whether they are male, female or neither. We still make assumptions about who should lead, who should nurture, who should be strong and who should remain silent.

Perhaps the next evolution of feminism requires us to challenge not only the expectations society places on women, but the limitations we continue to place on everyone. A man who advocates for women's rights is not betraying his gender. A woman who advocates for the wellbeing of men is not betraying feminism. And someone who challenges discrimination against gender-diverse people is not diminishing the importance of women's equality.

These are not competing causes. They are expressions of a shared belief that human beings deserve dignity, opportunity, safety and respect.

I would argue that feminism does not need to become less outspoken. Quite the opposite. We need strong voices willing to challenge inequality, violence and discrimination wherever they exist. But strength should not be confused with hostility, and advocacy should not be measured by how effectively we condemn another group.

We did not fight for generations to dismantle discrimination simply to rebuild it with different people holding the power.

Being a feminist in 2026 should not require an apology, a lengthy explanation or a declaration of opposition to men. It should mean believing that gender must never determine someone's worth, rights or opportunities. It should mean challenging discrimination without creating new forms of it. And it should mean recognizing that the advancement of women and the wellbeing of humanity are not opposing ambitions.

Feminism has accomplished extraordinary things, and its work is far from finished. Perhaps one of its greatest opportunities today is to reclaim the conversation from those who insist on turning equality into a battle between genders.

Because feminism is not a bad word.
Discrimination is.

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