

Unravelling the Misconceptions of Feminism as a Bad Word in India

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Abstract

The fear of the 'F' word is real. In a society entrenched with patriarchal values and beliefs, the words 'feminism' and 'feminist' have negative connotation. It is due to the popular perception that feminists are a species who hates men. While many women and men in the contemporary world understand gender equality, they refuse to associate themselves with the term. In fact, it has become a hard label to bear and carry. This paper is an attempt to dislodge the wrong notions of feminism—that feminists are radical, man-hating, bra-burning, and even worse. It is high time that girls/women boys/men understand the significance of the term. Gender studies should be part of the school curriculum. It is understandable that it is difficult for teachers to cram decades of struggles into 12 years of study. Curriculum planners should take to devise a grade-by-grade plan. As feminism is not just a female phenomenon, male students should be involved as well. This shift would be very good to dispel the idea that only women are feminists. It would be one of the best ways to prepare a new generation of women and men to fight against inequality.

Keywords: feminism, feminists, gender studies, school curriculum, inequality

Feminism is a genuine crusade. It has been one of the most far-reaching movements of this century, whose influence is felt in every area of social, political and cultural life worldwide. Indeed, feminism has achieved the dubious distinction of becoming an utterly familiar part of our cultural landscape. Most urban Indians are familiar with the word "Feminism", but the understanding of it remains vague and to a great extent we pay lip service to it. For the rest of the nation, feminism remains something 'out-there' rather than an internalized, actualized belief. This step motherly treatment is due to the misconception and misinterpretation of the term 'Feminism'.

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Adichie in her essay “We Should All Be Feminists” points out the string of negative associations to the term ‘feminism’. She says,

Feminist is so heavy with baggage, negative baggage: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should always be in charge, you don’t wear make-up, you don’t shave, you’re always angry, you don’t have a sense of humour, you don’t use deodorant.

It is high time to dislodge the wrong notions of feminism—that feminists are radical, man hating, bra-burning, and even worse. The biggest problem of feminism is the misconstrued inclination that, it is an exclusive domain of women, that is, anti male. It is against patriarchy and not men. It is about stopping certain actions and not stopping certain people. It focuses on anybody who spins down to this toxic system. People fail to understand that the objective of the movement is to advance gender equality.

Gender issues are not women’s issues alone. We need to understand that ‘femininity’ does not exist in isolation from masculinity. Both men and women need to develop the positive “masculine” and “feminine” traits in themselves and these values are human values. Most men cannot live up to the notions of hegemonic masculinity. They are ridiculed for being effeminate if they are not aggressive. Gentle boys are pushed around and sexually exploited by stronger, macho men. In Barack Obama’s words,

We need to keep changing the attitude that raises our girls to be demure and our boys to be assertive, that criticizes our daughters for speaking out and our sons for shedding a tear. We need to keep changing the attitude that punishes women for their sexuality and rewards men for theirs.

Gender equality requires each one of us to be strong and caring, fearless and sensitive, emotional and rational. It requires nothing short of bringing about a balance in the positive “male” and the positive “female” within each one of us. It can be achieved only when if men and women give up their lust for power and domination, give up misusing their power and get rid of their powerlessness, subservience and submissiveness. Awareness is the first step to initiate this change.

Teaching feminism in school might be a great way to bring out a change in young minds. Gender studies should be part of the school curriculum. It is high time that girls/women boys/men understand the significance of the term. It would help students to break the stereotypes, free themselves from the hard shackles of the society, challenge the conscious and unconscious biases children grew up with and prepare a new generation women and men to fight for equality. Learning about the history of women’s movement and how it is relevant today might help create good citizens, good human beings and good advocates for all marginalized groups.

It is understandable that it is difficult for teachers to cram decades of struggles into 12 years of study. Curriculum planners should take steps to make changes in lesson plans. Teachers and parents should devise new ways to combat gender bias and its long-term implications. Deconstruction of fairy tales, retelling of myths and omission of sexist rhymes are few ways through which feminism can be inculcated in young minds.

Fairy tales play an important role in projecting stereotypes of how a girl/woman should be and they perpetuate bias. The Princess is depicted as a sleeping beauty or a damsel in distress who needs to be saved by Prince Charming. Such portrayals create a negative idea that the sole purpose of her existence is to find her Prince Charming. Girls are disillusioned by romance, fantasy and supernatural elements in fairy tales. They fail to understand that fairy tales are completely removed from reality and life is not a cakewalk.

Books that set their standards high should replace such fairytales. Michelle Roehm McLann's *Girls Who Rocked The World: Heroines from Joan Of Arc to Mother Teresa* is a collection of inspiring stories that provides illustrated examples of strong and independent female role models. Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo's *Good Night Stories For Rebel Girls* is another interesting book that talks about the Princess who didn't marry Prince charming but instead went on to be an astronaut and the Queen who was in charge of the kingdom. It introduces us to hundred remarkable women and their extraordinary lives from Ada Lovelace to Malala and Elizabeth I to Serena Williams. Such stories will help girls understand that this world is their oyster where they can achieve incredible things. More importantly, boys would recognize that "Frailty, Thy name is Woman" is a wrong ideology that has been ingrained in the minds for generations together. Girls should be taught to worry less about fitting into glass shoes and more about shattering glass ceilings.

Retelling of mythology is essential because they are fabricated and the truths are distorted. For example, Volga's "The liberation of Sita" is a powerful subversion of India's most popular tale of Sita and Ram. Sita embarks on an arduous journey to self-realization. This book opens up new spaces within the old discourse, enabling women to review their lives and experience afresh.

Students should be encouraged to take non-traditional choices. The compartmentalization of tasks based on gender should be discouraged. Sewing, gardening and cooking are not just "girls-thing"; on the other hand, adventure and martial arts are not just for boys. We should offer them equal opportunities to explore different fields and resist the idea that a child's gender may affect an ability to work in an area of interest. Girls and boys can involve in activities that help them bring a step closer to an egalitarian utopia with the help of books like Bonnie Burton's *Crafting With Feminism: 25 Girl-Powered projects to Smash the Patriarchy* and Gemma Correll's *Feminist Activity Book*.

Like fairy tales, Nursery Rhymes have sexist overtones. Some rhymes are full of massive amount of language that is extremely sexist. For example, "Chubby cheeks, Dimple Chin" is a rhyme that emphasises on certain yardsticks that are required to be "beautiful". Such rhymes continue to perpetuate the false notion that being fair is beautiful. Boys and girls should be taught to accept themselves as they are.

Kamla Bhasin in her book titled *Housework is Everyone's Work --- Rhymes for Just and Happy Families* noted "most books were about boys and men, about their brave deeds, adventures, aspirations and ambitions... On the other hand, whenever girls and women found a place in these books, they were housekeepers." In this book, Bhasin features 20 rhymes which provide an alternative narrative – depicting fathers doing housework and changing nappies and women playing cricket and going out to work. This depiction of reversal of roles will help children understand that there is dignity in every labour and it should not be discriminated based on gender.

Like Fairy tales and Rhymes, Movies play an important role in mirroring the society in various dimensions. Movies are a fantastic medium to teach children. They can learn so much from the movie – the good, bad and ugly. Animated children’s movies have more to offer to boys when compared to the other gender. Movies like Snow White, Cinderella and Tangled have more of girl audience. These movies usually follow a similar plot, for example, the heroin attracts sympathy from all, finding romantic love, a need of rescuing from any physical or emotional danger and a brave handsome prince.

Children should be encouraged to watch few other children movies like Brave, Mulan, Ponyo, Matilda, Mary Poppins, Annie, Mary Kom etc. which challenge the traditional princess pattern and offer a new perspective. The title characters in these movies epitomize intelligence, poise, kindness, goodness, courage and charity. When viewed through the feminist lens, it becomes evident that these movies make a great progress in resisting patriarchy and offer young girls and boys a different picture from other traditionally seen in media.

Centuries of stereotyping, family attitudes, women’s magazines, movies and TV commercials have brainwashed us to live by a ‘truth’ that is no longer appropriate. It is the need of the hour to break free from wrong ideologies that are nailed into our skull. Raising a feminist means raising a child who looks for these disparities in our society and instead of accepting them as a social norm, sets out to eradicate them. It is the understanding that we live in an unfair, hetero-patriarchal society and that the children/students have the power to change that and redefine how our culture looks at gender inequalities. It is raising someone who wants to be part of the solution and not a part of the problem, and this comes by first admitting and then teaching children that there is a problem and that there is a solution. This shift would be one of the best ways to prepare a new generation of women and men to fight against inequality.

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