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The F Word

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As a British exchange student here at Iowa State, I frequently tackle the question, “What’s most different about your home university, compared to us?” Often falling upon surprised ears, my answer is feminism—or rather, the lack of it here in Ames. Am I looking nostalgically back across the Atlantic with rose-tinted glasses while criticising the students of ISU more than deserved? Almost certainly—we exchangers love doing that.

However, I can’t remember living in a time or place where the F-word was more of a taboo than it is right here, right now.

What’s so ominous about this word which so succinctly describes the theory that both genders are equal? I believe answers can be found by prodding the unenthusiastic majority while studying the passionate minority. In any argument, it is vital to know your opponent’s case as well—if not better—than your own.

**Living By Numbers**

When I drop the F-bomb on a fellow guy, he most commonly retaliates by looking as though I’ve just disclosed the details of a forthcoming jihadist plot. After being confronted by such extremism, most female friends of mine look a little less grave, but equally puzzled.

So I took to the floors of the Memorial Union and terrorized 200 innocent people with two questions—“What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘feminism’?” and “Are you a feminist?”

Less than a quarter of men and just over a third of women identified with the word. Of those who answered that first question, 40 percent of men and 20 percent of women immediately equated feminism with very extreme, undesirable views.
“I support women’s rights, not bitterness,” remarked one man. “Chicks with hairy armpits,” suggested another.

Similar wisdom was imparted by their female peers—“No, I don’t favor women; I’m equal both ways,” one student told me. “I believe in equal rights, but some people go too far.”

A similar survey, conducted by OnePoll in the U.K., can offer some transatlantic perspective. Of 1,000 British adults questioned, 25 percent of men and 47 percent of women considered themselves feminists. Importantly, this poll was conducted on city streets—not inside a university building.

While it would be difficult to find an ISU student who would not advocate equality, it seems that feminism currently carries a trunk full of baggage. However, abstaining from taking the driving seat with regard to feminist issues is going to get us nowhere, and I believe equality is further along the road than most people realize.

**Man-Haters**

Women here have every right to be angry about an oppressive social climate where “slutty” is as common an adjective as they’re ever likely to hear. But confronting perpetrators in a rage will do more harm than good. My introductory question—“What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘feminism’?”—was more than once met by a sharp, monosyllabic response—“Hate.”

The negative stigma carried by feminism needs to be jettisoned. To achieve this, relating with the reluctant—rather than vilifying them—is crucial. Though at times this may be a steep request, it is essential that feminists continue to invite others up to their high moral ground.

I have never met a female feminist who desires to deter men from association with the word. However, I have met many—who through tone of speech and the targets they choose—do. Usually the ferocity with which a feminist point is argued is the deterrent, not the point itself.

Feminists’ anger is of course reactive, not proactive. But the sad truth is that we young, white, straight, English-speaking males—who have never once been subjected to discrimination of any kind—are slow to empathize with such indignance. I can only speculate that if we were stood next to a third gender (30 pounds heavier on average, with an irritating habit of rape), we’d be a little more sympathetic.

Even still, unity between the sexes is crucial. As Emma Watson stated in her 2014 United Nations speech:

“How can we affect change in the world, when only half of it are invited, or feel welcome to participate in the conversation?”

The majority of ISU students regard feminism as associating with a group of people rather than supporting an idea. As realized by HeForShe, this must change—feminism is not a members-only club, and “misandry” is not the password.

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**Men vs Women**

On this campus, female superiority is another of the most popular—and dangerous—misconceptions of feminism. One survey participant informed me that feminism was “the negative belief that women are better than men.” There is no faster way to stir a young American man into opposition than to step on his competitive nerve. Feminists need to tread carefully, so as not to peddle an “us against them” mentality.

Again, if there is a female feminist who intends to do this, I certainly have never met her. Nevertheless, when it comes to the method and attitude with which arguments are pursued, lighter footsteps are often necessary in order for both sexes to move forward as one.

Competition with other countries ought to supersede any competition between the sexes. In order to maintain its status as a powerful economy, the U.S. needs to empower its women. According to the study “Women on U.S. Boards,” conducted by Ernst and Young, America has considerably more CEOs named “John” than female CEOs. An increased talent pool awaits any company willing to take the plunge. When a nation’s best prospective engineers and nurses actually become engineers and nurses respectively, regardless of their gender, an economic boom is inevitable.

Gender may not be as critical in influencing how we think—or the professions we excel in—as previous generations have believed. Indeed, the comprehensive and recently published paper “Gender Similarities,” co-authored by Iowa State’s own Zlatan Krizan, states:

“People may assume that males and females differ psychologically to a similar extent that they differ physically. (...) across most topic areas in psychological science, the difference between males and females is small or very small.”

Lurking inside each and every one of our engineering buildings is a male/female ratio capable of killing any party. Six to one, to be exact. Rather than being accepted as an unavoidable and natural occurrence, this imbalance could more insightfully be viewed as a product of subtle—but sustained—sexism.

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**The Feminist and the Sexist**

I’m sexist. I sometimes still feel a pang of competition whenever women around me outperform men. However, I don’t feel this admission should compromise my stance as a feminist. I believe this unusual statement can be justified by relativity. By 2015’s standards, I am not sexist. But relative to how things ought to be, I am. My future children and grandchildren will regard me as more and more sexist in turn—indeed I hope they do, as this would signify social change.

Embracing this elusive “F-word” is an unskippable stepping stone towards equality. It can only benefit men—our economy would improve, not subjugating half of earth’s population would be great for our reputation amongst future generations, and no longer would the wasteland to the west of Parks Library be such a sausage fest.

I questioned one man whose words struck me—“I’m not on either side.”

There is no merit in turning your head the other way, no maturity to be displayed by refusing to take sides. Nothing harms equality more than the belief that only bad people cause inequality. If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.

I’m a feminist. Are you?