

Why I am a Feminist

My journey to feminism began in the vibrant, cosmopolitan city of Montréal, Québec, at the age of 18, when I moved there to attend McGill University. The stark contrast between my upbringing in a conservative, predominantly Anglo-Protestant town on the banks of the Saint John River in New Brunswick, Canada, could not have been more profound. The city of Fredericton was rooted in old British traditions, quiet, and homogenous, while Montréal—multicultural, progressive, and intellectually stimulating—offered a radically different world. To be fair, while my mother came from a strict Anglo-Catholic upbringing of mixed Spanish-Filipino and Scottish heritage, she had an adventurous spirit, leaving her home in Manila to sail across the world by herself as a young woman. She was, and remains, a strong, opinionated woman who defied many conventional expectations. My father, from humble Scots-Irish and Dutch Quaker roots, had expanded his worldview during his own time in Montréal in the 1960s. Despite this, nothing could have prepared me for the transformative experiences I would encounter in this new city.

At McGill, as a bookish, naïve straight guy, I suddenly found myself surrounded by a rich diversity of cultures, religions, languages, and sexual identities. This was both captivating and overwhelming. One of the first people to introduce me to feminism was my friend Sarah, whose liberal, secular Jewish parents were from upstate New York. Through Sarah, I met women deeply committed to dismantling patriarchy and advocating for women's rights. I didn't initially grasp the concept of "the patriarchy," but I felt drawn to their cause.

I eagerly participated in their meetings and activism, though some women were understandably skeptical of a self-identified heterosexual male joining their cause (though I spent a lot of time in gay bars—at least there, men could dance!). A pivotal moment came when I objected, albeit mildly, to a campaign featuring stickers that read, "Look at How You Look at Her." By then, I had started studying feminist theory and concepts like the "male gaze" and the objectification of women's bodies. But as a Romantic who valued beauty—especially the beauty of women—I struggled with the implied puritanism. Was lust inherently problematic? I wanted to appreciate and desire women without reducing them to mere objects. Was there a way to do this respectfully? To riff on the great Emma Goldman: *If I can't desire, it's not my revolution.*

From an early age, I connected with women—not just because of their beauty but because I found them smarter, more grounded, and generally more enjoyable to be around. This gave me confidence in my own heterosexuality, even though I could also appreciate the beauty in men (to this day, I have a fetish for lean muscle). My closest friends growing up were often girls. They seemed to have an empathy and depth that my male friends lacked, which influenced my understanding of gender and sexuality in ways I didn't fully comprehend at the time.

As an undergraduate, I pursued joint honors in anthropology and political theory. Anthropology introduced me to cultural relativism, broadening my view of gender and sexuality across cultures.

Political theory taught me about humanism, equal rights, and alternative visions of freedom and equality. Alongside my academic studies, I devoured feminist thought—from Mary Wollstonecraft and the Seneca Falls Convention to Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Gloria Steinem. I explored radical feminism, too, with figures like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon challenging my assumptions. I leaned more toward liberal and Third Wave feminism but found radical feminism, like Shulamith Firestone’s work—and the Combahee River Collective Statement¹—compelling for its discomfiting ideas. I began to see the need to challenge the comfort of people like me.

A few years later, I returned to McGill for graduate studies in religious studies after pursuing a Master’s in social and political theory at Cambridge University. While teaching a popular course on Sexual Ethics, which examined gender and sexuality across global religious traditions, I saw a growing interest in discussions about gender and sexuality. The course exploded from a modest enrollment to 670 students in two weeks, in part due to my eccentric teaching style—appearing on the first day in a cape, holding a candle, inspired by Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut*. I was particularly pleased to have more than 300 young men in the course; having a young, male instructor no doubt helped, as did the fact that there were nearly 400 young women in the room, eager to discuss sex.

So, why am I a feminist? I like to turn that question around and ask, with Chimamanda Adichie: *why isn’t everyone?* What possible reason could anyone have for not supporting a movement rooted in the fundamental belief that all people deserve equal respect and dignity?

I understand the confusion—many mistake feminism for misandry, a harmful and false stereotype. Even some women hesitate to call themselves feminists, fearing the anti-male label. Others—particularly men—see women’s empowerment as a threat, as if gains for women must come at men’s expense. But this zero-sum view of power only reinforces the very patriarchy we need to dismantle. Let’s be clear: the answer isn’t simply putting more women in power. The “Girlboss” approach does little to challenge the deeply flawed, often irredeemable political and economic systems built on competition and hierarchy. Feminism is about far more than equal pay—it’s about equality in all its forms: social, cultural, economic, and emotional. Feminism isn’t just a political stance—it’s a fundamental commitment to human dignity. And perhaps most important, a call to *solidarity*.

¹ This powerful document, published by a group of Black American lesbian socialist feminists in April 1977, stands as a foundational articulation of what we now call intersectional feminism. It incisively reveals the limitations of any feminist worldview that fails to reckon with the intersecting oppressions of race and class. The only line I take issue with appears at the end, where they quote Robin Morgan’s remark: “I haven’t the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power.” While I understand the sentiment—and acknowledge that white straight men have caused much of the world’s suffering, particularly in modernity—I reject the ontological essentialism embedded in that claim, just as I do in Afro-pessimist thought. After all, the authors themselves invoke the positive influence of Karl Marx!