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## OF MISUNDERSTOOD FEMINISM AND MISDIRECTED CRITIQUES

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### ABSTRACT

*The current compulsions of disowning feminism have their roots in many factors from misunderstanding the movement to the unsavory rants of radical feminists to the systematic inducement of guilt by vested interests. But the bottom line is that women are nowhere near their destination. If even progressive societies still have glass ceilings, there is little hope that a country like India will see gender equality soon. The conundrum here is that the entire movement is being discredited as either vulgar or passé, and when the movement itself is discredited, there is little scope of it generating a good debate from which we can expect some concrete outcomes. . . Whether men like it or not, the issues of women have arisen out of a patriarchal framework. If they refuse to participate in the process of the empowerment of women, it is a given that the movement will remain confined to conference rooms. The disowning of feminism is hurting society, and thus it is in the interests of all strata of society to address it collectively.*

**KEYWORDS:** *misunderstanding, feminism, systematic inducement of guilt.*

### INTRODUCTION

***“The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.”***– Pat Robertson (Media Mogul, Politician and Influential Opinion Maker)

Feminism is perhaps the most misunderstood movement of recent years, making it more counterproductive than productive. It is not uncommon to find women who are almost apologetic of their peers who openly declare themselves feminist, only to affirm that they are not feminists per se, it's just that they would like women to have the same rights as their male counterparts. And therein lies the contradiction. The Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary (besides many other reputed dictionaries) simply defines feminism as 'the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state'. Why this becomes an agenda so hostile that someone with Pat Robertson's capacity for influencing opinion should label it as quoted above makes for an interesting study. This paper profiles the reasons why feminism is misunderstood, why it makes women apologetic and why it gets such a bad name.

**Feminism vs. Misandry:** Misandry is not a word much in use. In fact, it is not even recognized by MS Word which underlines it red when typed. However, one would be loath to suspect the existence of a word just because a certain software is not familiar with it. So, then, just as 'gyn' (and there's the familiar red line again) derives from the Greek *gunē* meaning female, andr (yes, underlined red once more) derives from the Greek root *anēr*. The roots serve as prefixes for a number of words pertaining to women and men respectively – gynecologist, gynarchy, androgen, androsterone, etc. Thus, when one

talks of a misogynist meaning a person who hates women, a misandrist would be someone who hates men (Nathanson, Young: 2006).

In the debate between those on either side of the fence, it is often the case that the two sides are arguing two different things altogether. What most people can't deal with is a misandrist – not a feminist. In fact, most women and many men believe in equal rights and opportunities for women. But the same people (and particularly men) would recoil if called feminists. Feminism for many is a hatred of men, plain and simple. Yet, really, it is misogyny that is getting confused with feminism.

For obvious reasons, misandrists tend to be more vocal and more radical than feminists in their approach to the whole issue of women's status vis-à-vis men in society today. And since it is their voice that is often heard above the din, it is the one that gets mistaken for that of rational people advocating a most logical position – that of equality of men and women. Thus, it is important to distinguish between feminism and misogyny if we are to find the voice of reason. It is the misandrists who are men-haters, not the feminists.

**Feminist vs. Effeminate:** The other set of attributes that has people confused is 'feminist' and 'effeminate'. The two terms are often understood and used synonymously though their meanings are vastly different. A feminist, as discussed earlier, stands for equal power, opportunity and rights to women, whereas an effeminate person is a man who is feminine in gestures and intonation, and has what are considered feminine characteristics. (The line dividing masculinity and femininity is not always razor sharp, but that is a whole different debate. For the purpose of this paper, it would be more expedient to consider the two as watertight compartments.) By confusing the two terms, even men who support equal rights for women would be offended if called feminists. It is, unfortunately, seen as a challenge to their masculinity to align with feminism. The terrible (and irrational, and unfair) stigma enveloping the LGBT community is in large measure responsible for the fear of having one's sexual orientation disputed – being called a feminist thus becomes equivalent to the hurling of abuse instead of being a compliment! Small wonder, then, that feminism gets such bad press.

**The Market Value of Sensationalism:** The above point leads directly to the reason why the harshest voices are either articulated or heard. It is a well known tenet of journalism that sensationalism sells. Thus, for the marginalized feminists (and the term is used with judicious care) sometimes the only way to be 'different' is to be radical. Since most of what they want to say has already been said, a way must be found to become noticeable. Thus, the more outrageous the slander against men, the more likely it is to raise the hackles of male dominated society. Such 'feminists' are often only looking for an opportunity to be in the limelight, and succeed spectacularly when they spew their venom (Lay, Daley: 2008).

The corollary is equally true. Because feminism essentially goes against the grain of the deeply entrenched patriarchal structure of society, there is always that disgruntled male quarter that feels affronted by the malicious tirades of misandrists. The ensuing shouting match does a disservice to both – sincere feminists whose standpoint is most logical and reasonable, as well as men who agree with this standpoint but find stereotypical labels offending. Thus, instead of a reasoned debate which would help things move along faster and in a more streamlined fashion, the result is hostility on both sides – men because they feel women indulge in generalized judgmentalism, and women because men dig their heels in when they feel the onslaught of unreasonable disparagement.

**Insecure Men:** Women getting an equal stake in social, economic and political affairs certainly means taking away from men. After all, it is only slightly more than a century since women started participating at all in matters outside the confines of the home, and 100% (or nearly that much) of the world's affairs were run by men before that. When women start storming more and more bastions, they do so at the cost of men who would otherwise have been running the show. For instance, even a simple thing like one woman driver on the Mumbai locals means one man less in the train driver's seat. The inroads women have been making in the career department have had to be made by eating into the

existent pie. While it is possible to argue that the participation of women has made the pie bigger, it is not easily demonstrable how much it has grown by. And it is quite realistic to say that the percentage of women joining the workforce is not in exact direct proportion to the growth of the economy.

So there is a ring of truth to the charge that women have been 'stealing' men's jobs. But then, is this not a case of taking back what is rightfully theirs? Since women have ably demonstrated that they are equally capable and efficient, the question of whether they should join the workforce is really moot. It only means that the society as a whole has missed out on being more productive so far because it decided to keep its women out. By being more inclusive, society can only benefit.

This brings us to the likes of Pat Robertson who would like nothing more than to go back to 18<sup>th</sup> century and see women comfortably ensconced in the warmth of the hearth. Since it is now firmly established that there is no logically coherent reason why this should be so, it can only be concluded that men who engage in rants against feminism are doing so not just out of a refusal to look upon women as their equal partners, but also that this refusal itself stems from the insecurity arising out of a very real fear of fringe-men being pushed beyond the edge altogether. Yet, if inefficient fringe-men are being pushed out in favour of more efficient women, then it is perhaps important to remind insecure men that this not the time to count individual losses. It is far more fruitful to count societal gains.

**The 'What about those poor kids?' Argument:** Traditionally, the rearing and nurturing of children has been the responsibility of women. However, as women take on responsibilities outside the four walls of their homes, they are able to devote less time to their traditional roles. This has given feminism bashers, to their mind, a very solid argument against women asking for equal opportunities. What about the children, they ask. Who will take care of them? Who will feed them when they come home hungry? Who will teach them to be good citizens? Well, first, studies have conclusively proven (Hoffman: 1998; Bibangard, Hatami: 2014) that working women's children become more independent and better equipped to negotiate the world at a younger age than those of homemakers. Second, children of working mothers feel a measure of pride in the fact that their mother amounts to something in society. Third, and more important than anything else, working mothers' sons generally develop a healthy respect for women and are more likely to succeed in relationships later in life, thus making for a more stable society. Those 'poor kids' don't get such a raw deal after all.

Incidentally, research has also shown that although men still don't contribute equally in household chores, homes with working mothers has seen a rise in men's participation. The situation is far from ideal, but it has been amply demonstrated that it is possible for men to be involved in the rearing and nurturing of children, thus paving the way for women's empowerment.

Practically, though, most working women are unaware of the research surrounding wrongful guilt induced by staying away from children for long hours. This guilt is more a product of upbringing and societal expectations than being grounded in reality. It prevents women from taking pride in what they do, obliges them to take jobs that are less demanding on their time and makes them more compromising than warranted. As a result, they risk being labeled as less committed to their jobs, non-ambitious and non-serious. This negativity surrounding women in the workforce is often the reason many women go out of the way to distance themselves from feminism. After all, nobody wants to say that they are working at the cost of their children. The irony is, they are not – they would be doing a greater service to themselves, their children and society at large by looking at their work in a more balanced way.

**Discussion:** The current compulsions of disowning feminism have their roots in many factors from misunderstanding the movement to the unsavory rants of radical feminists to the systematic inducement of guilt by vested interests. But the bottom line is that women are nowhere near their destination. If even progressive societies still have glass ceilings, there is little hope that a country like India will see gender equality soon. The conundrum here is that the entire movement is being discredited as either vulgar or passé, and when the movement itself is discredited, there is little scope of it generating a good debate from which we can expect some concrete outcomes. Discussions on

women's issues usually take place among women in hushed tones. Seminars and conferences organized along these lines see attendance only by women. Even ministries of women's welfare are always headed by women with the justification that women are able to understand women's problems better. But is this not tantamount to staying away because men don't consider women's problems to be their own too? Whether men like it or not, the issues of women have arisen out of a patriarchal framework. If they refuse to participate in the process of the empowerment of women, it is a given that the movement will remain confined to conference rooms. The disowning of feminism is hurting society, and thus it is in the interests of all strata of society to address it collectively.

However, after all is said, we still need to contend with the fact that the subject of gender equality is a tricky one. Is equality really possible? Would men in the near future be able to bear children and thus take on the responsibility of women? Would men and women then take turns at it and thus miss equal days of work? Would men run home from work because they have to breastfeed their newborn? Many such hypothetical questions are thrown at feminists to drive home the point that what they are asking for is completely impractical. However, this is a little like saying that a woman should insist that she eat exactly as much as her husband because she wants equality, or that she would take exactly the same number of steps in a day as her husband – no less and no more. This can really be taken to ridiculous levels if the agenda is to sidestep the issue entirely. On the other hand, a more reasoned approach would see biological differences offset by men's empathy. Men who genuinely feel that both sexes deserve an equitable role in society will find ways of compensating women for the role biology has entrusted women with.

**Recommendations:** As with most other societal issues, here too, the buck stops at education. As far back as 1979, feminist writer Jo Freeman had advocated the inclusion of gender issues in universities. As things stood, some universities offered optional courses in gender studies which could be taken for additional credit. In most universities, though, these courses were missing. The situation is not far different even today. Freeman argued that by permitting or even encouraging courses on women, universities can make some very real gains. Many universities have now made environmental studies mandatory. There is no reason why the same cannot be done with women's issues as well.

In fact, the earlier the process of sensitization starts, the more effective it can be. As of now, children's textbooks are replete with examples like 'Gita goes to school. Her mother cooks delicious food for her. She packs Gita's lunchbox. Gita's father drives her to school.' This is gender stereotyping at its worst. All references that imply that the home is the domain of the woman and the outdoors belongs to the man must go away immediately. Ideally, schools should incorporate gender studies in their curriculum and a sustained effort must be made all through an individual's educational journey to ensure that children grow up to be responsible adults who take pride in their partnership with their own sex as well as with the opposite one. In this sense, it would be quite in keeping with societal necessity today to integrate feminism in our education system.

And one last word to all who accuse feminism and feminists of upsetting the balance – if feminists really were against men, they would fight for complete dominion, not equality! The very fact that feminism indulges in a discourse of equality indicates that far from being men haters, women would like to be on the same platform as their male counterparts as partners, not antagonists. Surely, then, feminism is an inclusive term and not an exclusive one as its detractors would like to suggest. Disowning its tenets would mean a tango of one step forward, two steps back.

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