

# Feminism as Freedom from Gender Roles

by Veronica Nowakowski



As a transgender individual – I was born male and identify more as female – I may take a different view on feminism than some others. There are several waves of feminism, each defining it as something different. I define it based on its roots: as a fight to free women from the constraints of a male hierarchy.

However, as Hegel pointed out with his master and slave dialectic, and later Marx with his capitalist and worker dialectic, these power relationships enslave not only those who are at the bottom, but they also enslave those at the top who are benefiting from it. Therefore, as feminism starts to hit pitfalls with society again, the way to move forward is to remove the social expectations of both men and women alike.

One of these earlier waves of feminism glorifies masculinity and insists that women have the right to be masculine too. Followers of this wave are often every bit as chauvinistic as the male brethren they call chauvinist pigs, except

that they act as if females are superior. Furthermore, they expect men to fully act masculine, shame women for acting feminine, and, thus, create a paradox. If men are supposed to act in a certain way and fulfill certain roles in a relationship, how can a woman be free to do the same if they're in a relationship with a man -- fraternal, romantic, familial, or otherwise? A man who doesn't fulfill his role of masculinity is shameful; and so he must outpace masculine women. In this dynamic, women always remain one step behind. Even worse, what if a woman isn't masculine on the inside? She is bound to these new gender roles and expectations to act masculine -- even hyper-masculine -- because femininity is seen as a weakness.

Feminism today must be, essentially, anti-sexist. We have to abolish gender roles and see men and women as fundamentally the same; equal, even if not equivalent. We know we're probably not going to see pregnant men in the future and that there are genetic differences between the two sexes, and of course we can't

ignore our intersex brethren whose genetic coding transgresses the standard male-female duality.

Much of the differentiation between men and women is societal. Society says that men have to act macho to impress their mates and that a woman cannot overshadow their mate. That same society says that men have to be the breadwinners and women the caretakers. In order to free ourselves from these gender roles and expectations, we have to free men to be secure in staying home to tend the home or to show their emotional side. By freeing men to be more feminine, it frees up women to be more masculine.

In the same thought, it's important to note that there is nothing implicitly wrong with femininity, whether expressed by a man or a woman. In their extremes, femininity may be too passive and masculinity too aggressive. Balance between the two – assertiveness -- is the ideal; and I would even second that on spiritual grounds. However, you cannot force someone to be something that they are not and get positive results. Those who are more feminine by nature must be free to act feminine, and those who are more masculine must be free to act masculine – as long as it is kept in check. For example, someone who is feminine and is being abused must be encouraged to stand up to the abuser, and someone who is masculine and is abusing must stop, in spite of "nature." But these are extremes.

Our current society is one of extreme masculinity. Women who adopt masculine traits or dress are applauded, while men who adopt feminine traits or dress are shamed. In many ways, this is the story of the transgender individual. Beyond that, modern capitalism is a very masculine system encapsulating masculine values. You take what you can pry away or fool others out of, and there is no shame in that. It's this mindset that leads to wars of imperial conquest in order to take more from those who are weaker.

Communalism would be the feminine counterpart, where everyone is given the same no matter what – everyone is taken care of, regardless of their contribution. Both approaches have led to failure; poverty and unemployment are rampant in the United States, and there was massive famine in China when Mao's vision of communal farm life took hold.

Socialism is a system of balance, where one's contribution dictates the outcome, but those who are truly unable to fend for themselves are taken care of by society. In this way, perhaps it is like me -- slightly favoring the feminine. In socialism, one is assertive: neither allowing their rights to be trampled nor allowing oneself to trample the rights of others. Because of this, socialism and feminism are innately interwo-

ven. The advancement of either true socialism or true feminism will bring out the other; as a rising consciousness one will raise the consciousness of the other.

As socialists, it is our duty to also work to abolish gender roles in all forms. This ensures the freedom and promotes the happiness and wellbeing of each member of society. At the same time, it promotes a mindset of balance where people do not feel compelled to live out gender roles in their economic lives, where there are exploiters and the exploited. Though individuals may favor the characteristics of one or the other based on their gender identities, there will be nothing compelling them but their inner selves. Feminism and socialism may not be one and the same, but their fates are bound just the same.

## GUERRILLA WHINING

This poem is pounding on the door of your perceptions, groveling at the knees of your conscience.

I offer you the precarious kiss of reality:  
the work of the homeless—to survive one more night,  
the limiting nature of nuclear incident,  
the criminality of our prejudices,  
the arrogance of our wealth.

The monsters of commerce call to us and we respond,  
choking on \$12.95 wine and caraway crackers.  
The whites of the world's eyes  
are blushing with exhaustion.  
Good people have calloused lips from sucking the blame  
out of the tall, frosted glasses  
held by congressmen and princes.

We want to be dauntless in an era that begs us to forget,  
to ignore Iraq, Abu Grahb, New Orleans.  
The fragile white palm of a politician's hand,  
forever urging the bloody adventures onward,  
waving as the world's warring stride off to meet,  
is the palm no one touches. We only imagine it and still it  
pushes, directs, encourages and waves "goodbye."

Larry Levis says, "terror is a complete state of understanding."  
I get that. I agree with that.

Politics is a meaningless famine; it gives us  
the necessary vocabulary to discuss our new myths.  
It is compensatory collateral that makes of us  
sheep children, floating in nameless liquid,  
in clear glass jars on the shelves of fucking hell.

*from the book "Learning By Rote" by Martina Reisz Newberry,  
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