

Developing a feminism identity: a father's role

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



In 1986, Gloria Steinem wrote a satire about what the world would be like if men menstruated. She argued that in such a world men would brag about being a "three-pad man," tampons and sanitary napkins would be given out for free by the government, and women would carry the stigma of lacking this great gift of menstruation. She states, "In short, the characteristics of the powerful, whatever they may be, are thought to be better than the characteristics of the powerless - and logic has nothing to do with it." Upon my first reading of that article I shared in the anger, the irony, and the raging pleasure of it. At the end of the article, Gloria argued that, "In fact, if men could menstruate, the power justifications could probably go on forever. If we let them (1986)." In that sentence, I heard the unmistakable call she was issuing to women. She was calling them to uncover their eyes to the misogynistic cultural artifacts that many women are brought up in society to accept. However, years later, when I set out to write this essay on how I became a feminist and the role men played in that identity, I began to look at Gloria's article in a different light. Beyond the anger and sarcasm was a call for equality...a call that I believe was directed at men. Today, Gloria Steinem, through the Ms. Foundation for Women, continues to seek men's involvement in her crusade for gendered equality. In April 2003 the Ms. Foundation will transition their Take Your Daughters to Work Day program to Take Your Daughters and Sons to Work Day. Men's involvement, education, and healing are essential to the goals of feminism. In fact, feminist men have influenced the person and political activist I have grown to be. I was five years old the first time my dad took me to work with him. His office was a library of amphibians, both in books and jars. My dad was a professor of

biology at an all-woman's college. At that early age I began to appreciate the education of women. "I realized how important feminism is because you were born," my dad would say, a syringe in one hand, a salamander in the other. The women who filled the lecture halls amazed me with their knowledge, confidence, and beauty. Just as my dad's feminism started with me, my feminism began to bud in his classroom, listening to his lectures when I was five. As a feminist, my two greatest enemies are misogyny and ignorance, which I believe lead to inequality and oppression. As a feminist, these are the monsters I battle. Because feminists have often been demonized as man-hating, femininity-denying, tradition-rejecting, family-disoriented women, it is hard to conceptualize the idea of a feminist man, or even men's involvement in feminism. These stereotypes enforce confusion, antagonism between the sexes, and miss the point of feminism all together: equality. The popular antagonistic portrayal of men and women through feminism, in essence, makes equality seem like a radical idea. First and foremost, feminism is about equality; it has stretched itself to envelope not only gender, but also class, race, sexuality, and even animal rights. Fighting Feminisms I have been trying to find feminism for most of my life. Although my introduction to feminism was through my father—who sought to instill in me his interpretation of the feminist ideals of the 1970s—as I grew up and educated myself in the feminist lessons of my own era, I began to realize the dichotomy in which my father's feminism existed. While my father championed feminism for my sake, he did not do so for his own sake. While he could recognize the many disadvantages of women, he could not see his own privilege; a privilege that often caused those very disadvantages.

Because of this, feminism in my life has often been marked by confusion and fraught with tension. The seeming oxymoron of a feminist man has continuously haunted me because the most notable champion of feminism in my life has been my father. In what follows, I will document my growth within feminism through my own experience. Feminism is a unique form of Western political theory. While feminist theory and political theory are both about power, feminist theory is a way to discuss the world through a gendered lens. But Feminism as a united, political concept does not seem to be working in the U. S. Feminism has become a plural; a site of political difference, contestation, and diversity. Unfortunately, as black feminists have noted, many white women are racist, as gay feminists have pointed out not all female professionals are supportive of gay rights issues. Moreover, as more radical feminists have claimed, women may have gained access to previously all-male professions such as medicine, but this certainly does not mean that those who control medical training have adapted their curriculum to incorporate feminist theories or methodologies. Another concern is that the most vocal criticisms of feminism are feminists themselves. Theorists argue that activists are not being thoughtful and responsible. Activists argue that theorists aren't doing enough. Feminists urge each other not to homogenize themselves by noting our intersecting identities—such as race, ethnicity, age, and so on—within the social body of feminism, while fretting that these very different identities will tear the movement apart. This tug-of-war within feminism is augmented by stereotypes and misunderstandings of and between men and women, and the tense relationships that grow out of them. I believe that feminism, more than other forms of knowledge and

theory, carries with it a sense of responsibility. While most forms of political theory are based on a "challenge and response" pattern, feminism does not have the same sort of united, singular response. As a modern image of revolution, the guidelines of feminism are often fluid and ambiguous.

Rebecca Walker describes a certain kind of self-consciousness that comes with feminism today. She speaks to how, when editing the feminist anthology *To Be Real*, she often worried about what others would think of her. Did she learn enough from her mother? Was she doing it right? Saying it right? bell hooks argues that one isn't a feminist, but that one does feminism. It seems to me that women are having a difficult time wading through the muck of differences between, definitions of, and action among feminists. My father taught me his version of what feminism was. Could learning feminism from a man, who still employs many "traditional ideologies," create a rupture in its very goals? I worry often, as Rebecca Walker does, if I'm doing feminism 'right'. Creatively Feminist I like the word feminism. I even like feminism as a category and a purpose. I also believe in a gender-just world. Feminism is not just about women's empowerment, but also a release of men from the masculinized stereotypes they bear.

However, this inclusion is often met with a distrustful eye. Many of my feminist friends have told me that men's involvement in feminism is unwanted, unwarranted, and unfair. "What right do men have to crowd our movement? They already have all the power." Often, feminism is viewed by feminists and non-feminists as a man vs. woman dichotomy. I believe this antagonism and distrust is built upon conflicting and contradictory messages that are emerging within society about the expected roles of women. Old

systems of power often assumed specific gendered spaces: the public belonged to men, the private to women. These networks of power articulated to each gender that basic biological differences fit them to different tasks. Much feminist debate has uprooted these assumptions. Women have begun to choose different roles, but must still operate within a patriarchal culture. Patriarchal relations in Western society are structural and institutional. They are often unintentional and are integrated into our politics and language. The roles women are socialized to seek are now very complicated and diverse, ranging from those who opt out of the traditional role altogether, to the SuperMom who has and does it all to the anti-feminist who encourages all women to return to the home. Most women find themselves somewhere in between. I am constantly waiting for the moment when feminism will make as much sense in my head as it does in my heart. As I wade through murky theoretical arguments by contemporary feminists about "ethical" feminism and the importance of sameness, difference and equality, I wonder where my voice is heard. And when I float confused among metaphysical definitions of feminism where the only weapon against the gender hierarchy is performance and parody I grow apathetic and angry instead of inspired and liberated. And above all, where is my feminist voice, if that voice was coached by my father? Feminist Fathers Growing up, I was a feminist because my father was one. I can clearly remember my first feminist lesson sitting with him at the kitchen table, a Barbie lying before me. "Don't let anyone tell you that this is beautiful." my father warned me. I wasn't allowed to play with Barbies. My father thought they were grotesque and oversexed-looking. I looked at the blonde bombshell and couldn't imagine anything/one

more beautiful than Barbie. Her long flaxen hair made a mockery of my dark, unruly bob. Her long, thin legs reminded me of my ballet instructor's. She was tall, thin and beautiful. She was everything I thought a woman should be. At that moment, I stood at the biggest crossroad of my seven-year-old life. My two idols were squaring off. Barbie would from then on become my secret plaything. My shameful hero. I was my dad's little girl and I would do anything, be anything for him...even a feminist. From that day on my father and I began a journey exploring feminism together. At night he would sit on my bed and read to me from *Little Women*: a story about a woman writer and the man who would complete her. My dad always told me that I should use my mind and think for myself, but he never questioned whether I would need a man in my life. "Someday, Cara, when you get married..." He began to tell me stories about his mother, his childhood, how things were and how they should be. "I was never really a feminist before you were born." my dad would tell me. "I used to think that life was just easy for my parents, each in their own role. My mom quit her job as soon as she got married. But after you were born, I never wanted you to give up anything. My mom liked teaching, but she never thought twice about giving it up. I think I became a feminist because you were born." My dad and I talked about Barbie, fish tanks, tree houses, and biology. He taught me that feminism meant speaking my mind, and having self-respect and a positive body image. Those things seemed easy enough to me. However, as I grew, these three feminist life strategies became harder to achieve. As my dad encouraged me to have positive body-image I often ran brazenly around in my swimsuit on hot summer days. However, I never expected the shame I would feel when my

dad poked my stomach and told me I was getting chunky, or when he suggested I try out a slim-fast diet before I started high school. "It's hard for overweight people to get jobs," he would tell me. Just as I never questioned my father's feminism, I didn't question the shame I felt in my too-big, too-much, body. I was trying to digest the conflicting messages my father sent me over the years. He once told me: "Cara, you should be with someone who treats you like fine china." "Why china?" I should have asked. "Why something breakable?" But instead I nodded my head, soaking it all in. In my schooling of feminism with my father, I always had a guilty suspicion that women just might be better equipped at feminism than men, that they might know how to do it better. What was feminism really when wedged within these contradictions? By comparing me to a dish my father was unintentionally regurgitating many of the important life lessons American boys are taught. bell hooks states that "Like women, men have been socialized to passively accept sexist ideology" (1992: 269). Men, stereotypically, are the bearers of privilege and power. Women, as their compliment, are commodified, oppressed, and suppressed. My father's feminism was only as old as I was; it still had to compete with a lifetime of socialization. By assuming both my heterosexuality and my submissive, breakable position in that relationship, my father's feminism became confused. Men, by their very shape as masculine-gendered beings, embody the same systems of oppression that feminists fight. So what happens when a man, who still bears the scars of socialized gender inequality teaches a young woman feminism? Growing Pains In high school my father began to lose ground in his position as my idol and feminist teacher when I fell in love

with the captain of the cross-country team. He slid a little more when I kissed a boy on the soccer team. And by the time I got to third base with the first baseman on the baseball team, my feminism had become perverted, distorted, and lost. As I frantically searched for a man who would treat me like a dish I learned that men were not often gentle and usually wanted me to do the dishwashing. These men were nothing like my father. I was also finding it hard to navigate the mixed messages I was receiving from my dad. I should be independent, but I should also be on the search for a man who would complete my identity as a woman. I should be outspoken, but the guys I dated cared more about what I looked like and didn't want to know or didn't care what I stood for. Sex and sexuality are tied to socialized gender dichotomies in which roles are assumed and power is unevenly distributed. As a heterosexual woman, I could never seem to fulfill my sexual desires without slipping into the expected role. My feminism began to get squeezed out. As I went from man to man, I didn't seem to notice that over those four years of high school my self-esteem had grown weedy and undernourished and my feminism was nearly forgotten. Not until my dad found me sprawled melodramatically on the kitchen floor, declaring desperately to him that I had been dumped, did I begin to question my identity as a woman and a feminist. " Why do you put up with these jerks?" he implored. " You are so much more than this, why do you want to be with this guy who doesn't even appreciate you?" I felt betrayed and stumped. Growing up I had been my dad's biggest fan, his most promising prodigy. I had tried to live by his conflicting lessons. I was to be a self-confident, Barbie-hating woman, who watches what she eats so as to be desirable to men. I was acting self-

assured and independent, but inside I felt needy and exposed. How could dad's lessons have failed me now? I had found a man that treated me like fine china. He had beat up one of his competitors to prove how he loved me, to prove I needed protection. He had promised me that he would always be there for me. He had told me that I was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. I practically felt that my shatterable self had been put on display. With him I felt more like a dish than ever in my life. This one was The One. And he dumped me. I hit the floor like broken glass. Who would protect me now? Who would beat up the bad guys? Who would reassure me that my body was good enough? Who would make me a woman? Who would support me now that even my father had betrayed me? Me, that's who. But not for at least another four years. During my four years at college, I discovered a type of feminism that my father had never taught me. I learned that men were oppressors and should not be dealt with. I learned how to be angry at men. I learned to hate the way men unfairly hold the majority of the political, economic, and social power. I learned to assume that all men hated women at heart and planned to fight back with that same hatred. I read and absorbed the Restocking Manifesto which proclaimed: We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few dominate the rest. All power situations throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented. Men have controlled all political, economic, and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior

position. I discarded the ultra-macho men from my high-school years and replaced them with "feminine" men, and later replaced men with women. When my anger collapsed with my desire to belong I tried to adjust my life accordingly. I associated feminism with oppression; I thought the only way to do it right was to belong to an oppressed group, to make martyrs of women. I tried to behave as any man-hating feminist would. After all, how else would I avoid misogyny? I embraced a Foucauldian life: power is everywhere, oppression is unavoidable (Foucault, 1979). I chose lesbianism partly to avoid confusing heterosexual gender-roles, and also because I thought the only true feminist was a repressed one. The victimization explicit in my collegiate feminism was perfect for me. It seemed to collapse the lessons my father had taught me. I was outspoken; writing papers on feminism, marching through the streets with my colleagues yelling "take back the night." I had self-respect, appreciating my own skills within an all-woman community. I had positive body-image, without the supposedly critical male gaze. I lost track of the true feminist goal: equality. I chose a sexuality that was not my own. I chose victimization in order to ignore my privilege. I also made some huge assumptions about lesbianism being linked to feminism. Ultimately, I repressed my own sexuality because I believed it would oppress me, that men would oppress me. For heterosexual feminists, it is often a struggle to reconcile our feelings for men with whom we enter into intimate relationships, and our rage against male, misogynistic culture. Although I am part of the privileged majority (heterosexual), expected gender roles can still feel confining and limiting for both men and women. bell hooks writes about how feminism became a bourgeois white phenomenon. What she describes

is a fight over privilege, by the privileged. " They did not want to acknowledge that bourgeois white women, though often victimized by sexism, have more power and privilege, are less likely to be exploited or oppressed than poor, uneducated, nonwhite males" (1992: 266). By claiming my lesbianess for political reasons, I was trying to navigate this antagonism that hooks describes without recognizing an important slippage between my oppression and my privilege as a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman. Although this slip was my own, I believe its roots belong in my feminist training with my father. I believe my father tried to be an active feminist before he could even react to feminism. He tried to be a feminist before he could begin to hear feminisms and understand their claims. My father nobly attempted to carry out feminist agendas before feminism had a chance to saturate his perspective. hooks argues that there is a special bond between men and women in oppressed groups that doesn't exist between the privileged. They bond over political solidarity and exploitation. They need each other to achieve their goals, while many white women create an antagonistic perspective of feminism and see men as the problem, not a necessary part of the solution. However, are men not also oppressed by gender stereotypes? Men are often expected to be emotionally and physically tough, successful breadwinners, and they rarely have the choices and flexibility that women do in regards to staying home with the children. Is it possible, then, that in feminism, women need men to achieve their feminist goals? Feminist agency should belong to men and women, just as it belongs to women of all different races, classes, sexualities, religions, and political standpoints. I encourage debate, change, self-discovery, and

constant questioning. I don't believe there is a utopian feminist destination, but we invariably find pieces of it on our journey. Barbara Kingsolver states it perfectly: "The most important thing in life is to find what you hope for and live inside that hope" (1995: 139). My hope is equality; my method is feminism; and only by including women and men in that journey can I expect my goal to be achieved. The only way for me to be proactive, not reactive, about my feminism and femininity is to get to know myself and understand the source of the mixed messages my father gave me. This introspection continually leads me to further unpack feminism and how men can play an important part in it. I realize that as I change and grow up as a person, as my surroundings, friends, and perspective change, my feminism will change as well. I realized that even as my father was passing down some of the potentially harmful gendered lessons from his youth, he was also passing down some positive and inspirational notions about equality. Overall, I have found that I want men in my life and also in my feminism. I realize that my father and I still have feminism in common. I discovered that the gap that separated his slightly chauvinistic, fatherly feminism from my feminine, activist feminism really wasn't that deep or wide. My father and I could share feminism based on privilege and change, and recognizing our privilege and constant progress. Through my father's version of feminism I learned how important and hard it is to recognize your privilege while working towards your cause. My father has had many advantages: he is a white, middle-aged, middle-income man. Growing up as his daughter meant that many of his advantages were also mine. My father, who was reared on patriarchy, did his best to show me a world where I didn't have to sacrifice the things his

mother did. My father tried to show me a world of opportunities. And when the taint of oppression and tradition threatened to bleed into his feminist lessons, I had to forgive and teach the teacher of the greatest lesson I'll ever learn. I also had to let go and allow my dad to have his own version of feminism, just as women have given allowances to each other in the feminist community for decades. Feminism is in a continually transitional stage. Many of the principles that feminists have fought so hard for over the years are now part of the fabric of the nation. While progress is showing, equality has yet to be achieved. Feminists often tumble and scrape over the tactics to use for their goals; however, this energy proves that effort is alive in the movement. I'm not willing to give up the "responsible thoughtfulness" of feminist theory, while also not backing down from the hopeful polemic of my work. I will always fight for women's rights, while never again giving up on men or myself. Social scientists are often criticized and revered for complicating and problematizing situations that often seem clear-cut in our society. Within these ruptures I have found the space to move, a place to claim my own imperfect feminist identity and agency and have discovered that complicated and problematized is the creative space where I would rather be. Feminism is not only about women anymore. It is a lens with which to view the world and its inequalities and oppressions. Mindy Stompler states that "Feminism today is about figuring out ways to have equality or social justice without ignoring the differences among women and between women and men" (2002: 17). I realize that this is an anxious approach the subject, but within it, there is also a call for hope. My goal for this essay was to raise questions and awareness, not give out any answers. My hope is that

through my own story and individual activism, I will inspire others to think about their own feminism and femininity; their influence and power. I do not attempt to have all the answers, nor have I achieved perfection in feminism. My hope is that as you traveled with me on my own feminist journey, you learned what you really think about feminism and discovered what you're going to do about it. It is my hope that this essay challenged you to question how you can make feminism an active, effective and thoughtful part of your own life. I called my dad to tell him that I had proposed to my boyfriend. "Just remember," he told me instead of congratulations, "I'm on your side." I told him I knew it. He always had been on my side as a father and a fellow feminist. Later in the conversation he asked me, "Cara, do you remember that T-shirt I used to have with the bicycling fish on it?" I remembered it. Under the picture was screened the phrase: A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle. "Do you still think that's true?" he asked. My dad and I had talked through my growth and settling into feminism my whole life. These conversations had forced us to grow together; had made us better feminists. "Yeah," I answered him, "I think it's still true. Women don't need men, but I believe feminism does." Bibliography Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1993. Finlen. Barbara (ed). *Listen up: voices from the next feminist generation*. Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 2001. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish : the birth of the prison*. New York : Vintage Books, 1979. hooks, bell. *Black looks : race and representation*. Boston, MA : South End Press, 1992. Kingsolver, Barbara. *Pigs in heaven : a novel*. New York, NY : HarperCollins, 1993. Steinem, Gloria. *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*. NY: NAL,

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