

# Feminism, self-identity and internalized sexism



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

For contemporary feminist thinkers and theorists, the concept of womanhood and what it means to be a woman in a post-structuralist society is posing a problem. The problem that has risen, is one of fundamental ideation because if feminist theorists and thinkers cannot agree on what feminism and womanhood means, then the departure point from education isn't universal in nature. The reason for the ambiguity surrounding what it means to be a woman is primarily due to lived experiences and intersectionality. This concept of a divided feminist front is especially problematic in a society run by men who abuse politics and policies to sequester rights and perceived rights from women. Any attempt to speak on behalf of the entirety of feminism or women is to presuppose that one knows what it truly means to be a woman in a society where any historical documents surrounding women has been universally tainted by misogyny, bigotry, and ignorance. Millennia's old patriarchal structures continues to affect every aspect of human-kind, including feminists through internalized sexism, which leads to feminist on feminist toxicity.

The dilemma today is that a woman's own self-definition which is grounded to man's concept that one's self-definition must be quantifiable, understood, and explainable to standards that man himself would never hold himself to. Any attempts made to advocate for change for the good of women, under the power of man, is met with misconstrued notions that women are essentially entirely irrational and immoral, or entirely kind and benevolent. During a phone interview with an anonymous representative of the Westboro Baptist Church, a religious organization of whose brand of religion has become notorious for its hate speech, had this to say about feminism,

I have my definition of feminism . . . You know used to, I used to study, uh, philosophy at the Department – at the, the University of Kansas. I worked on a piece there for a while, so I have a philosophical definition of feminism, but then you- feminism is one of those kinda murky, uh, there really isn't a tightly-wound, uh, you know, disposition there, it's kinda like nailing jello to a tree. If you ask five different people what feminism is you're proba- you're bound to get five different answers. But, so, like I said, those aspects of, of feminism that have to do with equal treatment under the law, we're all for. But when you usurp the bible's authority on some aspects of feminism like, say, putting women in the pulpits, and, and having women- and there's a really good book for you to read on this. I can't think of the author's name, but I can tell you what the, the name of the book is. You'll really like this. It's called, uh, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers* . And that's, that's got kind of a bible view of how a true church of the lord Jesus Christ oughta take a look at the roles of women. (Barks)

The left and right-wing extremists and everyone in between are filling the gaps with what they think they know about feminism and womanhood, and political discourse is no exception. The President of the United States (POTUS), no matter who is in the Whitehouse, has his or her constituency to consider while creating new laws and policies. Historically speaking, Donald Trump used to (very nearly) take a pro-choice stance, according to Richard Wolffe, in 1999 Trump was quoted assaying “ I hate the concept of abortion. I hate it. I hate everything it stands for. I cringe when I listen to people

debating the subject. But you still – I just believe in choice” (Wolffe). Nobody likes the concept of abortion, but to accept that it’s a choice is fundamental to the pro-choice movement and for true autonomy of woman. Through either evolution of his own beliefs or due to pressures from his constituency as leader of the Republican party, Trump has changed his position on abortion rights and aims to defund any organization that provides the service, which would extend to include Planned Parenthood (Ravitz). The constituency that would pressure such a policy and hold a large interest in the Republican Party would of course be religious organizations such as the Westboro Baptist Church and other like-minded religious groups and some, if not majority of conservative viewpoints located in the United States. Religious groups that are fundamental in nature teach that abortion is murder, men are the heads of households, and a woman’s place is well defined within their bibles, written thousands of years ago by men designed to keep women subservient. The male supremacist culture that has been cultivated over thousands of years is the problem in which women, womanhood and a woman’s role is defined by men. The result of man defining women is the utter devaluation of feminine characteristics, which is what the feminist movements have been attempting to unravel since the first wave of feminism. The ability for women and feminists to define themselves, with the characteristics they believe matter to them, such as mental capacities in the formal education arena, duties in the household and private sectors, and their positions within the family unit are all being, in a sense, renegotiated and challenging the status quo that was laid out by men thousands of years ago.

One strategy that can essentially fix the issue of the need to define women and what it means to be a feminist, is to reject the possibility of trying to define women and feminism altogether. To approach this tactic would be to deconstruct attempts at defining women wherever it may be attempted, and to educate others that there doesn't need to be a definition. The need to define women by men stems from millennia's old misogynistic, archaic teachings and unravelling whatever compels the need to define women would take a great deal of pressure off those women who still feel compelled to explain or define themselves to men. Contemporary feminism still in many forms attempts to discredit by validating misogynistic idioms, such as the classic housewife expressions (get back in the kitchen, etc.), instead of deconstructing the notion that women belong in the home, we see feminism attempt to explain the value of the unpaid work of a housewife. Not that it's wrong to point out that the value of unpaid work done in a home by a woman is a huge dollar amount, it's just an example of how feminism is still in a position where the need to defend itself. The preoccupation with the seemingly endless need to define women and their roles leads to feminists indulging in erroneous generalizations about their fellow women, such as judging fellow women who are content with being a stay at home mother, not that they don't have the option or desire to be out of the home, but that they actually prefer to be at homemaker and that's their choice to do so.

The nature of feminism and self identity is complex and nearly paradoxical in nature. Paradoxical in a sense that feminists who choose to stay at home and take care of the day-to-day of the home, feel the need to explain that while they are choosing to stay at home, that they are aware they can do

whatever they want and are in fact, not taking their rights for granted. One such defender, Chitra Ramaswamy felt compelled to explain her reasoning in an article for The Guardian,

My take used to be the one espoused by Ann Oakley, the British feminist and author of 70s text *Housewife*: “ Housework is work directly opposed to the possibility of human self-actualisation.” And yet here I am, a feminist homechief in her mid-30s. To further complicate matters, I’m married not to a husband but civilly partnered to a woman who brings home the bacon and does the dishes after I’ve cooked every night. (Ramaswamy)

In other words, Ramaswamy and other like-minded women, have in their mind what it means to be a feminist, life partner, and parent in contemporary society. It’s apparent Ramaswamy believed prior to making the transition to “ homechief” that a feminist would or should not desire to be a “ homechief” or a woman who should desire a career of their choice. Ramaswamy in the article goes on to say, “ To decide to be a housewife does feel like you’re doing your grubby bit to uphold the gender roles upon which the patriarchy is founded.” (Ramaswamy). However, it is a valid argument to say that having the ability to choose to be a “ homechief” or having the choice to work in the private or public sectors, is one of the ultimate goals of feminism around the world. Articles like the one Ramaswamy wrote, hint at a totally different kind of ignorance, feminist on feminist shaming. This type of shaming would include gatekeeping by attempting to say who can and cannot be a feminist whose opinion should or should not matter. One such specifically targeted feminist groups are the Liberal Feminists, one such feminist from <https://assignbuster.com/feminism-self-identity-and-internalized-sexism/>

this sub-type is the Lebanese-American porn star Mia Khalifa. Khalifa who believes that her work in the porn industry was her personal way of openly defying patriarchy. Professor Fida Afiouni at Olayan School of Business at the American University of Beirut whose research focuses on gender in the Middle East said in an interview with International Business Times,

Mia (Khalifa) is definitely a feminist... She willingly chose her occupation.... Being a porno star is her own feminist expression and a means of asserting control over her sexuality. I believe that it is this assertion of control over her sexuality that is driving people crazy in Lebanon, as this is a blatant defiance to the predominant patriarchal structures. (Mofta)

This type of story would be considered paradoxical in the eyes of a man and many feminists, whose rudimentary knowledge of feminism may strictly include the common teaching that pornography perpetuates sexism, oppression and supports the predominant patriarchal structures. Another self-proclaimed Lebanese feminist Julia Yazbeck mentioned in the same article posted to twitter “ Watching Khalifa make global headlines felt like I had traveled for months, and just as I was nearing my destination, someone used my passport to wipe their ass, undoing all my hardwork and sending me back to square one” (qtd. in Mofta). Yazbeck referencing her hard work as a Lebanese feminist was undone by Khalifa’s actions, but fails to recognize that Khalifa’s decision, while subjectively right or wrong washes away and by calling out Khalifa on a public forum damages feminism overall.

Both Khalifa and Yazbeck are self proclaimed Feminists, but harbor very different ideas on what feminism means to them and how to disassemble patriarchal structures. Speaking on comments made earlier, that women are essentially accepted as immoral and irrational, or kind and benevolent, Khalifa in this instance broadly isn't taken seriously by fellow feminists due to patriarchal structures and teachings. We are programmed as a society to view those who do subjectively immoral things as essentially entirely "bad" and taking Khalifa seriously as a feminist is nearly impossible to do so long as this mental programming exists. Khalifa can now spend the rest of her life fighting for feminist movements, but no matter what she does she will always be remembered or reminded of her time spent in the porn industry. However, Khalifa isn't necessarily strictly a victim of internalized sexism at the hands of fellow feminists, she posted on twitter December 16, 2015 " All Twitter feminists know how to do is not shave their arm pits and throw the word " misogynistic" around unnecessarily" (Khalifa). The comment made by Khalifa on a public forum such as Twitter absolutely hurts feminism, it is self evident that those like Khalifa have their idea of what feminism should be, and those like Yazbeck have their own ideas of what feminism should be. The pot-shots that feminists take at each other are sexist, misogynistic and reinforce preconceived notions and stereotypes promoted by patriarchy. However, it is not clear how to rectify such a situation where the ideologies of feminism are separated by seemingly unreconcilable fundamental differences.

When we start to talk about sexism, the world becomes increasingly complex. The dynamics of power and control no longer fit into neat



categories but becomes a series of starts and tangents of intersectionality's and seemingly never ends. Internalized sexism is something instilled in women by millennia's old teachings, internalized sexism is a type of sexism that is arguably the most damaging on a personal and interpersonal level. Rachel Dolezal born Caucasian, is the former president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Spokane, Washington from 2014-2015. Dolezal identifies as African American and is completely comfortable with her identity. Dolezal grew up in an abusive white home and having African American adoptive siblings, she found solace in African American, and African culture alike, she was and is still comfortable with her identity as a transracial woman. However, no amount of certainty Dolezal had in her identity could stop the media and ignorance of men and women alike from tearing her down in such a way that cost her career. According to Dolezal's Netflix special *The Rachel Divide*, which aired in April of 2018, and depicts Dolezal's life leading up to her decision to become trans-racial, her time as President of the NAACP Spokane chapter, and the aftermath of her "outing" by the media, she has become unemployable. Because no company wants their brand or reputation tethered to the controversy surrounding Dolezal, she has been essentially blacklisted. In the documentary we see former allies of Dolezal who stood beside her in protests and demonstrations speak out against Dolezal in disapproval. Although the NAACP has no rules stating that the President of any chapter be a person of colour, the common perception in the media and amongst people of colour represented by the NAACP believe that the position should be held by a person of colour, and not by a visibly white person. Once again, we see the example of women being perceived as either essentially

<https://assignbuster.com/feminism-self-identity-and-internalized-sexism/>

entirely irrational and immoral, or entirely kind and benevolent. Nobody questioned Dolezal's integrity while she was fighting for equality and rights alongside naturally born coloured men and women alike. However, once Dolezal's scandal was "exposed" she immediately became all bad, irrational and immoral for the perceived trickery, because until this point in time there lacked an existing colloquial understanding of the term transracial ( *The Rachel Divide* ). One noteworthy article written by Syreeta McFadden, a professor of English in New York, for NBC News explores the documentary in an internalized sexist tone and attacks Dolezal's right to self-identity. McFadden attacks Dolezal in the article by trying to quantify Dolezal's "whiteness" stating that,

Hermisconstruction of black identity is evident to viewers as a tool to process pain inflicted by a kind of white violence. Dolezal is the second child born to white fundamentalist Christian parents whose faith and pro-life stance guided them to adopt four black children, who they raised in a socially isolated and homogeneous community in rural Montana. We learn in interviews that her adoptive sister was beaten with "glue gun glue stick" and "black baboon whip" and, later, that her adoptive brother and now-son Izaiah suffered similar abuses. Though she's never clear about what abuse she might have suffered at the hands of her parents, Ruthanne and Larry Dolezal (who in television interview clips present a "normal" and "respectable" kind of whiteness familiar to many). But their public efforts to discredit their daughter's elaborate lie surround her identity was apparently in service to another kind of violence: To defend their birth son, Josh — who

at the moment of the Dolezal's unmasking, faced charges of sexual abuse against his adopted sister Esther. (McFadden)

Dolezal's inability to relate to her white ancestry is one of relatability, myself, being a man of Native American ancestry descended from Big River First Nation, I too struggle and essentially cannot connect with Native American culture, although I identify as Native American, I'm relate more closely with western white culture, but I digress. Not everyone is going to understand the reasoning or mentality behind Dolezal's transracial lifestyle, however, agree or disagree it is an important topic to discuss and keep an open mind about.

If feminists are constantly dictating which feminist groups or individual opinions or methods are valid, or gatekeeping how fellow feminists are allowed or disallowed to identify themselves as, what are we left with? Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French philosopher says

The belief that "one is a woman" is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that "one is a man". I say "almost" because there are still many goals which women can achieve: freedom of abortion and contraception, day-care centres for children, equality on the job, etc. Therefore, we must use "we are women" as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot "be"; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say "that's not it" and "that's still not it". In

“ woman” I see something that cannot be represented, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. (qtd. in Kelly).

In other words, Kristeva believes that the term feminism shouldn't be used, because feminist groups will always be at odds with each other and the rest of society who need convincing to make changes, and essentially there will never be a universal definition of feminism. By promoting woman and womanhood as a universally inclusive term, there would be no need to have different types of feminism and removes the patriarchal societal need to unequivocally define feminism. However, today a drastic change such as the one Kristeva promotes would be highly disruptive to current feminist goings on and perhaps even counter productive to even attempt.

There will be an abundance of theoretical queries and circumstances on positionality that this discussion leaves open. However, the message should be repeated for the sake of emphasis, that the problem of identification, feminism and what it means to be a woman in contemporary societies is a subjective topic and not a topic of discussion strictly for high theorists. To identify as woman, advocate for women, and/or promote women's issues should be the only caveat to be considered a feminist.

Time is an ingredient to change and the patriarchal structures are proving very resistant to it, eventually, I must believe as a society we will be looking back on today's issues and remember how backwards or archaic our society used to operate. We already do that today, when we look back at the 1950's advertisements about women in the home and how to treat or land a husband, etc. We hear many women say, “ I can't believe women used to

live like that, I would tell that man right where to go,” or perhaps “ I couldn’t imagine cleaning and cooking all day while taking care of the kids, and still be expected to be dressed up and hair done for when my husband got home”. There is no reason to not believe that in the future, women’s positions in society will once again be unrecognizable to how society operates today.

## Resources

- Barks, Danielle. “ A Teen Feminist Calls the Westboro Baptist Church.” jezebel. com, July 12, 2011. <https://jezebel.com/5820485/a-teen-feminist-calls-the-westboro-baptist-church>
- Kelly, Jane. “ Postmodernism and Feminism.” InternationalViewpoint. org, 1992. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2737>
- Khalifa, Mia. “ All Twitter feminists know how to do is not shave their arm pits and throw the word “ misogynistic” around unnecessarily”. Twitter. com, December 16, 2015. <https://twitter.com/miakhalifa/status/677239024478588929?lang=en>
- McFadden, Syreeta. “ Rachel Dolezal’s Claim That she is Black is the Whitest Possible way to Deal with her Issues.” NBCNews. com, May 6, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/rachel-dolezal-s-claim-she-black-whitest-possible-way-deal-ncna871656>
- Moftah, Lora. “ Is Mia Khalifa a Feminist? Lebanese Porn Star Divides Arab World.” IBtimes. com. 2015. <https://www.ibtimes.com/mia-khalifa-feminist-lebanese-porn-star-divides-arab-world-1776454>
- Ramaswamy, Chitra. “ I Love Being a Housewife and That Doesn’t Make me any Less of a Feminist”. TheGuardian. com. March 2, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/02/housewife-feminist-baby>

- Ravitz, Jessica. “ Trump Move to Defund Planned Parenthood fulfills a Promise – and Promises a Battle.” CNN. com, May 22, 2018.

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/22/health/title-x-planned-parenthood-defunding-reax-bn/index.html>.

- *The Rachel Divide* . Directed by Laura Brownson, Performances by Rachel Dolezal, Izaiah Dolezal, Kitara Johnson, Latoya Brackett, Franklin Moore, & Shawn Vestal. Netflix Original, 2018. <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80149821?trackId=14277281&tctx=0%2C0%2Cbe789965-82f8-4739-ab8a-432be215453d-449593028%2C%2C>
- Wolfe, Richard. “ Donald Trump’s Only Fixed Position on Abortion is his Disdain for Women.” TheGuardian. com, July 1, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/01/donald-trump-abortion-supreme-court>