

I Think I Am a Feminist, Would You?

Hannah Gibran

The interaction between gender and injustice remains intact. One would think that as the world becomes modernized, women would be liberated from things that imprison them. But with modernity comes more championship of larger aspects of suffering. Feminism was initially about lifting women up and creating an equal opportunity between them and men in all spheres of life. That was the 1st wave of feminism, birthed through the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, also regarded as first formal Women's Rights Convention in the United States of America (USA). The 2nd wave of feminism took place around the 1960s-1970s; it broadened feminism to domestic affairs and reproductive rights and expanded its horizon to other Western countries. The 3rd wave of feminism emerged in 1990s and it reached countries in the Global South. It started to pay attention to inclusivity such as in terms of race. And the fourth wave of feminism, which started in around 2012, expanded the notion of inclusion into not just equality between men and women but rather the liberty to choose which gender a person can identify with.

I think I am a feminist, but I doubt that what I stand for is going to be universally accepted by those whose values are consistent with the cumulative discourse of feminism. At its core, I support equality of opportunity between women and men and will do everything in my power to help realize the agenda. But as a practicing Muslim, hijabi woman, some of the recent forms of support towards those who consider their identities are inconsistent with their biological sex smother my ability to practice my belief as well as to protect myself from harm – although the latter I am sure is not unique to a woman who practiced Islam.

Intersectional feminism talks about the different layers of a person's identity that should be considered in order to address the forms of oppression that exist. What I strongly believe as a person of faith is that our pursuit of justice should be grounded or at the very least should not violate the ethical and moral codes in my religion. And it seems that the space to communicate this idea has been extremely suppressed.

Nowadays, if you were to say publicly on the mainstream Western platforms that you are a feminist that does not advocate the creation of gender identities that do not conform with the biological sex, you would be called a radical, you would be located in the 'unfeminist' box. I do not condemn any human being for the life that they live. It is important to also underline that 'not advocating' does not mean 'forbidding' others to do what they want to do. But I cannot endorse things that are in conflict with my belief, and I should be free to embrace this practice.

I also feel that my agency as a practicing Muslim, hijabi woman has been severely reduced in magnitude. By wearing the hijab, I oblige to the Islamic teaching to not let any man who is not my *mahram* (a member of my family) stay with or see me without the *hijab*. These days, when I go to a public toilet, I can no longer treat a female toilet as a 'biologically female' toilet because a person who is biologically male but identifies as a female or non-binary could enter the restroom. Very often I would encounter women's public toilets with a sign "a male might be present in this toilet". This is obviously a good thing for those who seek to be validated of their new gender identities irrespective of the biological sex. But on the other hand, it jeopardizes progress to protect females.

I, therefore, do not think that this particular wave of feminism is leading towards equality. What I experience and witness is a construction of hierarchy in which the protection of the

ability to freely utilize a personal choice of gender identity matters more than that of someone who is biologically female and wants to live her life according to what she believes is safe for her. This is not equality.

The problem with this emerging social activism is the failure to think of a just solution – not only for one’s self, but also for others. We ought to promote inclusive feminism where the actions to protect one party should not end up harming the agency of another. How, if the world agrees to run a world where gender according to biological sex as well as self-identification are accommodated, can we ensure that the solutions do not try to force each other to agree to the same codebook but rather to live side-by-side with harmony?

Everybody should be able to speak up their mind as long as it does no harm to anybody. I treat my religion as a compass for how I see the world and live my life and I, like anybody in my position, should be allowed to speak up without becoming an object of ridicule. Furthermore, my adherence to Islam does not mean that I would force anyone to hold the same values as me and likewise, I wish for others with a different opinion to also not disrupt my ability to live as a female-cum-person-of-faith.

As time goes by, we will inevitably gather the strength to tackle many forms of injustice. However, that should not mean forgetting the unique lived experience of people of faith, of people with special needs, of females. It might be that the new feminist agenda is merely intended to normalize fluid gender identities with no intention to exclude women of faith from living their normal lives. But perhaps, this should remind us to always pay attention to the unintended consequences before actioning on the solutions. What we need is to create an environment that is safe for all of us without any order of importance.

Hannah Gibran regularly writes about humanitarian issues.

Reference for further reading:

1. <https://phillipian.net/2023/03/24/the-flaws-of-modern-feminism/>