

## I Was Not A Feminist

Jennifer Fox

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Growing up in the early 60s, the word "feminist" was a dirty word. I remember family dinners where my father would lecture about some awful woman he had met in the workplace, who "acted like a man." He would call them "ball busters" and paint images of tough looking "broad" in male-tailored suits, with a cigarette dangling from their lips. Being a feminist was like smoking back then, a horrible, ugly habit that real woman should avoid. It was very clear to me as the only girl child for the first seven years of my life (my parents eventually had five children and another daughter, but for a long time I was sandwiched between two sons), that I should do everything I could do not to be one of those masculine women.

This, of course, put me in a horrible dilemma. From the time I was very small, I hated all the rules imposed on me because I was a girl. As far as I was concerned, girls couldn't do anything fun. They couldn't wear pants, they couldn't run free in the woods, and they couldn't talk with boys. Girls had to be demure, girls had to stay indoors, girls could never ask a boy out and should never allow herself to have sex before marriage (this I learned long before I even understood what sex was.) Being a girl was boring at the very least, but at the worst, it was suffocating. When I looked ahead to my future, I was terrified. Judging from the women in my family the prognosis was awful -- the only acceptable fate was to be a virgin bride, become a good wife, stay home and raise a brood of children like my mother.

I was trapped, but I couldn't show it for fear of being chastised by my father, whom I depended on fiercely. My father had all the power in our family. If I alienated him I would get nowhere. So I tried my best to hide my boyish tendencies. I acted like a girl on the outside or what I thought a girl should be like. I tried to dress with as much lace as possible (not very easy for a tomboy like me), I kept my voice feminine and whispered a lot, and I tried my best to be deferential. But on the inside I was hell bent on one thing only: getting out of the trap of girlhood -- and by any means necessary. I put on blinders, slung my head down low and plowed forward with all my single-minded force to escape my fate. Inside of me, I must have made some pretty strong decisions, but I didn't realize back then what they were. There is only one thing I remember clearly: I resolved that men and women, girls and boys, were the same. I was not a girl, but neutral -- and being neutral meant I could be free.

As far as I was concerned, it didn't matter what happened to me along the way. Gender was not going to come in and ruin my life. When a teacher sexually abused me at 13, I was sure that it was personal, not political. When at 15, I was dragged from the street to a vacant lot and nearly raped -- but for a sudden car passing that made the rapist flee -- I never stopped to think it had anything to do with being a girl. And when at 17, I was beaten up on the street by a man I refused to sleep with, with people walking by who never stopped to help, I still thought it had nothing to do with gender. Somehow it was all an accident -- it could have happened to anyone male or female. It was just part of my individual story.

I was so afraid of being stopped that I couldn't admit that anything had to do with the fact of being a girl. When I wanted to go abroad as an exchange student at 15, my mother argued that I couldn't go because it was too dangerous for a girl to travel alone. I fought her tooth and nail. I knew if I admitted that I was scared because of my gender, she would have stopped me from going. Denial was powerful; denial worked. The times were in my favor, and the things I wanted were slowly more acceptable for a girl -- things like traveling alone, something my mother could have never done when she was my age or even older. But I never noticed that the small hole of freedom I was slipping

though was not just because of my willpower. I didn't see that there was a whole movement of women before me who had fought for the very things that allowed me to escape my gender's fate.

I consumed the hard work of those 'radical' women without thought and kept going blithely. I was going to have sex, but no pregnancy for me. I went on the pill at 15; I had my first abortion at 20. I didn't even bother to be grateful that I could go to a clinic instead of some back room. I knew if I had to go to a witchdoctor to avoid being pregnant, I would have done it. Back then, I thought I would rather die than be stuck with baby and thrust into the traditional role of mother. To me, being a mother was synonymous with being in prison. There was no concept in my mind that a woman could be both mother and working person. I didn't know I was shadow-boxing -- I behaved like a free woman, yet I was haunted by the traditional values I was raised with and couldn't shake. I traveled the world alone, became a filmmaker, and didn't marry. I took the attitude of "every woman for herself." I was going to survive and save my own skin no matter what. Looking back, I can't believe my naivety or my selfishness.

That is until one day I woke up in my 40s and realized that I couldn't find my female soul. I didn't know who I was as a woman, therefore I didn't know who I was at all. My life was falling apart; I was miserable and depressed. I had run away from the traditional values -- but never replaced them with anything else. Being a filmmaker, I did the only thing I knew how to do: I picked up the camera and turned it on myself for the first time. I started to film myself constantly -- when I woke up, when I went to the bathroom, when I went to the store, when I met with my lovers. I was desperate; I literally couldn't see myself. I started filming my girlfriends, first here, and then abroad -- what was this strange female life we were all leading? Was there a red thread through our experiences? I began traveling farther and talking to women I didn't know about everything I could think of. It turned into a five-year journey to discover what it means to be a woman. In the course of the journey I went to 17 countries and spoke to hundreds of women around the world. I found bits of my self and my own story in so many of the other women's stories that I was shocked. It seemed that no matter where I went, women were sharing the same words across a spectrum: about love, sex, control, abuse, and deceit, all the way to trafficking, prostitution and FGM (female genital mutilation). Suddenly I realized that my experiences were not personal at all, but part of range of female life that existed everywhere and was timeless. For the first time, at 40+ years old I woke up and joined the female race; I had arrived at feminism backwards.