

## [Why “feminism”?](#)

by Andrea Rubenstein [tekanji] @ [12:58 pm](#)

I’ve seen the argument come up time and time again: “feminism” as a term doesn’t reach out to men (or has negative connotations), so people are uncomfortable using it. Why not call it “anti-sexism” or just merge with equalism or humanism?

The short answer is that feminism has a deep and rich history that is important to the continued struggle for equality. To reject feminism is to cease honouring our feminist foremothers who did everything from win us the vote to help to get legislation passed that broadened the definition of rape to include married couples. To reject feminism, especially now with such a virulent anti-feminist atmosphere that has succeeded in passing off lies about feminism and equality as truths, would be to admit feminism has failed. When feminism finally fades out, I want it to be because its goals have been achieved, not because it was beaten down by a those who are all for an equal society as long as it doesn’t take away the power that they have over others.

The long answer is behind the cut.

## **I. To merge or not to merge**

So why not merge into another movement? Well, the easy answer is that movements like humanism and equalism share much in common with feminism, but they aren’t the same. The three movements share one major thing in common: all of them are based in the belief that all people have the same inherent worth as others.

I didn’t say that all people are equal, because that’s not the focus of [Humanism](#). Humanism tackles the issue of humanity from a “truth”/rational-oriented perspective, rejecting spirituality and the supernatural as determinants of fate in favour of self-determination. There is both secular and religious humanism, but both reject the idea of deriving religion from moral ground. This movement also doesn’t necessarily include equality; one can seek rational truth in a way that gives dignity to all humans while allowing privilege to continue in some areas.

[Equalism](#), like feminism, is outright concerned about equality and egalitarianism. Equalism isn’t confined to gender, but can and does encompass any area in which there are institutional inequalities. In this way it is broader than feminism — which, depending on the movement, either *only* deals with gender issues, or deals primarily with gender issues while acknowledging the importance of understanding intersections — which can be seen as both a positive and a negative. A positive because it is easier to acknowledge how oppressions intersect, but also a negative because the topic is spread so far it may sometimes be hard to find a focusing point (this, of course, is addressed by the movements within equalism).

So why not sublimate feminism into one of these movements? Because feminism is different.

For one, both humanism and equalism approach equality from the perspective of a level playing field. Meaning that they don’t acknowledge [privilege](#) and therefore give equal weight to actions that, in our society, feminism (and other focused anti-oppression movements) sees as not being equal. Feminism rejects the idea of “genderblind” or “colourblind” systems because historically they create the illusion of equality and make it that much harder to struggle for *actual* equality.

For another, and I briefly mentioned this when I was discussing equalism, feminism is focused on the equality of women. Most schools of feminism acknowledge that other forms of anti-oppression work are important, and many feminists self-identify as anti-oppression in other areas, but when we present ourselves — online, in person, in our written works or other media — as feminists, we’re standing up and saying, “Achieving equality for women is important, and it’s equally important to acknowledge that, despite how far we’ve come, we still have a long way to go and women are still, all other things being equal, not treated as fairly as men.”

## II. Why not just “anti-sexism”?

I think using the term “anti-sexism” or “anti-sexist activist” isn’t bad; I might start using it for myself sometimes, as well. I often refer to people who fight against racism as “anti-racist activists” and I know the civil rights movement often uses that term as well. But I wouldn’t use it in place of calling myself a feminist.

The first reason is what I talked about in my short answer: I am of the opinion that we need to stand by the term and honour the roots of the movement. It has been said many times by many different feminists that if we repackage feminism as something else, all that will happen is that the anti-feminist rhetoric will follow us to that term. If it’s not “feminazi” it will be some equally hateful term that is meant to paint those who fight for women’s equality as unreasonable, fanatic, and crazy.

Another problem is that “anti-sexist” doesn’t overtly acknowledge privilege — and, indeed, if you go by the dictionary definition of sexism then it would be very easy for people to apply this term to themselves even if they spent their entire time blaming women for expressing prejudice against men. Of course, there are those who do this even now (they are often of the, “I believe in equality, but…” crowd) but we have the vast, and growing, resource of feminist works at our disposal in order to debunk the myth of a level playing field. If we were to distance ourselves from the term, this resource would no longer be so readily available.

Then there is also the question of erasure, which I talked about in the above section as well. When one announces that they are a “feminist” they are announcing to the world that *women’s* issues are *human* issues. Now, many people argue that such a thing is assumed, but feminism’s argument is that women are more often than not seen as “special interest” groups whose issues are given airtime only when there aren’t any other [“important” matters](#) to focus on. If we *don’t* continue to draw attention to the gendered imbalance in our societies, then it’s only a matter of time before we get submerged entirely by the “default” issues of the privileged groups.

## III. Conclusion

Feminism isn’t a perfect term, and I do see the problems it has in attracting men to the cause (although if you do your homework on the movement you’ll find that terms like “pro-feminist” and “feminist ally” are available for those who don’t feel comfortable adopting the mantle of “feminist”). But the arguments against the word, for me and many other feminists, just aren’t enough to outweigh the reasons for it.

Feminists are fighters; we see inequality and we aren’t content to just brush it off as nothing, or buy the line that we shouldn’t sweat the “small stuff”. Being fighters, how could we ever face ourselves if we turned tail and abandoned our roots simply because the path got a little rocky? Feminism is important to

me, not just because of women's equality, but because of its history. I want to be a part of that history, not take part in destroying it.

## **Being a Feminist and a Humanist**

*by Patricia K. Willis*

I became a Humanist when I was fifteen years old, at the same time I became a feminist. I must admit that it's difficult to separate the two and I have found that those who are true to Humanist principals are also feminists. Indeed it isn't possible to be a Humanist without also being a feminist. Both philosophies abhor inequality, injustice, and advocate egalitarianism. As a matter of fact, I think the feminist community has a natural kinship to the Humanist community because both "isms" deeply regret and make every effort to deny the intrusion of patriarchal religion on our lives.

I was raised Catholic by my mother and father who were both converts. Both bought the whole book, so to speak, as is often the case with Catholic converts. My parents had nine children because Catholicism forbids birth control since Catholicism is inherently a patriarchal structure that commands women to obey men. Having nine children was a great hardship on my mother; my father was a typical patriarchal type who left all child raising to my mother and the two eldest daughters, one of which was myself. Fortunately for me, my mother railed against her injustices and those of others, and helped to create in me a broad and deep sense of fairness. Unfortunately I ran smack up against a great deal of unfairness, or injustices as I see it more politically now, so that I became a feminist and a Humanist before I knew the terms. I remember being granted permission by the mother superior and the rebel priest at my Catholic high school to question authority, Catholic and otherwise. This was during the late 1960's when many Catholic nuns and priests were radicalized, and thanks to them and my parents, so was I. I could not possibly comprehend a Noah's ark, a warrior/thunder god in the sky, or worse yet, that I was going to hell because I ate meat on Friday, the same fate for rapists and murderers. I had especial consternation with men who told me not to worry my "pretty little head" over anything more troubling than just looking pretty. My mother told me that my brains were my greatest asset; I agreed and promised to use them wisely. Being an atheistic feminist meant trouble for me, as you might imagine, so I was in particular need of intelligent ways of fighting rampant sexism and fundamental sectarianism.

Speaking of fundamentalism, my father converted to Catholicism from a Protestant sect called Primitive Baptist when he married my mother. My mother had been raised as a non-practicing Jew by her (anti-) orthodox father who just wanted to get away from some customs he did not believe in and so married my grandmother, a German Lutheran, who believe it or not, claimed to be Jewish to everyone she met and is buried in a Jewish cemetery on Long Island, which I understand is a desecration. Oh well. So many different religious perspectives was beneficial in the sense that I was exposed to a cross-section of Judeo-Christian ethics and I could see some different levels of mythic belief in metaphorical religion and in "revealed truth."

As I have matured in my feminism and Humanism, a result of my academics and my activism, I have been able to detect and define many levels of each. We sometimes think that because we declare ourselves to be one, the other, or both, that we have attained the highest degree of understanding. Yet it seems to be a constant personal struggle to cast off the entrenched but unwelcome socializations that dominant societal structures have made certain that we adhere to in this religious patriarchal culture. It's a difficult but happy struggle so, I would say, "Viva la resistance!" and "Viva las feministas!"

There's much more of course, and I welcome future opportunities that will present themselves as I engage in discussion with and meet more Humanist Celebrants, Humanist Society, and AHA members. At this point however, I believe it's important to recognize Feminist and Humanist members for their work. I feel my responsibility, as Feminist Caucus Chair, is to represent and to lead, in that order. It is not just my ideas I want to put forth, but theirs as well. Therefore I present for you the eloquently expressed ideals of three Feminist Caucus members.

I'm a woman who came to Humanism through the skeptical interrogations of my Mormon father: How do you know? And what does it do for you? I am now adding Humanist of the Year Murray Gell-Mann's question: Why not?

I keep asking those questions, sometimes of the Humanist movement, sometimes of myself, with a goal of living fully as a contributing member of society and of the Humanist movement. The answers I come up with vary with the content and context of the situation. Many times I have been the only woman in a group of Humanist men, an eavesdropper on a discussion (argument?) about some fine point of Humanist philosophy. Sometimes I have been in a group of Humanist women, sharing stories of our lives and challenges as we live with the awareness that we are responsible for ourselves-not the stars, the gods, the tides or the weather-but we who will solve our own dilemmas and fulfill our own dreams. I long to be part of a larger movement, creating a more humanistic world. I despair that there aren't more Humanists to share stories and ideas with.

Then I hear church/state crusader Vashti McCollum's story, and am inspired to act upon my beliefs, to grow intellectually and emotionally, and to continue seeking ways to contribute to the Humanist movement.

~ ***Paula Rochelle***

To be a feminist and a Humanist is to believe in equality across all lines, to believe that it is my responsibility to treat all people as having an equal share in the care of this planet and of those others here who have been denied their portion. It's therefore, my responsibility to fight for equality against the power establishment that exerts control wherever it exists.

All organizations must be headed by officers and directors who are equally divided among male and female members. As a feminist, and a Humanist, I seek not more for one segment of the population than any other-I seek equality for all. Not one of us is free or equal unless all of us are free and equal.

~ ***Colleen Kelly Johnston***

I would say that being a Humanist is knowing that each person is responsible for making his or her own choices, always keeping in mind that we should be careful with others and remember that the earth is our mother and we must protect it. I also think that it's important to work for fairness and justice for all people.

~ ***Carol Solomon***

These statements by Feminist Caucus members express a true belief in Humanism and egalitarianism. They express a hope, even a plea, to others to share the resources, power, prestige, and the difficulties inherent in organizing for lofty social goals. I applaud them and their strength of idealism and their struggles to gain a place for a feminist Humanism. I look forward to working toward these goals with them, all Feminist Caucus members, the Humanist Society, and the AHA.

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