The Power of a Word

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The word 'feminist' dates back to 1895 and is defined as “a person whose beliefs and behaviour are based on feminism.”¹ Therefore, in order to understand what a feminist is, we must first grasp the concept of feminism. Webster's English Dictionary defines the word feminism as “1. the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes and 2. organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.”² Many people believe that the word 'feminist' is an outdated term, and that since women have gained many advances through feminism, the movement is over. What these people don't realize, however, is that feminists today still have numerous goals to achieve, and because of this the word 'feminist' is still relevant in our modern society today.

It is true to say that many of the larger goals of feminism have been achieved, but that does not mean that the movement of feminism has come to an end. Gender roles, the pay gap, slut-shaming and girl-hate, abortions and reproductive rights, as well as many other issues, are problems that modern-day feminists still have to face daily. Misogyny is internalized into our everyday lives. Men have the power in our society—the percentage of men in high paying roles in the workplace almost always exceeds women. What we have to realize is that there are people in the world who have no idea what the basics of sexism are, and therefore, cannot understand the fight that feminists put up each and every day. Feminists keep us informed of these issues, and by not using the word 'feminist' anymore, we are sweeping these issues under the carpet.

Many critics of feminism believe that we do not need the word 'feminist' anymore, and that the term should be changed to 'equalist', 'humanist' or a variety of other terms in order to eliminate exclusionary language from the term. For example, on 4 November 2013, Equality Now honored award-winning writer, director, producer, and Advisory Board member, Joss Whendon, for his work on gender equality at its 'Make Equality Reality' event in Beverly Hills, California. At this event, Whendon gave a speech on his views on the word feminist:

But the word feminist, it doesn't sit with me, it doesn't add up. I want to talk about my problem that I have with it... People are confronted with the word feminism and it stops them; they think they have to deal with that. But I think we're done with that as intelligent human beings. Being on the wrong side of history in

terms of the oppression of women is being on the whole of history, all of recorded history, you're on the wrong side.” He goes on to propose a new word- genderist. “We need this word so that we can change the public discourse a little bit. And I came up with a lot of good ideas. I'm not going to lie... I'm alone in my room and I come up with genderist and I think "Oh! I've cracked it. This is amazing."... I would like this word to become the new racist. I would like a word that says there was a shameful past before we realized that all people were created equal. And we are past that. And every evolved human being who is intelligent and educated and compassionate and to say I don't believe that, that is unacceptable.  

Essentially, people argue that since feminism is important for everyone, the name should not exclude those who do not identify as women. The name 'feminism' suggests that the movement is only empowered by the actions of women, but men should be included for their contributions as well. The term 'feminist' brings many critics to believe that feminism is about raising women above men on the power level. Ultimately, these critics are saying: if feminism truly is about equality for all, then why would the name of the movement itself have exclusionary language?

Calling a 'feminist' a 'humanist', 'equalist', or even ‘genderist’ as Whendon proposed does dismiss gender specific issues that are at the core of feminism, whether it is intentional or not. By using these terms, we would be denying the difference between how genders are viewed and treated socially. Consider the fact that the way women are treated is still a large issue for feminists: by using the term 'equalism' we are denying the fact that the issue itself is largely gendered. It is important to realize that while men's issues are important in feminism, there are issues that specifically harm women in ways that men do not experience. It is also important to realize that the word ‘feminist’ does not prevent men from identifying themselves as one. It is not a word specifically meant for women; rather, it is just an individual who, regardless of gender, supports the feminist movement.

Feminists still have many major goals that they have yet to accomplish. From internalized misogyny to reproductive rights, the fight for equality for women has not yet been won. By not using the word feminist anymore, the issues of women today would not be validated as feminist movements in the ways they have been in the past. Many critics, including award-winning writer, director, producer, Joss Whendon, believe that the terminology should be changed from 'feminist' to 'equalist' or ‘genderist’ in order to promote equality, but what he, as well as many others do not realize is that there are many issues within feminism that are

gender specific to women, and by changing the name, these issues would be dismissed, even though they are the core of what feminism really is. Although many advances have been made, feminists today still have numerous goals to achieve, and because of this, the word 'feminist' is still, and will always be, a staple in our modern day society.

Bibliography

