

# Young women and feminism

Christina Scharff

Feminism is trending — yet many young women don't call themselves feminists. Why is this?

## Exam links

- Sociological perspectives
- Gender
- Socialisation, culture and identity

I do not remember thinking much about feminism when I went to school. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I was told — and felt certain — that men and women were equal and should be treated as such. This changed when I went to university and feminism entered my life. It was then and there that I realised that gender inequalities continued to exist in various spheres of life (such as in the workplace or the home) and that I started calling myself a feminist.

At the end of my first term at university, I went home and attended a party with my old school friends. As it happens, we started a discussion about gender issues and I was really struck by their hostility towards statements such as 'Gender inequality still exists' and 'I think feminism is a good thing'.

At university, I encountered similar attitudes. While most seemed to agree that men and women were equal, my classmates started acting a little strangely when it came to the word feminism. In particular, I was intrigued by the reaction of other women who seemed to have quite a negative, if not hostile, attitude towards the 'f-word'.

## The rise of (and resistance to) feminism

I started university in the early 2000s, which was a period in which feminist issues, topics or viewpoints were rarely covered in the media and in which the rejection of feminism was widespread (McRobbie 2009). Since then, a lot has changed: 'Everywhere you turn, there is an expression of feminism — on a T-shirt, in a movie, in the lyrics of a pop song, in an inspirational Instagram post, in an awards ceremony speech' (Banet-Weiser 2018).

For a number of years, feminism has experienced a wave of unprecedented popularity in English-speaking countries. This resurgence of feminism can further be seen in celebrities embracing feminism (for example Beyoncé, Emma Watson or, more recently, the Duchess of Sussex), bestselling books such as *Lean In*, vibrant feminist activism such as the Women's Marches, and much-discussed hashtags such as #MeToo.

Against this backdrop, it is surprising that the identity 'feminist' continues to be unpopular among young women in Great Britain. YouGov poll results demonstrate

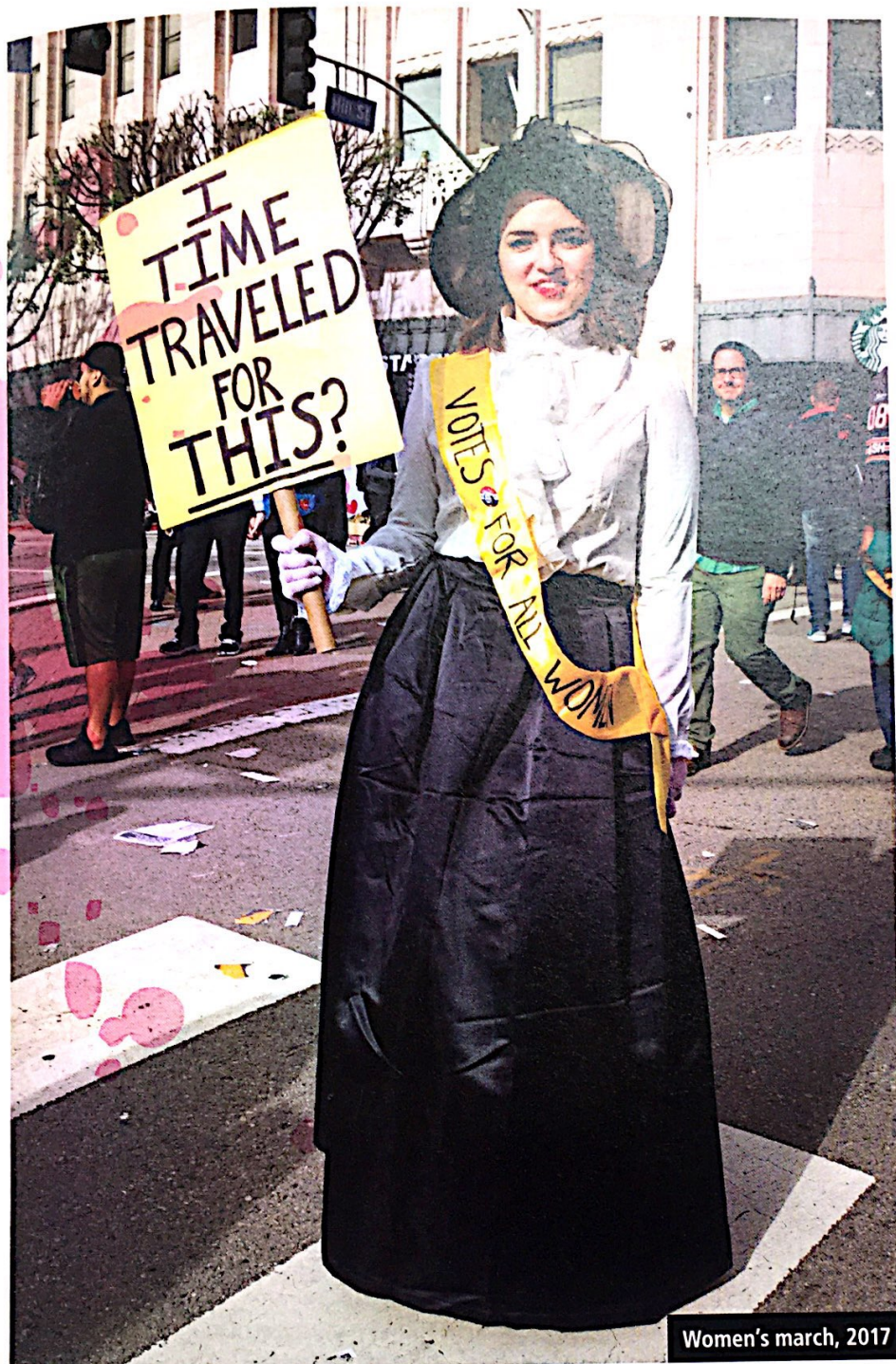
**'EVERYWHERE YOU TURN, THERE IS AN EXPRESSION OF FEMINISM — ON A T-SHIRT, IN A MOVIE, IN THE LYRICS OF A POP SONG, IN AN INSPIRATIONAL INSTAGRAM POST, IN AN AWARDS CEREMONY SPEECH'**

that 27% of women in Great Britain in 2013 said 'yes' when asked whether they are a feminist and 57% responded with a 'no'. In 2018 the figures were 34% (yes) and 51% (no) respectively.

While the 2018 YouGov poll indicates that young people (both men and women) are significantly more likely to call themselves feminist (46% of 18–24-year-olds versus 23% amongst those who are 65+), research commissioned by the Fawcett Society in 2016 demonstrates that only 18.6% of 18–24-year-old women described themselves as feminist.

The YouGov poll from 2018 also shows that respondents from social grades ABC1 were more likely (31%) to call themselves





Women's march, 2017

## Box 1 Methodology

The research was published as a book, *Repudiating Feminism: young women in a neoliberal world* (2012). The book is based on 40 interviews with young German and British women (aged 18–35) from all walks of life in terms of racial background, class background and sexual orientation.

In the interviews, I tried to find out how young women think, talk and feel about feminism. I asked questions such as: 'Have you ever heard of feminism?' and: 'If so, what do you associate with it?' 'Would you call yourself a feminist?'

Debates about intersectionality — the understanding that gender is always shaped by racial, ethnic and class background — are ongoing and feature prominently in contemporary debates, especially in digital spaces. Some women reject particular forms of feminism because they feel that they do not relate to the experiences and concerns of diverse groups of women.

Crucially, polls and studies also do not support the argument that British people reject feminism because they are against gender equality or believe that gender equality has been achieved. A 2018 YouGov poll demonstrates that 81% of British men and women think that they should be equal in every way and that sexism is still a problem in Britain (73%). In another YouGov poll of the same year, 56% of women believed there was still a need for feminism in Britain, but only 34% identified as feminist. Why, then, does the label 'feminist' continue to be unpopular?

### Exploring the rejection of feminism

In the late 2000s, I did a PhD on young women's relationship with feminism. (See Box 1.) Most of the women who took part in the research rejected the label 'feminist' and, indeed, were often reluctant to be associated with the women's movement.

They knew about ongoing gender inequalities. In that sense, these women were not 'duped' and did not believe that equality had been achieved. On the contrary, they were quite aware of existing gendered hierarchies. However, they often stated that these wider inequalities did not have an effect on their personal lives; despite the gender pay gap, they would make sure not

a feminist, than those from grades C2DE (20%). Notably, these differences in people's responses should not be seen as indicative of differences in attitudes towards gender equality between members of different class backgrounds. In 2015, for example, 82% of respondents from social grade ABC1 and 81% from social grade C2DE agreed that men and women should be equal in every way.

### Feminism and intersectionality

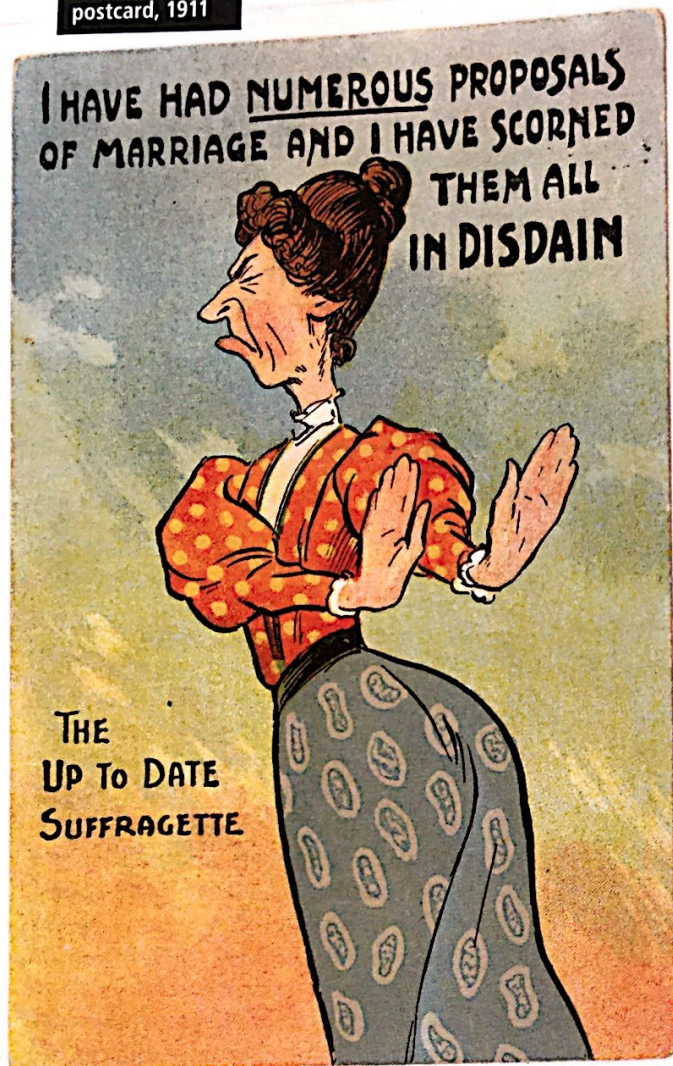
Different responses to the term 'feminism' — in terms of class, but also race and ethnicity — have to be understood in relation to ongoing struggles about including the voices

and needs of women from all walks of life. Often, the most visible and popular forms of feminism are those that represent the views of white and middle-class women, which excludes women from working-class and/or minority ethnic backgrounds.

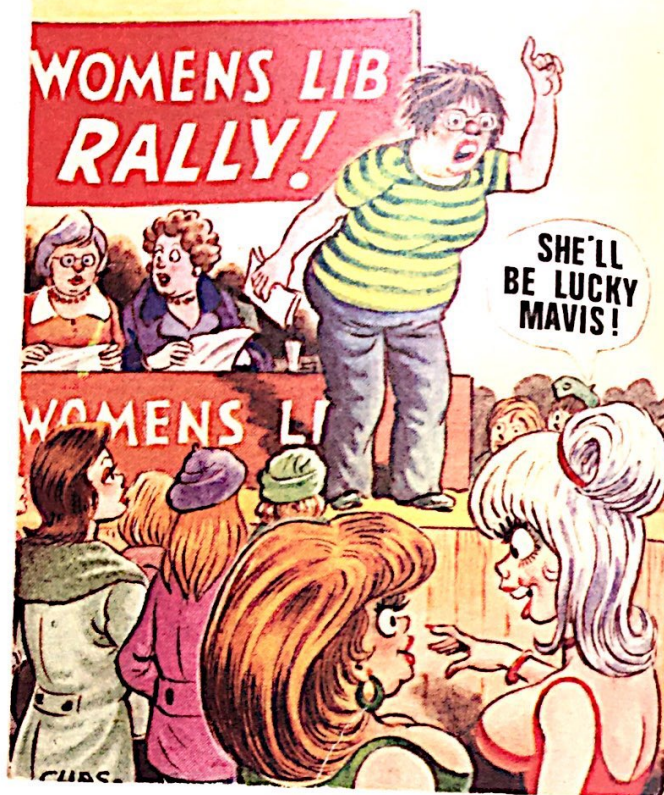
**THE MOST VISIBLE AND POPULAR FORMS OF FEMINISM ARE THOSE THAT REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF WHITE AND MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN**



An anti-feminist postcard, 1911



WE WOMEN MUST NOT TAKE THINGS LYING DOWN - WE WILL NOT BE JUMPED ON - WE MUST STICK THINGS OUT TOGETHER - AS LONG AS WE ARE SPLIT - THOSE MALE CHAUVINIST PIGS WILL BE ON TOP OF US!



An anti-feminist postcard, 1970s

to earn less than men. In this context, the research participants often used a language of personal empowerment and displayed a so-called 'individualist' outlook.

Instead of seeing their personal fates as being intertwined with wider social structures and forces, they thought of themselves as independent individuals. For this reason, they rejected joining social or political movements, such as feminism, and instead opted to fend for themselves.

It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that the women's relationship with feminism was entirely negative. Many said they were

grateful for the changes the women's movement had brought about. Others said that they were okay with feminism, as long as it was not extreme or of the 'man-hating' variant. Indeed, the majority of the women I interviewed associated feminists with man-haters, lesbians or 'unfeminine' women and, therefore, did not want to call themselves a feminist. I found this very interesting for two reasons:

■ First, what's so bad about being an unfeminine woman or a lesbian? Heterosexual conventions — the expectation that women should be feminine and intimate with men — strongly come to the fore here. Although some research participants were lesbian or bisexual, and although many emphasised that they were not anti-gay, the majority did not want to call themselves feminist because they feared that they would be seen as unfeminine, lesbian or man-hating.

■ Second, these stereotypes have 'stuck' to feminism for a long time. In the early twentieth century, feminists were called 'spinsters' and speculation about their sexual preferences was rife.

One hundred years later, these views are still prevalent. This is shown by the interviews I conducted, but they are also documented in scholarship on contemporary attitudes towards feminism (Weis et al. 2018).

### Challenging the stereotype?

In late 2018, the writer, journalist and blogger Scarlett Curtis edited the book *Feminists Don't Wear Pink (and Other Lies)*, which includes writing by 52 women on what feminism means to them. Curtis begins her introduction to the book with the words:

I didn't know I was a feminist until I was fifteen. I didn't know I was a feminist because I didn't know I

THE MAJORITY OF THE WOMEN ASSOCIATED FEMINISTS WITH MAN-HATERS, LESBIANS OR 'UNFEMININE' WOMEN



needed to be, and I also didn't think I would still be allowed to wear make-up if I became one.

Curtis goes on to state that it was the 'image' of a 'feminist' that meant she did not want to call herself one:

Feminists didn't use make-up (my favourite hobby). They didn't shave their legs (my favourite form of exercise). Feminists didn't like boys (my favourite type of human) and, most importantly, feminists definitely didn't wear pink. And pink was my favourite colour.

On the first page of the book, Curtis makes it clear that her initial rejection of feminism was mainly due to this list of feminists' alleged attributes. This list also resonated deeply with the accounts of the young women I spoke to in the mid-2000s.

Curtis also tells us that as a young woman she had an illness, which meant she had time to read, including feminist literature by a range of authors. She began to understand that: 'gender equality was not in fact a thing of the past but a far-off dream for the future'. Central to my arguments here, Curtis also began to understand that:

The assumptions I had held about what it meant to be a feminist were in fact a tool of the very systems of hate that these women were trying to smash. This system of hate (also known as 'the patriarchy') had concocted an image of a feminist precisely so young women would be deterred from continuing the fight. The lies we have been told about feminism have been fed to us to hold us back from a movement that is actually for everyone. A movement that is more beautiful and more potentially powerful than we could ever have dreamed. As I first began to read I began to understand that feminists do in fact wear make-up (if they want to).

### Exam-style questions



- 1 Explain, in the context of debates about feminism, what is meant by 'intersectionality'. (General non-exam-specific question — make sure that you *apply* the concept to debates about feminism.)
- 2 Using material from the article and your own knowledge, evaluate the view that feminism has little to offer the young women of today. (AQA/OCR-style, 20 marks.)

### THE FUSING OF FEMINISM AND FEMININITY DOES NOT QUESTION DOMINANT HETEROSEXUAL CONVENTIONS

They also shave their legs (if they want to) and love boys (if they want to). Feminists can also definitely wear pink, a lot of pink.

By arguing that feminism is 'actually for everyone' and that feminists can in fact wear make-up, shave their legs, love boys and wear pink, Curtis challenges the portrayal of feminism and femininity as mutually exclusive. In doing so, she departs from the accounts provided by the majority of the young women I spoke to. Insisting that feminists 'love boys (if they want to)', Curtis seeks to render feminism palatable to (heterosexual) young women.

Feminism may become more palatable if it is linked to femininity and 'loving boys', but the underlying heterosexual conventions that render women who are unfeminine and/or anti-man (in both attitude and sexual desire) unpopular remain intact. While the image of the unfeminine, man-hating woman may become disassociated from feminism, unfemininity and 'not liking boys' are still depicted as undesirable.

By 'rescuing femininity', and associating it with feminism, Curtis' version of feminism challenges historically prevalent stereotypes of the feminist as an unfeminine man-hater.

### References



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However, the fusing of feminism and femininity does not question dominant heterosexual conventions.

### Conclusion

The young women's responses in my PhD research, but also recent attempts to associate feminism with femininity, demonstrate that heterosexual conventions impact attitudes towards the term 'feminism'. How else can we explain ongoing discussions of feminist(s) imagined or actual relationships with femininity and men?

As Curtis' book demonstrates, recent popular forms of feminism have attempted to emphasise feminists' femininity to counteract age-old stereotypes of the women's movement. However, this strategy does very little to challenge expectations of what women should be like (for example feminine and pro-man). While I am of course not advocating man-hatred (and it is significant that I feel the need to mention this here), young women's attitudes towards the term 'feminism' are unlikely to change significantly if society's views of what women should look and act like don't also change.

### Key points



- There has been a resurgence of feminist ideas in recent years, in literature, 'celebrity' endorsements and social media campaigns such as #MeToo.
- Despite this, the author's research among young women in England and Germany revealed that many of them, while aware of gender inequalities, showed surprising resistance to identifying themselves as 'feminist'.
- One of the reasons for this was that they held stereotypes of what a 'feminist' was, tending to see feminists as man-hating, lesbian and/or 'unfeminine' women.
- Heterosexual conventions of what women *should* be like continue to dominate many young women's views about feminism.

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