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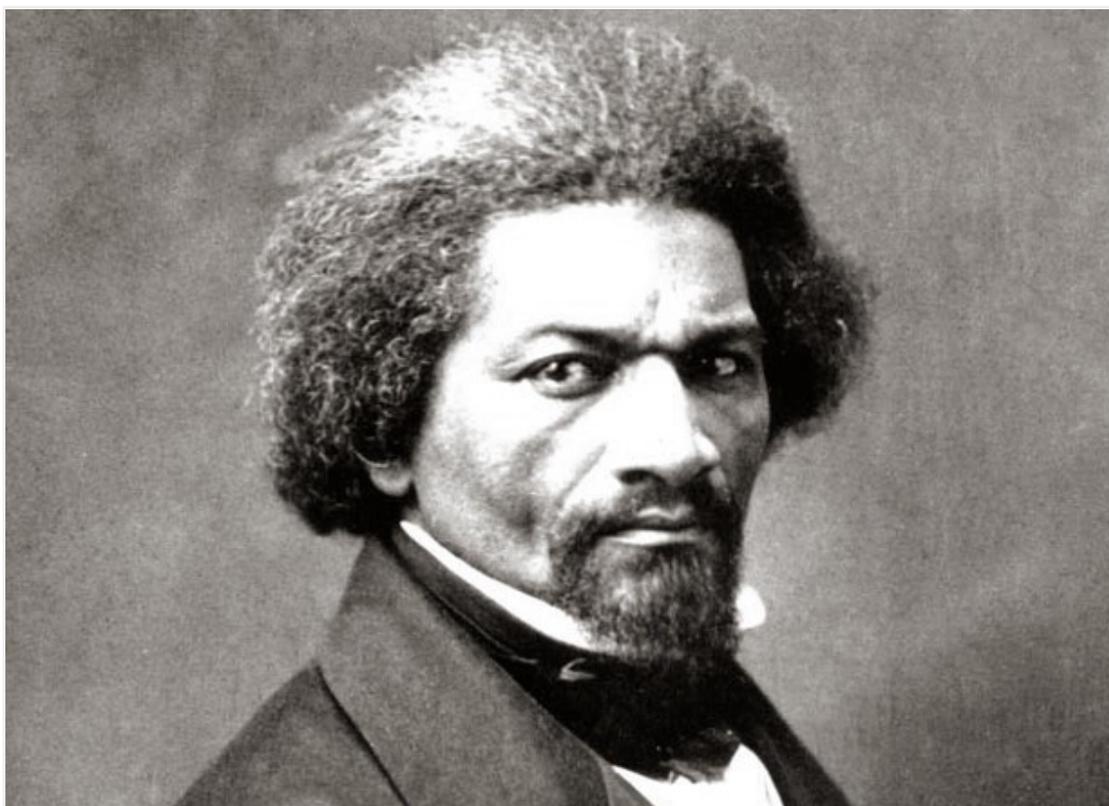
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POLITICS

A Short History of Male Feminism

From Frederick Douglass and John Stuart Mill to today's scholars, there are plenty of men who, despite their flaws, have helped advance women's liberation.



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NOAH BERLATSKY | JUN 12, 2014

Is it possible for a man to be a feminist? A [number of writers](#), including [me](#), have addressed this question recently, generally in theoretical terms. The arguments tend to focus on whether it makes ideological sense for men to call themselves feminists, or whether the terms of feminism are inclusive to men. But there typically isn't much discussion of the historical place of men in the feminist movement.

That's a shame, because there actually is a long tradition of male feminism in Europe and North America, dating back at least 175 years to the famous ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. The abolition and women's-suffrage movements were tightly connected in America, and Douglass was among the few men who attended the famous 1848 women's-rights convention in Seneca Falls. After the Civil War, Douglass had [tactical disagreements](#) with many women's-rights activists. Some white female leaders of the suffrage movement argued that white women were superior to black men and deserved the vote first. Douglass, for his part, felt that there was more "urgency" to give the vote to black men through the 15th Amendment, neatly shelving the small fact that black women were still denied the ballot. Still, his support for female suffrage never wavered. In an 1888 [speech](#), he both reaffirmed his stance and pointed to the primacy of women in their own movement: "I believe no man, however gifted with thought and speech, can voice the wrongs and present the demands of women with the skill and effect, with the power and authority of woman herself. The man struck is the man to cry out. Woman ... is her own best representative."

Around the same time that Douglass was working for suffrage in America, John Stuart Mill took up the cause in Britain. In *The Subjection of Women*, written in 1861 in collaboration with his wife Harriet Taylor Mill, he [declared](#): "[T]he principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to

the other—is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other." In 1866, Mill became the first British member of Parliament to introduce a bill calling for women to receive the vote.

"Woman ... is her own best representative."

Mill seems to have been inspired in the cause of women's rights by his relationship with his wife. Similarly, contemporary writer John Stoltenberg's radical feminism is inextricably linked to his long-time partnership with, and eventual marriage to, the feminist writer Andrea Dworkin. Stoltenberg founded the group "Men Can Stop Rape," but he's probably best known for his theoretical writing, especially his 1989 book [Refusing to Be a Man](#), in which he argues that men need to create and embrace a less toxic version of masculinity based on respect rather than misogyny. He focused on pornography—and, as a gay man himself, particularly gay pornography—arguing that bondage and sadism in porn, gay or straight, encourages men to treat women as “utterly submissive masochists who enjoy pain and humiliation and who, if they are raped, enjoy it.” His famous [conclusion](#) was this: "*Pornography* tells lies about women. But *pornography* tells the *truth about men*," meaning that pornography is an accurate representation of the way men, gay and straight, have constructed their sexuality around dominance, objectification, and dehumanization of women.

Another currently active feminist scholar is Adam Jones, a political

scientist who focused on genocide at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. In his books and on his website, [Gendercide Watch](#), he has used feminist theory in documenting and analyzing gendercide, violence perpetrated for gender-related reasons. For example, he has analyzed the way Bengali women were singled out for mass murder in the 1971 Pakistani [genocide](#); he has also studied cases of men being targeted for gendercidal violence, as in Saddam Hussein's [Anfal campaign against the Kurds](#), in which men were exterminated en masse.

It's important to recognize that although Douglass, Mill, Stoltenberg, and Jones are all male feminists, their engagement with feminism takes a range of forms. Douglass's commitment was an outgrowth of his involvement in abolitionism. Mill's feminism was part of his general liberal politics. Stoltenberg used feminism to think through issues of masculinity and misogyny, which he saw as both personal and political issues for men. Jones is connected to feminism through his research on genocide and gender. For all of them, feminism involves a mix of altruism, community, intellectual interest, political beliefs, and personal investment—which is probably something you could say for most female feminists, as well.

Although these men's activism and writing is inspirational, none of their work is, or should be, beyond criticism. Douglass prioritized black men's rights over women's rights at a crucial moment, helping to perpetuate a rift between the civil-rights and women's-rights movements that still exists. The radical anti-porn and anti-sadomasochism stances of theorists like Stoltenberg and Dworkin have faced fierce resistance from [pro-sex feminists](#). Jones' concept of gendercide [has been criticized](#) as conceptually muddled, as has his contention that feminism has not sufficiently addressed the problems of [men and masculinity](#).

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These critiques don't mean these men aren't real feminists, nor that men can't be feminists. It just means that there are arguments, and differences, and failures in feminism, as in any liberation project—or for that matter in any human endeavor. The fact that Mill or Douglass or Stoltenberg or Jones have flaws is all the more reason to point to their examples. It reminds us that male feminists are neither

new nor perfect, but they make important contributions to the advancement of women. They're real people, from whose mistakes we can learn, and whose successes we can aspire to emulate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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