

From Faux-Feminist To Pro-Feminist: A Man's Journey

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This is a story about two different types of men who profess to believe in feminism. One type is the profeminist.

Profeminists are men who are truly supportive of the feminist movement. They are attentive, compassionate, sensitive, interested, alert, active and tuned in. They listen to wymyn and follow the leadership of the best wymyn feminist thinkers and activists. This is the type of feminist I hold as an ideal-- an ideal which I hope to be nearing every day. The other kind of man who professes to believe in feminism is what I call the faux-feminist. My account of the faux-feminist is somewhat autobiographical and is based primarily on my own experience. Unfortunately, however, I have learned from listening to feminists that many such men exist-- men who claim to be followers of feminism yet continue to act in sexist or hurtful ways.

When I tell people that I identify myself as a profeminist, some questions are almost inevitably asked. "Why profeminist rather than just feminist?" some ask. The definitions of "feminist" vary from person to person. As Gloria Steinem says, there are as many different kinds of feminism as there are feminists. Although some definitions of "feminist" include men, there are some definitions which include wymyn only. While I am skeptical as to whether there is one "best" definition of feminism, it is not up to me as a man to decide how the feminist movement should define itself. Wymyn know better than men what sexism is and how to combat it. Therefore, I prefer the word "profeminist" so as not to beg any questions about what a "feminist" is and whether I can be one.

"By supporting feminism, aren't you turning your back on your own sex?" Well, I personally don't think there is a "war between the sexes." While I realize that sexism in this society affords me many privileges in society, I do not think that men are any "better off" in a sexist world. In fact, I think feminism has the potential for enriching the life of all people, men and wymyn. While it may cost men some privileges, the gains in terms of equality, morality and the overall good make feminism a movement worth supporting for all people.

"Feminism is usually associated with the Wymyn's Movement. Do wymyn even want men to take part in it?" I cannot speak for wymyn feminists. From my experience it seems that some feminists would like to see men actively involved in these issues and others do not. I have encountered many feminists who have become disillusioned with the idea of men playing a role in the feminist movement. They complain about the men who claim to believe in feminism, some even claiming expertise in the area, but who are ignorant or uncaring about their own sexist attitudes and actions. It is true that there are many men who claim to be feminist yet continue to act in sexist ways or even cause problems for the wymyn involved in the movement. These are what I call "faux-feminists." But I think we must see these "faux-feminists" as being on a journey, and I have hope, that through compassion, education and understanding we might help those who are "faux-feminist" become "profeminist." While the "profeminist" does wish to play a role in the wymyn's movement by helping to educate men and help them eliminate their own sexism, the "profeminist" realizes that his role should be limited.

“How did you come to be a profeminist?” This is perhaps the question I have the most to say about. For me, the journey from being unaware of feminist issues to being the self-identified profeminist I am today was not a simple one. The levels of socialization and the deep internalization of sexism in masculine culture made it very hard for me as a man to truly understand the complexity of feminism, and on what fundamental levels it could change my life once I opened my mind to it. My consciousness raising about feminism was anything but an overnight process. In fact, I struggled and continue to struggle with issues of feminism, to integrate feminism into my life, and to realize the myriad of ways institutionalized sexism affects my behaviour. While I have been interested in and supportive of feminism for many years now, I realize that I have still much to learn. But I also realize I have come a long way. When I first identified myself as “feminist” (rather than “profeminist” as I now do) I was painfully unaware of the depth of the issues involved. Although I tried to be feminist, I was often ignorant of, confused by, or blind to many of my own behaviors and thoughts which were sexist. I was, in short, a “faux-feminist.”

“What is a faux-feminist?” It seems to me that I am not the only man who has ever struggled with feminism when first getting involved with it. Many men, even those who are sympathetic with feminism, have difficulty truly realizing the extent to which sexism is prevalent in their actions and thoughts. While currently there has been a male “backlash” against feminism, there are still many men who are interested in feminism, who identify themselves as being feminist. Men from diverse backgrounds claim to believe in the basic assumptions, goals and beliefs of the feminist movements. Unfortunately, there are many such men who still act in a variety of ways which are (usually unbeknownst to them) sexist, misogynist, and oppressive. I know such men exist because I used to be one, and in many ways, I am still am one.

“How does one identify a faux-feminist?” Naturally, as human beings, every faux-feminist is different. I can only offer what I take to be characteristic examples, based on my own experience as a faux-feminist and what I have witnessed. This is not a list of criteria that lay out the necessary and sufficient conditions for what a faux-feminist is. There are probably many men who could be regarded as faux-feminists who do not exhibit any of these traits, and probably many people who do exhibit these traits but are not faux-feminists. But from my own experience, here are some examples of faux-feminist behaviour:

- The faux-feminist says that he believes in feminism, but rarely admits this in a group of all men.
- The faux-feminist still tells and laughs at sexist jokes, telling himself that they are “only jokes” and that “everyone has to have a sense of humor.” Or if the faux-feminist has stopped himself from telling sexist jokes, he does not confront those who do in his company.
- Similarly, the faux-feminist does not realize the importance of discourse and language in general for creating equality. He goes on using gendered pronouns and insensitive terms, thinking that words are insignificant. A 25 year old woman is at best “a girl” in his mind. Anyone who speaks to him on this subject is derided as being a member of the “p.c. thought police.”
- The faux-feminist does not realize the strong connection between the feminist movement and the movements against racism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism and classism.
- The faux-feminist believes that rape and sexual harassment are wrong. Still, if he is straight, he often puts pressure on his partner for sex. He still asks of his straight friends, “So, did you get anything last night?”
- The faux-feminist decries the narrow beauty standard which women are expected to follow in this country. Yet he still enjoys pornography and sensationalized images of unrealistic women. He pays money to see the movie with the “hotter babe” in it.
- The faux-feminist who joins feminist organizations does not worry about disrupting the group. He does not understand how his presence impacts the group dynamic and does not care. He interrupts women, he uses a non feminist conversational style, and often, makes the situation difficult or uncomfortable for the other members.
- The faux-feminist thinks that since he is interested in feminism, that it is the duty of women to

educate and inform him of the issues. Most importantly, the faux-feminist thinks he has the right to direct the feminist movement. As an “obviously progressive person,” the faux-feminist realizes that sexism is a problem and thinks he and only he knows exactly what needs to be done to solve it. He stops listening to wymyn who actually experience sexism first hand, and he instead tries to impose his own idea of “feminism” on the world.

“What can be done about the faux-feminist?” The faux-feminist can be dangerous, destructive, disruptive and demeaning, not to mention simply annoying for other people working on the same issues. But it should be remembered that the faux-feminist is just someone who is interested in feminism, but is simply ignorant of the true complexity and depth of the issues involved.

In my view, we need to be patient and compassionate with the faux-feminist. In this way, he can be made into a profeminist, a man who is truly supportive and sensitive to feminism in all its many forms. The path from faux-feminism to pro-feminism is an ongoing one. While I base my account here mostly on my own experiences, I am still far from being the ideal profeminist. But I have come a long way. I hope I can help other men who have made it to the faux-feminist stage make it past that stage as well. The goal is to help the faux-feminist move past that stage in a positive way. Too often I think men make it to the faux-feminist stage only to discover that they still are reacted to negatively by others and end up disillusioned with feminism entirely. I think this is a shame. I hope that those of us men who have survived this stage should learn to reach out to faux-feminists, to try not to judge them solely for their faults and sexist tendencies, but rather help them overcome them in a positive ways.

“What are the crucial steps for helping the faux-feminists become a profeminist?” For me, the key step in the process of becoming rising above faux-feminism was learning how to listen to wymyn. As a man and as a masculine person I was taught always to be in command, to be assertive, to be competitive. As such, I found that once I first identified myself as feminist I began to see myself as “an expert”-- someone who should be telling others how to be feminist, someone whose voice should always be heard in discussions having to do with sex and gender. Unfortunately, I was so busy talking, trying to convince others, trying to be what I thought a good feminist was, that I forgot to listen and see. I did not hear the wymyn whose perspective were different than mine. I did not hear or see how it sounded when I said one thing and did another. I stopped trying to identify sexism within myself and became preoccupied with identifying the sexism around me. I did not realize how my masculine ways, competitive way of speaking, crowded out voices who were not socialized into being so assertive verbally. I did not see how my very presence as a faux-feminist in feminist circles changed group dynamics. I did not understand that as a man I can never truly know what it is like to experience sexism first hand. I thought mistakenly that I could lead the feminist movement all by myself.

But I was lucky. With the help of friends and teachers, I began to be introduced to the issues of gender communication and the importance of language and discourse. Reflecting on these things, I began to realize the faux-feminist things about myself. I began to become more sensitive about the words I used and the manner in which I spoke. I examined how my presence and my tone and my actions impacted the dynamics of groups I worked in. These things continue to be difficult for me. The way in which we communicate is so intimately tied to our socialization and upbringing that it is hard to find a new way without falling into utter silence. But luckily, and most importantly, I learned the value of listening. I learned that wymyn too can be confused about feminist issues. I learned that wymyn are often put off by faux-feminist men. I learned that it is not up to me as a man to decide what is best for wymyn or what is best for feminism. In short, I learned what it means to be a profeminist. I was very lucky to have people who were patient and supportive of me, despite my faux-feminism.

“What is a profeminist?” I do not think there is one formula for being a profeminist, and all profeminists will be different. Again I can only speak from my own experience. The “profeminist” for me is an ideal, someone I try to be. I must admit that I fall short of this ideal quite often. But one does not have to be perfect to raise above the level of the faux-feminist. In fact, learning from mistakes is how progress is usually achieved. Slowly I do think I am making progress towards this goal. Here are some exercises in my imagination from some of the likely characteristics (again, I do not mean these as criteria) of the profeminist I personally would like to be:

·The profeminist believes in feminism and incorporates that belief in the many contexts of his life, and stands up for his beliefs, even in situations where they may not be popular or well-regarded by others. ·The profeminist tries to use inclusive language and communication style. He listens to others and tries to find a level of communication with which they are comfortable. He tries to be inclusive with his words and manner, and does not try to compete or dominate in a conversation. He chooses his words carefully and even incorporates those words into his own thought. ·The profeminist speaks out against the sexism he sees and hears, even the smallest joke. But he does so in a way that is constructive and not demeaning to those he criticizes. ·The profeminist consciously tries to expand his own definition of beauty, both male and female. He does not support literature or advertising that exploits or objectifies wymyn’s bodies. ·The profeminist educates himself about ableism, ageism, homophobia, racism and classism and realizes the importance of working against such things. The profeminist celebrates diversity. ·The profeminist questions and tries to redefine the traditional male account of sex and sexuality in a positive, healthy way. ·The profeminist is interested in taking action in the name of feminism, yet he does so in a nonassuming way. He makes it clear when he joins a feminist organization that his presence does not disrupt the purpose or the activities of that group. He tries first and foremost to listen to wymyn about feminism, for it is they who experience sexism first hand and know best where feminism as a movement should be going. ·While he sees himself primarily as listener rather than leader of feminism in general, the profeminist makes it a value of his to reach out to other men and educate them about feminist issues. ·While the profeminist realizes that only by listening and learning from wymyn can he truly be enlightened about feminist issues, the profeminist does not think that wymyn have the “duty” to educate him. While he gratefully accepts and learns from those wymyn who are willing to share, he realizes that the responsibility for being educated on feminist issues is his own, and that he is “owed” nothing simply for being interested in feminism. ·While the profeminist wishes to be an activist in support of feminism, the profeminist realizes that there are some feminist organizations and support groups that should be open to wymyn only. Wymyn face sexism daily, and often need time away from men-- to feel more open, more free, to explore their identities as wymyn. It is not sexist to ask men not to participate in some feminist activities. ·The profeminist makes mistakes and learns from them.

“What is the crucial difference between a profeminist and a faux-feminist?” Each person has a different path. I think perhaps the main difference for me was the level at which I truly understood the feminist motto, “the personal is the political.” As a faux-feminist I had heard that saying, and on a mental level I comprehended, but I did not understand its full import. Because men are often taught that the personal and the political are two separate realms, we can sometimes believe in something on the political level and not realize how it should be translated on a personal level. A faux-feminist might believe that rape is wrong and work against rape politically, but not realize how his own actions might be a kind of rape at the personal level. Even the very saying “the personal is the political” is prone to this problem. A man might believe it and understand it on an intellectual level, yet still not know how to incorporate that motto into his own life.

“But isn’t this just your view?” Of course. I do not think I have all the answers. The above list is just my own personal account of who I would like to be. It is very much tailored to my own experience as a middle class, white, (mostly) straight, American male who has been a faux-feminist and now longs for something more. While I often fall far short of my goal, I realize that it is the struggle that is important, and that the faults I do have do not make me unworthy. But other roads, other journeys, even other destinations are just as worthwhile, just as valuable.

“Can others learn from you?” While I do mean to speak primarily from my own experience, it does seem to me that there are other men who are going through or have gone through a similar process. I must admit I do often encounter individual men whom I have little choice but to see as being faux-feminist. I do not like “labelling” people, and the boundaries between faux-feminist, pro-feminism and everyone else are a bit arbitrary at best. Still, I think it is important to realize that the process of becoming a man who is truly sensitive and aware of the complexity and depth of feminism is often itself long and difficult. It is important to recognize that those people, including my former self, who exhibit signs of faux-feminism have already taken a step past the nonfeminists and antifeminists of the world. It is also important to recognize that such people are on a journey. Unfortunately, this journey sometimes takes them through deserts and swamps which are not pleasant for anyone involved. But rather than put up barriers in their way, I think the appropriate response to acts of faux-feminism is to put up road maps. I hope I have at least in a small way done that here.