

Beware the Self-Proclaimed Male Feminist

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I used to get so excited when a guy called himself a feminist. Now? Not so much.

For a long time I viewed male feminists as inherently good guys because so much of the world still thinks "feminist" is a dirty word. It was a relief to find a guy who didn't think feminists were women to steer clear of. But then there were feminists like the guy I dated who donated to Planned Parenthood, had tons of female friends, and would engage in hours-long conversations about patriarchy and rape culture, but who would simultaneously make angry comments about an actress he liked sleeping around too much, or comment only on a popular singer's body but not her work. At first these moments would make me think, *What the hell was that?* It was nothing, right? He's a feminist. In the midst of a lot of other allied statements he would make, it was easy to dismiss as a poor choice of words.

So when I saw [Stoya's recent tweet](#) about hearing people hail her ex-boyfriend James Deen as a feminist hero when she claims that he raped her, I understood why so many people were shocked. James Deen has long been branded as a feminist porn star (despite his saying [he wasn't sure if he was a feminist](#) this past summer) due to his friendships with outspoken feminist women, frequent mentions of gender politics in interviews, and the fact that so many of the women in his films seemed to genuinely enjoy having sex with him on camera. Women loved him because it was refreshing to see a porn star *making love* to women instead of just jackhammering away.

But once I'd read the tweets in the trending #SolidarityWithStoya hashtag, I realized my experiences were far from the only time self-proclaimed male feminists had turned out to be secret misogynists. And being hurt by a male feminist seemed to hurt more than it would've if the men had never claimed to be feminists, because weren't they supposed to be the good guys? While there are plenty of honest-to-god male feminist allies out there, how do you know which men are the safe ones, if even self-proclaimed feminists can be misogynistic at best, abusive at worst?

I dated one such man for a thankfully brief period of time. His bedroom was lined with "Thank you for your consistent donations" Planned Parenthood letters, we'd speak at length about our shared love of bell hooks and hatred of hacky sexist garbage jokes we'd see guys tell at my comedy shows. He'd call out people who would tell me I "wasn't like other girls," realizing the sexism in that, the implication that *other girls are terrible. You, however, are special.* But slowly, over time, whatever image he was trying to project began to crack.

He would get angry when he'd see women on the street who he felt weighed too much. He'd be bothered by women who didn't let him hold the door for them, angered by women who would sleep with other men but not him, and even admitted to me that one time he'd "technically had sex with a woman while she was asleep." Coupled with grandiose declarations of being in love with me for being such a strong, badass woman, his views seemed in conflict at all times. Finally, after a particularly explosive outburst I couldn't ignore, I ended things but worried about telling our mutual friends who knew him to be a Great Feminist Guy.

The next time I saw one of our mutual friends, I told her the story as though it had happened to a friend, a nameless person I knew. I told her about the beginning and how he seemed like such an awesome feminist dude, and then about how it began to get darker, and then about as dark as it could get. Not wanting to lie to her, after the story was over, I waited several minutes and told her it was me, and it was about him.

Her response was validating and scary all at once. "Fuck. I was hoping you weren't going to say that," she said. "I didn't know you two were dating and I hoped you weren't. I've known him since college and he does this thing where he only dates really smart, cool feminist women, and then he tries to break them. It's insane. I don't know how he does it."

But I knew exactly how he did it. Hearing a man say he's a feminist immediately gives you a feeling of safety, a weight lifted off your shoulders. You don't have to explain why street harassment isn't a compliment. You don't have to prove that your experiences are real. He's on your side because he said so. But after hearing more and more women I know who have experienced the relatively innocuous (see: *where the hell did that horrible rape joke come from?!*) to severe, I've gotten to the point where I wonder if a man calling himself a feminist is actually a cover for something even darker than a man who doesn't.

The men I've known over the years who are real, true feminists, rarely proclaim it because they don't need a cookie for believing in equality and they know they don't deserve one for that fact alone. They see inequality in the world, they're pissed off about it, and they know that women's issues are men's issues too and patriarchy sucks. And most of the time, we just eat tacos and watch movies, knowing that we're on the same side. Even if they've never used the word, I know they're feminists because of the way they talk to women, and because of the way they listen to and support me.

The reason fake male feminists are a real problem is because we need male feminist visibility now more than ever. It's awesome that guys like Joseph-Gordon Levitt and Aziz Ansari are becoming more vocal about being feminists and are actually taking action to help women. Hopefully it will usher in a crop of men who can make an active effort to change things for the better (and refute the idea that "feminism" is a dirty word because zzz). But the baggage that comes with that shift is a crop of men who use the label "feminist" as an asshole veil so they can get closer to women. It's an immediate stamp of innocence, as if to say, "Hey, I'm a feminist, so there's no way I could do anything wrong." (An especially dark example: The prison guard on *Orange Is The New Black* who told Tiffany Doggett he was a feminist before raping her in the very same episode).

Stoya's tweet is an important reminder that a self-proclaimed male feminist can abuse just as easily as one who isn't. And while there's not a right way to be a feminist of any gender, there is definitely a wrong one.

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