

## Feminism in The 21st Century

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Forty years ago American women launched a liberation movement for freedom and equality. They achieved a revolution in the Western world and created a vision for women and girls everywhere. Today, women's economic and social participation is considered a standard requirement for a nation's healthy democratic development.

But there is a need now, in the opening years of the 21st century, to rethink feminism. There are new challenges and new potential allies that didn't exist in the mid-20th century.

Islamic fundamentalism threatens women all over the world. Wherever they have gained power, Islamists have denied women their essential humanity and dignity. Islamic fundamentalism is not conservative religion but a fascist political movement that aims for world domination. Many feminists are out of touch with the realities of the war that has been declared against the secular, Judeo-Christian, modern West. They are still romanticizing and cheering for Third World anti-colonialist movements, without a realistic view of what will happen to the global status of women if the Islamists win. Many feminists continue to condemn the United States, a country in which, for the most part, their ideas have triumphed.

Accompanying the rise in Islamic fundamentalism is an increase in anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. Twentieth-century feminists condemned racism but never considered hatred of Jews a form of racism. As a result, they continue to deny, minimize or even support anti-Semitism in the name of opposing racism.

The exponential growth of the global sex trade is also a threat to the dignity and survival of women and girls. Sex trafficking is a modern form of slavery for many girls, especially those who are poor and uneducated. The sexual revolution benefited women in some ways, but it also fueled sexual liberalism, which has resulted in the increasing normalization of prostitution. Feminists have been hampered in their response to this threat because there are divisions within feminism about the nature of prostitution: Is it a form of work that should be legalized or a human rights violation that should be abolished?

Can we imagine telling our daughters that they can grow up to be "sex workers," that prostitution is now a job like any other? Millions of victims of trafficking are enslaved in the sex trade and dying of AIDS. This international human rights crisis should be met with feminist moral clarity. We must recognize that prostitution is inherently harmful. We must actively oppose the traffickers, the pimps and the men who patronize the brothels.

In the past, when faced with choosing allies, feminists made compromises. To gain the support of the liberal left, feminists acquiesced in the exploitation of women in the pornography trade -- in the name of free speech. The issue of abortion has prevented most feminists from considering working with conservative or faith-based groups. Feminists are right to support reproductive rights and sexual autonomy for women, but they should stop demonizing the conservative and faith-based groups that could be better allies on some issues than the liberal left has been.

In the past feminists interpreted freedom of religion to mean freedom from religion. Too often they have viewed organized religion only as a dangerous form of patriarchy, when it can also be a system of law and ethics that benefits women. Too often feminists base their views of religious groups on outdated stereotypes. Groups that were hostile to feminism 40 years ago now take women's freedom and equality as a given. For example, faith-based groups have become international leaders in the fight against sex trafficking.

Human rights work is not the province of any one ideology. Saving lives and defending freedom are more important than loyalty to an outdated and too-limited feminist sisterhood. Surely after 40 years feminists are mature enough to form coalitions with those with whom they agree on some issues and disagree on others.

Twenty-first-century feminists need to become a force for literate, civil democracies. They must oppose dictatorships and totalitarian movements that crush the liberty and rights of people, especially women and girls. They would be wise to abandon multicultural relativism and instead uphold a universal standard of human rights. They should demand that all girls have the opportunity to reach their full potential instead of living and dying in the gulags of the sex trade.

Twenty-first-century feminists need to reassess the global threats to women and men, rethink their vision, rekindle their passion and work in solidarity with pro-democracy forces around the world to liberate humanity from all forms of tyranny and slavery.

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