

# Feminism: What Are We Supposed to Do Now?

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**WE** UNDERSTAND that feminism doesn't actually have a first-person plural subject. Even before the various politics of gender equality—or the differently strategized movements to overturn globally ranged and differently performed patriarchies—came to be known as “feminisms” at the point of the approximate end of the so-called second wave and the beginning of the so-called third or post wave, the only “we” in sexual resistance was always local and specific, the only working definition of “woman” was always at most only national, across all the categories of national identification (race, class, sexuality, faith, diaspora). An experience-based politics and system of representation, feminism has always been functionalized in relation to the immediate and proximate, the ideological, social, cultural exigencies that underpin the experience of ordinary living in any place. Feminism thus didn't *splinter* in the late 1980s into diverse and frequently opposed constituencies: it was never anything else; there has never been a global sisterhood; there has never been a viable international feminism; there isn't one shared history; there isn't one discourse within which it is possible to be positioned unproblematically as “feminist” or, for that matter, as “woman.” The fact of biological gender doesn't actually make for a coherent group beyond what might be understood as a superficial

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genital identification, and questions like “what does woman want?” are only scandalous obviations of categorically distinct requirements for equality—something, it might be suggested, that likewise obtains for the question posed in this forum.

The recognition of the historical impossibility of a collective feminist subject is not, however, an index of anything other than a recognition of the immediate and proximate as determinants of gender-based inequality in diverse locations; and it is not in any way an indication that resistance to gender-based equality is impossible—or for that matter unnecessary. There is no evidence at this time that any patriarchal formation anywhere has effectively yielded to the pressure of oppositional politics. Even if feminism has no functional global subject and “women” aren't a coherent group, anyone who appears to fall into this latter category in any patriarchal formation (so, anywhere) is constituted within it *as* a “woman” and is consequently subject to what it means to live and move in ordinary space in a female body—to be subject, that is, to a system of gender-based inequity that continues to thrive and in various locations (by which we mean ideological rather than geographical) to be vigorously resurgent. The fact, in other words, precisely of superficial genital identification is enough to subject anyone thus biologically “female” to lower wages; fewer opportunities in politics, business, and public administration; policing during pregnancy as the passive vessel of reproduction, followed by minimal and sometimes nonexistent support for women with children; increasingly, a lack of access to procedures for the termination of pregnancy; a higher probability of being sexually assaulted; a greater threat of domestic violence; a more severe social condemnation and attendant internalized guilt for the “failure” to reproduce. Drugs and treatments are tested on and designed for men; likewise cars and airbags; universities have more female students and fewer female faculty; childcare remains primarily the responsibility of women; single mothers are still the most economically depressed category; women still do more work at home; pornography is still primarily about the representation and control of female bodies. By and large, anywhere, at this time, the condition of being genitally female isn't necessarily any better than it has ever been.

Feminism is frequently blamed for the persistence of what used to be called oppression and now isn't called anything at all: feminism *failed* to solve women's problems; feminism fell apart. In fact, there is no historical lack of resistance, activism, political work, rhetoric, and polemic that is feminist in one way or another: that patriarchal structures have failed to yield to pressure is not an index of feminism's shortcomings or a sign that

it should lie down and die—or that it has. Despite many reports to the contrary, feminism, if it is understood to be a basic principle of resistance to gender inequity rather than a particular movement at a particular time (the second wave, in the West), isn't dead. That it speaks and works in many voices and locations; that the bodies whose safety and dignity it seeks to protect occupy diverse geopolitical, social, and cultural spheres that intersect only at the point of the ideological construction of genital identity as fundamental or "real"; that it can't represent a global, nationally-specific, experientially divided constituency: none of these things suggest that there's something inherently wrong with pushing at your own boundaries and trying to make your own world more habitable. Individualism might after all be the most productive point of intersection for feminist politics, given that the real problem might be the resistance of patriarchal gender representations to first-person identification for women, who are always subject *to* rather than subjects *of* its discursive formations.

This forum is not representative of feminism or feminisms across all categories, but it does provide a range of responses to the question "what are we supposed to do now" from a range of feminist scholars engaged in English studies in Canada. These responses indicate at times a degree of despair and frustration over what seems to be the fruitless spinning in the mire of gender inequity of what First-wave English-Canadian feminist Nellie L. McClung described as "the wheels of progress," but their energy and conviction also indicate that feminism is actually alive and kicking and working for a kind of social change that is systemic rather than necessarily progressive and, perhaps most importantly, that feminism's real and incontestable space is the body that inhabits patriarchal structures and works against those structures, whatever or wherever they might be. Their collective answer, then, is something like this: this is what we're supposed to do now.