

(Wo)manifesto

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Since Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook COO, has been urging us to lean in, conversations have been buzzing about what it means to be a feminist. I'm always thankful for the opportunity to revisit the question.

I was not alive in the 1960s. This seems to be an important fact when it comes to feminism, because the dialogue around the movement morphs and changes among the generations, often causing misunderstanding or animosity between different waves. I grew up in a conservative Christian household, where I was taught that women should submit to men, women should not work outside of the home, and the "F" word was a dirty one. Feminists were painted in an ugly light—quite literally. I was told frequently that they were unattractive. All they cared about was burning their bras and their sole purpose was to make sure women had access to abortion (my fingers shudder to go on with the portrayals...so I will stop).

These constant messages burrowed under our skin because they undermined a woman's sexual and procreative power (I think that's the reason evangelical women often use the word "egalitarian"). In a strange way, just as women can be sexualized in pop culture, we could also be sexualized in strict fundamentalists circles, because as we focused on our gender, we reduced women to sexuality. Our worth and identity centered around purity before we were married and mothering after we were married.

So I've had to stretch and grow into feminism. At its root, feminism means that women and men are equal. As a movement, this means that women—all women of every race, ethnicity, and socio-economic situation—have dignity, and ought to have safety, access and freedoms.

I understand that feminists don't speak for all women. Often feminists are white, educated, and middle class (or, in the case of Sandburg, uber-upper class). We have been racist and classist in our endeavors, elbowing our way into a slot at the boardroom table, while carelessly overlooking the women who nurture children or clean homes. We ignored the voices of poor women, or those who stand in the intersection of underrepresented gender and racial/ethnic minorities.

Yet, I still claim the word. After all, there is no other word I can claim. As imperfect as it is, I have to confess our sins and keep struggling.

We strive so that women might have education. This looks different in various places. As I picked the stones out of the rice alongside women in Uganda, they told me how they were taken out of school, because their village needed them to carry water. My friends took a piece of cloth, twisted it until it became a small wreath to fit on my scalp and placed a massive container of water on my head. I walked a few feet before I had to relent. I became amazed at how they could balance the jugs with their strong necks for miles, and I realized that access to education for my friends in Uganda looked like a well in their village.

In other places, where the Bible belt cinches tightly, women are sexually shamed, and poverty soars, education might look like access to birth control. In many parts of our country, teen pregnancy can lead to lack of education and generational poverty.

Or access to education might mean an equal ratio of women and men gaining admittance into universities. After getting in, we know that women have other needs like scholarship availability, low-interest loans, or childcare

provisions.

We fight so that women can maintain control over our bodies. Again this looks so different from block to block. For some women it means that they're not used for sex work without their own volition. For others it means that they will not be subject to female genital mutilation.

For many, it is the drive for personal safety in our neighborhoods that might cause us to work for gun violence prevention.

We fight against rampant pedophilia, domestic abuse, and rape culture. We work for women's bodies, so that we might have access to proper health care, physical exams, prenatal attention, maternity care, and birth control.

We fight for women economically. We struggle in the hope that women around the world can own property and have the ability to accumulate wealth. We acknowledge that a woman's livelihood is often tied to environmental stability, and so our resolve to protect the earth becomes vital in the struggle.

We fight so that women can have financial independence. We yearn for the day when women are not socio-economically tied to a father, husband, or son—so that they do not have to be subject to violence or cruelty in order to survive.

We endeavor for comparable duties within the home, so that women and men might be able to achieve equally outside of our houses. We wrestle against the capitalistic tendencies of relentless manipulation, which can undermine a woman's dignity and tie women to debt for consumer goods. We fight for equal pay for equal work, and long for women to achieve the highest access to political and economic power.

We understand that our struggle is spiritual. In fact, tending to our souls just might heal a great deal of our ills. In our narratives and theologies, we long to lift up voices of women who linger in the background of our texts and have been dismissed to silence. We can understand the power of natality and fecundity, as we claim our identity as "born-again," knowing that the Spirit of God gives birth to us.

We can understand that the forces of religion have been strong in keeping women silenced, relegating us to submission, and lying about our dignity and worth. But there has also been a life-giving stream that has been a force of liberation against all strains of oppression. We must lift up that stream that binds the broken-hearted and sets captives free.

In this moment, it seems that we could allow the movement to only be defined by the most powerful and loudest forces. Feminism could become so entangled in capitalistic endeavors or caring for the greatest of these, that we forget the encompassing nature of our hopes for all women. As generational shifts occur and more women find themselves dropping out of the incessant educational and economic striving in search of more abundant lives, will we be able to welcome the redefining of our struggles?

It will largely up to the women and men who care for the nature of our souls to keep balance in the movement. Will we be up to the challenge?