Dear Alice,

I've been searching your website and found nothing about my particular problem. You see, I'm a young woman who is a very strong feminist. Not so strong that I hate men, though. I'm reasonable enough to know that most men are not bad at all. However, I've become increasingly annoyed with men when they say or do the slightest thing sexist. I know there's nothing wrong with believing in women's power, but how do I keep myself from becoming so strong of a feminist that I become prejudiced?

— Worried Feminist

Answer

Dear Worried Feminist,

The passion and tension you feel when voicing your convictions is one that likely resonates with many folks. Being a feminist (strong or otherwise) doesn’t necessarily make someone prejudiced towards men. At its most basic level, feminism is the belief that all people (whether they identify as women, transgender, or nonbinary) deserve equal political, social, and economic rights and opportunities. This need to fight for equality is rooted in the idea that society has a patriarchal structure, or one that gives preference to masculine qualities — regardless of whether someone is consciously taking advantage of these benefits. What you may be recognizing are the injustices and inequities in place in everyday systems and your feelings may not be prejudice but justifiable annoyance at sexist behavior. Feeling anger from injustices you or others experience doesn’t mean that you’re prejudiced against those that commit them. Before you decide to quit being a strong feminist, you may want to continue reading to learn about what makes someone prejudiced and how different types of feminism approach achieving equality.

Some might be surprised to learn that you don’t have to identify as a woman to be a feminist! Feminism is the belief that all people (regardless of their pronouns) are equal and deserving of the same rights and freedoms. Further, feminism contends that gender stereotypes negatively affect all people, including those that identify as men. While gender binary typecasts date far back in history, the effects still resonate today for many when it comes to employment, sexuality, and expressing emotions. Examples of constraining gender roles include sayings such as “men
don’t cry” or “women are better at caring for children”. These notions not only limit many people, but they have real-world physical and economic consequences. Based on this definition, feminists want to dismantle the patriarchal social system in order to achieve parity — as opposed to shifting the structure to provide a new system that shows preference for one group over another. If someone does act prejudiced towards men, they would fall into the realm of what’s called misandry. Conceptually, this framework opposes feminism since it advocates for the disadvantage of those identifying as men.

It's worth mentioning that varying frameworks of equality, as well as how to achieve it, have led to several categories of feminism, which are generally defined as:

- **Liberal feminism** advocates for achieving equality through existing systems and structures, such as legal processes (even if change is slow and incremental).
- **Radical feminism** prioritizes oppression of women or “the patriarchy” as the root of all inequality.
- **Marxist and socialist feminism** associates unequal gender relations and standing with the broader system of capitalism.
- **Cultural feminism** promotes the idea of a collective women’s culture based on shared experiences and advocacy.
- **Eco-feminism** connects feminism with environmentalism by ascribing oppression of women to broader exploitation of resources.
- **Intersectional feminism** acknowledges that membership in multiple marginalized groups leads to differing levels of oppression and discrimination.

As you reflect on your experiences, it might be helpful to have a little bit of context about what prejudice is exactly. To start, imagine prejudice as laying on a spectrum, with thoughts on one side and actions on the other. Starting with thoughts, making an assumption about a person or group based on their membership in a particular group (such as gender, race, or religion), is what’s known as a stereotype. These generalizations about groups of people can be positive (such as being good at math) or negative (such as being prone to violence). When stereotypes lead to negative beliefs about people within certain groups, it becomes prejudice. Finally, discrimination is when people act on their prejudice and treat people differently, such as a subtle preference for certain groups of people to more overt denial of services. These ideas and practices aren’t exclusive to feminism and their impacts may be compounded when people are members of more than one historically marginalized group. In any case, having conversations with friends or loved ones about topics such as sexism, ableism, homophobia, or racism can be challenging and may bring up many emotions. If you find that these feelings become overwhelming or interrupt your daily life, you may consider speaking with a mental health professional.

The struggle you describe isn’t uncommon. Sometimes the awareness you gain from delving deeply into an issue such as feminism makes you more aware of potentially sexist remarks, actions, or institutions in your environment. Feminism may manifest itself in a variety of different ways and, like in your case, may bring up feelings of anger, sadness, and discrimination. You may take comfort in the fact that others share in these feelings. Seeking out a supportive feminist community at your school, in your town, or online through resources may offer some insights for navigating some of these frustrations. Kudos to you for recognizing how your passion affects
your outlook and interactions with others and for reaching out for support.

Alice!
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