

# Feminism = Women's Movement? The Effects of Gender and Terminology on Endorsement of Feminism

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## Abstract

Building on past research, this study examined whether endorsement of feminism is still influenced by terminology used (i.e., feminism vs. women's movement) and participant gender. 100 undergraduates (36 men and 64 women) were randomly assigned to receive scale items that either referred to *feminism/feminist* or *women's movement/women*. In addition to endorsement of feminism using these items, activism, acceptance of traditional gender roles, and feminist identification were measured. As expected, men endorsed feminism less than women, and participants in the women's movement (vs. feminism) condition endorsed feminism more. When controlling for feminist identification, there was no gender difference in activism or acceptance of gender roles for participants in the *feminism/feminist* condition; however, women reported more activism and less acceptance of gender roles than men in the *women's movement/women* condition. This study suggests that there is still a stigma surrounding feminism that influences its endorsement, especially among women.

## Key Words:

Feminism, gender differences, feminist identification, political activism, attitudes toward women

Have you ever heard someone say, "I am not a feminist, but...?" According to prior research, people who endorse feminist goals and values, such as gender equality, may not identify as a feminist (Fitz, Zucker, & Bay-Cheng, 2012; Zucker, 2004; Buschman & Lenart, 1996). In addition to disagreement with conservative beliefs (Liss, O'Connor, Morosky, & Crawford, 2001) and endorsement of progressive values on social justice issues (Zucker, 2004), predictors of feminist self-identification include support of feminist goals and positive evaluation of feminists (Williams & Wittig, 1997). The current study examines why people may not self-identify as a feminist while holding feminist values by examining how endorsement of feminist beliefs may change, depending on whether terminology labels them as such. Feminist identification can have a positive impact on one's life (e.g., greater self-efficacy; Anderson, 2012). Research has found that holding

traditional gender role attitudes is associated with distress and a lack of awareness of sexism (McDermott & Schwartz, 2013) and that perceiving sexist events can also be distressing (Moradi & Subich, 2002). Greater identification with feminism has not only been linked to a less traditional belief system but also higher well-being (Cash, Ancis, & Strachan, 1997) and personal and professional activism (O'Neil et al., 1993). Holding traditional gender roles can have a negative impact on well-being but identifying as a feminist and engaging in activism can reduce the distress related to restrictive gender roles.

Nevertheless, feminists are stigmatized for being outside of traditional gender norms, which can impact self-identification and well-being negatively (Link & Phelam, 2001). In one study demonstrating the effect of stereotyping on feminist identification, women either read a story including positive stereotypes about feminists (e.g., active, confident),

negative stereotypes about feminists (e.g., angry, anti-male), or a control that did not refer to feminists (Roy, Weibust, & Miller, 2007). Women who read the positive stereotypes about feminists were twice as likely to self-identify as feminist than women in the negative stereotype or control conditions. Further, participants reading negative stereotype or control stories did not differ in feminist identification, which implies that negative stereotypes about feminists are the average opinion if one does not have positive associations and/or personally identify as a feminist. As a result of this stigma and negative stereotyping of feminists, people may not identify as feminists.

Other research has demonstrated that stigmatizing phrases have negative effects on acceptance of stereotyped groups. For example, participants showed more tolerance toward mental illness when items referenced “a person with a mental illness” than the more stigmatizing phrase “the mentally ill” (Granello & Gibbs, 2016, p. 17). Simply changing a phrase referencing a stereotyped group can affect how those individuals are perceived. In order to determine whether there is stigma about the word “feminist,” one study manipulated the phrase on a scale so that participants saw either “feminist” or “women’s movement” (Buschman & Lenart, 1996, p. 66). The term “feminist” resulted in less endorsement than when the same item used the term “women’s movement,” (Buschman & Lenart, 1996, p. 72). This finding further demonstrates negative stigma associated with feminism.

However, there is a gap in the research about feminist self-identification. Most studies have neglected to involve male participants, which potentially overlooks factors that attribute to men’s feminist identification. One study that assessed feminism in men measured morality, feminist identity, and political ideology. The non-feminists’ men were more likely to think of sexism as harmless, which led them to not identify as feminists (Precopio & Ramsey, 2017). Another study examined the effects of priming stereotypical and counter-stereotypical gender roles in men and women. Men had more acceptance of traditional gender roles when they were primed with stereotypical roles whereas women did not. Women who identified with traditional gender roles justified

the existing system more when they were exposed to counter-stereotypical roles, suggesting counter-attitudinal information made them justify their beliefs more (de Lemus, Bukowski, Spears, & Telga, 2015). Including men in the studies about feminism gives more insight into how to address stigma about feminism as well as the reasons that men may or may not identify as feminist.

The current study provides further insight into whether there is still stigma associated with feminism and whether there is a difference in the amount of stigma between men and women. Similar to Buschman and Lenart (1996), this study compares the effect of terms *feminism/feminist* versus *women’s movement/women* on the participants’ endorsement of the same items on a scale. In addition, it examined participant gender as a quasi-independent variable. The dependent variables for this study are endorsement of feminism, acceptance of traditional gender roles, and personal activism. Hypothesis 1 concerned gender differences; based on past research (de Lemus et. Al., 2015), it was expected that men would endorse feminism and activism less than women but have more acceptance of traditional gender roles than women. Hypothesis 2 concerned the effect of condition; consistent with past research (Buschman & Lenart, 1996), participants reading items referencing *women’s movement/women* were expected to endorse feminism more than participants reading the same items referring to *feminism/feminist*. Hypothesis 3 concerned the interaction between participant gender and condition; specifically, the *women’s movement/women* condition was expected to produce greater endorsement of feminist attitudes (including more activism and less acceptance of traditional gender roles) for women compared to men, whereas no gender difference was expected for the *feminism/feminist* condition.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 100 undergraduate students in a General Psychology course at a small Midwestern college, recruited using an online participation system. Because analyses were planned to be

conducted by gender, participant gender was tracked to achieve a minimum number of men in the sample; there were no further criteria for inclusion or exclusion. There were 64 women and 36 men, with the average age of 19. One participant was removed from the data because there was a mistake in the presentation of materials, but there were no further exclusions from the data.

## Procedure

The study received IRB approval before beginning data collection, and participants were treated consistent with IRB and APA standards. After obtaining consent, participants were randomly assigned to condition (i.e., *women's movement/women* vs. *feminism/feminist*) through the wording of the feminism scale. Participants then completed measures of acceptance of traditional gender roles, activism, and demographics, including two items that assessed feminist identification and political affiliation. Participants received course credit for their participation.

## Measures

*Endorsement of Feminism.* The Feminist and Women's Movement (FWM; Fassinger, 1994) scale measures attitudes towards the women's movement. The scale served as the manipulation; the scale was modified to refer only to "women's movement/women" or "feminism/feminist." There were 10 items, and participants were asked to respond with their attitudes about the statements. An example item is "[The women's movement/Feminism] has positively influenced relationships between men and women." The participants responded on a Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater endorsement. Both versions of the scale had high reliability (both  $\alpha$ s = .88).

*Acceptance of Traditional Gender Roles and Activism.* Two subscales of the Gender Role Journey Scale (O'Neil, Egan, Owen, & Murray, 1993) were used to assess participants' acceptance of traditional gender roles (10 items; e.g., "I am responsible for changing restrictive gender roles") and their personal-professional activism against

sexism (11 items; e.g., "Women should be the primary caretakers of children"). Participants responded on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate greater acceptance for traditional gender roles and more activism. Both acceptance of traditional gender roles ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and activism ( $\alpha = .90$ ) had high reliability.

*Demographics.* Along with indicating their gender and age, participants indicated their feminist identification using the item "I label myself as a feminist" on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), as in previous studies (e.g., Myaskovsky & Wittig 1997). Political affiliation was assessed on a scale from 1 (*conservative*) to 6 (*liberal*).

## Results

Table 1 shows univariate statistics for the sample and correlations between variables. Participants (collapsing across conditions) generally were at the midpoint of the scale for endorsement of feminism, but acceptance of traditional gender roles was below the midpoint. There was low to moderate gender activism and feminist identification, although feminist identification was more variable. Political affiliation was slightly more conservative than liberal but near the midpoint and variable. All correlations between these variables, examined separately for men and women, were significant except one (i.e., men's activism was not correlated with feminist identification). Participants – both men and women – who endorsed feminism or women's movement more also reported more activism, greater feminist identification, more liberal political affiliation, and less acceptance of traditional gender roles. Acceptance of traditional gender roles was negatively correlated with all other variables.

A 2 (Participant Gender: men vs. women) x 2 (Condition: women's movement/women vs. feminism/feminist) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted to test hypotheses. The results showed a significant main effect of Participant Gender,  $F(1, 96) = 11.18, p = .001$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 1, men ( $M = 38.89, SD = 9.09$ ) endorsed feminism significantly less than

women ( $M = 44.61$ ,  $SD = 7.60$ ). There was also a significant main effect of Condition,  $F(1, 96) = 4.00$ ,  $p = .047$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants in the women's movement condition ( $M = 44.50$ ,  $SD = 8.22$ ) endorsed feminism more than participants in the feminism condition ( $M = 40.60$ ,  $SD = 8.56$ ). There was no interaction between

Participant Gender and Condition,  $F(1, 96) < 1$ , contrary to Hypothesis 3. Although the interaction was not significant, the cell means shown in Table 2 show a trend with a larger gender difference for the women's movement (vs. feminist) condition, with women in that condition showing the highest endorsement of feminism.

**Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for All Variables**

Variable	$M (SD)$	Correlations for men are above and women below the diagonal				
		1	2	3	4	5
1. Endorsement	4.25 (0.86)	–	-.50*	.52*	.51*	.52*
2. Acceptance of roles	2.27 (0.77)	-.69*	–	-.61*	-.38*	-.36*
3. Activism	3.43 (0.91)	.72*	-.58*	–	.50*	.27
4. Feminist identification	3.21 (1.62)	.73*	-.46*	.72*	–	.43*
5. Political affiliation	3.33 (1.34)	.51*	-.49*	.38*	.45*	–

Note: \*  $p < .05$ .

Because feminist identification had high correlations with dependent variables (i.e., endorsement of feminism, activism, and acceptance of traditional gender roles), feminist identification was added to all further analyses as a covariate, which provides a stricter test of the hypotheses. Therefore, we analyzed endorsement of feminism again using a 2 (Participant Gender: men vs.

women) x 2 (Condition: women's movement/women vs. feminism/feminist) between-subjects factorial ANCOVA controlling for feminist identification. As expected, the covariate was significant,  $F(1,95) = 67.87$ ,  $p < .001$ , and there was a significant effect of Condition on endorsement of feminism when controlling for feminist identification,  $F(1, 94) = 6.2$ ,  $p = .015$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants in the women's movement condition ( $M = 44.50$ ,  $SD = 8.22$ ) endorsed feminism significantly more than participants in the feminism condition ( $M = 40.60$ ,  $SD = 8.56$ ) when controlling for feminist

identification.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to Hypothesis 1 and 3, there were no other significant effects, all  $ps > .32$ .

Activism was examined using 2 (Participant Gender: men vs. women) x 2 (Condition: women's movement/women vs. feminism/feminist) between-subjects factorial ANCOVA controlling for feminist identification. Again, the covariate was significant,  $F(1, 95) = 67.15$ ,  $p < .01$ . There was a significant interaction of Participant Gender and Condition on activism when controlling for feminist identification,  $F(1, 94) = 3.98$ ,  $p < .05$ . Planned comparisons indicated that there was no difference between men's ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) and women's ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) activism in the feminist condition,  $p = .48$ ; however, women reported more activism ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) than men ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) in the women's movement condition,  $p < .01$ . There were no other significant effects, all  $ps > .39$ .

Acceptance of traditional gender roles was examined using 2 (Participant Gender: men vs.

women) x 2 (Condition: women's movement/women vs. feminism/feminist) between-subjects factorial ANCOVA controlling for feminist identification. Again, the covariate was significant,  $F(1, 95) = 20.13, p < .01$ . There was a significant main effect of Participant Gender on acceptance of traditional gender roles when controlling for feminist identification,  $F(1, 95) = 6.30, p = .014$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 1, men ( $M = 2.65, SD = 0.79$ ) endorsed traditional gender roles more than women ( $M = 2.05, SD = 0.68$ ) when controlling for feminist identification. There was a significant interaction of Participant Gender and Condition on acceptance of traditional gender roles when controlling for feminist identification,  $F(1, 95) = 5.16, p = .025$ . Planned comparisons indicated that there was no difference between men's ( $M = 2.45, SD = 0.94$ ) and women's ( $M = 2.21, SD = 0.87$ ) acceptance of traditional gender roles in the feminist condition,  $p = .25$ ; however, women reported less acceptance of traditional gender roles ( $M = 1.99, SD = 0.88$ ) than men ( $M = 2.86, SD = 0.61$ ) in the women's movement condition,  $p < .01$ . There were no other significant effects, all  $ps > .68$ .

### Discussion

This study examined whether endorsement of feminism would depend on the label referenced in scale (i.e., feminism vs. women's movement) and participant gender. Prior research showed stigma related to feminism, with women reporting that they have feminist values but not self-identifying as feminists (Fitz, Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2012). Other research demonstrated stigma associated with the term feminism by manipulating scale items; participants who received the "women's movement" version of the scale reported higher levels of support for feminism than participants who received the scale that referenced "feminism" (Buschman & Lenart, 1996). However, prior studies examined these effects only among women. Our research found differences in men's and women's endorsement of and reactions to the term feminism vs. women's movement. It also demonstrates continued stigma associated with feminism.

Although prior research has studied men's and women's feminism independently of each other, the current study included both men and women.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, male participants endorsed feminism significantly less than female participants. Although there was no gender difference found for activism, men reported more acceptance of traditional gender roles than women when controlling for feminist identification. Thus, men endorsed feminism less and accepted gender roles more than women in our sample.

Hypothesis 2 concerned the overall effect of the term "feminism" on attitudes. Participants in the women's movement condition endorsed feminism more than participants in the feminism condition, in support of Hypothesis 2 and in replication of past research (Buschman & Lenart, 1996). Further, this effect continued to be significant even when controlling for feminist identification, which suggests a large and robust effect of terminology. Our study suggests continued stigma around the term "feminism" in society today, despite recent movements drawing attention to women's issues, such as #MeToo.

Hypothesis 3 extended previous research by examining whether negative responses to feminism (vs. women's movement) depended on participant gender. There was limited evidence of this interaction for endorsement of feminism, but other attitudes relevant to feminism demonstrated the interaction. In partial support for Hypothesis 3, women reported more activism and less acceptance of traditional gender roles in the women's movement condition than men, when controlling for feminist identification; however, there was no gender difference in the feminism condition. The terms "feminism" and "women's movement" had differing effects on men and women. Women may be more motivated to distance themselves from feminism, given the negative associations, by reducing their endorsement of feminist attitudes. Exposure to feminism in men, however, may prime more socially conscious attitudes that shifts their attitudes toward women more generally.

More research is needed in order to examine why men continue to endorse feminism less than women. Although a significant main effect for gender was found, our sample of male participants was smaller than the female sample, which may have limited our ability to detect a significant interaction between

condition and gender for feminist endorsement. Future research should continue to examine men's endorsement of feminism and self-identification with feminism. Including both genders could assess the reasons for not identifying as feminists and bring valuable information in why men would endorse it less than women.

Although internal validity is limited when using gender as a quasi-independent variable, the internal validity of this study is high for the terminology manipulation, given the survey items were the same with the exception of their reference to feminism vs. women's movement. As such, this small manipulation produced reliable effects detected across several measures related to feminist attitudes. Future research could differently examine the stigma associated with feminism by defining the word, which could lead to more indication of how large the stigma on the word feminism is and whether a short definition could shift that perception.

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrated that men endorsed feminism less than women, and that exposure to "feminism" vs. "women's movement" reduced endorsement of feminist attitudes, especially among women. Specifically, men and women responded differently to this manipulation, with women reporting more activism and less acceptance of traditional gender roles than men in the "women's movement" condition. This study adds to the literature by examining endorsement of feminism across gender, but more research is needed on why this discrepancy occurs. Women may distance themselves from the stigma of feminism by not only failing to identify as feminist but by shifting their attitudes to be less feminist. The implication of the study is that feminism is still stigmatized and negatively stereotyped for women, although reminders of feminism may bring men's attitudes more in line with women's attitudes.

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