

In recent years, more and more celebrities have declared themselves to be feminists. From Beyoncé performing at the 2014 MTV awards in front of the word “Feminist” in big, bold letters, to Emma Watson’s speech on gender equality at the United Nations in 2014, it seems everybody has an opinion on whether or not we should look to celebrities to espouse feminist ideals. Does celebrity advocacy help or hurt the cause of feminism? After reading and researching this subject, I will present information that shows that not only is celebrity advocacy of feminism not helpful, it can be contrary to the end goal of feminism and gender equality.

Perhaps the most obvious claim to make that supports celebrity advocacy of feminism is that society is talking about the subject because of their advocacy, and that is a good place to start. Perhaps without celebrities initiating this conversation and injecting the debate into our culture, we wouldn’t be talking about feminism at all (Hobson, 2016). Emma Watson’s September 2014 speech at the U.N. regarding gender inequality is a shining example of celebrity feminism, which launched the U.N. HeForShe campaign, which urges men (and boys) to fight for women’s right and gender equality (Cole, 2018). In her speech, Watson explained that feminism is simply equality between the sexes; that men and women should share the same rights, and not, as many believe, man-hating (Cole, 2018). Emma Watson is just one example of what kind of bully pulpit celebrity creates, and equality of the genders is undoubtedly a noble pursuit.

Not all celebrities can seem to agree on what feminism truly is, and this of course, creates a problem with messaging. In 2014, actress Shailene Woodley discussed feminism in a much different way than Emma Watson, describing it as an attempt to place women on a level above men, thus making men subservient to women (Bahadur, 2014). Woodley continued to say that men and women should share equal status (equal rights), but that she is hesitant to call herself a

feminist due to her belief that some element of “man-hating” is involved (Bahadur, 2014). Here in lies the problem with celebrities advocating for feminism; they can’t agree on what feminism is, which ends up creating more confusion and uncertainty on the topic. Our culture tends to have a misplaced trust in celebrities; we make the assumption that they are somehow more informed than the rest of us.

One of the biggest criticisms of celebrity feminism is that it’s actually “feminism-lite”; that is to say feminism in name only, devoid of the true hallmarks of the feminist movement. Celebrities such as Beyonce have been known to embrace hyper-femininity, and a “presentation that is antithetical to feminism.”, rather than a “more substantive or authentic feminism that is less appealing to the masses than what our celebrities have to offer.” (Hobson, 2016). Essentially, the feminism that celebrities present us with is shallower than what “average” feminists embrace. It wouldn’t be surprising to learn that most celebrities live different lives than the rest of us, lives of privilege and entitlement that the average person probably can’t fathom. Celebrity feminism doesn’t run on nuance or complexity, but rather their bottom dollar (Hobson, 2016). All this is not to say that celebrity feminism isn’t a good starting place, it simply doesn’t have the hallmarks of true feminism.

Celebrity feminists fail to recognize that they are not like us...which tends to be problematic. Actress Jameela Jamil is an advocate of magazines and other publications eliminating the use of photoshop and airbrushing to fix imperfections when females appear on in photoshoots (Giorgis, 2018). On its face, this sounds like a noble idea; however, Jameela Jamil is an actress and model, someone who is universally recognized as beautiful, and she fails to recognize that she doesn’t represent the looks of “average” women. You may agree with the idea that women shouldn’t have to change their looks through photoshop in order to fit society’s

standards of beauty, but in the end, magazine covers and photoshoots remain an aspiration, something to work toward, thus ensuring that celebrities maintain a “gentle superiority” over the rest of society (Giorgis, 2018). In other words, only those of us who can afford the best clothes, makeup, hair products, etc. can ever hope to fit society’s standard of beauty (Giorgis, 2018).

Another problem with celebrity feminists is that they unknowingly perpetuate certain stereotypes. For instance, Emma’s Watson’s speech before the U.N. in 2014 wasn’t exactly groundbreaking as far as feminist ideals are concerned, but the fact that those ideas were spoken by a young, pretty woman made it somehow more palatable to her audience (Gay, 2014). Gay suggests that Watson’s HeForShe campaign doesn’t consist of anything feminists haven’t always stood for, but it nevertheless helped the feminist movement (2014). Of course, that could be seen as a positive thing, and perhaps it is, but it also seems counterproductive when the public only cares about equality between the sexes when it comes in a pretty package. Gay continues to say that men can make an even bigger impact on the feminist movement when they speak up, but then again, they aren’t saying anything new or game changing (2014). In 2017, Emma Watson posed topless in *Vanity Fair* magazine, and in doing so her feminist ideals came under fire. Her critics claimed that she was behaving exactly the way society expects female starlets to act, she was essentially betraying feminism (Saltz, 2017). Watson responded by insisting that women should have the freedom to pose topless if they choose to and be free from criticism, just as a man would be if he were to pose topless (Saltz, 2017). It’s true that women should be free to choose how and when they want their body to be seen; however, where does that freedom end, and where does the objectification and sexualization of women begin?

While it is true that celebrity feminism has brought much attention to furthering the cause of gender equality and women’s rights, the generic brand of feminism preached by most

celebrities is more harmful than not. Being a celebrity has many perks; fortune, fame, and most of all, a true voice, and perhaps it is for that reason that many celebrities espouse feminism.

However, celebrities fail to recognize that they are not the arbiters of what feminism is, and all too often their messaging is mixed. Mixed messaging leads legions of fans to misinterpret and misunderstand what feminism means, which ultimately breeds contempt and mockery of a noble pursuit. Instead of watching our favorite celebrities speak out for feminism, isn't it time that we ourselves, as men and women, speak out and speak up? It's easy to watch the beautiful people in Hollywood tell us what feminism means, but isn't time we find out for ourselves what it means and what we can do to make it a reality?

References

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