Help! I'm a feminist and becoming prejudiced against men!  [1]

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 prejudice?

?Worried Feminist

Answer

Dear Worried Feminist,

Being a strong feminist does not require that you become prejudice towards men. Feminism, at its most basic level, is the belief that women should have equal political, social, and economic rights and opportunities as men. Feminists believe and acknowledge that gender inequality exists and believe that working to eradicate this inequality would improve the lives of everyone - women, men, and children alike. However, sometimes the awareness you gain from delving deeply into an issue like feminism makes you more sensitive to potentially sexist remarks, actions, or institutions in your environment. Finding passion like you have is great and being able to recognize how it affects your outlook and interactions with others is very insightful and important.

The struggle you describe is not unlike one that many feminists face. In fact, there's even a whole model that tries to explain the process of developing a feminist identity (Downing and Roush, 1985). Split into five stages, the model breaks down the evolution of a feminist identity from "passive acceptance" of traditional gender roles to an active commitment to perpetuate nonsexist ideals of gender equality regardless of biology or sexual orientation. Between those stages though, the model posits that people often face an instance or set of instances that trigger them to begin questioning traditional gender roles. This may be accompanied by anger and guilt and it sounds like this is what you're experiencing. The light at the end of the tunnel is that sharing this frustration with other like-minded people may create a bond that could help you cope.

To transform this annoyance you're feeling into positive energy, try getting involved with
others who share your beliefs and who may also relate with your frustrations. Seeking out a supportive feminist community at your school, in your town, or online (check out www.feministing.com) that allows you to use these feelings as fuel to promote gender equality may help you progress to the last few stages. Exploring these resources may even motivate you start your own feminist group, volunteer with an existing organization, or, at the very least, give you the opportunity to have your voice heard through virtual outlets such as Twitter or other social networks. Working your way through these final stages, you may find it easier to recognize that sexist comments and actions are products of individuals, rather than characteristic of all men (though it sounds like you're already well on your way to getting there).

However, if you find that you don't fit into this model, that doesn't mean you're not a feminist or that you won't be able to get past the frustration that your social consciousness has brought about. First of all, you don't have to identify as a woman to be a feminist! Feminism is the commitment to the belief that all genders are equal and deserving of the same rights and freedoms, and that gender stereotypes negatively affect all people. Feminism may manifest itself in a variety of different ways and, like in your case, may bring up feelings of anger, sadness, and discrimination. Take comfort in the fact that others share in these feelings. If you find that these feelings become overwhelming or interrupt your daily life, you may want to consider speaking with a mental health professional. Students at Columbia may contact Counseling and Psychological Services at x4-2878 to set up an appointment.

Again, being a feminist doesn't mean you're anti-men but it may bring up strong feelings towards people, organizations, and institutions that act in gender discriminating ways. Recognizing and addressing this with the help of a supportive feminist community and possibly a mental health professional may help you reach the stage where you are able to transform these negative feelings into positive actions to promote gender equality.

Alice!
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