

# MANY STILL FEAR THE “F” WORD: FEMINISM

BY CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER



The movement towards gender equality has seen many milestones including women's suffrage.

"I have decided to send the feminists, who have always ruined my life, to their maker." Those are chilling words from the suicide note of Marc Lepine. Twenty-five years ago, on Dec 6, 1989, Lepine slaughtered 14 women at Montreal engineering school École Polytechnique.

The word 'feminist' emerged over a century ago as the defining term for people supporting the struggle for women's rights and equality. Radical misogynists like Lepine, or Elliot Rodger (who went on a killing spree in California in May because women rejected his romantic advances), spit out the word with loathing and contempt. To them, it is a dark and sinister epithet for man-hating women intent on usurping the rightful place of men.

However, there are a growing number of people who spurn the words 'feminism' and 'feminist' even though they support women's rights and equality. It seems there's widespread misunderstanding about what these terms mean. And the message that sends to youth about the ideals of gender equality concerns us deeply.

In early November, actor Salma Hayek was honoured by rights organization Equality Now for her global advocacy on behalf of women and girls. But prior to the event, Hayek told an interviewer, "I am not a feminist." Hayek is the latest in a list of female celebs who have rejected the label—joining the likes of young actor Shailene Woodley and Spice Girl Geri Halliwell.

We're not saying anyone should be forced to wear a label they don't want. But the reasoning behind their rejection can be

disturbing. Explaining why she won't call herself a feminist, Woodley told a *TIME Magazine* interviewer "I think the idea of 'raise women to power, take the men away from power' is never going to work out because you need balance." Unfortunately many hold this view that feminism is all about "us versus them."

Too many think that to be a feminist is to play a zero-sum game; a winner-take-all battle of the sexes where every gain for one side is a loss for the other.

But the end of segregation and the extension of civil rights for minorities hasn't resulted in less rights for whites. Voting rights for women didn't interfere with men's voting rights. Why, then, would anyone think that equal pay for women means less pay for men, or that more female engineers means less male engineers? Discussing women's issues doesn't equate to ignoring legitimate men's issues.

Feminism means promoting equality. Period.

More annoying are the celebrities who grab headlines burdening the word 'feminism' with outdated stereotypes. Halliwell of the once-huge girl band, Spice Girls, told *The Guardian* in the UK: "For me feminism is bra-burning lesbianism."

Are a small number of those who call themselves feminists also angry militants? Perhaps, yes. Do they define feminism? No.

If high-profile women don't want to declare themselves feminists that's okay. Everyone has the right to self-identify as they choose. But what must young people thinking when they hear the word denounced with negative

sentiments? The feminist becomes the nasty bogeywoman that Lepine and Rodger hated and feared, and by association, the movement for equality itself is tarred.

So, for the sake of equality, let's reclaim 'feminist' and 'feminism' and reintroduce the words—properly defined—to a new generation.

Do you believe girls should have equal access to schooling? Women should get equal pay and our boardrooms and parliaments would be stronger with equal representation from both men and women? Do you support the concept that no means no, and harassment and violence are always wrong? If you believe these things then, woman or man, you are a feminist.

Equality is an issue that concerns us all—and everybody can be a feminist.

To commemorate the Montreal Massacre, today is the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women. We invite all Canadians to join us in marking this day by proudly declaring: "I am a feminist."