

Feminism

Rebecca Hebbel

Imagine two teenage girls: Alex, a rather bulky girl with short green hair, unshaved legs and no make-up, is the first one. Tiffany, a tall brunette wearing a pink mini-dress, high heels and tons of highlighter, is the second one. Now, you have to choose. Which one is more likely to attend a demonstration supporting feminism, Alex or Tiffany. If your brain just screamed Alex, you fell for the most typical prejudices about feminism. Because guess what, the image of feminists as women that do not wear make-up, do not shave their legs and hate men is not quite accurate. Even though feminism has been mischaracterized as only benefitting elite white women, feminist movements not only empower all women regardless of race and class but also empower entire nations.

Stereotypes of feminism hurt women in the first place, but the effects ripple through the entire society, which means that everybody is hurt in the long run. Therefore, any woman, men or non-binary person should have feminist views and support other women. Nevertheless, of course, intersectionality still plays a huge role when it comes to specific goals and ideas of feminism. New York Times author and communicational studies specialist Richard Jones describes intersectionality as the fact, that every person has multiple cultures and identities that intersect with each other and determine the person's privileges and disadvantages. This means, every woman already faces more challenges and struggles than men do just because of their sex. Being a woman and being black, or being a woman and being poor or raising children by oneself, however, includes many more difficult situations in the everyday life. Therefore, naturally every woman fights for her own specific and individual privileges every single day. At the same time, it should be an international, cross-

gender goal to empower females and establish gender equality. The result would not only mean more rights and dignity for women but it could empower entire nations and countries.

First of all, investing in young girls and women and especially their education is one tool to eradicating extreme poverty. Education not only improves choices on an economic and personal level, but also ameliorates the health status of affected women and, often forgotten, their families. The government-owned website Peacecorps could prove that education leads to decreased maternal and child mortality and “higher chances of having children survive past the age of five.” Even though the importance of education does not need to be explained anymore, more than 35 million girls do not attend school in developing countries, which is four million more than the number of boys not being able to attain education. Again, intersectionality plays a huge role on the severity of the effects. Two-thirds of the mentioned 35 million girls are members of ethnic minorities. As mentioned by The Borgen Project, an initiative to fight extreme poverty, supported by several congressmen, the children of uneducated women are also less likely to go to school. Consequently, numbers of teen pregnancy, malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, trafficking and sexual exploitation rise which “constrains women’s lifestyles and limits choices inhibiting future opportunities.” (The Borgen Project)

Insufficient education for women affects the entire nation, since women that are educated have the opportunity to play a bigger role in the economy by carrying out better jobs and getting higher wages. An increased number of women earning money results in a higher average GDP as well as a higher GDP per capita which is directly correlated to a nations wellbeing. Women make up approximately half of our world population. By denying those 50 percent of the world population the right to work and be part of the labor force, we diminish and restrict our own potential. Making sure that every girl has access to extensive education increases the number of skilled workers and maximizes the worlds production

possibilities. In their peer-reviewed paper about gender inequality and economic growth, Cuberes and Teignier-Baqué show, that giving female farmers, for example, the “same access as men to productive resources such as land and fertilizers, agricultural output in developing countries could increase by as much as 2.5 to four percent.” Output could be further increased by as much as 25 percent through better allocation of their skills and talent just by eliminating barriers against women in certain sectors or occupations. According to research conducted by the United Nations Women Headquarter, “increasing the female employment rates in OECD countries to match that of Sweden, could boost GDP by over USD 6 trillion“ (Finance and Development), which means that the gender gap costs the economy roughly 15 percent of GDP. Combined with the fact, educated women have healthier children that are more likely to go to school and become part of the labor force, a multiplier effect arises.

Keeping in mind that more females still die at younger ages compared to males, especially across all developing countries, GDP could be even higher if we started to save their lives. Resulting the excess female mortality, “about 3.9 million girls and women under 60 are ‘missing’ each year” (Finance and Development), in those countries due to never being born, dying in early childhood or during their reproductive years. Improving the access to medical care and education of women in developing countries could save those women and enable them not only to live a life in dignity but also to become part of the labor force, which would increase the nation’s overall wealth.

Not only the overall female participation in the labor force should be increased, but more women should be employed in leadership positions. The United Nations Women Headquarters could prove that by increasing employment and leadership opportunities for women, “organizational effectiveness and growth” would be improved. In fact, companies “with three or more women in senior management functions score higher in all dimensions of organizational performance.” All of this proves, that women should have the same rights,

opportunities and participation rates in the economic world as men do. However, more than 2.7 billion women in 189 economies are still legally restricted from having the same choice of jobs as men do. Some of those restrictions go even so far that husbands have the power to prevent their wives from working. Furthermore, the labor force participation for women aged 25 to 54 is 31 percent lower of that of men with only 63 percent compared to 94. (UN Women) This number is even lower when including younger and older women which equally means, that women are more likely to be unemployed. Obviously, the majority of those 37 percent of the female population that are not part of the labor force still work on a daily basis, mostly as family workers, which explains the negative correlation between the female labor force participation and the amount of time devoted to domestic work. To add specific numbers, “women tend to spend 2.5 times more time on unpaid care and domestic work than men”. (UN Women) Even though this kind of work is essential to the functioning of the economy, it is neither included in GDP nor does it generate income. A study, conducted by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, estimates, “that if women’s unpaid work were assigned a monetary value, it would constitute between 10 percent and 39 per cent of GDP.” (UNRISD)

As a result of gender inequalities in employment and job quality, women furthermore have less access to social protection acquired through employment, such as pensions, unemployment benefits or maternity protection. The International Labour Organization states, that “globally, an estimated nearly 40 percent of women in wage employment do not have access to social protection.”

Finally, empowering women as economic, political, and social actors can change policy choices and make institutions more representative of a range of voices. Although women can vote and run for public office in almost every country nowadays, as stated by Harvard Kennedy School, the school of public policy and government of Harvard University in

Cambridge, Massachusetts, “in 2013, they accounted for only 21 percent of parliamentarians worldwide and served as head of state or head of government in twenty-four countries.”

While this underrepresentation is often implicitly or explicitly framed as a shortcoming on the part of women, as in suggestions that female candidates lack confidence, skills, or networks, it is mostly due to financial, social and legal barriers. However, female representation in public offices is crucial for the progress of overall female empowerment, because they “prioritize public goods that are of concern to women, including water, infrastructure, sanitation, roads, education and health.”(Harvard Kennedy School). Furthermore, civic discussion is enhanced, crimes against women are more likely to be reported, and “adolescent girls’ aspirations and educational attainment increase while their time spent on household chores decreases.” (Harvard Kennedy School).

Gender equality in economics and politics needs to be achieved as soon as possible. According to the International Monetary Fund, a major financial agency of the United Nations, in order to achieve gender equality, policymakers need to concentrate on five clear priorities. First of all, the excess mortality of girls and women needs to be stopped. Then, remaining disadvantages in education and access to economic opportunity must be eliminated. Their voice in households and societies has to be equalized and, finally, the transmission of gender inequality across generations must be stopped. One way to do so, is by freeing up women’s time, allowing them to work outside the home by providing free subsidized child care and allowing flexible working hours. Moreover, women need to have better access to credit and productive resources such as land. In terms of employers, the “lack of information about women’s productivity in the workplace [needs to be addressed,] and institutional biases against women [have to be eliminated]” (International Monetary Fund) by, for example, introducing quotas or job replacement programs. Women’s voice in society overall could be expanded by introducing political representation quotas, training of future

women leaders, and expanding women's involvement in trade unions and professional associations.

Building truly gender-equal democracies requires more than just adding women to the mix. It requires the transformation of entire institutions that have been built on our patriarchal society. Barriers that prevent women from engaging in electoral politics must be tackled as well as financial hurdles and unequal caregiving burdens. Before all of this is possible, we – as a society – have to let go of stereotypes and gender schemas.

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