

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Bad

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Feminist

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*Essays*

Roxane

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Gay

# Bad Feminist: Take Two

I am failing as a woman. I am failing as a feminist. To freely accept the feminist label would not be fair to good feminists. If I am, indeed, a feminist, I am a rather bad one. I am a mess of contradictions. There are many ways in which I am doing feminism wrong, at least according to the way my perceptions of feminism have been warped by being a woman.

I want to be independent, but I want to be taken care of and have someone to come home to. I have a job I'm pretty good at. I am in charge of things. I am on committees. People respect me and take my counsel. I want to be strong and professional, but I resent how hard I have to work to be taken seriously, to receive a fraction of the consideration I might otherwise receive. Sometimes I feel an overwhelming need to cry at work, so I close my office door and lose it.

I want to be in charge and respected and in control, but I want to surrender, completely, in certain aspects of my life. Who wants to grow up?

When I drive to work, I listen to thuggish rap at a very loud

volume even though the lyrics are degrading to women and offend me to my core. The classic Ying Yang Twins song “Salt Shaker”? It’s amazing. “Bitch you gotta shake it till your camel starts to hurt.”

Poetry.

(I am mortified by my music choices.)

I care what people think.

Pink is my favorite color. I used to say my favorite color was black to be *cool*, but it is pink—all shades of pink. If I have an accessory, it is probably pink. I read *Vogue*, and I’m not doing it ironically, though it might seem that way. I once live-tweeted the September issue. I demonstrate little outward evidence of this, but I have a very indulgent fantasy where I have a closet full of pretty shoes and purses and matching outfits. I love dresses. For years I pretended I hated them, but I don’t. Maxi dresses are one of the finest clothing items to become popular in recent memory. I have opinions on maxi dresses! I shave my legs! Again, this mortifies me. If I take issue with the unrealistic standards of beauty women are held to, I shouldn’t have a secret fondness for fashion and smooth calves, right?

I know nothing about cars. When I take my car to the mechanic, they are speaking a foreign language. A mechanic asks what’s wrong with my car, and I stutter things like, “Well, there’s a sound I try to drown out with my radio.” The windshield wiper fluid for the rear window of my car no longer sprays the window. It just sprays the air. I don’t know how to deal with this. It feels like an expensive problem. I still call my father with questions about cars and am not terribly interested in changing any of my car-related ignorance. I don’t want to be good at cars. Good feminists, I assume, are independent enough to address vehicular crises on their own; they are independent enough to care.

Despite what people think based on my opinion writing, I very much like men. They’re interesting to me, and I mostly wish they

would be better about how they treat women so I wouldn't have to call them out so often. And still, I put up with nonsense from unsuitable men even though I *know better* and can do better. I love diamonds and the excess of weddings. I consider certain domestic tasks as gendered, mostly all in my favor as I don't care for chores—lawn care, bug killing, and trash removal, for example, are men's work.

Sometimes, a lot of the time honestly, I totally fake "it" because it's easier. I am a fan of orgasms, but they take time, and in many instances I don't want to spend that time. All too often I don't really like the guy enough to explain the calculus of my desire. Then I feel guilty because the sisterhood would not approve. I'm not even sure what the sisterhood is, but the idea of a sisterhood menaces me, quietly, reminding me of how bad a feminist I am. Good feminists don't fear the sisterhood because they know they are comporting themselves in sisterhood-approved ways.

I love babies, and I want to have one. I am willing to make certain compromises (not sacrifices) in order to do so—namely maternity leave and slowing down at work to spend more time with my child, writing less so I can be more present in my life. I worry about dying alone, unmarried and childless, because I spent so much time pursuing my career and accumulating degrees. This kind of thinking keeps me up at night, but I pretend it doesn't because I am supposed to be evolved. My success, such as it is, is supposed to be enough if I'm a good feminist. It is not enough. It is not even close.

Because I have so many deeply held opinions about gender equality, I feel a lot of pressure to live up to certain ideals. I am supposed to be a good feminist who is having it all, doing it all. Really, though, I'm a woman in her thirties struggling to accept herself and her credit score. For so long I told myself I was not this woman—utterly human and flawed. I worked overtime to be

anything but this woman, and it was exhausting and unsustainable and even harder than simply embracing who I am.

Maybe I'm a bad feminist, but I am deeply committed to the issues important to the feminist movement. I have strong opinions about misogyny, institutional sexism that consistently places women at a disadvantage, the inequity in pay, the cult of beauty and thinness, the repeated attacks on reproductive freedom, violence against women, and on and on. I am as committed to fighting fiercely for equality as I am committed to disrupting the notion that there is an essential feminism.

I'm the kind of feminist who is appalled by the phrase "legitimate rape" and by political candidates such as Missouri's Todd Akin, who in an interview reaffirmed his commitment to opposing abortion, almost unilaterally. He said, "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down. But let's assume that maybe that didn't work or something: I think there should be some punishment, but the punishment ought to be of the rapist, and not attacking the child," drawing from pseudoscience and a lax cultural attitude toward rape.

Being a feminist, however, even a bad one, has also taught me that the need for feminism and advocacy also applies to seemingly less serious issues like a Top 40 song or a comedian's puerile humor. The existence of these lesser artifacts of our popular culture is made possible by the far graver issues we are facing. The ground has long been softened.

At some point, I got it into my head that a feminist was a certain kind of woman. I bought into grossly inaccurate myths about who feminists are—militant, perfect in their politics and person, man-hating, humorless. I bought into these myths even though,

intellectually, I *know* better. I'm not proud of this. I don't want to buy into these myths anymore. I don't want to cavalierly disavow feminism like far too many other women have done.

Bad feminism seems like the only way I can both embrace myself as a feminist and be myself, and so I write. I chatter away on Twitter about everything that makes me angry and all the small things that bring me joy. I write blog posts about the meals I cook as I try to take better care of myself, and with each new entry, I realize that I'm undestroying myself after years of allowing myself to stay damaged. The more I write, the more I put myself out into the world as a bad feminist but, I hope, a good woman—I am being open about who I am and who I was and where I have faltered and who I would like to become.

No matter what issues I have with feminism, I am a feminist. I cannot and will not deny the importance and absolute necessity of feminism. Like most people, I'm full of contradictions, but I also don't want to be treated like shit for being a woman.

I am a bad feminist. I would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all.