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A UConn student talks to a group of prospective students on Sept. 17. Across all campuses, UConnn has over 29,500 undergraduate students enrolled this fall.
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CALLING YOURSELF A FEMINIST ISN'T ENOUGH

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People care a lot about their outward appearance and how people perceive them. The way you dress and speak is often driven by the motivation to curate a perfect picture of how others see you in their heads. Part of this curated appearance involves how we choose to label ourselves, specifically our beliefs.

Labels help us quickly communicate what we believe to the people around us, but because of that, they also create expectations. If we choose to adopt a label, others will reasonably assume that our actions reflect the principles it represents. Calling yourself a feminist, for example, communicates that you believe in gender equality and oppose the systems and behaviors that undermine it. However, when your actions contradict the label you put onto yourself, that label can become performative. It is easy to identify as a feminist; it is much harder to examine the ways our everyday language, humor and treatment of others may still reinforce the gender expectations feminism seeks to dismantle.

Internalized prejudice, no matter how much you want to claim it isn't, is apparent in all of us. Everyone expresses some form of bigotry, let it be racism, sexism or anything in between. Part of dismantling that structure is to become aware of it and aim to change. This is easier said than done, however, with it becoming increasingly easier to stay stagnant with our beliefs as time goes on.

When self-described feminists call their skinny ex-boyfriend a "twink" — a term typically referring to a young, slim gay man — as a way of mocking his masculinity, or judge women primarily by their sexual desirability, they undermine the principles behind the label they hold. Using femininity or perceived homosexuality to humiliate a man only works when those traits are understood as degrading.

Consider what actually makes these insults insulting. Calling a man feminine with the intention of humiliating him only works if femininity is understood as something degrading. Judging women according to their appearance or sexual desirability similarly reduces them to standards that feminism has spent decades challenging. Even when these comments are made casually or jokingly, the joke relies on the same gender expectations that we claim to oppose.

This contradiction is not exclusive to either men or women. A man can support women's equality while still expecting his male friends to suppress vulnerability or prove their masculinity. A woman can reject sexism directed toward herself while still weaponizing femininity against men or holding other women to gendered standards. Neither necessarily wakes up intending to reinforce sexism. The problem is that simply adopting the label of "feminist" does not automatically remove the assumptions we have already internalized through our life.

In fact, the label can sometimes make self-reflection harder, as once feminism becomes part of how someone understands their own character, acknowledging that something they said was sexist can feel like an attack on their core identity. Instead of evaluating whether the criticism has merit, it becomes tempting to fall back on the mental reassurance that since you call yourself a feminist, you obviously did not mean it in a sexist way. Studies have found that threats to a person's moral identity can increase defensiveness and make them less willing to acknowledge the harm caused by their actions.

In no way am I suggesting that feminism should demand perfection — or even near-perfection. Expecting someone to discover and eliminate every single unconscious prejudice before being able to consider adopting the label would be both unrealistic and counterproductive. The more realistic acceptation is effort. When someone points out that a joke, insult or assumption relies on patriarchal ideals that you oppose, being a feminist should make you more — not less — willing to consider why.



Male protestors display signs of encouragement for women's rights. Writer Nathan Fikadu said that feminists should critically examine their own biases.
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