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### Feminism and Breaking Boxes

I have spent my life in a box. As a female, I am expected to be powerful in every sense of the word. At age 10, I will be a both robust and superior athlete. At age 20, I will receive utmost admiration from only the most enticing of women. At age 30, I will fill my days polishing the glass cases of my lavish, gold-gilded university degrees. Most importantly I will never, never show emotion. Coerced, intimidated, forced and restricted into the tight confines of box so dark, so abysmal that they can barely breath, are my male counterparts. At age 10, they will be strongly discouraged from taking an interest in science and mathematics. At age 20, they will submit to catcalls in the street and unwanted touches in the workplace. At age 30, they will begrudgingly alter their appearance, lifestyles and even beliefs to conform to the fleeting whims of their wives. Most importantly they will be quiet. Of course, I am saying this all wrong. Rather women are expected to silently submit while men are expected to dominate. In a society where these gender roles are propagated in every medium imaginable, feminism is a dirty word. Too often, it is equated with man hating and the belief that women are superior to men. This must stop. In fact, feminism is defined as the belief that both men and women should have equal political, economic and social opportunities. Feminism is equality. It is not complicated and should not be controversial. Therefore, I want to explain what men and women can do, as

individuals, to achieve gender equality. I believe that this is the most forgotten and perhaps most important aspect of feminism.

Amidst the sweltering heat of Arizona, I started to question gender-based expectations. Running my fingers through the fluffy, white carpet of my parents' room, as a tiny, bleary-eyed child I would sit on the floor listening to the stories of very strong women. Escaping both an unhealthy marriage and the chill of the east coast, my great-grandmother, along with two young daughters, moved to Arizona in the mid-1900s. With much hard work and grit, she became one of the first female business owners to open several clothing stores on the popular Mill Avenue in Tempe. The result of a woman daring to venture into the business world of men was unknown. Venture outside your comfort zone. The rewards are worth it. Girls choosing their lifestyles and boys not being afraid to be anything other than "macho" will certainly yield a reward-gender equality. Drawing on my great-grandmother's example, her daughter, my grandmother, founded multiple, highly successful clothing stores. Defying the strict societal constraints, she was both a successful business woman and exemplary mother who had the courage to be in power. Hearing these stories made me want to have a voice, an influence. One that reached beyond myself. So, I was confused when my female friends purposely got low grades on tests so that they would not seem "too smart" and therefore unattractive. I did not know why I was in the minority to oppose sexual harassment around me. I did not understand why my male friends were scolded for crying and for "fighting like a girl." At age 16, I realized this needs to change. I decided I was a feminist.

I realized that one of the most vital ways to achieve gender equality is to provide people with examples of men and women who defy the standards of their gender. I would not have these

ideas had I not witnessed and listened to the stories of powerful women and men who were willing to promote change. For instance, my cousin, in her twenties, became the first female Air Force pilot in our family after graduating at the top of her college class and enduring harsh training. In a male dominated field, she showed me that a girl can be tactical, clever and resilient. Her husband, also an Air Force pilot has not only applauded her efforts but also promoted the reality that she is just as capable as him. They are equal partners. Just as I am inspired by her, she was inspired by Amelia Earhart and even Disney's Mulan. Eleanor Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Malala Yousafzai, Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Emma Watson among millions of others have enabled me to understand the value of defying the traditional idea that women will be quiet. That their only purpose is to be married. That their value is in their appearance more than in their mind. Even if they are not given a voice, cannot vote, cannot have a career and cannot have a choice, they have shown that it is necessary to persevere to create change. Women in history that led revolutions, fought wars, and ultimately changed the course of the world have shown us that women cannot be placed in a box. They will not forgo their voice nor their potential. Similarly, brave male leaders like Barack Obama, John Legend, Prince Harry, and Daniel Radcliffe have advocated for women's rights. Barack Obama explained that "the simple truth" is when "women succeed, America succeeds." So, America can form a true democracy through the examples of strong men and women working to achieve equality. Therefore, we must only promote media that does not portray women as weak and men as dominating. We must raise our voices so that women can have a choice. We must not be afraid to associate ourselves with feminism. Most importantly, we must become the real-life examples of people who extend beyond the constricting box of gender stereotypes and oppression.

