

It's 2015, and we are living in a time of blossoming feminist pop culture. Turn on the radio, the TV, or your computer screen and messages of gender equality are likely to greet you. Feminism is everywhere!

Celebrities have been coming out in droves, proudly declaring their feminist bonafides. Comedians like Aziz Ansari, Amy Schumer, and Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer of *Broad City* don't just call themselves feminists, but integrate feminism into their comedy. Pop-culture icon Beyoncé has made feminism and gender equality a critical part of her music and performance. Her hit song "Flawless" features a portion of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx talk on feminism and expectations for girls. And when Beyoncé took the stage at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, she performed that song in front of giant, emblazoned block letters that spelled FEMINIST. We swoon over the male actors who embrace feminism, like Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Matt McGorry. We ask every celebrity under the sun if they are a feminist, and often, [they say yes](#).

It's not just who identifies as a feminist, but how we as a society are talking about and responding to some key feminist issues. Campus sexual assault, for instance, has emerged as a crisis in need of systemic change *because* of the work of feminist activists like [Emma Sulkowicz](#), the young woman who carried her mattress around Columbia University to protest the university's callous response to her rape.

The cultural emergence of feminism extends to, and often burgeons from, social media. Hashtag movements have centered women—marginalized women, in particular—within media narratives. Women are driving the narrative and forcing social and media attention like never before. From #BringBackOurGirls, which brought international attention to the Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram, to #SayHerName, a new hashtag movement that has emerged as a way to document and resist police violence against black women, hashtags are a source of power. These hashtags have directly contributed to the cultural boom of feminism, and to the shifting media narratives around women and women's issues.

Women's magazines, which are often mocked for focusing on fashion and makeup, have embraced feminism. Publications like *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* are now sharing explicitly feminist articles, exploring abortion and birth control, challenging rape culture, and the persistent wage gap between men and women.

Then there's the shift in how we respond to women's sports. The U.S. Women's National Team captured our hearts and our viewership as they won the World Cup in dominant fashion. A record-setting 26.7 million Americans tuned into watch the FIFA Women's World Cup final, the highest ratings ever in the U.S. for a soccer match. Carli Lloyd's jaw-dropping hat trick

catapulted her and her teammates to the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and the Canyon of Heroes for the first-ever ticker tape parade for a women's sports team. On *Late Night*, Amy Poehler and Seth Meyers went viral when they [mocked](#) the sexist tweet from *Sports Illustrated* writer Andy Benoit, in which he ignorantly stated that women's sports aren't worth watching.

Suddenly, feminism is hip. Gender equality is en vogue. It's cool to call yourself a feminist again.

As this is happening, as Amy Schumer's movie is [killing it at the box office](#) and as millions of grown men are screaming their heads off in joy for women athletes, you would think that women's political rights would be advancing—and you would be wrong.

In December of last year, feminist journalist Amanda Marcotte [detailed](#) how 2014 was such a successful year for feminism that she wondered if a backlash was coming. In fact, it had already arrived.

At this time of feminist omnipresence in American culture, we are experiencing one of the most regressive political periods for women's rights in recent memory. And that's not a coincidence.

Since 2010, nearly 300 restrictions on safe and legal abortion have been enacted in state legislatures across the country. [Fifty-one abortion restrictions](#) have been enacted in the first six months of this year alone. The percent of women living in a state hostile to abortion rights has surged, from 31 percent in 2000 to 57 percent in 2014. Safe abortion clinics have evaporated, and several states only have one safe clinic left.

Fifteen states now have bans on abortion at or before 20 weeks, some, like Wisconsin, without an exception for rape or incest. [Thirty-five states](#) require women to receive counseling before she obtains an abortion. In [28 states](#), women are forced to wait a specified amount of time, from 24 up to 72 hours, to obtain an abortion. Women in [11 states](#) are denied coverage for abortion care on their *private* insurance plans. In order to obtain an abortion in [17 states](#), women must be given counseling that contains medically inaccurate information.

We are rapidly returning to the days of back-alley abortions, as women in areas that can only be described as "abortion deserts" are forced to turn to untested or unsafe methods in order to terminate their pregnancies. Women in the [Rio Grande Valley](#), a vast expanse of land with no abortion clinic due to the 2013 omnibus anti-abortion bill HB2, are now crossing the border into Mexico to obtain abortion-inducing drugs.

As abortion becomes increasingly criminalized in the states, it is [women of color who suffer](#) first and foremost. Women like Kenlissia Jones, a Black Georgia woman who was arrested and charged with malice murder for having a miscarriage. Or women of Asian or South Asian descent like Purvi Patel and Bei Bei Shuai, who are targeted under emerging laws like the Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act, or PRENDA. Supporters claim is [designed to prevent sex-selective abortions](#). But bills like PRENDA limit women's ability to make decisions about their bodies in a race-specific way, and these women are [sentenced to lengthy prison sentences](#) with little in the way of real public outcry.

There's also egregiously nonsensical, sexist legislation like South Carolina's attempt to [extend](#) "Stand Your Ground" to fetuses. Or a Kansas lawmaker who proposed [banning surrogate pregnancy](#), which would have made it a misdemeanor to hire or work as a surrogate. Or a [2013 Ohio law](#) that strips state funding from rape crisis centers that refer their patients to a facility that provides abortion care.

But it's not just reproductive rights. Republicans filibustered the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, designed to help combat the pervasive wage gap between men and women. The renewal of the Violence Against Women Act, which was originally passed with broad bipartisan support, nearly faltered because Congress defeated Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's bill to overhaul military sexual-assault policies, in response to the [disturbingly high rates](#) of sexual assault in the military. Even a push to mandate [paid maternity leave](#) for all workers has gone nowhere, facing staunch opposition from Republicans (many of whom support a ban on safe abortion care).

Then there are attacks on low-income women, specifically low-income mothers who receive welfare assistance. Earlier this year, Kansas Governor Sam Brownback signed a paternalistic and cruel law that [limits welfare recipients](#) to withdrawing just \$25 a day from ATMs with their benefits cards. For a low-income single mother, that amount would barely cover lunch at [McDonald's](#) for an adult and three children. What's more, this law a harsh and punitive 36-month cap on receiving benefits, after which they are banned for life from receiving benefits again. Kansas Republican lawmakers threw low-income single mothers under the bus in the face of a [\\$600 million budget deficit](#), when this deficit actually occurred because of huge tax breaks the Governor Brownback provided to wealthy Kansans.

Cisgender women aren't the only ones who are suffering, either. Trans women face harsh political hostility and outright discrimination. Conservative activists like [Michelle Duggar](#) have waged a campaign of fear and transphobia to [prohibit transgender women from using women's restrooms](#), often centered around schools. Trans women are forced to use men's restrooms because they were assigned male at birth, a deeply transphobic and misogynistic attack on their rights and

bodies.

Women's rights aren't just politically toxic; they're political garbage.

It's hard to fathom that these two realities can simultaneously coexist, that Malala can grace the cover of *TIME* and a [woman can earn a spot on American currency](#) while politicians can enact some of the most draconian legislation in recent memory. But they actually go hand in hand.

As women's equality becomes a more palatable, mainstream idea, those in power are left scrambling. That's really for one simple reason: most of those in power (white, straight, cisgender men) profit off of the continued subjugation of women and other marginalized communities, particularly people of color.

Backlash is nothing new; it's an established political reality, a response from those in power to the shifting social terrain. We are watching it unfold in real time with the conservative responses to marriage equality. Now that the Supreme Court has made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states, conservative lawmakers are trying to pass "religious freedom" bills that will allow citizens to legally continue to discriminate against members of the LGBT community.

It was nearly 25 years ago that Susan Faludi wrote her explosive book *Backlash: the Undeclared War Against American Women*. And yet, here we are, still living it. Every time women lurch forward culturally and socially, we are shoved back politically. If we're shoved back anymore, we will lose many of our basic rights, and it will be incredibly hard to get them back.

So, what do we do about it? How do we combat the surging legislative restrictions on our health and lives?

Humanizing women's rights is critical. Second Wave feminists embraced the idea that "the personal is the political." For the younger generation of feminists, it's about making the political personal.

That's why abortion storytelling has the potential to be so transformative: When people tell the story of deciding to and ultimately having an abortion, it's not about politics or optics, but about our lives. Women like Renee Bracey Sherman, who unapologetically tell their abortion stories and why it was the right decision for them, have the power to radically transform how we understand abortion. And having celebrities tell their abortion stories helps, too. When *Girls* star [Jemima Kirke](#) told the story of her abortion as part of the Center for Reproductive Rights' *Draw the Line* campaign, she garnered positive responses from otherwise uninvolved publications like [US Weekly](#), the gossip magazine.

When we lay bare what women's rights means in terms of our lived experiences, it becomes more difficult to deny them to us. Issues like free birth control, accessible abortion care, and ending sexual harassment and assault take on new life when we contextualize them. Free birth control means being able to go to work and be productive every day, free from menstrual pain. Accessible abortion care means finishing college and pursuing your dream career. Ending sexual harassment and assault means catching the subway at any time, day or night, without constant anxiety or panic.

Women's rights aren't political talking points, but critical aspects that work to improve our lives and promote our well-being.

It is great that Taylor Swift is embracing feminism and that female soccer player Alex Morgan is on the cover of FIFA's video game, but it's also a lesson that moving the cultural dial doesn't necessarily mean that we're moving the political dial. Millions of Americans cheered on the US Women's National Team to their World Cup victory, but those women still made a [tiny fraction](#) of the take-home pay that the men's World Cup champion team received. Cultural support doesn't translate to political support unless we ourselves force that change.

That means that it is up to us to stem the tide of misogynist backlash that is sweeping us back half a century. We can't simply hold up feminist celebrities like Amy Schumer and Beyoncé as a sign of victory when women's rights are eroding and marginalized women, in particular, are suffering as a result.

So, the next time a comedian sends out a feminist tweet or a pop star says that yes, they are a feminist, remember the war being waged on in state legislatures against those very same ideals. It's great for popular culture to reflect our feminist ideals, but it's not enough. Feminist anthems are great, but feminist legislation is better.