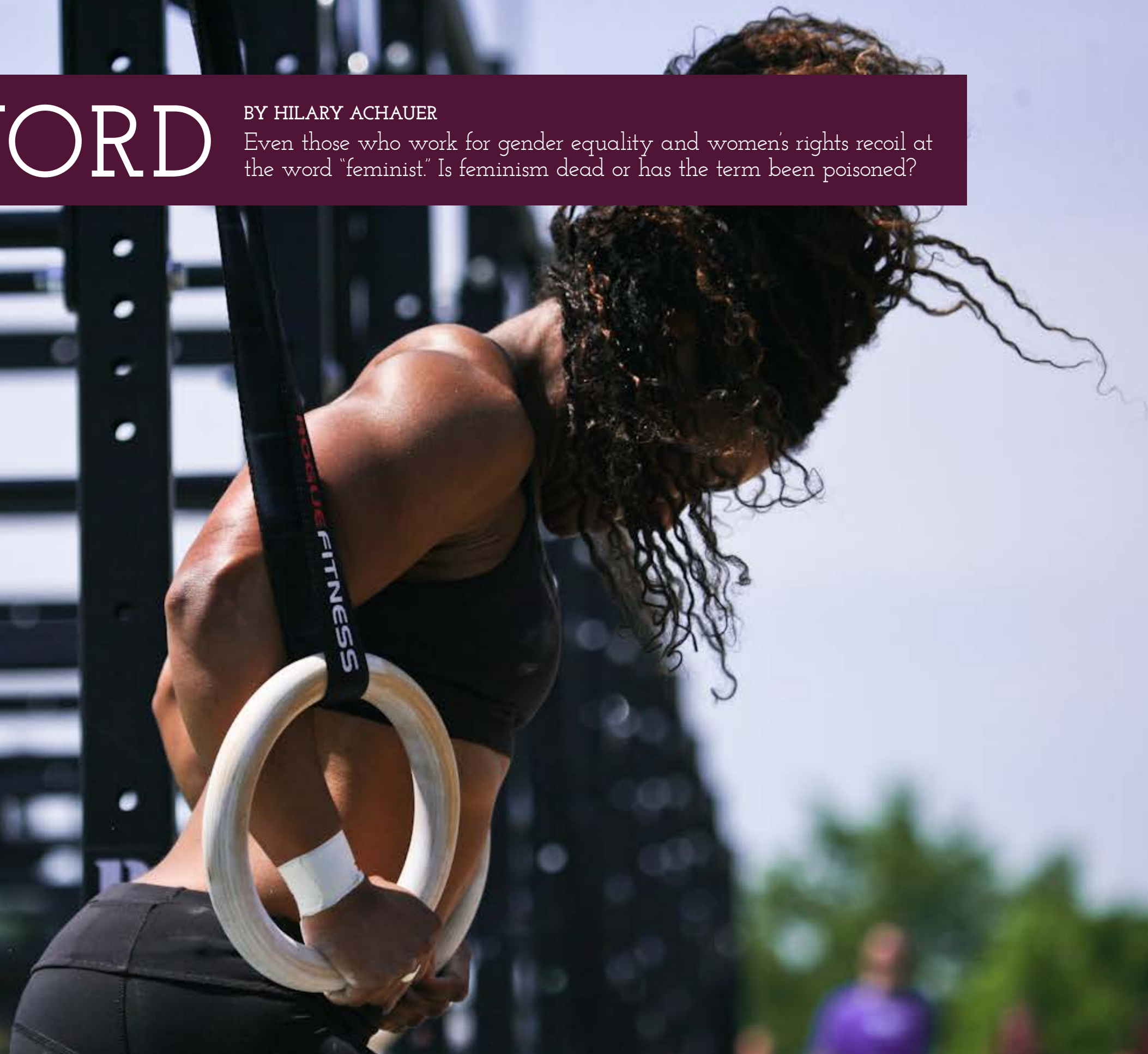


THE F-WORD

BY HILARY ACHAUER

Even those who work for gender equality and women's rights recoil at the word "feminist." Is feminism dead or has the term been poisoned?



"I wouldn't call myself a feminist."

I looked at the strong, intelligent, accomplished woman in front of me. Only 11 years separated us, but at that moment the gulf between us felt enormous.

I'm 40 years old and attended college in the mid-'90s. It was the height of the grunge and riot grrrl movement, an important part of third-wave feminism, which began in the early '90s. At the time, feminism was punk rock. It was cool and it was anti-corporate. It was Doc Martens and flannel shirts, Kurt Cobain and Bikini Kill.

I admit that a big part of the appeal of feminism at the time was that it seemed badass. It was of the moment. It was change and rebellion. Third-wave feminism differed from the second wave—which lasted from the 1960s to the '80s—by emphasizing diversity and more fluid definitions of gender and sexuality. While the goals of feminism remained the same, young feminists started taking back traditional markers of femininity (cleavage, lipstick, high heels) and reclaiming derogatory words such as "slut" and "bitch."

All these years later, as a married mom of two kids, I still consider myself a feminist. I'm in good company—Beyoncé has become very public about her feminism. She wrote an essay for the *Shriver Report* titled *Gender Equality Is a Myth* and sampled a feminist lecture in her song *Flawless*. If anyone can rehabilitate the man-hating, dour reputation of feminism, the gorgeous, sparkly, almost universally loved Beyoncé isn't a bad choice.

But when I bring up the word "feminism" to some of my younger friends, they recoil in distaste.

"That word makes my skin crawl," one of my friends told me.

It's an opinion shared by successful, independent women who believe strongly in gender equality.

How did the word become so reviled?



Through physical strength, many women have found the inner strength to challenge traditional gender roles.

Man-Hating Club

Caitlin Ellinwood is a 25-year-old consultant for one of the Big Four professional-services firms. She provides commercial and federal clients with strategy and operations-related consulting services. She's a young woman in a male-dominated field, and she's a CrossFit athlete who isn't afraid of loading up the barbell and lifting alongside men. She's independent, intelligent and opinionated. Just don't call her a feminist.

"The idea of feminism on paper is great," Ellinwood said. "Equality is important. I don't think women should be subordinate to men."

However, she thinks the word "feminist" has been, as she said, "bastardized." She feels feminists are overreaching.

"They want more than just equality for women. The extremes of feminism alienate the male gender," Ellinwood said.

As feminism gathered steam in the 1980s and '90s, some men felt women were gaining equality but weren't revoking their traditional feminine privileges. Activists for men's rights pointed to the economic burdens on men, as well as inequality in laws governing divorce, custody and abortion. When Ellinwood recoils from the word "feminism," she's reacting to the idea that feminists are alienating men and trying to tip the scales the other way.

Her biggest problem is the way she thinks feminists identify themselves.

"It's like a woman cult, that's the way it's perceived in society," she said.

"It's like The He-Man Woman Hating Club from *The Little Rascals*," she said, but in reverse.

However, when asked if she thinks there is gender equality, Ellinwood doesn't hesitate: "I don't feel there is gender equality. Absolutely my gender works against me."

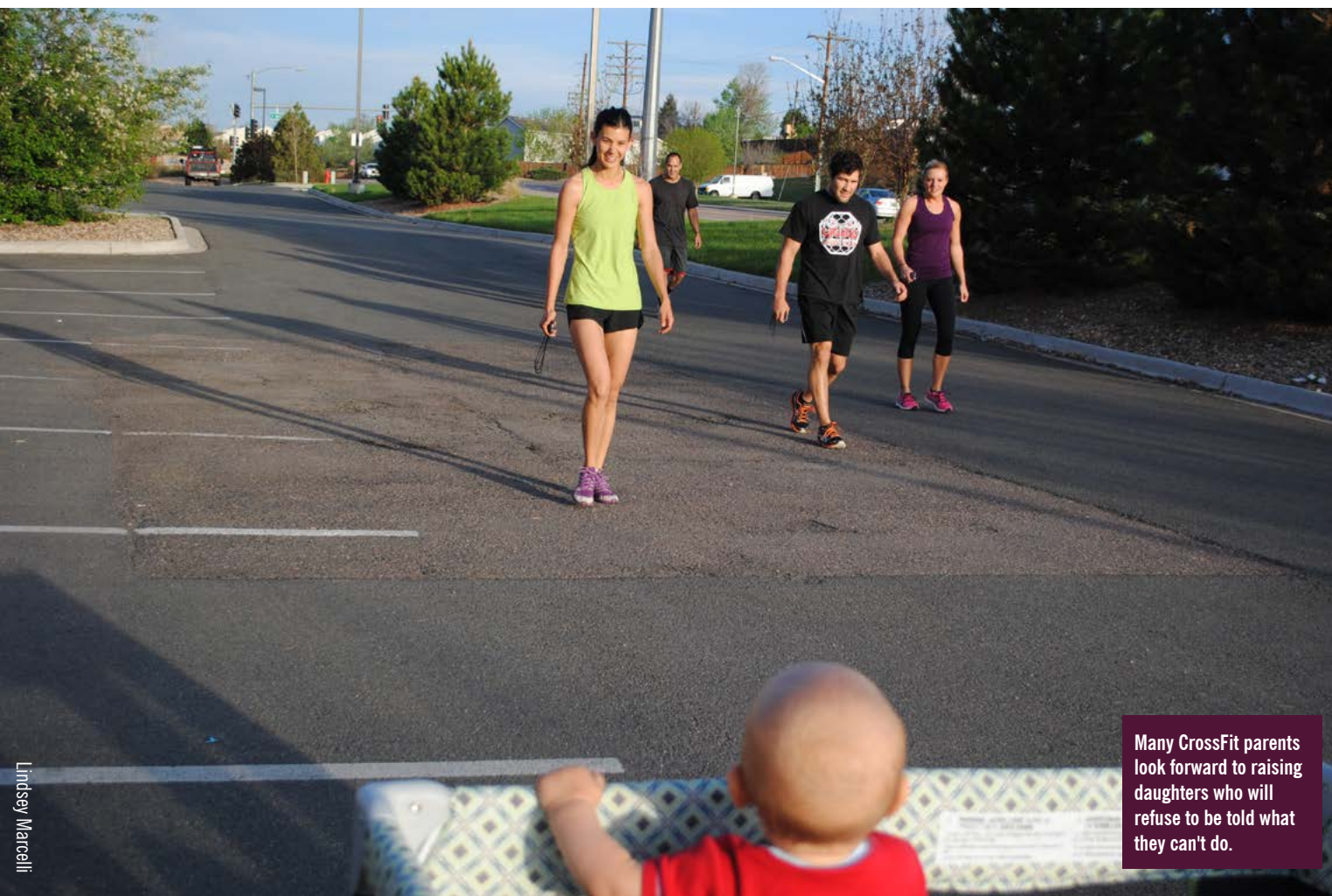
"I don't feel there is gender equality. Absolutely my gender works against me."

—Caitlin Ellinwood



Appearance says little about politics. What should a "feminist" look like?

Michael Brian



Many CrossFit parents look forward to raising daughters who will refuse to be told what they can't do.

Lindsey Marcelli

She said her natural state—warm, happy and bubbly—sometimes makes it hard for her to be taken seriously. She believes it would be easier to just act like a bitch; that would earn her more credibility.

It's not a problem young men have to confront. As this Pantene ad points out, one man's boss is another woman's bossy.

It's the adjustments women are forced to make that form the patchwork of gender inequality. The speech Beyoncé samples in *Flawless* is *We Should All Be Feminists* by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In it, Adichie talks about when she was preparing to teach a writing class in graduate school for the first time.

She was nervous, not because she didn't know the material but because she was worried about what to wear. Adichie wanted to be taken seriously, and she worried that if she looked feminine her students wouldn't respect her. She really wanted to wear her shiny lip gloss and her girly skirt, but Adichie decided to wear a serious, manly and, as she said, "ugly" suit.

"Because the sad truth is that when it comes to appearance, we start off with men as the standard, as the norm. If a man is getting ready for a business meeting, he doesn't worry about looking too masculine ... if a woman is getting ready she has to worry about looking too feminine," Adichie said in her talk.

Adichie said she wishes she had not worn that ugly suit, and she has since banned it from her closet.

"I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and my femininity," Adichie said.

Rather than dress like a man to be taken seriously, Adichie decided to reject the notion that feminine equals frivolous.

First a Mom

Lisette Islas, a 38-year-old nonprofit consultant, said she considers herself a feminist, but she understands why some people have trouble with the word.

Islas studied at the University of California, Berkeley from 1993 to 1997. It was at the progressive, liberal haven that Islas said she found her identity as a feminist. It was also where people began telling her what she could and could not do as a feminist.

"People told me you can't be a feminist if you like to wear makeup," Islas said. "You can't be a feminist if you wear heels."

She said many feminists she encountered had a specific idea about what it meant to be a feminist, and if you didn't fit that image, you weren't a true feminist.

The sad irony is that the fight for gender equality was started by women who chafed against the confines of traditional female roles. The brave women of first-wave feminism challenged the social norms and fought for basic civil rights, such the ability to vote and own property. Feminism was built on challenging the status quo, but even at Berkeley, Islas felt that she was being told what her role as a woman should be.

There's a deeper, darker issue lurking here, and it's the linking of a woman's appearance with her politics. The second wave of feminism, which lasted from the 1960s to the 1980s, may have led to some narrow ideas about what a feminist should look like, but it also resulted in the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (outlawing major forms of discrimination against racial, ethnic, national and religious minorities and women), and the Women's Educational Equity Act of 1972 and 1974, to name just a few.

Yet when many think of feminists, what do they picture? Bra-burning, man-hating women who disapprove of heels and makeup. Not the brave women who fought for the vote, the right to own property, educational equality and reproductive rights. A woman's appearance should not have anything to do with her politics.

"I like wearing heels," Islas said. "They make me feel taller. I don't wear them for a man."

As Adichie said in her speech, "The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be, rather than how we are."

"Feminism is not about man-hating," Islas said. "It's about equality."

—Lisette Islas

Islas said she became less political after college, but she started to think more about gender politics after the birth of her daughter, now 2, when she became a working mom.

"I felt like I had to choose between being a good mom and a good worker," Islas said. She told the story of a boss who came by her desk at 5 p.m. one night, patted her on the head and said, "You've got to be home now. You're a mom."

Islas had never heard him say anything like that to her male coworkers with children.

However, despite the sometimes-negative connotations of the word, Islas is still proud to call herself a feminist. As a Mexican-American woman, she also has to think about her ethnic identity, but she most often identified herself first as a woman, and then as a Chicana or Mexican-American.

That all changed after the birth of her daughter.

"Now I'm first a mom," she said. "I think a lot about how I'm going to expose (my daughter) to a lot of things ... so she doesn't feel boxed in."

And that's why Islas identifies as feminist. She believes strongly in making sure her daughter has a world of options available to her, from how she dresses to her career choices.

"Feminism is not about man-hating," Islas said. "It's about equality."

Speaking Out

When the first-wave feminists of the early 20th century dreamed of future equality for women, they probably didn't dare to hope for someone like 28-year-old Fiona McFarland.

A graduate of the Naval Academy, McFarland is a surface-warfare officer in the Navy who is headed to work in the public-affairs office in the Pentagon. She's a fierce CrossFit athlete who out-lifts most of the men in the gym. McFarland is intelligent and thoughtful and keenly aware of her position in a male-dominated world. But don't call her a feminist.

McFarland said she does not consider herself a feminist and feels there are too many negative connotations of the word.

"The whole bra-burning and women wearing shoulder pads to look like men—there's a lot of anger associated with the word," she said. "Gender equality means more to me."

McFarland said gender equality is always on her mind, and it's been a hot topic in the military since the ground-combat



CrossFit.com does not prescribe a "women's weight." Women can choose what to lift, and many can beat male counterparts using the same loads.

Amanda Ryan

exclusion was rescinded in January 2013, allowing women to occupy select positions in ground-combat units.

McFarland recognizes the trail blazed by those before her.

"I have been in the Navy almost six years, and there is more gender equality than there was (when I started)," she said.

She added: "Some of the women who are role models (to me) were not available to women a generation ahead of

me. Women have only been allowed to serve on surface combatants since the late '80s. In the early '90s, the generation before me, they didn't have anyone to turn to."

She said she thinks the Navy is a kinder and gentler place than it once was. She knows gender equality has not been achieved, "but all the right things are in place to get us there."

"This word has become poisoned."

—Fiona McFarland

McFarland knows there's still work to be done. The evidence is right in front of her.

She recalled a recent day in which 40 people, including McFarland herself, received orders to help bring ammo aboard a ship.

"There were five women out of the 40," McFarland said. "All the women were put in a position to sit and watch, not carry any ammo. It occurred to me that the women were put in useless positions."

What McFarland did next says a lot about her gender politics regardless of how she labels herself.

"I made a complaint. I brought it up," she said. "And a lot of the men supported me, they said, 'Lt. McFarland, she's stronger than a lot the guys on the crew.'"

And that's how the fight for equality has progressed over the years. Someone notices an injustice, steps forward and says, "This is wrong. It needs to change."

McFarland acts like a feminist and talks like a feminist, but she simply does not consider herself a feminist.

"This word has become poisoned," McFarland said. "Maybe language has evolved. I don't love that there is negativity associated with the word."

The Future of Feminism

So what to do about a word that is so divisive and unappealing to young women who believe strongly in gender equality?

Some people are trying to reclaim the word. In an interview with *Glamour* magazine, Zooey Deschanel bristled at the idea that feminists have to look and behave a certain way.

"We can't be feminine and be feminists and be successful?" she asked. "I want to be a fucking feminist and wear a fucking Peter Pan collar. So fucking what?"

It's also worth examining where the negative connotations came from. It could be that a society uncomfortable with women gaining full equality—fighting on the front lines and running corporations and countries—sought to demonize the word.

From the first days of feminism, women fighting for equal rights have been called anti-family, anti-men and anti-God. The anti-feminism rhetoric gathered steam in the early 1990s, when Rush Limbaugh began using the term "feminazi." Since then, Limbaugh has worked hard



Lindsey Smith

Pictures such as this have raised debate on CrossFit.com but reflect a new functional aesthetic.



Theo Tsakouras

Mothers, daughters, sisters, wives: in a CrossFit gym, all are simply "athletes."

to poison the word. In May of 2013, he posted a radio transcript to his website titled *Have We Defeated Feminism?* In talking about the state of feminism in 2013, Limbaugh said, "One person has been shouting from the rooftops warning about this movement. It is I, El Rushbo, and it might be said that I have succeeded in stigmatizing it."

Anti-feminists may have succeeded in prejudicing people against the word feminism, but the plan seems to have backfired, because what struck me from talking to young women about feminism is that none of them were blind to the inequality around them. They were well aware about the progress that had been made and the work that needs to be done.

While I still feel strongly it's important to reclaim "feminism," it not longer disturbs me that so many young women dislike the word.

Can a movement exist without a name? Future generations of women, perhaps the daughters of third-wave feminists, may reclaim the word with pride. Until then, even if many young women aren't talking the talk, they are walking the walk and continuing the fight for gender equality. ■

About the Author

Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary is an editor and writer for the *CrossFit Journal* and contributes to the CrossFit Games site. An amateur-boxer-turned-CrossFit-athlete, Hilary lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and trains at CrossFit Pacific Beach. To contact her, visit hilaryachauer.com