



Essay

How Feminism Was a Part of My Life, but I Did Not Know That

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Abstract

Feminism has been a significant concept in the Western world. However, is it possible to adhere to its principles without identifying with the label? This essay provides a positive answer and presents two cases to support this argument. The first case draws from the Soviet past and its developments, which granted women various rights. The second case offers a Biblical perspective on the status of women conceived initially by God. In both instances, Causal Layered Analysis helps reveal not only surface actions but also the deep, hidden reasons behind them. The essay was prompted to reflect on Ivana Milojević's "The Hesitant Feminist's Guide," which inspired this exploration.

Keywords

Feminism, Causal Layered Analysis, the Soviet Union, the Bible

Introduction

Certain moments in life should shake us and bring our understanding to a new level. If there are no such revelations, then we are intellectually dead, and for me, this is equivalent to physical death. *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future* by Ivana Milojević (2024) was a recent trigger for reconsidering specific dimensions of my life and personality. Let me explain.

Such words as “feminism” or “feminists” have never been in my vocabulary. I remember getting perplexed by a question from my new friend, a doctoral student from Morocco who was writing her thesis on gender and the Qur’an. She asked me, “Why are you not involved in feminist research?” That question puzzled me because my personal background has never led me to give it much thought.

A few years later, teaching a course on Sociology, I reencountered feminism. That time, I dived deeper into it. I learned some important lessons like (1) the movement is diverse and includes 19th-century liberal feminism, proletarian and Marxist feminism, and radical feminism that calls for a radical reordering of society (Artwińska & Mroziak, 2020) and (2) because of feminist movements women got different rights, including the right to vote, run for public office, work, earn equal pay, own property, receive education, enter into contracts, have equal rights within marriage, and maternity leave (Burkett & Brunell, 2001). All those rights seemed natural for me, a person born in the USSR. The Soviet gender narrative overshadowed feminism as an independent movement, making it something alien, colonial, and hostile. It should not be a surprise because “as decades of research in cognitive psychology and latterly political science has shown, narratives are the underlying means through which we store and recall memories; they bear down powerfully on how we interpret the present” (Sadriu, 2022). Yes, the narratives we absorb are keys to understanding our assumptions, behaviors, motivations, actions, and reactions that comprise our worldviews, which serve as gears of the present and future.

In this essay, I will try to unpack the different existential modes that led me to consider feminism seriously. The Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 1998) is the best tool for this, helping us see not only surface actions but also

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the deep, hidden reasons.

My “Soviet” Self, Perplexed with Feminism

I have never regretted being a woman. I grew up in the USSR hearing about oppression and discrimination there, in the capitalist West, with its inhuman attitude toward workers, black people, and women. On the contrary, my world was full of equal opportunities for everyone. The main selection categories were hard work and persistence. The Soviet mass media and pop culture actively nourished these ideas. Take, for example, Katerina, the main heroine of *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears*, a top-rated 1980 Soviet romantic drama movie. For those unfamiliar with the movie, a collage of the main heroine's images can help picture her (Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Katerina, the main heroine of *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears*. Image from <https://dzen.ru/a/YEhsWqbDlI60ZGEB>

It won the Academy Award for *Best Foreign Language Film* in 1981 because the so-called “American dream” was fulfilled by Soviet Katerina, who made a breathtaking career from a factory worker to a director of a giant plant. For Soviet women, it was not a fantasy or fairy tale, but a reality filled with professional growth opportunities, big careers, prestigious social status, and higher than men’s salaries. It seemed that Soviet women lived different and better lives than their American counterparts. Academic research supported my subjective feelings.

A few years ago, I encountered a book called *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* by Kristen Ghodsee (2020). The author explores the relationship between an economic-political system and personal relations, including satisfaction with intimate life. In a nutshell, women can fulfil feminists’ aspirations not under capitalism but only under socialism due to the specific position of women under each system. Ghodsee traces the ground to Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), and *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). The jumping-off point was their statement that capitalism:

has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest and then callous “cash payment” ... It has resolved personal worth into exchange value ... it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation (Marx & Engels, 1848, pp. 15-16).

Later, August Bebel (1840-1913), a German socialist politician, elaborated on that idea, focusing primarily on women’s status. In 1879, he wrote a transformative book, *Women and Socialism*. In Chapter XXVIII, called *Woman in the Future*, he suggested what I envision as a “preferable feminist scenario.” It happened almost a century before actual scenario planning (Schultz, 2015). Bebel presented a detailed description of women’s emancipation under

socialism:

In the new society woman will be entirely independent, both socially and economically. She will not be subjected to even a trace of domination and exploitation, but will be free and man's equal, and mistress of her own lot. ... In the choice of love, she is as free and unhampered as man. She woos or is wooed, and enters into a union prompted by no other considerations but her own feelings... Here socialism will create nothing new, it will merely reinstate, on a higher level of civilization and under a different social form, *what generally prevailed before private property dominated society* [emphasis added] (Bebel, 1879, p. 466).

Such a nuanced narrative can inspire deep respect from contemporary futurists. Bebel's conclusion underlines that capitalism and private property were responsible for women's subjugation in the home.

Alexandra Kollontai, a Russian revolutionary, diplomat, and Marxist theoretician, chose one dimension of the feminist future that was neglected at that period. In 1921, Kollontai published *Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations*, presenting a dialectical materialist analysis of love and how love works in different epochs under different economic systems. Using futures studies language, Kollontai constructed a new vision:

As regards sexual relations, communist morality demands, first of all, an end to all relations based on financial or other economic considerations. The buying and selling of caresses destroy the sense of equality between the sexes, and thus undermine the basis of solidarity without which communist society cannot exist (Kollontai, 1921, para.18).

In other words, our concept of love and romance—and a family overall—depends on production relations and will be completely different in a post-capitalist society. Therefore, as a champion of women's liberation, Kollontai believed it “could take place only as the result of the victory of a new social order and a different economic system” (Kollontai, 1926, para.5, line 5).

Some essential strategic steps Alexandra Kollontai took as a head of the Commissariat of Social Welfare after the 1917 October Revolution and put together a package of reforms that aimed to liberate women from patriarchy and capitalism. Among such actions were liberalizing divorce by abolishing the category of illegitimate children, liberalizing abortion (in the Soviet Republic, it happened in 1920 (Avdeev et al., 1995)), establishing state kindergartens, public cafeterias and public laundries that socialized women's domestic work to allow women to go out into the workforce and be financially independent (Klots, 2024).

It is important to note that Kollontai's revolutionary male comrades, Vladimir Lenin and Lev Trotsky, thought of the country's electrification, building factories, and launching railroads as crucial in socialism winning. In other words, they were for systemic changes. However, Kollontai insisted on revolutionizing man-woman relations because that worldview-level radical transformation would transform the broader economy. She looked deeper, understanding the need for a simultaneous change in both narratives and systemic strategies (Milojević, 2022).

The Causal Layered Analysis demonstrates this interconnectedness and reinforces the validity of Kollontai's approach (Table 1).

Table 1: Deconstructing Soviet feminism

Litany



System

Constitutionally secured gender equality, plus a right to work and rest;
 Free general education and guaranteed work placement after graduation;
 Children care organizations - free state kindergartens, schools, and universities; paid maternity leave (up to three years) with job retention;
 Free medical care; free trade unions' vouchers to sanatoriums and health resorts;
 Guaranteed (equal) salary, long-service pay, professional career opportunities;
 Guaranteed pension on retirement; guaranteed paid vacation (from 15 to 40 working days);
 Paid domestic labor, public laundries, and household service centers.

Worldview

The October Revolution made men and women equal in everything;
 The Soviet society abandoned old patriarchal traditions and created a human being of a new formation;
 Women's abilities are not restricted by any rules but only by their desires;
 The Soviet state provides women with all necessary things; they need to request it;
 A woman is not only a mother or a wife but a full-fledged citizen of the freest country in the world;
 Whatever can be done by men can be done by women;
 In the Soviet state, people are valued for their professional abilities and skills;
 The better and higher education one has, the better position one can obtain at work and in society.

Myth-metaphor

“Every kitchen maid must learn to rule the state.”

The above Causal Layered Analysis demonstrates that the USSR advocated gender equality and women empowerment. It starts from the most visible level, the litany, illustrated with propaganda billboards. The billboards' slogans, along with their translations, are presented here to convey their full depth and meaning:

Pic. 1. 8 марта – день восстания работниц против кухонного рабства. Долой гнет и обывательщину домашнего быта! [March 8 is the revolt day of female workers against kitchen slavery. Down with the oppression and philistinism of domestic routine!]

Pic. 2. Женщина в СССР имеет равные права с мужчиной! [In the USSR, a woman has equal rights to man (a woman holds an election bulletin)].

Рис. 3. Союз Советских Социалистических Республик есть социалистическое государство рабочих и крестьян. Статья 1 из Конституции СССР [The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a socialist state of workers and peasants. The USSR Constitution, Article 1]

Рис. 4. Вставай в ряды боевых подруг! Дружинница бойцу помощник и друг! [Join the ranks of front-line she-friends! A woman-at-arms is a soldier's assistant and comrade!]

Рис. 5. A man holds a volume of Lenin-Stalin collected works.

Рис. 6. A grammar lesson at a Tajik primary school.

Moving down to the system's level, we can see that it was well developed and organized in Soviet times, providing all women's daily needs. This comprehensive approach reflected a new worldview shaped by Soviet reality. The state ensured equal opportunities for all its citizens because the critical division - the division between classes and social groups - was removed by the Soviet Revolution. Therefore, a new metaphor demonstrated unlimited possibilities regardless of gender. It should be noted that the phrase "Every kitchen maid must learn to rule the state" is often attributed to Vladimir Lenin (1917). In his article "Uderzhat li bol'sheviki gosudarstvennyu vlast'?" [Will the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?], he discusses the idea that even a kitchen maid, as a representative of the broad masses of workers, must learn to govern the state and be involved in public administration.

Even though the table is not exhaustive, it articulates the key ideas central to the Soviet ideology concerning gender roles and the status of women in society. However, it is essential to note that the reality could be quite different. The extent to which these ideals were achieved and how they translated into everyday life for Soviet women has been the subject of much historical analysis and debate (Bobroff, 1974; Goldman, 1997; Gordon et al., 1977; Mespoulet & Rundell, 2015). To be fair, many women did experience increased rights and opportunities, but others faced significant challenges. It was widespread in rural areas, where solid cultural and patriarchal traditions influenced people's adherence to historical norms and assigned women primarily to housekeeping. Figure 2 presents one of the artifacts from the past of Uzbek Soviet women. There, on the wall you can see a portrait of Vladimir Lenin, the leader of Soviet power and the new reality. However, a woman wears a *paranjah* [a heavy veil] that Uzbek women had to wear outside long before the Soviet revolution. Such challenges have shown that attaining the proclaimed socialist ideals has proved elusive. Therefore, it is vital to consider another component of my identity.



Fig. 2: In an Uzbek Marriage Registry (ZAGS) in 1924. Image from <https://t.me/birturkistan>

“For the LORD Does Not See as Mortals See...”

As was discussed in the above section, the Soviet gender policy was not flawless, particularly in terms of practice. Imperfect people can only bring imperfect solutions to problems they create. Therefore, turning to something - or Someone initially ideal – could make much more sense. Being a Biblical Christian who follows the Protestant motto *Sola Scriptura*, I find solutions to problems feminists struggle with within the Scriptures, and those solutions are existential and deal with primordial reasons. Causal Layered Analysis again can help to see the transformations suggested by the Bible (Table 2).

Table 2. CLA: Biblical Solutions to Feminism Issues

	Issues Faced by Feminists	Biblical Solution
Litany	Women’s humiliated position, a second-sort social status, inequality, and domestic violence.	Originally, God created males and females in His own image, perfect and flawless, blessed them, gave them earth and everything on it to take care of (Gen.1:26-28), and united them in a perfect marriage when “they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24, NIV) or irrevocably integral to each other.
System	For centuries, education and public life were only for men, professions, and careers were only for men, inheritance rights were through sons, family law favored men, voting was only for men, and policy-making was only for men.	A woman’s subordinate position is a result of God’s command violation (Gen. 3). Humans wanted to be “like God” and do “whatever seemed right in their own eyes” (Judg.21:25). However, God keeps striving to bring everything back to perfection, offering people His alternatives: Ten Commandments that articulate equality of everyone on the Sabbath day, and a special blessing for honoring father <i>and mother</i> (Ex. 20:9-12; Set of daily life regulations protecting women from sexual abuse, raping, unjust accuse of adultery, pennilessness, and unprotected existence (special care is given to widows and orphans), even their physical and psychological conditions during their periods (Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy); and finally, Christ comes “who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14). In His second coming, the old set of things will be destroyed. The New Earth will obtain the perfect order again (Rev. 21-22).

	Issues Faced by Feminists	Biblical Solution
Worldview	<p>All the evil is from women.</p> <p>The best career for a woman is a successful marriage.</p> <p>The best acquisition for a woman is a rich husband.</p> <p>The primary duties of a woman are housekeeping and childbearing.</p> <p>Women are weak creatures (in everything); men are their protectors, mentors, and lords.</p>	<p>“For God so loved the world...” (not a specific group or gender)</p> <p>“For the LORD does not see as mortals see” (1 Sam. 16:7).</p> <p>A woman can become a savior (a female Messiah) of her people (Esther during the reign of King Ahasuerus).</p> <p>A woman can be a successful and deeply respected judge (Deborah in Jud. 4).</p> <p>God is not ashamed of putting Ruth, a Moabite and gentile, and Rahab, a Canaanite (a prostitute), into the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah.</p> <p>“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, <i>nor is there male and female</i> [emphasis added], for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).</p>
Metaphor/ Myth	Figures in Others’ Shadow	Glorious princess of God’s Kingdom

It is critical to note that the idea of God’s supremacy governs Biblical solutions. As the Sovereign, He creates both male and female in His image. He loves and cares for His creation. Therefore, He establishes various legal, ethical, social, and political systems to protect them. Adhering to these systems’ rules can restrain the evil that humans tend to generate. Moreover, throughout the Bible, God reminds us about His worldview and perspective on us, both men and women. The culmination of this message is found in Christ, Who confirms God’s love for His creation, leading us to a new, perfect existence, as stated in Revelation 21:4: “for the former things have ceased to exist.” Ultimately, God will reestablish His Kingdom on earth. However, He can rein in your heart now if you allow Him. Therefore, you can embrace a royal metaphor in your life starting today.

Such an integral Biblical image makes me act and feel differently, as if the ideal reality of equality is already here. Therefore, the only one whose opinion matters to me now is God. With this presupposition and the context, I do not need to be a feminist or anti-feminist. I live a different, third-scenario reality of a woman free of oppression, prejudices, or restrictions, and that freedom flows from inside due to a new Spirit received.

Closing Remarks

All in all, I am grateful to Ivana Milojević for *The Hesitant Feminist’s Guide to the Future* (2024), which allowed me to revisit the foundations of my worldview and to reflect on how resilient they are in withstanding external tsunami. I agree with Milojević’s statement as an intro to Chapter 9, “We create our language, then the language shapes us” (2024, p. 39). I would add, “... and our future.” Don’t we limit ourselves by tending to label everything? Is compartmentalization the best solution? Can our struggle for inclusion bring more separation? Battling for equality, can we create more profound segregation? These and many other questions reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of our postnormal times (Sardar, 2010). Therefore, simple yes/no answers will not work, along with the “you-are-either-feminist-or-anti-feminist” solution. Plural futures require plural presents.

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