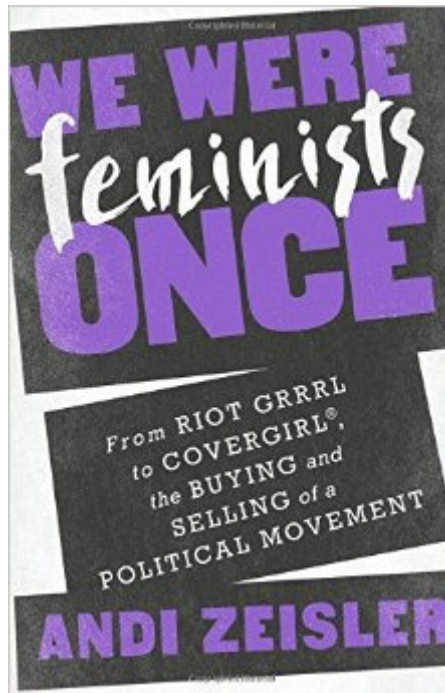


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# We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl To CoverGirl®, The Buying And Selling Of A Political Movement



## Synopsis

Feminism has hit the big time. Once a dirty word brushed away with a grimace, feminism has been rebranded as a shiny label sported by movie and pop stars, fashion designers, and multi-hyphenate powerhouses like Beyoncé. It drives advertising and marketing campaigns for everything from wireless plans to underwear to perfume, presenting what's long been a movement for social justice as just another consumer choice in a vast market. Individual self-actualization is the goal, shopping more often than not the means, and celebrities the mouthpieces. But what does it mean when social change becomes a brand identity? Feminism's splashy arrival at the center of today's media and pop-culture marketplace, after all, hasn't offered solutions to the movement's unfinished business. Planned Parenthood is under sustained attack, women are still paid 77 percent or less of the man's dollar, and vicious attacks on women, both on- and offline, are utterly routine. Andi Zeisler, a founding editor of Bitch Media, draws on more than twenty years' experience interpreting popular culture in this biting history of how feminism has been co-opted, watered down, and turned into a gyratory media trend. Surveying movies, television, advertising, fashion, and more, Zeisler reveals a media landscape brimming with the language of empowerment, but offering little in the way of transformational change. Witty, fearless, and unflinching, *We Were Feminists Once* is the story of how we let this happen, and how we can amplify feminism's real purpose and power.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Is pop culture a better lens than political action to view the state of feminism? Andi Zeisler's *We Were Feminists Once* posits that feminism has been taken over by Madison Avenue and capitalism, so that's where we must look. She calls it marketplace feminism, the main takeaway of this book. In a blistering summary of songs, commercials, bands, tv shows, films, novelists, fashion and especially actresses, the book is clear evidence of way too much television intake. Capitalism and Madison Avenue have been lurking about feminism right from the beginning. Marketplace feminism long ago overcame the stigma of hardcore feminism and has never looked back. Zeisler points out there are all kinds of so-called feminist products that have little or nothing to do with feminism, but they are feminist because the purveyors say so. Right in the commercials and on the packaging. So it must be true. The basic point is sadly obvious and valid: feminism has been diluted by capitalism. The word empowered is so ubiquitous and overworked "We may have empowered ourselves into a corner." There's a whole chapter on the word, and it's the best chapter in the book. There appear to be no two people who have the same appreciation of feminism. And everyone seems to criticize everyone else's definitions, as well as their lifestyles and life choices. The entire book is anecdotes along these lines, and the message from them seems to be Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here. Everything counts, from t-shirt slogans to song lyrics to tv interviews. And everyone is an expert. And nothing is forgotten - or forgiven. Zeisler's style is delightful. Every time I thought I'd had enough, she swung through with pointed, perceptive sarcasm, self deprecation or a caustic observation that kept me reading. She is knowledgeable, thorough, clever and smooth. The book though, doesn't build. Every chapter is more of the same. And then, after all the enduring criticism of marketplace feminism, Zeisler concludes: "Marketplace feminism has made equality look attractive, sexy and cool." And she hopes for more. So I don't know. David Wineberg

Within a very short span of time, feminism has come to occupy perhaps its most complex role ever in American, if not global, culture. It's a place where most of the problems that have necessitated feminist movements to begin with are still very much in place, but at the same time there's a mainstream, celebrity, consumer embrace of feminism that positions it as a cool, fun, accessible identity that anyone can adopt. I've seen this called "pop feminism," "feel-good feminism," and "white feminism." I call it marketplace feminism. It's decontextualized. It's depoliticized. And it's probably feminism's most popular iteration ever. ### "The vote. The stay-at-home-dad. The push-up bra. The Lean Cuisine pizza." ### "4.5 stars

“When WE WERE FEMINISTS ONCE: FROM RIOT GRRRL TO COVERGIRL®, THE BUYING AND SELLING OF A POLITICAL MOVEMENT first crossed my radar, I was intrigued but also worried; the book’s description sounded like it could easily devolve into a chiding of Millennials by their older, second-wave sisters for not doing feminism right. (Think: Gloria Steinem’s recent statement that young women’s support of Bernie Sanders is merely a ploy to meet boys and get laid.) Then I saw that Andi Zeisler is the author, which mostly put my worries to bed: I’m a longtime subscriber of B\*\*\*\* Magazine, which Zeisler co-founded, and it’s pretty trenchant, on-point, and welcoming of diverse voices. As is WE WERE FEMINISTS ONCE which, as it turns out, is a smart and funny look at the the commodification of feminism, both in recent times and historically. Bolstered by capitalism and neoliberalist policies, “marketplace feminism” is the repackaging of feminism as something that’s solely personal vs. political. This “feminism” is decontextualized and depoliticized, made soft and nonthreatening for mass consumption. It is a feminism “in service of capitalism.” With an emphasis on personal choice as opposed to equality and liberation for all, this feminism asserts that all choices are equally valid; a choice is feminist as long as a self-proclaimed feminist (or any woman) is the one making it, as though the choice to wax one’s body or take your husband’s surname or even to marry at all is made in a vacuum. (Enter one of my favorite references: Charlotte York’s desperate declaration, “I choose my choice!” upon quitting her beloved gallery job after marriage.) Values and ideology become so much products to pick and choose from, as if they were different brands of conditioner. Worst still, feminism itself is presented as a product in need of branding. So we have feminism (and less threatening code words, such as liberation, empowerment, girl power, and choice) used to sell everything from cigarettes to yogurt, celebrities to thousand-dollar networking conferences. Companies like Estée Lauder and Revlon support cancer research through their charitable arms “while also pushing products that contain known carcinogens. Dove implores women to embrace their bodies through its Real Beauty campaign “and yet creates new problem areas to which they have conveniently devised a solution. (Soft armpits, really?) Perhaps the most egregious example comes from Walmart, which launched the Women’s Economic Empowerment Initiative in 2012 “not long after the Supreme Court killed what would have been the largest-ever class-action sex discrimination lawsuit against the company. (If you want to “empower” women, Walmart, why not start with equal pay in your own company?) Zeisler roughly structures the book around various forms of media: advertising, movies, television, celebrities, the news media, music, and the beauty industrial

complex, with a fair degree of overlap. As a book nerd, I kind of wished she'd looked at feminism in fiction especially given the proliferation of strong female characters in YA science fiction/fantasy but I get why she didn't: these same concerns are mirrored in other forms of media. While the scope of the topic is pretty large, she does a good job of distilling it down to its most essential parts, and providing timely and relevant examples. (If you're paying just a little attention, no doubt you're already familiar with many of the campaigns, products, and kerfuffles referenced in these here pages.) Despite the depressing nature of the subject, Zeisler's writing is witty, funny, and engaging. More than once I found myself snorting aloud. It's also worth noting that, just as feminism is not only about the individual, Zeisler avoids laying the blame on individuals who make unfeminist choices (or celebs for their ill-informed riffs on feminism; or hating the player and ignoring the game, as it were). Getting a nose job, binge watching THE BACHELOR, or pursuing a modeling career doesn't make you a bad feminist; however, dismissing the context in which these choices are made and validated (or not) does mean you may be an uncritical thinker, at the very least. To this end, I do wish she'd offered some possible solutions. To be fair, the problem is so vast, it's hard to know where to start. Social media has proven a powerful platform for pushing back against sexism as we see in some of Zeisler's examples yet it often feels like a drop in the bucket. For instance, Zeisler cites the hashtag campaign #abbiemillsdeservesbetter as a reason why Fox (supposedly) rethought its sidelining of Abbie Mills after the first season of SLEEPY HOLLOW. Since she turned in the final draft of this book, however, Mills was killed off in the season three finale to further the white, male MC's storyline, no less. Granted, it was Nicole Beharie's choice to leave the show but only after being sidelined, mistreated, and marginalized by the writers and production team. She chose her choice, sure, but why and at what cost?

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\*\* Full disclosure: I received a free electronic ARC for review through NetGalley. \*\*

Finally! - someone is willing to let the proverbial cat out of the bag by intelligently scrutinizing the consequences and general ickiness of marketplace feminism. In some ways I feel almost creeped

out by how accurately Zeisler is able to summarize my own misgivings about the general direction of an "empowerment" feminism that cares more about capitalism, consumerism and neoliberal policies than it does about actually improving the lives of women - but until now, there hasn't been an accessible language to express my own concerns or other feminist leaders willing to say "hey, this is bulls\*\*\* - let's talk about it, honestly." Not only is Zeisler sharp in her criticism (and hilarious at times), she isn't inclined to just sit back and point fingers. Instead, she offers valuable and thought-provoking propositions for how we might finally move beyond the trap of "feel-good feminism" collectively. The fact that we find ourselves in a time where young women like myself are asked to justify our decision to vote for Bernie Sanders over Hillary Clinton (because real feminists don't vote for men, ever, apparently) most frequently TO other women who also label themselves feminists (and often, said "feminists" whose only engagement with feminism is watching Amy Schumer or buying a new Taylor Swift album) confirms to me that a paradigm shift is necessary; or, if not a paradigm shift, a way of detaching marketplace feminism from rampant consumerism. Amen, Andi Zeisler,...amen!

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