

What the 'Fearless Girl' statue and Harvey Weinstein have in common

By [Sarah Banet-Weiser](#)

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In March of this year, State Street Global Advisors unveiled the "Fearless Girl," a statue of a little girl installed to face Wall Street's famous "Charging Bull" statue. Her defiance was aimed at financial culture's historical exclusion of women in the financial industry, especially in leadership positions.



Harvey Weinstein and 'Fearless Girl' statue © SamAronov and tom934 - [123RF.com](#)

In early October, its parent company, State Street Corporation, quietly settled allegations that it had been paying female employees less than their male counterparts, agreeing to award \$5m in back pay.

Then, a week later, a series of explosive articles revealed that Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein may have engaged in a decades-long pattern of abusing and harassing women. Weinstein, the reports noted, had been a prominent donor to causes that address gender inequality, especially in the entertainment industry.

In both cases, a public-facing feminism ended up essentially serving as a front, a superficial sheen that distracted from systemic sexism. What does feminism mean if it functions as an alibi for structural discrimination? And how powerful are the forces that oppose it?

Popular feminism and popular misogyny

Together, these two stories tell an even bigger tale of a national dynamic that I call "popular feminism" and "popular misogyny."

Popular feminism refers to a sort of mainstream, corporate-friendly feminism. It announces itself on self-help blogs that implore women to “be confident in the workplace” and on aspirational Tumblr pages that remind women that they are beautiful despite societal norms that tell them that they’re not. In this way, popular feminism is “safe” – it implicitly encourages more women to work within a system that is already designed to devalue (and underpay) the labour of women.

Like popular feminism, popular misogyny is expressed and practiced on multiple media platforms. Yet its primary goal is to dehumanise and devalue women.

Every time feminism gains broad traction – that is, every time it spills beyond niche feminist enclaves – the forces of the status quo lash back. Skirmishes ensue between those determined to change the normal state of things and those determined to maintain it, who frame the challenges to the status quo as a set of risks that must be contained.

This happened with suffrage and abolition. More recently, it happened to the women who sought to assert themselves within the male-dominated world of video games (the “Gamergate” controversy).

We also see this dynamic in the stories of the “Fearless Girl” and Harvey Weinstein.

A sanitised version of feminism

The “Fearless Girl” statue was installed in the middle of the night in lower Manhattan on 7 March 2017, on the eve of International Women’s Day.

It faced the well-known “Charging Bull” statue, which, since 1987, has been a global symbol of Wall Street. The bull was intended to be a sign of American “virility and courage” – an “antidote,” in the artist’s words, for the stock market crash of 1986. The bull’s allusions to manliness and a strong sex drive continue to be acknowledged in the popular tourist practice of taking a picture next to (or touching) the bull’s huge testicles.

On the surface, the appearance of a statue that appears to directly challenge the bull is a striking symbol of empowerment.

But let’s not forget that “Fearless Girl” was intended as an advertisement. State Street’s new index fund sought to signal itself as a collection of “gender-diverse” companies, meaning that they have a higher percentage of women among their senior leadership than most global investment companies. (Its Nasdaq ticker symbol is “SHE.”)

To be clear: I believe it is important to praise those companies that hire women in leadership. It is equally important to have women directors behind the camera in the entertainment industries.

At the same time, the recognition of gender inequality in leadership positions is a familiar trope of popular feminism. The remedy is thought to be simple: Have more women “sit at the table.” This is Weinstein’s brand of “feminism” as well: to talk about the importance of hiring more female directors or giving more opportunities to female actors.

But where are the results? Why is it that, despite widespread acknowledgment of gender and racial exclusion in the technology industries, women and people of colour remain in the vast minority? Why is it that, despite Harvey Weinstein’s vocal support for feminist causes, just 4 percent of directors of the 100 top-grossing films between 2007 and 2016 were female?

Harvey Weinstein’s public support of gender issues in Hollywood and of female politicians easily gained traction and praise. But in reality, it could have worked to distract people from his behaviour and a culture of sexual assault and gender

discrimination that undergirds Hollywood.

Popular misogyny takes aim

What does the “Fearless Girl” distract us from?

The plaque below the statue originally read, “Know the power of women in leadership. SHE makes a difference.” (The plaque has since been removed and replaced.)

The presumption here is that putting more women in leadership positions is a catch-all solution to gender inequality. But what if it’s simply a statement about women becoming better workers?

The artist, Kristen Visbal, admitted that the artwork isn’t meant to alienate, but to accommodate.

“I made sure to keep her features soft,” she explained. “She’s not defiant, she’s brave, proud and strong, not belligerent.” (This is one way that popular feminism transfigures other feminist movements, which, historically, have been mobilised by defiance and belligerence, while directly confronting patriarchy.)

Yet the accommodating tone didn’t matter to the forces of misogyny.

Even the suggestion that women should participate more visibly within capitalism – an economic system that depends, after all, on a gendered division of labour – incurred a misogynistic backlash.

The creator of the “Charging Bull”, Arturo Di Modica, has asked for the “Fearless Girl” to be removed, claiming that she was “attacking the bull” and that he objected to her “political messaging” (as if symbolising capitalist America’s resilience was somehow not political).

Other reactions were more pronounced than Di Modica’s. Alongside hundreds of photos and selfies of girls and women with “Fearless Girl”, pictures also circulated in social media featuring men simulating sex with the statue. In May 2017 another artist, Alex Gardega, installed a statue of his own: “Pissing Pug,” a small dog urinating on “Fearless Girl.”

Even a “soft” corporate feminism poses a threat to masculinity – so much so that it becomes a target of degradation and sexual violence.

Apparently, the “Fearless Girl” injures masculinity simply by existing in the first place.

The perils of popular feminism

The pervasiveness of popular misogyny can appear in subtler ways, whether it’s political campaigns centred on taking away reproductive rights for women, or denying women and girls opportunities in the workplace.

Others join “Pissing Pug” in the not-so-subtle category, like Weinstein’s alleged tactics of forcing women to perform sexual acts in order to earn his approval.

The years-long silence of Weinstein’s many female accusers – or of the many men and women who were aware of what was happening – is all, in my view, about the power of popular misogyny. Women are rarely believed when they report sexual assault, while public shaming can ensure that future opportunities to do so can dry up.

In the aftermath, misogynistic backlash has already emerged. Those who came forward are being questioned about what they were wearing and why they let themselves be alone with him – how they “invited” the assault.

Harvey Weinstein is only the latest in a list of powerful men who have been exposed this year alone: Bill Cosby, Roger

Ailes, Bill O'Reilly and, of course, Donald Trump.

But while popular misogyny can silence in very visible ways, popular feminism can also work to silence dissent. Through building statues, appointing a woman to the board of a company and paying celebrity feminist spokespeople, this soft, corporate version of feminism signals that by being accommodating and safe, the problem will go away.

Popular feminism might dispense a vision of progress. But don't let it distract from the structural gendered violence that persists, unabated, in so many aspects of American society.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Banet-Weiser is vice president and director of the School of Communication at USC Annenberg. She is also a professor in the School of Communication at USC Annenberg, and in the department of American Studies and Ethnicity.

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