



# Let's shut down antifeminism!

THE VERBAL SELF-DEFENCE  
GUIDE FOR FEMINISTS



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# Introduction

As feminists, we regularly encounter situations where we would really like to react by affirming our values, especially considering the prevailing reactionary climate. This guide wants to help you with that.

We are, once again, in a period of increased resistance against feminist ideas. If we do not find satisfying solutions to the situations described in this guide, we risk to be silenced. Those situations also affect people who do not (yet) define themselves as feminists, because they hinder the participation of more people in the women's rights movement.

This guide will not give you ready-for-use answers, like "if the other person says A, then you say XY." It is more about sharing certain **basic tools to encourage you to find your own answers**, according to your taste and preferences. For that, we share our tips & tricks to know when to act, how to keep cool, how to protect yourself, on what basis to take strategic decisions and, above all, what to say once you have made your choice.

This guide is not a complete list of all the situations that a feminist can encounter, nor an exhaustive repertoire of all the possible answers. It is a starting point and we hope that you will make use of it, and build answers that are fitting for you.

Good luck and, most importantly, enjoy!

# Identifying antifeminism

Feminism constitutes, among other things, a movement for more social justice and equality. Feminists analyse gender inequality, denounce the existing binary (hetero-)sexism and vindicate their rights to rectify unacceptable injustices and build a more inclusive and egalitarian society. Of course, this does not please everyone, and especially not the persons who benefit from the current injustices because of their privileged social position. Let's call such people the "Antifeminist Persons" (APs). Like any social movement, feminism has to face a reactionary movement that wants to preserve the status quo, by any means.

Resistance to social change is a common reaction. The American trade unionist Nicolas Klein already said in 1918: "First they ignore you. Then they belittle you. And then, they attack you and want to burn you. But later on, they build monuments for you." Not only does Klein talk about the continuity of the repression of social change, but he also sees it as a sign that "things are working out." **The stronger the reaction, the more we are defying unfair social structures.**

But this isn't exactly comforting when you're faced with antifeminist situations that not only jeopardize feminism's credibility, but also put feminists at risk. Since the 1990s, analysis of antifeminism – and its organised form, masculinism – have multiplied. We have identified four large problematic areas that interact with and reinforce each other:

**Ordinary sexism and misogyny:** Despising and devaluing women, treating them differently than men, confining them within stereotypes, all these behaviours make it harder for feminists, mostly women, to be heard and respected. The referral to traditional/essentialist gender roles (the so-called maternal instinct, or 'natural' female peacefulness, etc.) and the individualisation of problems render invisible the unequal social structures. The intention might not be to harm feminism, but that is definitely the outcome.



**Antifeminist silencing and exclusion:** Feminism has contributed to numerous social changes that are nowadays perceived as positive, or even essential and necessary. Those contributions are too often hidden. This gives the impression that feminism is no longer needed. There are also other ways to silence feminism, for instance, ridicule, plagiarism or some women's lack of feminist solidarity ("If I, as a woman, am successful, it is only because I put the necessary effort into it/ I took the right decisions, no thanks to feminists who paved the way for me").

**Antifeminist representations:** These distortions and misinformation can directly attack three elements: the feminist cause, the problems that need to be solved, or the feminists themselves. Regarding the feminist cause, we can often hear the accusation that feminists would like to reverse male domination and seize power, or that feminism makes sense somewhere else, at other times, but not here and now. There is a lot of ignorance about the diversity of feminism, and APs try to recuperate feminism for racist and classist goals. Then there are the APs who tell us that we are not working on the real

issues, that we are fighting the wrong battle, etc. The denial of inequalities and the mirroring of oppressions ("yes, but men also [Insert the problem of your choice that particularly concerns women]") is also a problem. Finally, feminists themselves have always been and still often are caricatured as aggressive, ugly, frustrated, lesbian, extreme, etc. in order to divide us into "good" and "bad" women and prevent solidarity. Such attacks can be more general or individualised.

**Antifeminist violence:** From insults to rape and massacres, we have seen it all. This type of antifeminism is the most visible and thus the easiest to spot. This is why feminist self-defense was developed in the first place, in its early stages more than 100 years ago and again at the end of the 1960s, as a tool to protect activists from political violence and police brutality.

There you are, we have a better view of the problem, so let's find some (beginnings of) solutions!



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The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself.  
*Virginia Woolf, 1929*

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I have worked in a field where I have always been the only woman and the word "feminism" was not heard at all. Every time I tried, it cost me quite a lot. However, there are some ways to let them know that you do not accept certain situations. It is not because I am a woman that I am going to be making coffee for everyone. "You've got legs, too, coffee's over there." Or to avoid that you are the one to always take notes for the meeting, and so on. You have to be watchful and organise everything for it not to happen that way. But this still does come at a price because I have to put in a lot of energy not to be seen as a woman, to avoid those risks. This also means I cannot be myself. Otherwise I am the hysterical woman who makes problems and I risk being rejected from the group.

Karima

## Self-care

Like any minority and oppressed group, women as a social group find themselves confronting numerous situations of micro-aggression, discrimination and injustice on a daily basis while their resistance is delegitimised. Those accumulated experiences create a constant mental and emotional charge, also called "minority stress." If, as a member of an oppressed group, we also try to resist openly, even collectively, the stress is compounded.

Being a feminist is therefore not an easy task and takes an emotional and physical toll. We belong to a minority that affirms the problem of inequality and sexist oppression and gives it significance. We are in constant divergence with the dominant society and with many people around us. The task of explaining again and again that, "Yes, there is injustice" falls entirely on us. To be able to face such truths and to express them can profoundly shake us up, even more so as we receive, in general, little support. On the contrary, antifeminism touches our identities, our emotions, our physical well-being. It is thus not very surprising that many feminist activists end up remaining silent, giving up, or getting sick.

That is why taking care of oneself is not a luxury, but a necessity for a lasting commitment. It is also a form of resistance in itself. Doing well in a context where the cards are stacked against us means going against oppressive norms and values. Moreover, good self-care increases our resilience, creates space for more creativity and helps us to face antifeminism.



We are often shocked by what we hear, whereas if we take up the habit of telling ourselves "so here, this person is using symmetrisation, that person is making you invisible", we manage to distance ourselves from it and to keep calm. This helps us to better understand the attack because, actually, the person is not looking for dialogue, but to put you in a difficult situation or to generate certain emotions.

Eva

The frame of this guide is too limited to address activist self-care in its entirety. However, here are some approaches to better live and act as a feminist:

**Be sympathetic to yourself:** It is already enough stress to be permanently judged, criticized, and belittled by a whole society, so do not add to it! Instead of being your worst critic, be your best friend: empathetic and attentive, authentic and loving, always having your own back. Our errors should teach us something, instead of being a source of shame and guilt. No one will be better off if you feel guilty or if you sacrifice yourself on the Feminist Altar.

**Take care of your body:** Rest and sleep, hydration, a healthy and balanced diet, physical activity that you enjoy are elementary needs for all humans. These are all elementary needs for humans. The best is to listen to our bodies to understand what they need and when. This will also give us precious information about our boundaries, when those are not respected and when to react.

**Get in touch:** We all need one another to build ourselves, also as feminists. That is why it is important to surround yourself with people – inside the movement and outside – who give you the necessary space and support to evolve into the person that you want to be. Trust, empathy, and the disposition to let yourself be changed by others should be mutual. Likewise, our groups and movements should get in touch to create alliances and get over the disunity that weakens us.

**Build safe spaces:** As a member of an oppressed group, we are at all times at risk of being judged, snubbed, and goaded. We need spaces to breathe and simply be, where we don't have to always be on our guard, or answer to outside requests. Safe spaces can exist in physical places, private or semi-private (a library, a conference, a blog), or in relationships. To have a safe space, we need to consent that we want the space to be safe, to safety rules and to everyone's effort to respect them as well as we can.

There are certain days where I really do not want to argue, where I say I am on holiday from feminism and that I will not defend my opinions that day. We don't always have to be feminist 24/7. So sometimes I tell myself, "I am tired and I do not have the courage today, feminist holidays, that's it." It is clearly due to the fact that I am working in that field and that when I am not at work, sometimes, I do not feel like continuing the fight.

Constance

### Counter helplessness with empowerment:

To acknowledge and express your feelings in the face of antifeminism allows you to get a grip on the situation. At the same time, this also helps to manage your emotions and can also slow down the AP. Learning how to defend yourself, verbally and physically can also increase your self-confidence. Feminist self-defence groups are spaces where you can reclaim situations where you have previously felt powerless. Helped by the exchange within the group, you can develop new ways to act and react.

testimonies



My dad made some hurtful comments when he discovered I was a feminist. I had to explain to him that for me, feminism is not just a hobby, a trend I am following, but something that is really important for me. In that case, when we take the time to explain things to the people close to us and tell them how we feel, well, it makes them think. My dad realised that he went too far, and it completely reversed the whole situation. So, sharing your feelings, even if it makes yourself a bit vulnerable, is, I think, also a good method.

Johanna

A friend told me, "feminism is my long-distance race. This doesn't mean that I have to run the 100m hurdles all the time." It is like a board game, we know that at the end, there will be feminism, but sometimes you have to skip a couple of rounds. I believe that we also need to be able to forgive ourselves to have to skip certain things, because we are all fallible, because we are fond of some people, because we are in love, because we have children, because... and that there are some moments where, indeed, we end up in "jail" and we have to skip two rounds before being able to continue.

Valérie

## Choose a strategy

For many people engaged in movements for social change, including feminists, it may be complicated to differentiate between collective fight and individual commitment. Just because we are feminists doesn't mean that we have to be on duty 24/7. We can decide at any moment and choose how we want to present the feminist side of our identity.

Many factors influence that choice, from our personal safety to our physical, mental and emotional well-being and the political or affective stakes, among others. You are the only person who knows which factors are important to you at that specific moment in time. To not unnecessarily exhaust yourself, it can help to ask yourself the question of whether it is worth investing your energy in responding to the AP. For example, what we can refuse in a private or professional individual setting (a discussion with Uncle Jack on Christmas Eve) can be more difficult to avoid in a militant setting (a discussion with an AP during a public debate). Even so, you'll have to weigh the pros and cons of giving the adversary a stage for voicing their opinions by entering into dialogue with them.

Therefore, we may choose for safety, self-care or other reasons, not to tackle antifeminism at that specific moment. This strategy is called **flight** (see next page) and it is as valid and as valuable as any other – as long as this remains a choice and not a standard solution due to a lack of alternatives. **Because for feminism to continue and grow, feminists have to survive and save their energy and other resources.**

If we reply to antifeminism, it is often to try to change the other person's mind. For that, a useful strategy is **argumentation** (see next page). But not everyone is necessarily easy to convince. Indeed, antifeminism is organised on a continuum. For example, we can be faced with a friend or an ally of feminism, with a person uttering standard antifeminist prejudices, or with a hard-line masculinist. Of course, it is more difficult to convince a person situated at the very opposite end of the continuum than a person closer to our own position.

Argumentation is a form of dialogue. The basic principle of a dialogue is that all the implicated parties can express themselves and are heard. Any dialogue becomes impossible if one of the parties does not respect these minimal conditions. Your AP has many possibilities to undermine the dialogue: through violence, by using existing power inequalities (e.g. a paternalistic attitude), through manipulative techniques or through the refusal to listen or indifference. This makes argumentation impossible.

Luckily, we are not at the end of our list of strategies. You will also find within this guide **semantic self-defence techniques** (see p. 20). In this type of self-defence, it is the meaning of the words that we attack. It is a particularly

useful strategy when the AP uses words loaded with negative meaning or clearly does not know about what they are talking about. When there are third parties involved in the exchange, this defence can also have an instructive impact.

Yet another strategy is **confrontation** (see p. 22), which means setting boundaries. The different tools for confrontation in this guide enable you to cut short any antifeminist situations, to denounce fallacious arguments, in other words: to stop the AP. It is an extremely useful strategy (and not only against antifeminism), because it relieves our anger, establishes explicit rules and boundaries between what we can accept and what not. It is even possible to add a pedagogical touch.

Other strategies exist of course, but are often less successful. For instance, **reciprocity** (also known under the name “an eye for an eye”) is only rarely effective, because we are interacting in a context of power inequality. Therefore, to reproduce a reverse antifeminist attack will not have the same sense, nor the same weight – except if this mirror attack is even worse than the original. Claudine's testimony (see p. 12) perfectly illustrates the case in point.

The choices are almost endless when it comes to reacting to antifeminism. So on your marks, get set, go!

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### Be careful with MANIPULATIVE METHODS, for example, when the AP:

- uses arguments ad temperantiam: *“Don't complain, other women are even more oppressed than you are”*;
  - throws a *red herring*, that is a provocative bait that misdirects the debate towards insignificant or extreme issues. A classic example is the *“yes, but men also...”* that distracts the dialogue from a problem that specifically impacts women;
  - attributes a particularly unpleasant statement to you – that you never made – because that is way easier to do than to debate on the actual topic;
  - resorts to abusive simplifications;
  - attacks you personally, for instance criticising you for getting angry, being aggressive, having that opinion only because you had bad experiences, etc.
- 
- 



I am under the impression that women who, from the outset, appear opposed to us are more open and more prone to listening and to understanding when talking face to face with them. Men are much more often on the defensive. So, in a group, these women are not necessarily our allies because they stand on the dominant position's side, but face to face, there are ways to talk with them.

Natalia

When I was newly elected to the municipal council of my community, the mayor called me out in a mocking fashion by my married name. He knows that my partner is a famous activist and that I am a feminist, because I have campaigned, amongst others, for women's rights and for a better gender balance in politics. A feared conservative, paternalist and big mouth, he wanted to show that I was there thanks to my husband and that I would merely follow him. I sharply answered him by calling him by his wife's name. And... he did not dare to ridicule me again for the rest of my mandate.

Claudine



## Flight

We all have the right not to feel like replying to an AP... or not daring to. Each one of us has to choose our fights depending on the context, our priorities and our energy levels.

To avoid that a strategic retreat has a negative impact on your self-confidence, you first have to accept that no one is all-powerful, including feminists. We are not superheroines who can handle any situation without even blinking and who will defend the cause until the last drop of blood. There is no shame in choosing flight at certain times, and the more understanding we are towards ourselves, the more the flight will be beneficial.

As for all of the other strategies, there are ready-to-use tools existing to facilitate your flight. You can, of course, avoid contact with a person you know has antifeminist inclinations or who loves to provoke you by attacking you as a feminist.

Why would you expose yourself again and again to such situations when you have so many better things to do with your life? You can find out if awful Uncle Jack will be at the family gathering and not attend or insist on not being seated next to him.

If contact is inevitable, or if you choose not to leave the stage to the AP without necessarily looking for confrontation, you can avoid unpleasant debates by **changing topics**. That can be done discreetly. If, during the starter, Uncle Jack winds you up by mentioning your ongoing singlehood and childlessness, interrupt him by asking him a question close to the topic, but that will still bring the debate somewhere else. For example: "Oh, this makes me think of Cécile. How is she doing after the birth of baby Benoit? How are you feeling being a grandpa?" If the AP is really annoying you, you can also change topics in a more sudden manner: "I see that we need a new topic of conversation. Who can propose one?" or "Now that I think of it – have you heard that the cost of gas is going to increase again?" Such a prompt change of topics clearly shows your disagreement. If someone calls you out on it, you can yet again answer with a change of topics: "Yes, I'll change the topic. I read a book on inner peace, and it is fascinating, how much you can do to feel better in your skin ..."

Some feminists are concerned that their flight could be interpreted as a sign of weakness. So **leave while being strong!** You can express your disagreement with the antifeminist statement without plunging into the debate. Non-verbal signals are useful when you are out of words – or when you do not want to spend too much energy. Sigh deeply, roll your eyes, or look at the AP intensely and seriously, shake your head. For a verbal flight it is often enough to just describe what you are doing at that moment: "I am going to leave now", "I am not going to answer the question", "I am going to change topics now." This shows that you are not ashamed, that you have nothing to hide or to fear and that you just do not want to be exposed to antifeminism. And it is your right.



We often ask ourselves, "do I decide to debate, or do I decide not to debate." The other day with a couple of acquaintances, I told myself that I did not want to, that it was unbalanced. They were two against me, and that therefore it was not worth it. I was forcing myself not to intervene. It was really hard because they were trying to provoke me. However, I felt much better afterwards, and it makes you realise that sometimes it is better to keep discussions for when you are in a positive mind set. Because later on, I had a discussion with one of the people, and it went really well. What was great is that, because I had decided not to react, I didn't become a victim and didn't feel distressed.

Lison



There is a trick that really helped me during the holiday season. Just say, "if you are that interested, there are 150 years of feminist writing, so I invite you to read some." Because I was really suffering when I had to discuss and debate with everyone about any feminist issue. I do not know all the statistics and I felt rapidly trapped because I am not a library.

Karima

## Argumentation

You have decided that it is worth it to enter into debate with the AP right here and now. Very well, but let's first be clear on the objectives of this exchange of arguments. Two possibilities exist. Either you are directly addressing your discussion partner, in which case your objective is to make the AP change their opinion. Or you are indirectly talking to a third party, for example other guests at the table or the audience of a public debate; then you are trying to convince the public of your position, or at least to make them immune to the antifeminist positions of your adversary.

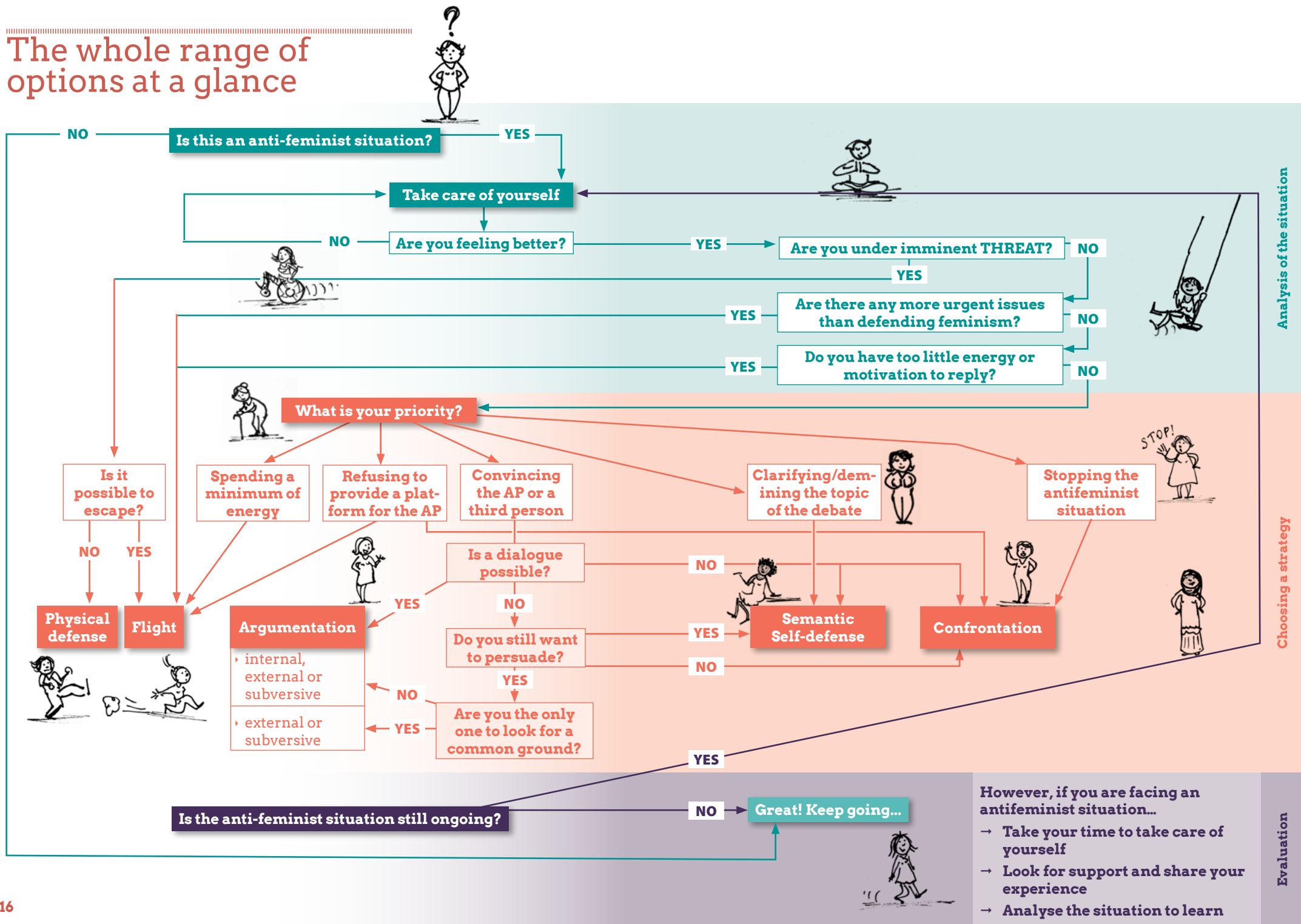


You probably know these unending debates where you start full of enthusiasm with your best arguments, data, quotations, statistics, etc. to defend your cause, but the longer it lasts, the more you feel frustrated, angry and finally exhausted without having gained any ground at all. There are several reasons for such situations. Often, the conditions for a dialogue were not fulfilled. In this case, another strategy would have worked better. But in other cases, it is because we mix up different forms of argumentations.

To argue better, we have to understand the difference between three forms of argumentation. In the **internal argumentation**, we accept the ideological principles of the other to deconstruct them from the inside. Or we start from the (optimistic) idea that we share some principles, for example the fundamental right to non-discrimination, and that the AP is just drawing the wrong conclusions. It is a strategy that allows you to unveil the double binds so common with sexism: "You say that it was my fault that I was being harassed in the street because I dress in a feminine manner. But the other day, you said that to go further in my professional career, I had to be well-dressed and take care of myself. Why should I have to choose between either being left in peace in the street or being successful at work?" or else "The gendered division of labour cannot be a result of natural selection because there is no selective advantage to women being solely responsible for children and the household, quite the contrary."

In the **external argumentation**, we categorically refuse the AP's ideological fundamentals. With this strategy, do not hope to convince the AP if they are situated at the other end of the ideological continuum. We are fighting on equal footing, principle against principle. For an AP not too far from your position or to convince your public audience, this could very well work. "I cannot condone the idea that my biology predetermines that I earn less money for the same work as my male colleagues." Or: "Even if the gendered division of work is a result of evolution, we are not obliged to settle for it. Evolution made us loose our hair but we are not walking around naked."

# The whole range of options at a glance



The **subversive argumentation** does not try to prove or to refute a thesis using logic. It is actually a humble attitude where we are merely informing ourselves on what the antifeminist ideology is made of. We propose other ways of seeing things, we invite the other person to critically reflect. It is by taking antifeminism at its word that it is possible to denounce its dangers. For that, it is not even necessary to position yourself visibly as a feminist. The goal here is not to defeat antifeminism in a heroic fight, but to render it uninteresting, outdated and boring, to let it self-destruct. It is not enough for antifeminism to show a tolerant face, because at the smallest power change, the antifeminist weaponry can rapidly be taken out of the closet. It is important to keep exposing the dangers and injustices of sexism, even of “benevolent sexism,” until it becomes completely outdated.

## Many subversive methods are at our disposal:

▮ **The argument of the slippery slope** demonstrates where we would end if we followed the antifeminist reasoning. *“Oh, women are naturally less good in science. Well, then that means that men would be in a much better position to cook, program a washing-machine or work as a nurse.”*

▮ **The substitution argument** replaces a type of oppression with another to make the AP’s fallacious argumentation visible. *“You say that you feel personally targeted as oppressor because we have decided that the feminist meeting will be women only. However, I never heard you complain when LGBT+ people or undocumented workers gather without you.”*

▮ **Memory work** wants to remind younger generations of the atrocities of yesteryear for them to understand why it is so important to resist today’s antifeminism. *“In 1975, Belgium adopted a law on equality within marriage. My mother had already been married for 5 years where she had to obey her husband and couldn’t even open a bank account without his approval.” Or “If abortion is penalised again, we will go back to the sixties where desperate women who did not have enough money to pay for a safe clandestine abortion had to risk their health and lives to be able to get an abortion.”*

▮ **The critical distance**, also known as “the alien spectator” asks the antifeminist discourse to justify itself and to explain the inexplicable. *“How would you explain to a visiting alien why the choice of studies or profession should depend on a person’s genitalia?”*

## TRAPS TO AVOID:

▮ **Being the only one looking for common ground for the argumentation to be possible.**

**Solution:** switch to external argumentation or subversive argumentation.

▮ **Continuing to debate when minimal conditions are not fulfilled anymore.**

**Solution:** switch to confrontation (see p. 22).

▮ **Defending yourself against accusations or criticisms. The more you defend yourself, the more people will get suspicious.**

**Solution:** explicitly refuse to answer an attack and set boundaries (see p. 22).

▮ **Insisting on using arguments against beliefs. What is believed without arguments cannot be changed with arguments.**

**Solution:** explain that these are beliefs (ex. shield sentence, p. 23), or use subversive argumentation.

Something that really drives me crazy regularly is when people argue with personal examples to analyse a broad social reality. It is particularly annoying when it is a woman who takes her own life as a proof that feminism is not necessary anymore, that women already have all their chances. My standard answer is, “congratulations, but you cannot mistake anecdotal examples with societal tendencies. Where are all the women that are as successful as you?”

Stéphanie



I would say that people are not very close to becoming feminists, and it is not us in particular who will change that in everyone. Often, I tell myself, “I need to convince that person”, but often it takes time. Everything that we say, we should say it for ourselves in the first place. If we argue, it is because we feel like it. We have to put ourselves first in the discussion.

Natalia

## Semantic defence

An antifeminist situation can be about the words that misrepresent feminism or provoke you as a feminist. The semantic defence is a strategy situated between argumentation (because there is a certain exchange of information) and confrontation (because the goal is to stop the situation). As its name indicates, it is about creating confusion about – or clarifying! – the sense of words.

A first semantic defence technique is the **redefinition of the term** in question. Let's start with a simple example. Someone, whose position on feminism is unclear to you, asks you if you are a feminist. You thus have no idea how your position is going to be welcomed. If it is for an interview, a categorical answer could be warped. Then, why not clarify what exactly we are talking about? For instance, like this: *"If by feminist, you mean someone who wants everyone to have the same rights, the same possibilities, then yes, I am a feminist."*

Close to this technique is **confirmation**. It might seem counter-intuitive to agree with an AP, but it is a little bit like using martial arts. The idea is to use the momentum of the attacker against themselves. If the AP tells you that you have no humour because you refuse to laugh at their sexist jokes, a confirmation will deviate that person in an unexpected direction: *"yes, indeed, my humour is not sexist/I do not have this kind of humour."* The principle is simple: you take the problematic section of the antifeminist comment and you change it until you completely agree with the sentence. In that way, you concede a point to the AP and they cannot attack you any further without losing the point they just won.

Another useful tool for semantic self-defence is the **antidote question**. It is particularly useful for situations where an AP throws toxic words at you (biased meanings, labels, criticism). The antidote question simply pretends not to understand and asks for a definition. Since toxic words can only have an impact when they remain blurry (and often actually make no sense at all), bringing their meaning to light can either reveal the bad intentions of the AP, slow them down or make it difficult for them to explain what they meant.

Let's go back to the question of whether you consider yourself a feminist: you could also reply with an antidote question (this does not mean that for you, feminism is a poisonous word, but it could be for the AP): *"What do you mean by feminism?"*



Either your conversational partner will give you an acceptable definition of feminism and then you can reply, *"Yes, I am."* Or they will provide the usual stereotypes and you can then decide what your next strategy is. This time it will be based on more complete information. An even more sophisticated version (because it allows you to demonstrate the diversity of feminism and the ignorance of your conversational partner at the same time) is this one: *"To which feminism are you referring to? Liberal, radical, materialist, intersectional, essentialist...?"*

Of course, you cannot respond to the original question before you get that issue straightened out...

The antidote question is particularly beneficial in cases of criticism. If your AP is complaining that feminism went too far, ask them from what point on it was too far. If they find that since you started defining yourself as a feminist you have become too extreme, ask them up to which point you are allowed to be feminist without becoming extreme. Be prepared to dismantle antifeminist criticism by equipping yourself with the appropriate antidote questions!

### SOME EXAMPLES OF CONFIRMATION:

■ The AP: *"As soon as we speak about feminism, you become aggressive."*

You: *Yes, I am. Sexist injustice everywhere is a good reason to be mad, especially for the people who suffer from it the most. I am quite proud of my self-control."*

■ The AP: *"Feminism is discrimination against men."*

You: *"Yes, we feminists are conscious that it is a term that allows that confusion, but while waiting for a better one, we are obliged to use it. Do you have another proposition?"*

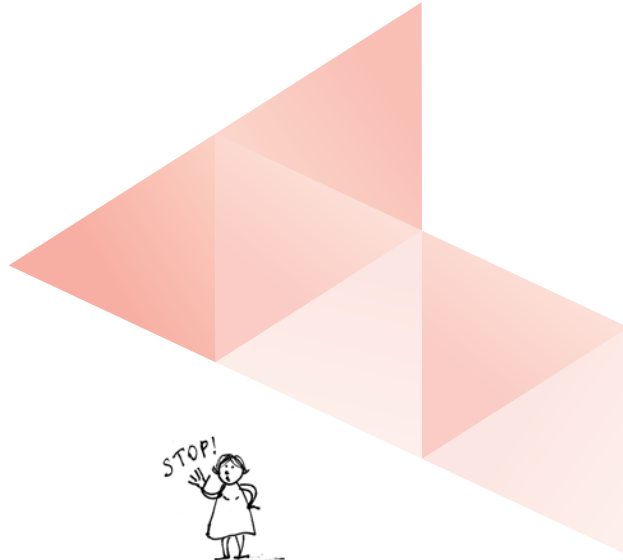
■ The AP: *"I am sick of hearing about violence against women all the time while no one is talking about violence against men."*

You: *"I am happy that the fight against violence against men is so important to you. How do you transform that concern into action?"*

# Confrontation

Readers who know Garance know that we have a certain preference for confrontation. It is a strategy that seeks to impose a clear boundary between what we like and what we don't, what we can accept and what we can't. These boundaries are of course different from one feminist to another, but how do we set them? We have several tools under our belt for exactly that purpose.

It might be the case that you are familiar with the **three sentences technique** below. Nevertheless, here are some explanations to (better) use it against antifeminism. You can practice formulating the three sentences by using other situations mentioned in this guide, or situations that you have experienced yourself. You'll see, they provide an answer to almost everything!



1 <sup>st</sup> sentence describes the AP's behaviour that is bothering you	2 <sup>nd</sup> sentence describes your feeling towards the AP's behaviour	3 <sup>rd</sup> sentence describes an alternative to the AP's behaviour, what you want to happen now
You are not listening to any of my arguments.	I do not feel listened to.	If you don't listen, I'd prefer to stop the discussion.
You say that feminists want to reverse masculine domination and to dominate men.	That surprises me.	I advise you to read some feminist books.
You say that the gendering of job titles does not deserve my attention.	I feel patronised.	Accept that I am capable of choosing my own priorities for political commitment.
You are accusing me of things I have never said.	That really bothers me.	Let's stay on the topic of...
Two weeks ago, you...	I was too shocked at the moment to react.	Now I know that I don't want that to happen anymore

Systematically, when we talk about feminism, people take it personally. I like to put the definition of feminism in a political context. When a person replies by saying "Yes, but my boyfriend takes the trash out" or something like that, I say, "Ok, can we please not talk about him." I do not want to analyse what is happening in her relationship because the person always wants to defend herself and to defend her partner. I say, "Yes, that is great, but can we think more globally?"

Fatima

testimony

If you do not want to limit yourself to those three sentences, other tools are at your disposal. With the **shield sentence**, you can reframe what the AP said, and by doing so, remove power from them and what they are saying. A soft example would be: "Well, one can see the issue like that." This implies that you can also look at it differently, that it is only one of the many possible interpretations. More direct shield sentences are "That is an opinion" or "That is a belief, not a fact." Like with a knight's shield, you stop the argumentative momentum of the AP without entering a debate.



Another particularly useful option against manipulative techniques is to **denounce** what is happening in the communication. "You are simplifying and changing my statements." "You are not answering any of my arguments." "I notice that you are making assumptions about my intentions." Sometimes, the attack is more complex and, as a consequence, the denunciation could be as well:

**The AP:** "Women in Saudi Arabia or in Iran are fighting for their rights, and I understand that. But here in Belgium, women really do not have any reason to complain."

**You:** "You are comparing different types of oppression to negate my right to fight against the one that directly concerns me. It is not because it could be worse that I have to tolerate everything."

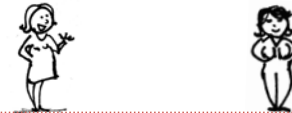
Likewise, you can **question the motivation** of the AP to attack you. This will be like handing them a mirror and they will be obliged either to recognise that there are hidden motivations, or to stop their behaviour.

**The AP:** "Why are you so aggressive?"

**You:** "It is funny really, every time that someone is left with no arguments when debating feminism, I hear that reproach. Might that be your case, too?"

These are some examples on how to stop – elegantly and without having to think too hard – an antifeminist situation whenever you want, in a way that feels right for you.

## testimonies



In my work, it happens that I have to speak publicly about violence against women. Invariably, there is always at least one person who will bring up violence against men. It depends on the context and day how I'll reply, but one answer that has been very useful was to say more or less this: "This is an issue that is being brought up systematically every time we speak about violence against women. If I was giving a conference on the prevention of road accidents happening to pedestrians, no one would criticise me for not also be talking about the accidents happening to cyclists. This demonstrates that violence, on the contrary to road accidents, occurs within a system of sexist oppression. That is why society has conditioned us to not focus on violence against women."

Irene

During a meeting between school principals for workshops on violence prevention, I introduced my organisation and explained feminist self-defence. A man called me out vehemently, "I have been doing martial arts for x years and I am sure that your thing there doesn't work! Two days is not enough. Can you guarantee that you can defend yourself if you are being assaulted?!" I kept calm and replied, "indeed, we are not absolutely certain that it works, we never know in advance how we are going to react when faced with an aggression. But you, with your x years of experience in martial arts, can you guarantee me that you could react to an assault?" He did not reply and continued to get angry. I know that I didn't convince him, but, at least, I had the satisfaction of seeing the other people in the public agreeing with me.

Pauline

I live with eight other people and for the umpteenth time, during our weekly meeting, I mention that there is a very gendered division of tasks and activities (renovation work for the guys, arranging the living room, cleaning, welcoming guests, taking care of the children for the women). On that note, one of my male roommates reply was, "when you bring up stuff like that (meaning: with a feminist perspective), it makes me feel guilty and that paralyses me." As if the problem was for me to find other ways to share my ideas to make him feel comfortable. I replied that his guilty feeling was not my problem, that I do not see how that helps us finding solutions for the problem.

Maud

I moderated a movie club session on the topic of sexist violence. At one point, the discussion touched upon gallantry. To relaunch the debate, I asked the following question: "Is gallantry synonym with friendliness?" And at that moment, a man (that I know) in the public overreacted: "Really, Ernestine, you are unbearable, you prevent us from breathing. We cannot do anything anymore without you questioning us. I don't want to have anything else to do with you, be it privately or professionally." All of that over and over for ten minutes in front of dozens of people. I managed to cut him off. I explained to the audience that his intervention arrived after a question on a specific phenomenon and that his intervention was a personal attack. And that this type of attack is quite frequent when there is a reassessment of deeply rooted behaviours.

Ernestine

## And afterwards?

You find yourself in the aftermath of an antifeminist situation. Well done! It is not important how you reacted or if you are satisfied with your reaction, you have to recognize that you lived through a difficult moment. Remind yourself that it is not your fault that you found yourself in such a situation and that you did the best you could in difficult circumstances. But the work is not over yet!

First of all, it is about limiting the negative impact that antifeminism can have on you (see self-care, p. 7). Put in practice the self-care strategies that work well for you and, above all, find ways to express your experience, by talking about it, by using creativity or through activism. Maybe you'd like to create a blog on antifeminism? Look for support from people that are good for you and help you by listening without judging. And be your best friend by being empathetic, grateful and honest with yourself!

Some antifeminist situations can be the object of judicial procedures, depending on what country you live in. For example, in Belgium the anti-sexism law allows you to sue APs that have denigrated you personally, humiliated, etc. as a woman in public, or online. The EU antidiscrimination directive mentions discrimination on grounds of political beliefs. In the case of antifeminist discrimination in employment or in access to goods and services, you can file a complaint with the antidiscrimination body in any EU country.

If you want to continue to develop your capacities in facing antifeminism, an analysis of your experience is necessary. To boost change and learning, it is better to focus on what worked rather than on your shortcomings. Instead of feeling guilty for not having used this or that tool, it is better to analyse what you were able to do. Were you able to understand quickly that it was an antifeminist situation? Did you manage to keep calm? Did you manage to analyse the stakes of the situation to reach a strategic choice? All of this is necessary in order to be able to reply verbally. It might be the case that your choice of words was not the best, but you already have control of some of the basics and you can keep getting better from there.



To get better at reacting, use every antifeminist situation as an occasion to learn more. Change your way of reaction by using all the different possibilities included in this guide. If you met a mansplainer, for instance, who wanted to make you understand what "real" feminism is, think about how you could have answered with a strong flight, an argumentation, a semantic defence or a confrontation. Write down the different answers, or even better, role play the different versions with a friend, so that your brain can better integrate all the options. And choose your favourite reactions, the ones that help you and make you feel better, the ones that lighten the emotional burden and that you have fun with. Because that will make it easier to mobilise them the next time, and you can rest assured that there will be a next time!

You might have been able to answer in a satisfying way. Then it might be a good idea to share that success, to strengthen your self-confidence, but also to let other feminists benefit from your experience. In some feminist groups or organisations, they share successful responses under names such as "Hafida's response", "Melanie's objection."

We truly hope that this guide gave you some ideas and inspired you to react to antifeminist situations that we know all too well. If you found renewed pleasure in resistance, our biggest ambition was reached. In any case, we would like to hear from your experiences, bad or good. In this way, we can continue to develop tools to support feminists.



I use social media a lot and that is how I find feminist groups. There are lots of meetings where you can meet each other. The problem is that those groups are often very temporary, we see each other three times, once, and then it stops because everyone has a busy agenda. What I do is that I go to different things and events and in the end, you always find the same people and you become friends. That is how I use social media, like an intermediary for meeting in person.

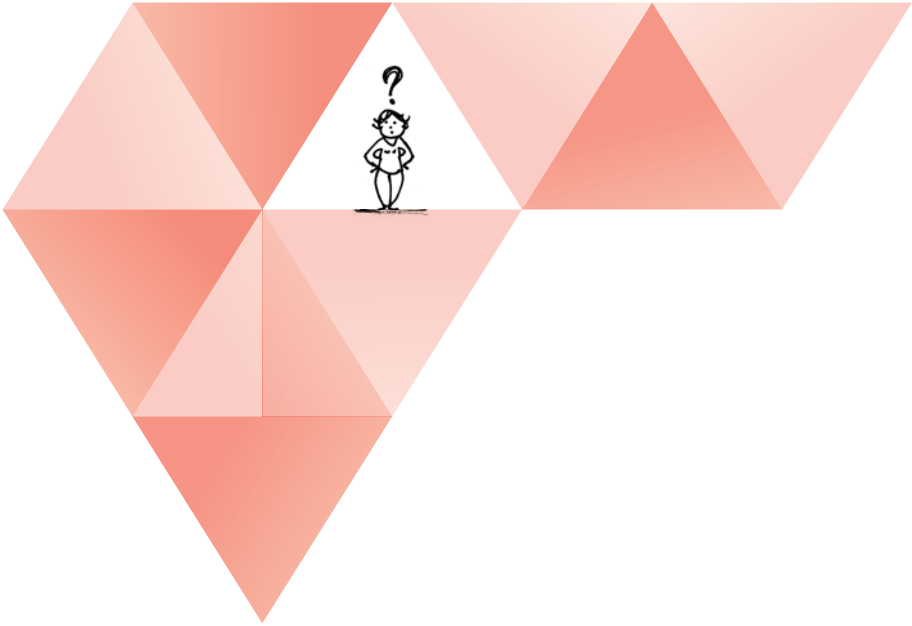
Constance

Why don't I always say that I am a feminist? It is like a vicious circle. I have had negative experiences so often and felt helpless and unarmed, and started to fear those situations more and more. However, we can also enter a virtuous circle with support groups, lectures, where you learn and identify antifeminism. Actually, as soon as I come out of my isolation, I do not feel like an alien anymore, like I am the only one experiencing that, and I see that what I experience is also shared by others. It makes me laugh to hear all the examples of what we have been through, to tell myself "Well, there are ten, twenty or hundred women who also experienced that before me." That helps me to feel better because I know where I stand. I dread a bit less to say that I am a feminist because I am no longer dealing with emotions that are too strong.

Karima







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