GWSS CHAIR AND PROFESSOR, SHIRLEY J. YEE, IS QUOTED IN THE SEATTLE TIMES ARTICLE ‘FEMINISM’ IS THE WORD OF THE YEAR. SHOULD WE BE CELEBRATING?

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‘Feminism’ is the word of the year. Should we be celebrating?, Nicole Brodeur, The Seattle Times, 12/19/2017.

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By

Nicole Brodeur

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In the days since the Merriam-Webster dictionary named “feminism” the word of the year, I haven't been sure whether to celebrate, or scream.

It’s great to see that the word was the most-searched on Merriam-Webster’s website, and that look-ups for the definition increased by 70 percent over last year.

That means people are curious, that they want to learn. They want to be sure that the term isn't so much a salvo as a sensibility.

But it also feels as if people are just now realizing the need to step up their game, to look at the fine print to get a better sense of how things work, like they’re just learning how to turn on the dishwasher.

To them, I say: Really? You had to look it up to understand why millions of women marched through the streets of Washington, D.C., last January for the Women's March — likely the largest single-day demonstration in U.S. history?

You had to do research after Trump mouthpiece Kellyanne Conway said in an interview that she didn't consider herself a feminist “in the classic sense” because the term is associated with being “anti-male” and “pro-abortion”?

You needed an explainer for why “The Handmaid's Tale” and “Wonder Woman” were the one-two punch of pop culture, one written by the great Margaret Atwood and other directed by Patty Jenkins — both female?

You needed help understanding the wave that was carrying the #MeToo movement?

As Merriam-Webster defines it, feminism is the “theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes.”

That's it; just believing that we're all in this together.

Feminism is sitting across the dinner table from you. It's at the next desk, in the corner office, on the playing field and behind the camera. It's running for office and voting down child molesters (thank you, Alabama female voters of color!) and fighting for reproductive rights.

Feminism is also being paid for your talents, experience and hard work. It's about respect.
“It has always been the word of the year to me,” said Kathleen Hanna, a musician, activist and founder of the feminist punk riot grrl movement.

Many of us remember when “feminism” was the f-word that disallowed women from being sexy or pretty or staying at home with their kids. The word was less spoken than spat out when it first showed up in the ’70s — even though its roots go all the way back to 1837, when the word “feminisme” was coined by the French philosopher Charles Fourier. It first appeared in the United States in 1910, when the suffrage movement promoted women’s right to vote.

Only recently did “feminism” start to take on new power, respect and believers.

And yet, just three years ago, *Time* magazine proposed banning the word “feminist,” putting it in its fourth-annual “word banishment poll” alongside trendy little numbers like “turnt” and “bae.”

“You have nothing against feminism itself,” *Time*’s Katy Steinmetz wrote in suggesting the word get the ax. “But when did it become a thing that every celebrity had to state their position on whether this word applies to them, like some politician declaring a party?

“Let’s stick to the issues and quit throwing this label around like ticker tape at a Susan B. Anthony parade.”

Wait, did Susan B. Anthony get a ticker-tape parade? She sure deserved one. If it wasn’t for her, Ms. Steinmetz, there might still be slavery. Do your homework.

*Time* editor Nancy Gibbs later apologized for including “feminist” in the poll, saying, “While we meant to invite debate about some ways the word was used this year, that nuance was lost, and we regret that its inclusion has become a distraction from the important debate over equality and justice.”

Despite that history, there has been plenty of debate about the word “feminism” in Shirley Yee’s classes at the University of Washington, where she is chair of the Department of Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies.

“It is a word and a concept that we often take up for debate and analysis as well as critique in our classes,” Yee said, adding that while most students are comfortable with the term, “others feel the term does not capture the complexities of systematic inequalities.”

She’s right. Modern feminism has been called out for being co-opted by white, educated women of means and leaving out women of color and different classes.

But as we saw in Alabama last week — *when African-American women played a major role in defeating Republican Roy Moore’s bid for the U.S. Senate* — the face of feminism is changing.

And the word is changing with it.

It is a term of empowerment, a word that people of all stripes can wrap themselves in comfortably, and speak without malice, but pride.

“I think we are seeing a new generation of students who are politically aware and active and who see feminism as a potentially positive avenue for social change,” Yee said. “Unfortunately, the old negative stereotypes persist.”

If that’s true, then I suppose I should be happy that so many people are looking up “feminism” and learning that all it means is that women want what everyone else has. What they deserve.

If that makes it the word of the year, great.

But did it have to take so long?

*Nicole Brodeur’s column appears Tuesday and Sunday. Reach her at 206-464-2334 or nbrodeur@seattletimes.com.*

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