



# Readying the Rape Rack: Feminism and the Exploitation of Non-Human Reproductive Systems

*Dedicated to Lindsay April*

“We believe that feminism is a transformative philosophy that embraces the amelioration of life on earth for all life-forms, for all natural entities”

(Carol J. Adams, *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist vegetarian critical theory*, 1990)

*It was a foggy morning, the bar level with my eyes keeping me from spying on what was buzzing around me, the stifling heat and smoke from machines, the smell of dust and hay. There was nothing that day but fleeting grief accompanied by the thick storm clouds looming above us that I could see through the cracks in the splintery, wood ceiling.*

*I knew the routine by heart. When the machines started, we all stood frozen, the concrete floor rumbling below our cold, blistered feet. Our eyes dipped and fell despondent, whispering, “it won’t always be like this” and other sentiments that would once more prove themselves untrue. Sometimes I would even feel guilty for lying to myself; for being what I was and who I was. When the men arrived, we made sure to be compliant. To stand still, upright. It was faster this way. Sometimes, they would slap the top of my head or back as if to say bello. The contact made my skin crawl and the flies around me disperse, only to land on a new part of my rotting pelt, still buzzing the way flies always buzz.*

## Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the sexual exploitation of non-human bodies, specifically, dairy cows. As a vegan and animal rights activist, I feel compelled to take this opportunity to share and maybe even enlighten fellow social justice advocates on feminist aspects of animal agriculture, an under-researched topic that many overlook and might not even consider relevant to feminist discourse. Drawing on animal rights-based feminist theory, I argue that, in order to fully fight gendered oppression, we must also advocate for those whose voices are not always lifted or comprehensible, but are still subjects to sex-based discrimination and violence. Throughout our lives, we are offered an idealized image of dairy cows where these animals graze on beautiful pastures, have room to sow and play, and are comforted in spacious areas in which to sleep. We are presented with images of a life well lived, but when it comes to the deaths of those same animals, the picture perfect story comes to a grim reality. The animals whose milk we put directly into our mouths are the ones whose lives are most frequently shrugged off by consumers since we are instructed to assume that this is just a part of life.

We teach our children that dairy is a crucial part of any cake recipe, we give students boxed milk with their school lunches, and worst of all, people are socialized to believe that as human beings, we need the milk from another mammal to sustainably survive. For example, “Got Milk?”, a government funded campaign that emerged in the 1990s, used celebrities to glamorize and idealize the consumption of milk to promote the growth of strong bones in children. Today, we know the campaign was nothing but a ploy to increase milk sales (Keon, 2010).

This fallacy is not only ruining our bodies, but it also supports and exemplifies the degrading way in which we treat female bodies and reproductive health. What I hope that readers can gain from this piece is a more mindful attitude towards dairy products and an ability to incorporate non-human bodies into their own feminist perspectives. This idea is something that is scary to learn about at first, since we are taught that consuming milk is a tradition. However, as many of us know, traditions die out after they are exposed to be not only untrue, but also ethically unjust and the real horrors come to center stage after many years of quiet suffering.

## Why Feminism?

When it comes to this topic, many may question the dairy industry as a feminist issue. Some will offer the argument that human lives are more important than non-human lives, and that social justice should be more devoted to issues of race, class, and gender. Others will simply not want to see the life of a cow as equal to that of a human being. However, the animal agriculture industry is something that the majority of us mindlessly support from day to day. If we are going to argue fairly for the rights of all beings in a world soured with sex and gender based oppression, then dairy cows deserve to be taken into account when discussing issues of reproductive women's health. If women do not choose to become mothers, they are shamed. If a female cow is incapable of successfully bearing a calf, they are sent away for slaughter. Their reproductive system is useless therefore, they, as a being, are useless. The double standard however, is that human pain is considered to be more valid than the pain of non-human animals. The idea of murdering women once they can no longer bear children is gruesome and disturbing. Why is it acceptable to perform such horrifying acts on bodies

that are different from our own (Adams & Donovan, 1996)?

The outdated stereotype about women being caretakers and most importantly child bearers remains consistent in the dairy industry, especially when we take into account the means through which these animals are exploited. A few brief examples include rape or sexual assault, nonconsensual hormone treatments, and emotional trauma related to pregnancy. Dairy cows are forcibly impregnated, or raped, in order to constantly produce milk for humans to consume. This is not to say that male cows (bulls) do not undergo similar pain and anguish. They struggle, they die, and they cry for help the same ways a dairy cow does. However, it is the biological differentiation that determines their life journey, similar to the way these biological differences will indicate how human beings will be socialized and treated throughout their lifetime (Adams, 1994).

The dairy industry is a host for sex-based discrimination. It is a site where sexual assault and objectification based on biological makeup are highly prevalent but ignored as we choose to neglect non-humans with whom we share a planet. Most of us can agree that in order to be an intersectional feminist, you must see things from points of views

different from your own. Feminist thinker bell hooks (2000) depicts intersectionality as a way to combat oppression by dismissing the idea that there is one single way that women can suffer. This way is biological sex. However, assuming that all power struggles are rooted in the system of sex and gender has become ineffectual. For a brief moment, place the importance of animals' lives as equal to your own, similar to how you might validate and advocate for the struggles of women that you personally do not endure due to privilege of race, gender, class, etc.

### **Women's Reproductive Health in Peril**

Women's reproductive health is one of the most commonly discussed feminist issues in not just Western culture, but worldwide. Education, being limited and sometimes completely absent, is vital for young women living in bodies constantly under scrutiny and pressure to reproduce. I have observed that some individuals and groups with more conservative family values see women who choose not to have children as wasteful or unwomanly, whereas see pregnant women as the epitome of what it means to be a woman: a breeding ground for children to be admired and

praised but never to the extent where the body is exposed or shared with others.

For example, the bodies of women are seen as not only incubators for newborns, but when that newborn is conceived, it's also a prison (Bordo, 1993). Pregnancy, being one of the most emotionally and physically traumatic experiences a female body can or will undergo, is romanticized and fetishized in Western culture through the media. Choosing to have a child is seen as something to glamorize. Extravagant gender-reveal parties, Instagram posts and online communities make pregnancy seem like a walk in the park for new mothers -- the Kardashians, for example. Abortion is still highly stigmatized. Women who regularly take birth control are quietly judged for taking necessary precautions to prevent pregnancy and to aid other reproductive issues. Girls who get their periods earlier than others are immediately subject to shame since the body is now able to carry a child (Bordo, 1993).

Susan Bordo writes about the struggles of individuals who become mothers and the genetic objects they become as a result of the societal conventions of early/pre-parenthood. In her chapter, "Are Mothers Persons", Bordo (1993) elaborates on the lack of autonomy society gives women based on their sex

and biological makeup. This idea translates fluently to the lives of dairy cows, as once they become incubators for conception, their personal experiences no longer matter and their bodies are subject to manipulation and human interference.

The pregnant woman (whose ethical and legal status as a person is not constructed as a question in the abortion debate, and which most people wrongly assume is fully protected legally) is seen as fighting, not for her *personhood*, but ‘only’ for her right to control her reproductive destiny.

The nature of pregnancy is such, however, that to deprive the women of control over her reproductive life -- whether by means of involuntary or coerced sterilization, court-ordered cesarean, or forbidden abortion -- is necessarily also to mount an assault on her personal integrity and autonomy (the essence of personhood in our culture) and to treat her merely as pregnant *res extensa*, material incubator of fetal subjectivity (Bordo, 1993, p. 93-4).

I remember a story about when my cousin started her menstrual cycle at the age of ten. Her father threw a livid fit of rage as soon as she came home from school with a box of sanitary napkins in hand. “*She can get pregnant now...*” my mother recalled, sitting in a room with Diana and playing with paper dolls after school. One girl was bleeding and one

was not, and one girl could now conceive a baby and one could not. Even as children, women have been consistently assessed as incubators for new generations with no acknowledgement of their personal experiences, thoughts, or emotions towards the situation. Girls and women are thus stripped of their personhood.

Dairy cows begin their lives as vessels of reproduction as soon as they are assigned a sex. If they are male, they are slaughtered for veal or sold to cheap meat industries. If female, however, they will begin and end their lives in a figurative cage. They will undergo gestation periods repeatedly throughout their life, until one day they are no longer able to survive a pregnancy and are then killed for meat. As a woman undergoes menopause, the similar way in which a cow does, she suffers the intangible loss of womanhood. She is a dairy cow, wanting her old life back or maybe even some more time with her menstrual cycle. The difference is, human beings are still valued after menopause as people, while a dairy cow is seen as a useless item that takes up space and thus, should be exterminated (Bordo, 1993).

### **Animals as Sentient Beings**

If you have ever owned a pet before, and most of us have, you are well aware of

the fact that animals can feel sensation and are able to portray emotion. Your cat arches their back when you scratch above their tail, or your dog's face makes a sad look when you scold them for chewing on your favorite shoes. Though we cannot verbally communicate with animals, they still converse with us every day. When it comes to farmed animals, that connection is lost. The compassion we feel for animals who exist directly in front of us does not translate to what we eat at the dinner table because consuming animal products is what most of us are taught is right. However, I again would like to argue that, like other traditions, there are things we are taught that we have eventually had to unlearn.

Female non-human bodies are objectified and commoditized within spaces of animal agriculture, with little to no acknowledgement of their ability to feel physical pain or the existence of their nervous systems. In the same way, women are in gendered spaces when it comes to reproductive rights and health. For example, discussions of rape culture in terms of intrusive, sexual violence are often seen to be women's fault, because as females, they should treat their bodies with the utmost respect and modesty. Another example is the stigma attached to abortion and how vilified women who choose to have them are, despite the

emotional and physical pain that accompanies such a big decision. Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation - The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement's* (2009) main framework emphasizes this basic truth: animals, just like human beings, feel. In his first chapter, he discusses the nervous systems of animals and how biologically, we are aware that they exist:

We also know that the nervous systems of other animals are not artificially constructed – as a robot might be artificially constructed -- to mimic the pain behavior of humans. The nervous systems of animals evolved as our own did. In fact, the evolutionary history of human beings and other animals,



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*Figure 1.* Dairy calf taken away from her mother to begin a life of confinement. From “New born calf waits in a wheelbarrow at a dairy farm in Spain,” by K. Orzechowski & Animal Equality, 2010. Copyright 2018 by J. McArthur & We Animals. Reprinted with permission.

especially mammals, did not diverge until the central features of our nervous systems were already in existence (Singer, 2009, p. 5).

The acknowledgment of the non-human nervous system is crucial to recognizing the ethical dilemma of animal cruelty in general. In this paper, I am choosing to focus on the animal cruelty that functions in the dairy industry. The argument, “Well, don’t the cows need to produce milk? It doesn’t hurt them, right?” is becoming more and more invalid as the realities of the treatment of dairy cows is more and more exposed (Singer, 2009). I will discuss this in the section titled “Lactation and Impregnation”.

Singer (2009) contextualizes my argument by holding up the idea of speciesism and the way human beings discriminate on non-human bodies in the same way we are socialized to subordinate marginalized groups. We are simply taught that one life is more or less vital to the wellbeing of our society and on a wider scale, our planet.

This killing and abuse is happening behind closed doors. It’s easy for one to say they love animals and then to enjoy a glass of milk with dinner that was the product of a living, breathing individual’s pain, suffering, and inevitable slaughter. This begs the

question: If you had to visit the factory farm every morning to get your own milk, stare into the irises of sick, bleeding creatures, see their deformed and infected nipples, and walk away knowing very well how your temporary enjoyment affected another female’s body and overall fate, would you still drink it and call yourself a feminist?

### **Lactation & Impregnation**

The same way women’s health has been at stake for years, a dairy cow’s reproductive system has been poked and prodded. There is a myth that all cows produce milk all year round and need frequent milking in order to stay healthy. In fact, dairy cows must be pregnant or new mothers to produce milk (Newkey-Burden, 2017).

The process in big dairy industry is not as simple as depicted in children’s books or TV shows. There are not men and women in straw hats gently squeezing the milk out of a cow’s udders. Instead there are cold and painful machines designed to draw and suck as much milk as possible, which often leave the udders sore and bloody with abscesses of puss and bacteria. There are not little tin buckets underneath the cow’s body to catch her milk; there are large tanks where all of the milk goes to be pasteurized, processed, and sold to

human beings. Singer (2009) references this false image:

The dairy cow, once seen peacefully, even idyllically, roaming the hills, is now a careful monitored, fine-tuned milk machine. The bucolic picture of the dairy cow playing with her calf in the pasture is no part of commercial milk production. Many dairy cows are reared indoors, some kept in individual pens with only enough room to stand up and lie down (p. 34).

It is important to keep in mind that cows are not encouraged to go “explore” their sexuality with bulls in order to engage in sexual reproduction. Dairy cows become pregnant by humans through invasive, nonconsensual means through both vaginal and rectal penetration (Cochrane, 2010). Dairy cows line up in a circle and are chained to a large round post before the impregnation, also known as the “rape rack” (Butler, 2015, p. 40). Most dairy cows are impregnated yearly in order to make lactation constant and to ensure a surplus of calves. A dairy cow’s calf will almost immediately be taken away post birth. Male calves are sold for veal production, while a female calf is not permitted to nurse to make sure all of the milk is going to humans. The calf is fed a fatty and hormone-filled milk substitute in order to gain weight quickly

to be ready for pregnancy as soon as possible (Butler, 2015).

As I stated earlier, it is important to note that human beings are the only mammals in existence to drink the milk from a different mammal. Dairy has been known to have a direct link to obesity, heart disease, and high cholesterol (Butler, 2019) The fat percentage in dairy is meant to sustain the growth of a calf that will one day be 2,000 pounds (Keon, 2010). Humans consuming this milk (widely consisting of puss deposits, blood and fecal matter) are drinking baby cow growth fluid, whether they pour it on their cereal or freeze it into ice cream (Andersen & Kuhn, 2014).



*Figure 2.* Two male calves being taken to slaughter after being born. A dog watches as they are carried away. From “5 Images That Should Turn any Mother into an Animal-Rights Activist,” by Kinder World, 2018b. In the public domain.

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*It was halfway into the milking when I heard it, a loud whaling that made everyone start to look around. We couldn't turn and see what was going on of course, but we knew the cry well. One of us, far away in another pen separate from those of us in gestation, would lose today. The whaling grew louder and I put my head down in solidarity for her. I knew it was a dark morning and would get much worse as the day progressed. No one really forgets. I know I haven't.*

*When it was finally done, we sighed in relief that she was out of pain but braced ourselves for what was to come. It was silent, only the sound of the machines roaring away at our cold, lifeless bodies that had grown so used to standing until our limbs were stiff and udders were chafed. I had become so distracted by the happenings that morning that the sore, raw feeling of my skin being pulled ended up in the back of my mind. It was all at once that the sound of a wheelbarrow traced its way through the dust in front of us, leaving a straight line in its path... The sounds of her crying grew louder and suddenly the whole room shook as one of us, and soon more of us would say goodbye. All at once the same man that slapped my back yanked the tubes off of me, leaving a cold and senseless stinging. I had grown dizzy and bereft.*

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## Commercial Dairy as Social Subordination

In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, eco-feminist writer and activist Carol Adams (1990) argues that basic animal rights violations coincide with issues of social subordination as experienced by humans. Adams (1994) expands on this argument in her second book, *Neither Man nor Beast*, urging the reader to understand the violated animal's experience as a product of racial and gender inequalities.

Adams coined the term "absent referent" (Adams, 1990, p. 13), meaning the disconnect between what is on your plate and what is a living being with a heart, brain, and nervous system. I would argue that this is considered in modern day discussions of feminism, where we only consider the lives of those in front of us, more specifically, white middle-class women in western civilization. The oppression of women who do not share the same culture as us is easy to brush off, especially in commercialized feminist movements. This type of feminism, though many are making efforts to push back on this concept, has become a cisgender and heterosexual white-washed movement that has proven to be toxic to those who need the results of feminism the most.

This same idea is placed on animals, as we favor and glorify some beings while marginalizing others since we do not interact and acknowledge their presence every day, as humans commonly do with animals like dogs or cats.

When we favor dogs over cows, we are ignoring their intellectual differences in the same way society chooses to place men over women. In reality, however, cows have proven to be wiser and more sentient than dogs in numerous cases (Kim, 2017). For example, cows have acute hearing and alert, visceral senses. According to Marino & Allen (2017), cows have amazing visual acuity, having only one blind spot directly behind them, as their eyes are on the sides of their heads (p. 475). Cow's sensory system is also very complex, being able to detect all five senses and more specifically, the ability to detect salt and sour tastes (p. 476). Cows are known to grow deep and loving connections with each other and human beings. Cows have been referred to as "big puppies" (Kinder World, 2018a), since they act bubbly, charming, and playful when in a stable, peaceful, environment free from pain (Marino & Allen, 2017).

Cows are also very sensitive to touch and have mechanoreceptors, thermoreceptors, and nociceptors in the skin and muzzle. They use touch to determine the

appropriateness of certain food items. They are sensitive to pain but, as they are prey animals, may sometimes suppress familiar signs of pain in order to escape notice by predators. Nevertheless, a number of reliable signs of pain and distress have been identified in cows including during manipulations typical to the farming industry, such as de-horning). Interestingly, while cows are often fearful of touch by humans, they are also calmed by some forms of tactile contact such as scratching behind the ears. (Marino & Allen, 2017 p. 476).

When we ignore the promising attributes of cattle and their ability to feel pain and emotions, we are objectifying them as they embody the absent referent (Adams, 1990).

## Conclusion

The sexualized abuse of dairy cows directly mirrors the way female repro-



*Figure 3.* From "My Dog Met a Cow Today," by reddit, 2015. In the public domain.

ductive systems have been and continue to be treated. As feminism moves in waves, so does the unequal treatment of animals. As the third wave erupted and ecofeminism arrived, feminists began to identify more with the oppression of dairy cows and other farm animals. Though I don't explore this specific topic in this paper, supporting the egg industry promotes the same sexist treatment, just in a different way: hens are impregnated and used for their menstrual cycles and slaughtered once no longer useful to capitalist objectives. It's easy to write off animals as being non-sentient and unworthy of rights since as human beings it is difficult to empathize with non-human subjects. However, as this new wave of feminism emerges and we continue to bring hushed voices to the forefront of the discussions we have in classrooms and auditoriums, we must start to acknowledge the voices of all beings rather than constantly contradicting ourselves when we engage in the consumption of dairy.

When exposed to what is going on outside of our peripherals, people begin to make a change for both non-human beings and themselves. As a vegan who is also a feminist, I believe that human beings should not be able to dictate which lives are considered valuable and

which ones are not. Non-dairy alternatives are becoming more and more popular and accessible and are commonly known to be less expensive than dairy milk as the vegan movement flourishes in the United States. The dairy industries panic as the public continues to learn of these injustices hidden from them. While we fight against the sexual abuse of women, why are we still allowing the same treatment to be thrust upon other living bodies when there are other, more sustainable ways to live that do not involve harming millions of female bodies? With simple lifestyle changes that promote reproductive justice towards animals available to many, why are we picking and choosing which pots of capitalism, sexism, and patriarchy to stir, when we could dismantle it all?

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*The wheelbarrow whistled as the cries grew louder again. The baby sat upright, blood and thin goo matting his new fur. I thought for sure he had no idea what was going on, but somehow I found a twinkle of distrust in its eyes as he gazed into mine. Twisting and pushing his body to find an ounce of comfort, or solace, or maybe just a cool side of the transportation to lay. But it was impossible to stay cold that day. It turned out to be one of the hottest days that summer.*

*My dear friend's sounds were deafening and I myself began to cry.*

*I knew how it felt to have the only accomplishment, the only product of my pain,*

*torn away from me with nothing left to show for it besides those buzzing flies and the hope that one day it would all be over...*

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