With his notorious claim that Mexican immigrants are rapists, Donald J. Trump opened his candidacy by reviving a myth—at least as ancient as the classical story of the Rape of Lucretia—in which white women stand in for the endangered homeland. Historically, the myth of the other-as-rapist was used to justify segregation and lynching even as it rendered invisible the systematic rape of female slaves by white owners. In Trump’s campaign, it has been used to redescribe discrimination against immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, and the Middle East as defense of national borders. This myth structurally excludes white women from the “we” of public action, treating them as prized possessions to be guarded. It structurally erases women of color altogether. It denies the reality that the majority of sexual assaults are committed by white men. For the protection of white women is also the protection of white men’s privileged access to all women. When you are a wealthy white man, “You can do anything . . . Grab them by the pussy,” and it may be “offensive” and “inappropriate” (the words used by Melania and Ivanka Trump), but it is no more a matter of public concern than a child’s poor table manners.
The fact that Trump’s opponent in the 2016 election was a woman added particular urgency to the claim that only a strong white man could make America great again. For Hillary Clinton sought the role of protective leader, not passive victim. In substance as well as style, she personally and structurally challenged an order of white male entitlement that often goes by the name of “family values.” In this order, women know their place. They know that, as Ivanka Trump put it, “The most important job any woman can have is being a mother.” They know that to care about other things as much as, or more than, motherhood, or to choose not to become a mother at all, is selfish, unnatural, and dangerous. Indeed, Clinton’s challenge to heteronormative family values in both her political ambition and her public support for reproductive rights was translated into a literal crime in fake news reports that she was running a child sex trafficking operation out of a D.C. pizza place—circulated by Breitbart News, the publication run by Trump’s chief strategist Steve Bannon, the story led to death threats against the restaurant’s owner and staff.

The dubious genius of the Trump campaign is that it appealed to a popular, consumerist form of “feminism” devoted to individual personal fulfillment rather than collective social justice. 53% of white women (as opposed to only 4% of black women) voted for Trump. I do not presume to know how these white female voters felt about Trump’s racist, xenophobic, and misogynist remarks and policies. Some may have been motivated by racism; some may not have been. But in voting for him, they prioritized the economic gains that he promised to both wealthy and the working class voters over civil rights, women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, and criminal justice reform. They chose private gain over public good.

The most effective spokesperson for the view that Trump would be better for women than Clinton was, of course, Trump’s daughter Ivanka. She has made an impressive career selling a retrograde, racialized ideal of femininity that helped
make her father palatable to women. Her imagined audience is the young, professional #womenwhowork. #Womenwhowork are women who obscure their own labor, who make women’s “work” just one more flattering accessory, not a central part of the world economy. #Womenwhowork laugh off sexual harassment in order to avoid coming off, as Ivanka puts it in The Trump Card, as “a tightly wound witch.” They take for granted that if they can’t “deal with” the reality of sexual harassment, they should, in Donald Trump Jr.’s words, “go, maybe, teach kindergarten.”

#Womenwhowork accept that it is a white man’s world and that they will achieve love, success, and privilege if they play by white men’s rules. In their elegant submission to male standards, they embody a logic summarized by Catharine MacKinnon: “Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms.” This logic undergirds Michael Savage’s observation that Trump appeals to women voters because they want to identify with his trophy wife rather than his political opponent: “Melania’s a movie star; Hillary looks like a maid.” Savage’s comment makes legible the class divisions that shape a feminism of personal fulfillment. #Womenwhowork and pat themselves on the back for having it all take for granted the many women who have always done the unglamorous labor of nannies and nurses, housekeepers and sex workers—the women who are hard-pressed to scrape by, much to “architect lives that they love.” The equation of female success with feminine attractiveness also promotes a racial hierarchy chillingly, succinctly expressed by Pamela Ramsey Taylor, the West Virginia public official who celebrated Trump’s election by tweeting, “It will be so refreshing to have a classy, beautiful, dignified First Lady back in the White House. I’m tired of seeing a [sic] Ape in heels.”

It is time that women and men reject this privatized version of feminism and the political quietism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity it promotes. We must return to one of the signal insights of the feminist movement: that the personal is
political. What we do is just as important as what we think or feel. Racism, misogyny, xenophobia are structural, not personal. This means that none of our “choices” are made in isolation of a larger social, political, economic, and ideological fabric. Even our most seemingly intimate decisions are those that we can make among options that our world allows some of us and denies others. Our “personal” aspirations maintain or resist the status quo.

Remembering that “the personal is political” can be a real drag, since it compels us to examine our choices within a larger structure of unequal power and privilege—not just the votes we cast once every four years, but the decisions we make every day. Even for those of us who oppose Trump’s assault on women, minorities, and immigrants (54% of American voters, by the most recent count, voted against him), there is a wide spectrum between the extremes of political commitment and political apathy, between service and selfishness. Calls that seem easy in principle may be much more difficult in practice. This is as true for me as for anyone. Do I challenge a sexist/racist/homophobic comment or do I keep the peace? Do I splurge on a fancy dinner or do I donate to an organization fighting for social justice? Do I write my book or do I volunteer that time to political causes? What individual comforts and ambitions am I willing to give up in the name of the greater good? Knowing that complacency, timidity, and selfishness can have the same effects as bigotry and hatred, where do I draw the line?

To be a feminist doesn’t require us to spend every waking moment fighting for the revolution. But it does require us to recognize that our seemingly personal choices affect our world, and to take responsibility. It is to notice how we benefit as well as suffer from the intersecting forms of systematic privilege and discrimination. Such an outlook can be daunting and humbling. But feminism isn’t for girls who just want to have fun. It is for women and men who want to work collectively for change.