

Feminism: Understanding the Movement and Its Impact

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Received: 01-Feb-2025; Manuscript No. gmj-25-162157; **Editor assigned:** 03-Feb-2025; Pre QC No. gmj-25-162157 **Reviewed:**15-Feb-2025; QC No. gmj-25-162157; **Revised:** 21-Feb-2025; Manuscript No. gmj-25-162157 (R); **Published:** 28-Feb-2025, DOI: 10.36648/1550-7521.23.73.477

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Citation: Moon Y (2025) Feminism: Understanding the Movement and Its Impact. Global Media Journal, 23:73.

Introduction

Feminism, at its core, is a movement that advocates for gender equality, focusing on the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Throughout history, women have been marginalized, often denied basic rights and opportunities, and subjected to systemic discrimination. Feminism emerged as a response to this inequality, and over the years [1], it has grown into a global movement that encompasses a wide range of perspectives and goals. The purpose of this article is to explore the evolution of feminism, its key principles, the different waves of the movement, and its impact on society.

The Origins of Feminism

Feminism's roots can be traced back to the early social and political changes that occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Enlightenment period challenged traditional structures of power and authority, laying the groundwork for questioning social norms, including the roles of women [2]. Early feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft in England, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), argued that women should be educated and treated as equals to men.

Throughout the 19th century, the feminist movement began to take shape in the form of suffrage movements, with women advocating for the right to vote. In the United States and the United Kingdom, women's suffrage campaigns became central to the feminist agenda, culminating in the eventual passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 (U.S.) and the Representation of the People Act of 1918 (UK), which granted women the right to vote [3].

The Waves of Feminism

Feminism has evolved over time, and scholars and activists have often divided its history into distinct "waves." These waves represent different periods of feminist activism, each addressing specific issues and responding to the needs of their time.

First wave feminism (Late 19th to Early 20th Century): The first wave of feminism was primarily focused on legal issues, most notably women's suffrage. Activists fought for the right to vote

and for legal reforms to ensure women had access to education, property rights [4], and better working conditions. The suffrage movement, led by figures such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the U.S., and Emmeline Pankhurst in the U.K., made significant strides toward gender equality.

Second wave feminism (1960s-1980s): The second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960s and was driven by the civil rights movements and broader societal changes. This wave focused on a range of issues, including workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, sexuality, and gender roles. Prominent figures like Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, and Gloria Steinem, a journalist and activist, helped to bring issues such as sexual liberation, equal pay, and access to birth control into the mainstream. The second wave also saw the founding of organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW), which aimed to address systemic gender inequality.

Third wave feminism (1990s-Present): Third wave feminism emerged in the 1990s, and it is often seen as a response to the perceived limitations of second-wave feminism. This wave focuses on diversity and intersectionality [5], recognizing that the experiences of women differ across race, class, sexuality, and other social identities. The third wave also challenges the traditional notions of femininity and embraces a more inclusive and fluid understanding of gender. Feminists like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Judith Butler have been instrumental in advocating for a more nuanced understanding of feminism that acknowledges multiple experiences of oppression and privilege.

Fourth wave feminism (2010s-Present): The fourth wave of feminism is characterized by its heavy reliance on social media and digital platforms to mobilize activism. This wave addresses issues such as sexual harassment, body shaming, and reproductive rights, with movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp gaining widespread attention. It is also marked by a more global approach, focusing on the challenges women face in different cultural contexts. Fourth wave feminism emphasizes inclusivity [6], calling attention to the experiences of marginalized groups, including transgender women and women of color.

Key Principles of Feminism

At its heart, feminism is about equality and justice. Some of the key principles that guide the feminist movement include:

Gender equality: Feminism advocates for the equal treatment of all genders, challenging systems and structures that perpetuate gender-based inequality.

Reproductive rights: Feminism supports women's rights to make decisions about their bodies, including access to birth control, abortion, and comprehensive healthcare [7].

Workplace equality: Feminism fights for equal pay, fair labor practices, and the elimination of workplace discrimination based on gender.

Ending gender-based violence: Feminists work to combat violence against women, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment, and seek to create a world where women feel safe in all aspects of life.

Intersectionality: As defined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is the understanding that various forms of oppression—based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and more—intersect and cannot be understood in isolation [8]. Feminism now strives to address the interconnected nature of social inequalities.

The Impact of Feminism

Feminism has had a profound impact on societies worldwide. Some of the most notable accomplishments include:

Legal reforms: Feminists have successfully campaigned for numerous legal changes, such as the right to vote, access to education, and equal employment opportunities. Laws addressing sexual harassment, domestic violence, and workplace discrimination have been enacted, providing greater protections for women.

Cultural shifts: Feminism has reshaped societal attitudes toward women and gender roles. Women have gained greater visibility in politics, business, and the arts, and traditional notions of femininity and masculinity are being questioned and redefined.

Increased awareness: Feminism has raised awareness about issues such as sexual violence, reproductive rights, and workplace discrimination [9]. Movements like #MeToo have brought attention to the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, fostering an ongoing conversation about consent and accountability.

Access to education and work: Feminism has paved the way for women to enter fields that were previously dominated by men. Today, women pursue careers in science, politics, business, and technology, and they are fighting for equal representation and opportunities in these fields.

Challenges and Future of Feminism

While feminism has achieved significant progress, there are still many challenges to address. Gender inequality persists in many areas, including the gender pay gap, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and widespread violence against women [10]. Additionally, the movement continues to grapple with issues of intersectionality, ensuring that the voices of marginalized women are heard and prioritized.

As we move forward, feminism will likely continue to evolve, addressing new challenges such as the impact of technology on gender relations, the rights of transgender individuals, and the global fight for women's rights in the face of cultural and political opposition. Feminism's future lies in its ability to remain inclusive, adaptive, and focused on achieving justice for all genders.

Conclusion

Feminism is not just a historical movement, but an ongoing struggle for equality and justice. Over the years, it has evolved to address the changing needs and challenges of society. From the fight for women's suffrage to contemporary issues of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, feminism has made significant strides in improving the lives of women and men alike. However, the journey toward true gender equality is far from over. By continuing to advocate for systemic change, embrace intersectionality, and engage with new forms of activism, feminism can create a more just and equitable world for all.

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