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Figuring out Feminism and its different features

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Abstract

The present paper Understanding Feminism and its different waves is an attempt to understand the actual concept of feminism which is one of the most important social movements of the past two centuries and certainly the social movement which has brought about the most enduring and progressive transformation of human society on a global scale. It is customary to divide the history of feminism into a First, Second, and Third Wave, with each period signalling a different era in the struggle to attain equality between the sexes. Today feminism means many different things to different people, but at its core, if one goes back to its origins in the late 18th century, it is primarily a social movement for the emancipation of women. That movement was slow to start, and it wasn't until the late 1880s that the term 'feminism' actually appeared. Before then, the more usual term was 'women's rights'. The first advocates for women's rights were for the most part lonely voices pleading against obvious and manifest iniquities in society's treatment of women.

Keywords: feminism, feminine, female, emancipation, harassment

Introduction

A Brief History: The Four Waves of Feminism

Broadly, feminism refers to a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social equality of sexes.[1] This includes seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to those for men.

Feminist movements have campaigned and continue to campaign for women's rights, including the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to earn fair wages or equal pay, to own property, to receive education, to enter contracts, to have equal rights within marriage, and to have maternity leave. Feminists have also worked to ensure access to legal abortions and social integration, and to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence.[3] Changes in dress and acceptable physical activity have often been part of feminist movements.[4]

Some scholars consider feminist campaigns to be a main force behind major historical societal changes for women's rights, particularly in the West, where they are near-universally credited with achieving women's suffrage, gender neutrality in English, reproductive rights for women (including access to contraceptives and abortion), and the right to enter into contracts and own property.[5] Although feminist advocacy is, and has been, mainly focused on women's rights, some feminists, including bell hooks, argue for the inclusion of men's liberation within its aims because they believe that men are also harmed by traditional gender roles[6] Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues concerning gender.[7]

Numerous feminist movements and ideologies have developed over the years and represent different viewpoints and aims. Some forms of feminism have been criticized for taking into account only white, middle class, and college-educated perspectives. This criticism led to the creation of ethnically specific or multicultural forms of feminism, including black feminism and intersectional feminism. [8]

While the roots of feminism are buried in ancient Greece, most recognize the movement by

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the three waves of feminism.

However, empowered by the constant connectivity of the internet and the strength of the #MeToo movement, a new wave of feminists are speaking out in record numbers against discrimination. A new era for feminism has begun, full of passion, social-influencing power, and demanding change.

The first wave (1830's – early 1900's): Women's fight for equal contract and property rights

At the beginning of the 19th century in the UK and US, the agency of women was restricted on two different fronts: legal autonomy and the right to vote. In most countries women were considered property of their fathers or husbands. They were generally unable to enter into contracts or own land, and were legally seen in much the same way children are today.

Also, at the time, voting was largely by household, with only householders able to cast a vote. Hence, although there were comparatively few *direct* prohibitions on women voting, the restrictions on women owning property kept most of them disenfranchised. Later in the 19th century, when property qualifications for voting were eliminated, women became explicitly excluded from the franchise.

Because there were no other waves at the time, first wave feminism did not describe itself as such. In fact, the term feminism was not coined until decades after first wave feminism ended. Second wave feminists retroactively dubbed the suffragettes first wave feminism to clarify their continuity with but divergence from that earlier movement. Hence, the feminists of the first wave set out to extend to women the assertion of Thomas Rainsborough during the Putney Debates: "I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government." [9]

First-wave feminists often joined other social movements, including abolitionism, the temperance movement (the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, for example, was headed for many years by a feminist, Frances Willard), the labor movement, and the anti-war movement in regards to World War I.

Some famous feminists from this era are Mary Wollstonecraft, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Alice Paul, Emmeline Pankhurst, Margaret Sanger, and Emma Goldman.

The second wave (1960's-1980's): Broadening the debate

Coming off the heels of World War II, the second wave of feminism focused on the workplace, sexuality, family and reproductive rights. During a time when the United States was already trying to restructure itself, it was perceived that women had met their equality goals with the exception of the failure of the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (which has still yet to be passed).

This time is often dismissed as offensive, outdated and obsessed with middle class white women's problems. Conversely, many women during the second wave were initially part of the Black Civil Rights Movement, Anti-Vietnam Movement, Chicano Rights Movement, Asian-American Civil Rights Movement, Gay and Lesbian Movement and many other groups fighting for equality. Many of the women supporters of the aforementioned

groups felt their voices were not being heard and felt that in order to gain respect in co-ed organizations they first needed to address gender equality concerns.

Women cared so much about these civil issues that they wanted to strengthen their voices by first fighting for gender equality to ensure they would be heard.

The third wave (1990's – early 2000's): The "micro politics" of gender equality

Unlike the former movements, the term 'feminist' becomes less critically received by the female population due to the varying feminist outlooks. There are the ego-cultural feminists, the radicals, the liberal/reforms, the electoral, academic, ecofeminists... the list goes on.

The main issues were prefaced by the work done by the previous waves of women. The fight continued to vanquish the disparities in male and female pay and the reproductive rights of women. Work continues to end violence against women in our nation as well as abroad. This wave was about acceptance and a true understanding of the term 'feminism'.

It should be noted that tremendous progress has been made since the first wave, but there is still much to be done. Due to the range of feminist issues today, it is much harder to put a label on what a feminist looks like

Feminism in true sense refers to any ideology that seeks equality in rights for women, usually through improving their status. Feminism is rooted in ending men's historical power over women. While modern feminist thought is largely rooted in the Western intellectual tradition, the ideology is gaining currency throughout the whole world. In many cases, the feminist goal of equality for women has helped push movements around the world to change the entire way private society is viewed, and in some cases even helped topple authoritarian governments. [10] One of the greatest vindications of feminism is the power women in Liberia showed when, with some assistance from the international community, they ended the civil war and subsequently replaced the chaotic, unabashedly corrupt, and genocidal dictatorship with a reasonably functional democracy.

Feminism can be studied from the perspectives of the actual movements for equality or from the writings of observer, commentator and participant addressing the underlying issues of why women have not been and are not seen as equal.

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10. Three articles on women's roles in the Arab Spring.