

# Through the Lens of Feminism: Concept, Origin and the four Waves

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## Abstract

Women's movements are the movements that advocate for social, political, and cultural rights for women while also talking about empowerment and equality. The women's movements that specifically focus on achieving gender equality and dismantling patriarchal ideologies are known as feminist movements. This paper gives a detailed account of gender and gender based discrimination along with an explanation of the major four waves of feminism and the key demarcations which differentiate all the waves from one another. This is a review based paper and the content analysis method has been used for this purpose secondary sources like books, journal articles, and newspaper reports have been used. The paper represents an analysis of the four waves of feminism in a nutshell, the first wave talked about the political rights of women while the second wave had a broader area of coverage with the slogan "personal is political", the third wave which corrected the mistakes made by second wave feminist and worked on being inter sectional, the fourth wave integrated the ideas of the previous waves and amplified them with the help of internet while also introducing concept of body positivity. The paper concludes that feminism as movement will continue as long as women are denied their right to a dignified life with equality with equality in all walks of life.

**Keywords:** Feminism; Intersectionality; Women; Misogyny; Gender.

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## INTRODUCTION

Social movements are coordinated efforts by groups of people who want to change anything in society, whether it is social, cultural, or political. Economic injustice, discrimination, human rights, environmental concerns, and political corruption are just a few of the themes that can inspire social movements.<sup>1</sup> (Silva, 2015) For the purpose of

spreading awareness of their cause and pressurising on those in positions of authority to address their problems, these groups frequently employ methods including protests, marches, sit-ins, and civil disobedience. In order to garner support and bring about change from the ground up, social movements may also engage in lobbying, advocacy, and community organizing. The social movements that seek to advocate for women's right and gender equality are known as Women's movement. These movements aim to throw light on issues such as gender discrimination and inequality, unequal pay, violence against women, reproductive rights, and access to education and healthcare.

Building women's movement are "a process of mobilizing women and women's organizations for struggles whose goals are specific to gender equality outcomes, such as sexual and reproductive rights or violence against women."<sup>2</sup> (Jessica, 2013) Together, feminist and women's movements have been able to put an end to patriarchal gender power relations, which are to blame for violence against women and girls because they routinely exclude and marginalize women and girls.<sup>3</sup> (Karim, 2022) The term feminism refers to a political, cultural, and/or economic movement that addresses issues of gender based discrimination and works to ensure that women have equal rights and legal protection. The women's suffrage campaign, which battled for women's ability to vote, started the women's movements and has a lengthy history starting late 19th century.

The second wave of feminism evolved in the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on concerns including domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and reproductive rights. The 1990s was when the third wave of feminism gained momentum, it promoted gender equality and inclusivity while also acknowledging the interconnectedness of various oppressions. The fourth, which is still defining itself, continues wave which is still defining itself continues on with the principles of the third wave with an additional emphasis on people's right to define their gender. Women's movements have used a variety of tactics to bring about change, including marches, rallies, and protests, as well as lobbying, advocacy, and community organizing. Some of these movements have been successful in bringing attention to women's issues and achieving important legal and social changes.<sup>5</sup> (Taylor, 1999)

### ***Women and Gender Discrimination***

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Before talking about gender discrimination, the meaning of the term gender should be

understood properly. Gender has almost always been confused with the term sex but both terms have different meanings. According to the World Health Organization's definition, "Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed." While sex refers to: "the different biological and physiological characteristics of males and females, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, etc."<sup>4</sup> (Council of Europe, n.d.) The Canadian Institute of Health and Research provides a more comprehensive definition: "Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people." The genders aren't limited to men and women or girl and boy; gender is a whole spectrum of many different sexualities. To summarize gender is a social construct that varies over time and across societies.

When someone is treated unfairly or unequally because of their gender identity it is called as gender discrimination. The definition of Gender discrimination doesn't do justice to how much it affects a person; it can impact a person's mental as well as physical health. As analyzed by a Medical News Today article Women who said they had experienced gender discrimination in the previous year score higher on a depression screening test. Moreover, compared to men, women are more prone to develop eating disorders, PTSD, and anxiety. Women are 1.5 times more likely to attempt suicide than men, although the precise cause is unclear, researchers think discrimination is a factor. Gender discrimination gets worse when it intersects with social issues like class, caste, race, or religion, all of these factors make the situation more complex and compound to deal with. It does not only hurt its target but is an issue for everyone to deal with. Anyone who does not follow the gender roles is frowned upon, the gender roles rob men of expressing their emotions and put the burden of being the breadwinner for their family.<sup>6</sup> (Huberty E. S., n.d.)

On a larger scale gender discrimination can hurt the economy too "Gender based discrimination in social institutions costs the world economy \$6 trillion according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development." It is imperative to eradicate gender discrimination for the benefit of everyone in society. Women and the feminist movement have struggled for centuries to eliminate this kind of discrimination and continue to fight till day to achieve a world where a person's worth isn't predetermined by their gender.<sup>7</sup> (Georgieva, Sayeh, & Sahay, 2022)

## *Waves of Feminism*

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Feminism was one of the first movements in human history. There is no single definition of feminism, although it generally refers to the elimination of gender bias and the promotion of gender equality. Throughout history, various kinds of feminism have emerged. Broadly the feminist movements are termed "waves", the distinct times when activists tackled various feminist issues, and promoted feminism's expansive ideals of inclusivity and empowerment. Each of feminism's four most significant waves was built on the previous movements' gains.<sup>8</sup> (Huberty & Emmaline, n.d.) While certain feminists' goals have remained consistent over time, such as abolishing gender inequity and empowering women, others have come about to meet the demands of the time. For example, protests for voting rights occurred in the nineteenth century, whereas reproductive rights and more comprehensive women's liberation movements occurred in the twentieth century.

The term "waves" became popular after Martha Lear's 1968 New York Times article in which she emphasized the difference between the first movement for suffrage with the second movement of activism. The wave metaphor is commonly used to explain feminist movements; however, it has certain problems. It oversimplifies a complicated history of beliefs, ideals, and people who frequently clashed. With this simplification, one would believe that the history of feminism follows a straight line, but the fact is far more complicated. There are several small movements that interact with one another and build on one another. The wave metaphor is a good place to start since it provides an outline, but it does not tell the entire tale.

### *First Wave of Feminism (1848-1920)*

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The term "first-wave feminism" describes a protracted period of feminist activity in the Western world mainly the United Kingdom and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries majorly focused on the political rights of women. Initially, it was based on the advancement of married women's husbands' ownership of them as chattel, an attempt was made to oppose chattel marriage and fight for women's equal contractual and property rights. Women were confined to their houses and had limited power; married women were seen as the husbands' property, while unmarried women weren't spared either and were seen as the fathers' property. Their conditions were so poor that they could neither have custody of the

child nor could they start a divorce. In 1866 when the "American Equal Rights Association" came into existence, the purpose of the struggle changed from suffrage to the ability of women to cast ballots in the electoral process. Later in the early months of 1869 "National Women Suffrage Association" (NWSA) was established after the American Equal Rights Association group disbanded. In the same year, the "American Women Suffrage Association" (AWSA) was founded. Both of these organizations (NWSA and AWSA) later merged into one forming the "National American Woman Suffrage Association" (NAWSA).<sup>9</sup> (Anand, A Brief Summary of The First Wave of Feminism, 2018)

Nonetheless, there was a campaign going on for women's economic, sexual, and reproductive rights during this time, it was being led by feminists like Voltairine de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger. On July 19 to 20, 1848, "Seneca Falls, New York", hosted the first convention for women's rights, which called for "discussion of the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman." Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote the majority of the Declaration of Sentiments, sometimes referred to as the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments, which was signed there by around 70 women and 30 men, or 100 out of the roughly 300 guests. Of the 300 guests, there were no women of color. The declaration is now popularly known as the Seneca Fall Convention which planted the seed for future feminist movements. In 1876, "the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)", provided the campaign with unexpected support. Members thought that giving women more access to public life would enable them to have a good impact on the world. Unknowingly they contributed to the misconception that women's role was to be mothers and caregivers by believing that women were morally better and could become "citizen mothers".

In 1916 the National Women's Party (NWP) was founded by Alice Paul who was a young feminist at that time. Alice left the NAWSA and was reluctant on making constitutional amendments with regard to suffrage rather than the state amendments. The National Women's Party staged demonstrations outside the white house inspired by the British militant suffragists, their campaign continued during World War I. Party workers pressed the Wilson administration to support suffrage through picketing, going on hunger strikes, getting arrested, and using public relations. NAWSA's president supported the war efforts by US while striving to gain attention to the movement during World War II, presenting NAWSA as a patriotic organization.<sup>10</sup> (Lumen Learning, 2021) The 19th

Amendment's 1920 ratification, which took 72 years to complete, was the first wave's most significant accomplishment. Out of the 100 signatory of the Declaration of Sentiments, Charlotte Woodward, was the only one still living at the time the 19th Amendment was approved, though Woodward was too unwell to participate in the vote. During this early period, Margaret Sanger, a well known feminist, advocated for the use of free and easily accessible birth control.

### ***"Second Wave of Feminism (1960s- 1980s)"***

The Suffragists and Suffragettes fought for women's voting rights in Britain, with the Suffragists possibly having more success. "Representation of the People Act" was passed in 1918, the act gave right to vote to women who were over 30 years of age and owned a house. In 1928, this became accessible to all women over the age of twenty-one. The foundation of the second wave was laid down by the first wave. Compared to the first wave the second wave was more comprehensive and expanded the battle for equality to encompass more areas of society. Due to the feminist movements being white centric it was only after years that the issue of extreme marginalization of black women was being addressed in the second wave.

### **LIBERAL FEMINISM**

Liberal feminism advocates for legal and political changes to protect gender equality. It is a form of individualistic feminism that places a focus on the potential of women to preserve and exhibit their equality via responsibility for their own actions. To improve the dynamics between males and females, liberal feminism advocates for social change. Liberal feminists assert that change is possible without altering the structure of society because there is no woman who cannot fight for her equal rights.

Liberal feminists consider a number of problems to be crucial, including access to affordable childcare and health care, rights related to reproduction, abortion, sexual harassment, and the franchise, schooling, "equal pay for equal work," & raising awareness about sexual and domestic abuse against women are all important issues.

### **RADICAL FEMINISM**

The primary factor in women's enslavement is the male controlled capitalist system, which radical

feminism attacks as sexist. Radical feminists believe that in order for women to be free, the patriarchal system, which they see as essentially oppressive and overbearing, must be destroyed. Radical feminists contend that male dominated institutions of authority and power are to blame for oppression and injustice, and that society will not undergo major change as long as these institutions and their tenets remain in place. Some radical feminists think that utterly destroying society and reconstructing it is the only way to accomplish their goals.

### **CULTURAL FEMINISM**

Culture based feminism is the belief in a "female nature" or "female essence" that seeks to celebrate what are often overlooked qualities in women. While emphasizing the differences between men and women, it considers these distinctions to be psychological and cultural artifacts rather than features of the human species as a whole.

Critics of cultural feminism claim that it can be essentialist, discriminatory, and has a tendency to reinforce outdated gender norms and stereotypes. They also mention that it might be difficult to reconcile cultural feminism with other feminisms that emphasize gender equality as a universal goal and that it occasionally overlooks or downplays the significance of women's political and economic equality.<sup>11</sup> (GWAnet Central Asia, n.d.)

### ***Third Wave of Feminism (1990s-2008)***

Rebecca Walker, a 23-year-old Black bisexual woman, coined the phrase "third-wave feminism" in 1992. Third-wave feminism is frequently linked to the underground feminist punk movement known as Riot Grrrl. Riot grrrls adopted a self-sufficient and independent anti-corporate position. The focus of riot grrrl on a universal female identity and separatist frequently seems to have more in common with second-wave feminism than third. Rape, domestic violence, sexuality, and female empowerment are all topics that riot grrrl bands frequently touch on. The roots of third-wave feminism can be observed in the Riot Grrrl's connections to social and political issues. The third wave of feminism evolved at the beginning of the 1990s in reaction to criticisms levelled against the second wave and the backlash it provoked, new reform movements and initiatives were launched. Third-wave feminism challenges or avoids the essentialist views of femininity that, in their opinion, overemphasize upper middle class white women's perspectives. There was no hiding from the truth for third-wave feminists who

wanted to point out the problems with the first two waves of the movement. Conflicts frequently arose over movements which tend to be insular, and the majority tends to ignore anyone outside the norm. As a result, recognising the multifaceted nature of oppression and including marginalised communities were important goals of the Third Wave of feminism. It began with the second wave's sex affirming dialogues and shifted its attention to issues of racism and gender.

It is widely said that The third wave of sexual harassment claims began in 1991, when Anita Hill accused Supreme Court candidate Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment. Given the lack of an African-American justice on the Supreme Court, Thomas was considered a promising nominee and because both parties were African Americans. After Hill spoke in front of the Senate, which was made up entirely of white men, Thomas responded by denying everything and claiming that Hill had been the victim of a "high tech lynching."

Instead of people believing Hill's testimony, she received a great deal of reaction and her reputation was questioned. Her trial was broadcasted, and the image of a African American black woman telling the Senate about the harassment had an impact on women across America. In response, Rebecca Walker praised Hill and declared the arrival of the Third Wave in an article for Gloria Steinem's Ms. Magazine. Saying, "I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the third wave."<sup>12</sup> (Anand, A Brief Summary of the Third Wave of Feminism, 2018) Women's reproductive rights received a lot of emphasis during the Third Wave of feminism. Women's freedom to choose whether or not to have children, as well as access to birth control and abortion, were argued by feminists fighting for these rights to be essential human rights. In contrast to the First and Second Waves, the Third Wave placed more emphasis on the voices of young people and expanded its influence into pop culture and the media.

The Eve Ensler book *The Vagina Monologues*, which sparked controversy and increased discussion on violence against women, became a national success. Beginning in 1993, the BUST magazine expanded the media's representation of women. The Third Wave's plot was influenced by a number of different shows, including favourite TV shows include *30 Rock*, *Parks & Recreation*, *Thelma & Louise*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Teenage girls started to take center stage in media, and a new generation of young women saw feminism very differently from their mothers. Strong female

feminist figures increased in popularity as a result. Trans feminism became increasingly popular during Wave Three. Transgender people's legal protections had not yet been acknowledged by feminism, despite the urgent necessity to do so. Because Gender, sexuality, and self-perception were major concerns for the Third Wave of feminism, trans feminists felt more at home there. Although the Third Wave was essential in starting the process of teaching others, many members of society continue to misunderstand transgender persons.<sup>13</sup> (Snyder, 2008) In the 1990s, great strides were made toward women's suffrage and political power. 1991 was sometimes referred to as the "Year of the Woman," and by 1993, 5 women had entered the US Senate.

First female Secretaries of State and Attorney General both assumed their positions. Ruth Bader Ginsburg was appointed as the court's second female justice in 1993 and in 1995, Hilary Clinton delivered the iconic UN speech "Women's Rights are Human Rights,". The Family Medical Leave Act, which became law in 1993, allows workers to take time off without pay to deal with emergencies in their families or themselves. Specifically, the Violence Against Women Act, which was passed in 1995, improved the justice system for battered women. These were important Third Wave accomplishments and key US historical choices. Third-wave feminists successfully cultivated feminism that is universal, multicultural, and transnational through the use of mass media, notably the Internet. Yet, the third wave's emphasis on identification and the of boundaries did not successfully address many enduring macro-sociological problems like sexual harassment and sexual assault. The third wave was very individualistic in nature.

#### *Fourth Wave of Feminism (2008 present)*

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The fourth wave of feminism is still developing. It continues the struggle third-wave feminism began to end the exclusion of women of color. It also highlights how crucial it is to include trans women in feminist initiatives, fighting for their right to choose their gender in addition to the more conventional goals of gender equality and body positivity. Women between the ages of 18 and 29 are the "power users of social networking," according to the Barnard Center for Research on Women at Columbia University's #Fem Future: Online Feminism research. This study shows a rise in the proportion of women using digital places. There is evidence that new technologies like Twitter are being adopted more widely in regions

where women continue to experience societal inequalities. For instance, 72% of social media users in Turkey are women and girls. Numerous online initiatives, like "The Everyday Sexism Project" and "No More Page 3", as well as websites like "The F Word" and "The Women's Room", have gained thousands of supporters in the UK. Other movements like #metoo and #timesup have also gained lot of attention. These individuals believe that the internet can serve as both a platform for activism and a place for discussion.

The "Me Too" slogan was created in 2006 by Tarana Burke to increase public awareness of sexual assault against women. It served as a means for female victims of sexual abuse or harassment to let other female victims know they were not alone. When Alyssa Milano tweeted in 2017 to urge women who had suffered sexual abuse and harassment to share their stories, the actress Alyssa Milano boosted Burke's campaign. The movement gained worldwide traction as women from every major social media platform shared their stories of assault. In the end, the movement exposed numerous prominent individuals for abusing the women they worked with. It also emphasized how our culture has internalized patriarchal values and discriminatory views on women and other vulnerable groups.<sup>14</sup> (Boeglin, 2020) In response to the #MeToo movement's exposure of pervasive misogyny, more than 300 A-list actors and actresses launched the #TIMESUP initiative. The goal of the campaign was to raise awareness of the more widespread cultural problem of the imbalance of power between men and women in the workplace. It promoted fairness, safety, and justice at work by addressing issues including income equal rights and employment possibilities, especially for women of colour. They have established the Time's Up Legal Defence Fund to aid anyone who are willing to protest against discrimination and unfairness in the workplace. As a result of the popularity of social media, the most successful GoFundMe campaign ever garnered almost 21 billion dollars.

One of the other important and new aspects of 4th wave of feminism is body positivity. Based on a 2019 National Library of Medicine (America) study, body positivity seeks to subvert accepted aesthetic standards. It encourages acceptance of all skin colors, genders, and body types. All forms of media present us with societal standards of beauty. Women should aspire to be thin, have fair skin, have light hair that is straight or has no hair, and have a fair complexion. Even while they are not exempt from beauty standards, men are sent

words telling them they should be big and strong. The most common problem with eating problems is body unhappiness, which has been made worse by these impossible beauty standards. Using body positive hashtags on social media, 4th wave feminism has responded to this. Any social media platform can be searched using a body positivity related hashtag to find a ton of photographs about body acceptance. These photographs depict a wide range of body types, including transgender and disabled people. Hashtags like #All Bodies Are Beautiful are made to appreciate and promote a healthy body image.<sup>15</sup> (Cohen, Irwin, John, & Salter, 2019) The body positivity movement has not been successful in promoting inclusivity, despite its noble aims. According to studies, the majority of Instagram posts utilizing the movement's hashtags, including #body positivity, show young, Caucasian, non-disabled ladies. Some researchers have criticized the movement for praising obesity and being overweight while ignoring the associated health problems. However, this reasoning ignores the damage that can occur when people experience stigma and humiliation as a result of their weight.<sup>16</sup> (West, 2022)

Another highlight of the 4th wave of feminism is the Women's marches around the globe that took place as a response to the anti-women remarks made by Donald Trump both before and during his campaign for president. In support of reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, gender and racial equity, workers' rights, immigration reform, healthcare reform, religious discrimination, and environmental issues, more than 7 million people turned out to demonstrate. The march was well-organized and widely publicized on social media, making it the biggest in history. It is considered debatable whether or not online advocacy genuinely promotes change. The disconnect between online activism and dispute resolution in the real world is a source of concern. "Slacktivism" the word is used to characterise "feel-good" efforts that are well-supported from the public but do not always address urgent issues, like a petition circulating over Facebook. Research suggests that the internet is reviving feminism, but it is widely contested whether or not this is resulting in transformational political action. The trend to online activism may be a result of the persistent under representation of women in politics in western democracies; for instance, in the coalition administration at Westminster, only four of the 23 Cabinet roles are held by women. Female politicians were frequently discussed in less formal contexts than their male

counterparts in the months leading up to the 2010 UK general election, according to research from the University of Liverpool, and coverage of their physical appearance frequently took precedence over political issues. While there is much debate about how to tell the difference between the second, third & fourth waves of feminism, it's obvious that a number of fundamental themes drive modern feminism. The intersectionality and exclusivist nature of mainstream feminism continue to be significant issues. The political potential of the fourth wave is focused on providing those women a voice who are still being marginalized by society.

### Key Differences between the Waves of Feminism

The first concerted campaign to improve the status of American women was launched at the conference that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott sponsored in Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. Feminism's initial wave began here in the 19th and 20th century events. Women's equality was affirmed in the Declaration of Sentiments. Other rights, including voting, were also granted in a dozen resolutions. Even if early feminists were associated with abolitionists, some women's rights activists were outraged when the 15th Amendment was ratified in 1870 and Black men were given the vote before white women. Black feminists who advocated for women's suffrage, such as Ida B. Wells and Sojourner Truth were also excluded from the movement. Problems persisted for People of colour, especially black women until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965., despite the fact that the fundamental goal of the first wave of feminism ensuring white women's right to vote was accomplished in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

The second wave, which started in the 1960s, was mainly concerned with women's reproductive freedom, sexual liberties, equal pay, and defense against domestic violence, including marital rape. It was more radical and confrontational in approach. Works of Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*) and Carol Hanisch (*The Personal is Political*) had mass influence on people another prominent feminist of that time was Gloria Steinem. The 1990s saw the emergence of the Wave Third of feminism, which was marked by a focus on issues such as intersectionality, the deconstruction of gender roles, and the empowerment of women of color and LGBTQ+ individuals. Key figures in this movement included Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde. Early in the 2010s, the fourth wave of feminism began, and it is currently going strong. Focusing on problems like

body positivity, online abuse, and the confluence of gender and technology characterizes this wave. Active participants in this movement include Tarana Burke and Malala Yousafzai.

Feminism has been evolving with time as the needs and challenges have differed in different periods of time. While there are separate unique features of different waves of feminism the end goal has always remained the same to achieving gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms and structures.<sup>17</sup> (Sethmini, n.d.)

## CONCLUSION

Feminism as a social movement is necessary as it is a means of representation of women and other marginalized genders. As discussed above if it wasn't for feminism women wouldn't have very basic social and political rights such as the right to vote, right to property and access to education. Women voices became more capable of raising their voice against domestic violence, marital rape, sexual harassment at work place, discrimination at work place like wage gap and working hours, etc. Feminism has shaped many policies and legislations in India like "Equal Remuneration Act 1976", "Maternity Benefit Act 1961" and "Sexual Harassment of women at Work Place Act 2013", etc.

Men are expected to be strong and superior; they are not permitted to feel "weak" or emotional. Feminism has made it easier for men to express their feelings and recognize that feeling weak occasionally is entirely natural. Supporting the feminist movement is essential to the development and well-being of society because it makes society a better place for people of all genders.

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