

# The Central Issues of the Women's Liberation Movement

Annielynn Ibale

Department of Sociology  
California State University, Los Angeles

*This paper examines the Women's Liberation Movement, the generalized construct of women in society, and the underlying grievances of the Women's Movement. Feminist scholars divide the movement in three "waves" that categorize the different aspects and issues historically and currently. Throughout most of history, male dominance has been the primary social order. As a result, women have been considered inferior and naturally incompetent, both physically and intellectually, compared to men. Today, women are still being socialized through generations of traditional beliefs about gender. Thus, feminism will still continue as long as we do not address this social issue.*

<sup>1</sup>The Women's Rights Movement was a significant crusade for women's equality that began in the late nineteenth century to present-day. Advocates for women's rights initiated the insurgency as they yearned for equal participation and representation in society. Throughout most of history, male dominance was of primary importance to social order. Women in particular were considered inferior and naturally incompetent both physically and intellectually, and they were often stereotyped as less capable

than men. Furthermore, women are robbed of their self-confidence and self-respect, reinforcing their dependence on their husbands. Research done by Shulamith Firestone (1970) constitutes the central grievances that the feminist movement sought to challenge, which vary on issues regarding employment and pay, equal opportunities in education, property and voting rights, reproductive issues such as abortion and contraceptives, improved facilities for childcare, tightening the legal sanctions of violence against women in both public and private spheres which includes sexual and domestic violence, and most pre-dominantly to put an end to discrimination on grounds of

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<sup>1</sup> Annielynn Ibale is an undergraduate student at the Department of Sociology. Her paper was originally submitted to SOC 418 Crowd Behavior and Social Movements, taught by Professor Hyojoung Kim in Summer 2009.

sexuality, race, religion, and ethnicity (Ryan, 1992). As a significant account of women's historical struggles, feminist scholars divided the movement in three "waves" that categorized the different aspects of the issues that were being called forth. The seven key arguments will be further discussed throughout the following divisions of feminist disparity.

The first-wave which refers to the movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> century was perhaps the first instigation of Women's liberation. It mainly dealt with issues underlying the Suffrage movement, primarily concerning women's rights to vote. There were many prominent leaders during this era including American Civil Rights leader, Susan B. Anthony who played an important role in the anti-slavery movements, and most notably, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was also another leading advocate in early 19<sup>th</sup> century repression. Stanton wrote *Declaration of Sentiments*, which was presented at the first women's rights convention in 1848 held at Seneca Falls, New York (Salper, 1972). The words documented fought for women's voice and mandated inequalities. Women during this period began to make their voices heard through organized marches and campaigning advocacy on equal suffrage. World War II paved the way for expanding women's roles in work places. However, higher education was off-limits, and wealthy women held no property rights or economic autonomy. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed in 1920 that women were finally granted the right to vote, which also included reforms in the areas of education and partial healthcare.

Nonetheless, many women still experienced less control and liberation in the aspects of gender stratification. While subtle changes took place during World War II, in that they were able to occupy military and industrial jobs, as well as there was a rise in female college graduates, women's return to traditional domesticity increased yet again (Wrigley, 1992) Their career options were restricted to gender-based occupations as male workers still dominated the majority of high-end professions. This major up-rise in work discontentment and dissatisfaction with domestic restriction led to a new age of activism, which encompassed a broad spectrum of political beliefs and ideologies.

The second-wave came about during the 1960's to 1980's. Feminism took a continual turn towards particular issues concerning the inequality of laws, addressing official and unofficial legal discrimination on sexuality, family, and, most controversially, on reproductive rights (Ryan, 1992) There were many groups and factions that contributed to the women's liberation expansion. One of which was the National Organization of Women (NOW) that was first established in 1966, which sprang after The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) failed to eradicate sexism in the workplace, opting to take on racial discrimination instead. (Salper, 1992) The organization focused on issues on rape, domestic violence, abortion, and access to childcare, some of which was established by the first wave. Through constant and persistent campaign struggles, feminism grew into a mass movement, gaining support from other women of common discriminatory

experiences. Thus, the slogan “The personal is political” aptly summed up the goals of the second wave feminism. This period predominately marked many uphill challenges for women as they strove to address the issue and bring awareness to the public. (Haussman, 1992) Many other significant key contributions during the second wave took effect such as the written words of *The Feminine Mystique*, a book by Betty Friedan, which described the victimization of women to a false identity in that they lose their sense of fulfillment and freedom. The rise of radical feminism in the 1970’s was also notable during this period due to their fight against patriarchal roots of inequality. Subsequently, legal victories included the *Equal Pay Act of 1963*, which requires that both men and women be given equal pay for the equal amount of work under the same establishment, *Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, prohibiting employers from discriminating against employees based on race and gender, *Title X of the Public Service Act*, opting to provide family planning services to those in need, as well as major court cases such as *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Roe v. Wade* (Ryan, 1992). These court rulings gave substantive rights to privacy in the use of contraception and cases regarding a women’s right to abortion. To put it simply, the second wave fought to educate women to see their personal lives as reflective of the patriarchal structure of power, domination and sexism, that these gender inequalities classified women within a false image, which socialized them to behave or act in a certain way because society

expected that of them. But even with all this, there was still a feeling of failure during the second movement, which eventually led to a new phase in history that still exists today.

The third-wave which begun in the early 1990’s to the present arose as a response to the hostile response and criticism against the movement brought on by the second wave. It also addressed much deeper issues of women’s perception in America in regards to the differences pertaining to the standpoint of “oppression” between race and class, as well as issues on the bounds of sexual harassment and the definition of “femininity” (Rosen, 2000) In other words, third-world feminists basically tried to challenge the second-wave paradigm of what is good or what is not good for women, as they defined it by their own classification of its understanding. Momentous authors during this time such as, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, wrote *Manifesta*, concluding that the word ‘feminism’ is never wholly consistent because its definition changes and evolves overtime with each new generation. The 1991 case (*Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas*) in regards to sexual harassment was perhaps the root subjectivity of the third-wave, which focused on the intersection between race and gender (Adler, 1991) While the second-wave fought for the rights of women concerning reproductive rights, rape and domestic abuse, the women’s studies program and policies of sexual harassment within the work place became the third-waves prolongation. Derogatory words that down-grade women are also fought by this present movement, including the most

significant debate in regards to the “*glass-ceiling*” case in which women are discriminately unable to rise to higher positions within the corporate system due to gender barriers (Cott, 1987). Most of the third-wave feminists try to fight for women’s right as far as career inequality is concerned. For instance, women, who bear children, are opting for fair maternity leave, where in some cases women are trapped between their career and their children in which they are most likely compelled to leave their job to maintain the welfare of their family due to the social roles that constrain them.

This period, hence, marked the existence of how women are portrayed in the post-modern world. As far as the media and the depiction of women in contemporary pop-culture, we are greatly sensitized to the unhealthy and derogatory representation of females in entertainment as sexualized objects solely for men’s pleasurable needs. In fact, most women of today are socialized to be finer and slimmer than the average mass; hence, this is why so many of these cases results in eating disorders and bad dieting consumption due to extreme weight lose problems. Women of today experience constraints in what it means to be “feminine” in a masculine world. On the one hand, they feel compelled to be attractive and sexually appealing due to social coercion, yet they are restricted to becoming “too loose” or open to such advances because, in doing so, they run the risk of being constrained and mocked for being overtly sexual; this is apparent in cases between opposite-sex relationship in which a male significant other restricts his girlfriend for being voluptuously

exposed, but, all the while, expects her to be sexually appetizing for his own personal pleasure. And, insofar as work occupations are concerned, I believe that women are not entirely as “free” as they assume they are in the current global economy. Even though strong female leaders such as Hilary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and Oprah Winfrey have greatly contributed to rapture of the glass-ceiling, there is still a pattern of gender bias within the workforce. Linda Martin-Alcoff, a professor of Philosophy and Women’s Studies in Hunter College, states that while women are occupying approximately 49% of jobs today, it does not provide inclusive wages between men and women (Salper, 1992) The fact is that elderly women in the United States are more likely than men in the later stages to be poor and on welfare; a pattern that is still consistent in our society over the years. Thus, the Women’s Movement is still existent in that they are trying to reform the social order and the ways that they are perceived. Conditions such as the choice of occupations and the majority of people occupying certain jobs are witnessed to be more gender-related than they are diversely structured.

Today, conscious-raising of feminism has increasingly appealed to young men, although Nancy Cott (1987) reported that there is still very little awareness on the side of the male population presently. I believe this is due, perhaps, to the underlying factor of socialization in that most men find it difficult to speak out among the ranks of feminism beliefs because it is contrary to the social ideals of masculinity. Indeed, the historical women’s movement may have created a change for humanity, but

did not inclusively revolutionize the way we ideologically perceive the meaning of “gender” in our society. From a personal observation, I have witnessed countless women who have successfully reached the corporate ranks of male-dominated occupation, yet women still suffer as victims of sexual taunts and of unfair representation. Examples include “supermoms,” who are able to juggle both career and family life but are not getting the same constructive feedback as men who occupy a comparable job and are not required to attend to family means, and women, who are also the victims of derogatory name-calling and are victimized in sexual harassment for wearing provocative clothing. To put simply, women are still being socialized through generations of traditional beliefs about gender. Perhaps it may be because we are simply accustomed to the social ordering of individuals in our society that we do not question its existence. To most people, primarily young children, it becomes a normative way of understanding world. The main problem in the contemporary third-wave of feminism is that people see the feminist standpoint as antiquated in the sense that feminism is all about suffrage and the right to work (Cott, 1987). The issue lies in the ways society masks that perception into our awareness. Individuals believe that since women of today are essentially better off than they were in the past in regards to work that they should have no other reason to invoke further demands due to the foregoing success of the women’s movement. The fact is that patriarchy is still the dominant force that shapes our society and social order, even with the present success of women’s right to vote, higher education, and self-

determination laws. By studying the earlier Women’s Movement, I have learned that mobilizing a unified ideology of goals is an important part in opting for social change. Feminism will still continue as long as we do not address the issues and differences among women and their experiences.

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