

The Struggle for Women's Rights: History, Present, and Future

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Abstract: This paper delves into the multifaceted journey of feminism, tracing its historical evolution and exploring its contemporary developments. The overarching goal of feminism has been to challenge and dismantle the traditional gender roles, advocating for equal rights between men and women. The feminist movement has evolved through four distinct waves, each addressing specific facets of gender inequality. The first wave focused on securing legal rights, while the second expanded its scope to include education, workplace equality, and reproductive rights. The third wave introduced the concept of intersectionality and the need to consider the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds. The fourth wave leverages technology and social media, aiming to address issues such as online harassment, body positivity, and consent. Contemporary feminism also faces challenges, including online debates between men and women, often rooted in misunderstandings of feminist goals. Despite these hurdles, the future of feminism remains bright. It encompasses key areas like achieving equal treatment of women in the workplace, safeguarding reproductive rights, improving education for women, and fostering global solidarity to combat gender inequality worldwide. The collective efforts of women from all corners of the globe signify a promising path toward a more equitable and inclusive future.

Keywords: feminism, history, present, future patriarchy

1. Introduction

Women, as integral members of society, should inherently possess equal rights and opportunities on par with men. Nevertheless, throughout history, women have consistently occupied a subordinate position, frequently marginalized in political, economic and social spheres. This disparity echoes back to the ancient Greek era, demonstrating the prolonged existence of gender-based political inequity.

In the confines of a patriarchal society, issues affecting women, including sexual violence and wage disparities, have often been dismissed or ignored. However, as the modern era dawned, the awakening of women's consciousness led to a growing realization that these issues needed to be confronted. Women across the world embarked on tireless journeys advocating for their rights, giving birth to the feminist movement. The feminist movement has achieved remarkable strides in elevating women's rights and status, sparking increased recognition of issues disproportionately affecting women. With the movement's influence expanding, more women have been drawn into its fold, enlarging its sphere of impact.

Within the pages of this paper, we delve into the historical underpinnings of the feminist movement, its contemporary state, and the goals and directions it envisions for the future. Studying feminism's evolution carries profound significance; it empowers us to advocate for women's rights more effectively by drawing upon the lessons of the past. It also serves as a catalyst to awaken society and advance progressive thinking. Thus, examining the development, current status, and prospects of feminism is not just pertinent but essential for charting a path towards gender equality.

2. Waves of the Feminism

Feminism isn't a one-size-fits-all concept. It encompasses a range of beliefs and strategies aimed at achieving gender equality. At its core, feminism seeks to challenge traditional gender roles and division of labor. Throughout its historical evolution, feminism can be distinguished by four distinct waves, each building upon the achievements and ideals of the previous.

2.1. First-Wave Feminism (Late 19th to Early 20th Century)

This wave focused on securing legal rights, particularly suffrage, for women. One of the most significant milestones was the United Nations' adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which stated that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration without distinction of any kind." This laid the foundation for international recognition of women's rights as human rights.

This wave was sparked by the influence of the French Revolution and its revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In the late 18th century, a burgeoning number of women's clubs in Paris passionately advocated for education and employment rights. Pioneering feminist Marie Gouze boldly issued the first "Declaration of Women's Rights" on behalf of her club, arguing that the inalienable rights of freedom and equality should extend to both men and women. Tragically, she met a dire fate during the later stages of the French Revolution, and the women's clubs were forcibly disbanded [1]. In the years that followed, women's organizations were reorganized repeatedly, but they were always met with hostility from a patriarchal society, sometimes even provoking violent conflict. Pioneers like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the United States fought tirelessly for women's right to vote.

2.2. Second-Wave Feminism (1960s to 1980s)

Building on the achievements of the first wave, second-wave feminism broadened its scope. Leaders like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan pushed for gender equality in areas like education, workplace, and reproductive rights. The second wave had a profound impact on society, fostering increased awareness and practice of gender equality and women's rights. It challenged traditional gender roles and stereotypes, encouraging women's participation and advancement in politics and the workforce. Additionally, it influenced legal and social policies, including the prohibition of gender discrimination and heightened concerns about domestic violence. Moreover, it left an indelible mark on culture and the arts, exemplified by feminist art and literature. Literature from this era, such as "Pride and Prejudice," symbolizes a burgeoning female consciousness, asserting that "women are as intelligent and rational as men." Authors from this period often depicted the keen perceptiveness and discernment of their female protagonists in comparison to the men surrounding them [2]. An example from this period is "Anne of Green Gables," in which Anne's character epitomizes a rebellion against the patriarchal system, a yearning for women's autonomy, and a desire for self-dominance [3].

2.3. Third-Wave Feminism (1990s to Present)

This wave seeks to address the intersectionality of gender with other forms of discrimination, such as race and sexuality. It emphasizes individual empowerment, diversity, and inclusivity. Prominent voices in this wave include Kimberlé Crenshaw and bell hooks. Third-wave feminism also raises a significant critique of its predecessors: past feminist movements predominantly consisted of middle-class Western white women, focusing primarily on the concerns of middle-class white women in the Western world while often overlooking the issues faced by women in the Third World, lower-class women, and women of color [4]. This wave brought attention to the gaps within women's issues, emphasizing that gender alone does not encapsulate the entirety of women's experiences.

2.4. Fourth-Wave Feminism (21st Century)

Emerging in the digital age, this wave harnesses technology and social media to advance feminist causes. It focuses on issues like online harassment, body positivity, and consent. Issues of concern to fourth-wave feminists include sexual harassment on the streets and in the workplace, sexual assault in schools, and a culture of rape. Scandals involving harassment, abuse and murder of women and girls spurred the movement. These include the 2012 Delhi gang rape, the 2014 Isla Vista murder, the 2016 trial of Jian Ghomeshi, the 2017 Harvey Weinstein charges and the subsequent Weinstein effect, and the 2017 Westminster sex scandal, among others. Notable examples include the Daily Sexism Project, 10 Hours of Walking as a Woman in New York, A Billion People Rising, Women's March 2017, Women's March 2018, Me Too and others. In December 2017, Time magazine named several prominent female activists involved in the "Me Too" movement as their figures of the year, calling them "people who break the silence [5]."

These distinct waves of feminism collectively represent the ongoing fight for gender equality, each wave building upon the progress and challenges of the past, shaping the course of a more equitable future.

3. Contemporary Feminism: Evolving Strategies and Challenges

3.1. Current Development of Feminism

Nowadays, feminism has achieved great development. In recent years, with the continuous progress of politics, economy, society and science and technology, the ways of women's struggle have become more diverse and rich. One striking aspect of this evolution is the increasing diversity and richness in the ways women engage in their struggle for equality. The emergence of the fourth wave of feminism exemplifies this trend. Women have harnessed technological advancements to amplify their feminist message, employing platforms such as public accounts and short video accounts that focus on gender studies. These digital channels have extended the reach of feminist discourse, allowing it to permeate various software platforms. The establishment of these public accounts and the dissemination of their articles have played a subtle role in gradually influencing society to think about feminism. Moreover, as the public thinks more deeply about feminism, the depth of thinking in these articles also keeps pace with the times, effectively breaking down some hypocritical "feminism" and further clarifying the definition of feminism. Undoubtedly, this contemporary development of feminism marks a significant and progressive step forward in the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

3.2. Cinematic Focus on Women's Issues

The current movie themes are also paying more attention to women themselves. For example, this summer's movie Barbie directly caused a large-scale discussion on the Internet. "Everyone can be a

Barbie, every girl is a Barbie" is to encourage girls Let go of the cage of self-restraint, be confident, and not care about other people's words and eyes, bravely face various challenges in life, and do what you think is right. Similarly, films themed around domestic violence have resonated with audiences, raising awareness of sexual violence and the inequities within marriage. This cinematic evolution is an essential step in shedding light on critical gender issues.

However, there are still many problems in this process, and many patriarchal society's views and controls inevitably appear in these movies. Many movies still carry vestiges of patriarchal views and controls. This is evident in the fact that media organizations are predominantly led by male managers, with women occupying minority positions. Consequently, the male perspective tends to dominate popular culture, perpetuating the discourse of gender inequality as a reaction to patriarchy. Moreover, media producers, even if women, often grapple with the challenge of breaking free from the deep-rooted patriarchal concepts that shape our social culture. This struggle manifests in narratives that tend to cater to male preferences, thereby reinforcing patriarchal ideologies.

Even some female directors may find themselves unable to fully explore female-centric stories, as their success may hinge on producing films that replicate male-dominated themes, solving problems men control and desire to control. The reason for the success of their films lies in their ability to produce Films that are "just like men" can solve the problems that men control and desire to control. Although feminist thought has become more and more developed, the mass media's reflection of feminists is not satisfactory. Survey research shows that feminists are more "demonized" by the media than ordinary women, which is the "symbolic annihilation" pointed out by Tuchman. This also shows that feminist media research still has a long way to go [6].

3.3. Online Controversies about Feminism

The continuous development of feminism has also made online controversy more intense. The main problem is the debate between men and women. Some men are still rigid in their thinking. They believe that because the law has protected all citizens, including women, the feminist movement has completely lost its meaning. And some people who have a wrong understanding of feminism have led to the beginning of gender opposition debates online. The root of these debates lies in the misunderstanding of feminism. First of all, the feminist movement has never regarded men as their enemies. The feminist movement is only the pursuit of equal labor relations. In fact, the biggest misunderstanding of women's rights is that it only cares about women and protects women's interests. Not only do many men misunderstand this, but also women. Many feminist scholars agree that men's liberation is an integral part of women's rights because men are also harmed by traditional gender roles, such as Bell Hookes (American feminist theorist, cultural critic, educator, writer, and poet. One of America's indispensable, independent thinkers) [7]. At the same time, those men who believe that men and women are already equal enough and that the feminist movement is meaningless do not realize the shackles imposed on women by this patriarchal society, nor the differences in biological and social responsibilities between women and men. And it brings even more difficulties to women.

These disputes can be analyzed from two aspects. On the one hand, it is indeed not conducive to promoting the current relationship between men and women, making the problem of gender opposition more serious. But on the other hand, this has greatly promoted the spread of feminism, causing more women to awaken and fight for women's rights. As feminism continues to evolve, it is imperative to study its development, current status, and future prospects. A deep understanding of feminism is necessary to navigate the complexities of contemporary gender relations and ensure that progress toward gender equality remains steadfast.

4. Envisioning the Future of Feminism

As feminism continues its journey towards gender equality, there remains a substantial path to tread. However, the future of feminism is luminous. In charting its course ahead, several key facets come into focus.

4.1. Equal Treatment of Women at Work

Securing equal treatment for women in the workplace is an ongoing and critical battle. Continued efforts to break down gender barriers and encourage diversity are essential. Women still suffer many inequities at work, and although most countries have laws in place to regulate these inequalities, invisible shackles remain. These issues span beyond salary discrepancies and encompass unequal treatment, such as gender-based assumptions about household and caregiving responsibilities. In many societies, men enter the workforce unburdened by household and childcare duties. This inequality often extends to workplace perceptions of women's abilities, hindering their progress up the career ladder. Women who seek success in traditionally male-dominated environments often face a challenging balancing act between professional life and family responsibilities. While some attain the label of a "strong woman," it often triggers societal discrimination. In essence, such women are trapped between societal expectations of the "good wife and mother" and their career aspirations. Moreover, women's biological differences sometimes result in disadvantages, particularly in professional contexts that involve social activities. Women might feel compelled to push themselves beyond reasonable boundaries, often at the cost of their well-being. Consequently, maternity-related challenges are often visible in the workplace. Although women will have longer maternity leave, after returning to work after maternity leave, there are many women who have lost the opportunity to be promoted.

4.2. Reproductive Rights

Access to reproductive healthcare, including contraception and safe abortions, remains a contentious issue. Protecting these reproductive rights is of utmost importance. It is essential to emphasize that a woman's decision to have children should remain exclusively within her purview. Biological rights should unequivocally rest in her hands. Fertility holds profound implications for women. It is the means by which women fulfill their biological destiny. Yet, the ongoing debate over reproductive rights has made it clear that nature no longer wholly dictates reproduction. Over the last century, humankind has gained control over reproductive functions [8]. However, setbacks have arisen, as seen in the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, giving states the power to enact abortion laws, eroding the constitutional protection of this right [9]. While the move sparked nationwide protests, it underscored the vulnerability of women's reproductive rights. The objections to abortion, notably from men, are often devoid of moral concerns and fail to address the circumstances of rape or spousal deception that often necessitate the procedure. Moreover, the opposition often disregards the inadequate healthcare infrastructure contributing to high maternal mortality rates. These limitations stem from a society that ties women to the "good wife and mother" stereotype upon childbirth, a responsibility not equally shared by men [10]. Therefore, this aspect of the problem also needs to be solved urgently.

4.3. Education

The issue of education is also a major problem for women. Let's start with those rural areas that are not equally developed. Those economically underdeveloped rural areas are still at a relatively backward level ideologically. They attach importance to the education of girls, and in those areas

girls' education usually stops at the age of 16 or even earlier, after which they return home to help with farming, and when they grow up for a while, they generally go to the big cities to work, and then marry and have children at the request of their parents. This creates a closed loop that acts on their children. The root of the problem is the lack of education for women, the inability of economically backward areas to care about women's education, and even those areas do not have the conditions to build schools, not to mention the feudal ideology that girls are considered unnecessary to go to school. And for those girls who have the opportunity to go to school, there are also various invisible barriers. Admission criteria sometimes favor boys, and they are more likely to gain access to educational institutions. Gender disparities extend to standardized testing, with lower admission requirements for male candidates, thereby perpetuating inequality. Correcting these deep-seated issues demands time and extensive change, primarily rooted in transforming societal perceptions of women's roles and dismantling patriarchal systems.

4.4. Global Feminism

Global feminism is not just a concern; it's a powerful catalyst for change. The fight for gender equality transcends borders and holds the promise of reshaping our collective future. In this context, the unity of women from all corners of the globe is a beacon of hope. It's a call to action that women, regardless of their nationality or cultural background, should rally together to champion the rights of women worldwide.

In our contemporary world, disparities in women's legal rights persist, often tied to economic underdevelopment. This underscores the inextricable link between economic progress and gender equality. Tragically, some regions, particularly parts of Africa, still adhere to antiquated feudal systems that perpetuate significant harm to women's health and well-being. Additionally, restrictive norms and practices continue to impede women's autonomy in various facets of social life in many nations.

The battle for women's rights is not an isolated struggle but a shared endeavor on a global scale. It's a call for solidarity, transcending boundaries, cultures, and traditions, as we work collectively to pave the way for a brighter future where gender equality knows no bounds.

5. Conclusion

Feminism's evolution and its unyielding pursuit of gender equality throughout history present a tapestry of progress and challenges. As we journey through the annals of feminist waves, from the suffragettes of the first wave to the digital activists of the fourth wave, a common thread of determination and resilience emerges. This paper's exploration of feminism's past and present has underscored the achievements and struggles, while spotlighting the challenges and aspirations that lie ahead.

The current state of feminism reflects substantial advancements. Women have harnessed the power of technology to disseminate their message and build a vibrant community. The digital realm has served as a dynamic platform for discussions, enabling the dissection of the hypocritical aspects of feminism and sharpening its definition. Furthermore, cinema and media have started paying greater attention to women's issues, bringing narratives that prompt discussions on domestic violence, sexual inequality, and societal stereotypes.

Despite this progress, deep-seated patriarchal values continue to manifest themselves within these realms. Biases within media organizations, the lingering influence of traditional gender roles, and the internalization of the male perspective persist in cinema, posing challenges to women's equal representation and the fostering of a more inclusive narrative. Symbolic annihilation of feminists in media perpetuates the struggle for fair and comprehensive representation.

As feminism pushes forward, the path to achieving gender equality is illuminated by hope and determination. The progress of feminism symbolizes a broader awakening, not just for women but for society as a whole. It calls for the dismantling of patriarchal systems, the questioning of traditional gender roles, and the establishment of a world where gender is no longer a determinant of one's opportunities. Feminism is a universal cause, transcending boundaries, and offering the promise of a future where equality is no longer an aspiration but a reality. It's a journey we must undertake collectively, for the future of feminism is a brighter, more equitable world for all.

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