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Rethinking Feminism: Origins, Divisions and Enduring Debates

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Abstract

Feminism stands as a dynamic intellectual and political movement dedicated to challenging gender-based injustice. Far from a unified doctrine, it encompasses diverse perspectives on the nature of sexism, the meaning of gender, and the strategies necessary for social transformation. This study argues that feminism's continued significance lies in its adoption of an intersectional framework, though this complexity introduces challenges to its coherence and practical application. Using a qualitative approach grounded in historical and discursive analysis, this research traces feminism's evolution through its major waves and theoretical traditions, including liberal, radical, socialist, and post-colonial thought. It critically examines foundational concepts such as the sex/gender distinction, the varied manifestations of patriarchy, and the feminist critique of the public-private divide. The study also engages with contemporary debates, including trans feminism, neoliberal feminism, and global movements for gender justice. The findings reveal that while feminists broadly agree on the illegitimacy of women's subordination, deep disagreements persist regarding the roots of oppression and the means of liberation. The sex/gender distinction proves essential in challenging biological determinism, while the concept of patriarchy illuminates the systemic nature of male dominance. Feminist critiques of the public-private dichotomy expose how traditional political theory has rendered domestic oppression invisible, yet feminists remain divided on whether privacy rights serve as a tool for emancipation or a reinforcement of patriarchal control. Ultimately, this study contends that feminism's internal tensions, rather than indicating decline, reflect its continued capacity to generate critical insights into the intersecting dynamics of gender, class, caste, race, and sexuality in contemporary society.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchy, intersectionality, sex/gender distinction, public-private dichotomy, feminist waves, liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, post-colonial feminism.

1. Introduction

Few intellectual and political movements have reshaped modern society as profoundly as feminism. At its core, it represents a dual commitment: a theoretical effort to understand the roots of gender-based injustice and a practical drive to dismantle sexism in all its manifestations. Yet feminism is far from a single, unified doctrine. Those who identify with it often hold deeply divergent views on what constitutes sexism, how it should be addressed, and what gender itself means—both socially and politically. The movement has grown from its early focus on legal rights, such as suffrage rights, into a far-reaching examination of how gender intersects with caste, race, class, and sexuality. Driven by the overarching goal of social justice, feminist thought now engages with an expansive array of subjects, including the body, labour, disability, family structures, globalization, human rights, popular culture, reproductive justice, science, selfhood, and sexuality.

The significance of feminist inquiry extends beyond academic circles; it informs policy debates, shapes social movements, and challenges deeply entrenched cultural assumptions. From the #MeToo movement that exposed the pervasiveness of sexual harassment across industries to ongoing struggles for reproductive autonomy and equal pay, feminist ideas continue to animate contemporary political life. Yet despite these achievements, feminism remains a contested terrain, both from external critics who question its relevance and from internal debates that reveal fundamental disagreements about priorities, methods, and goals. This study argues that feminism's continued relevance lies in its capacity to adopt an intersectional lens. However, intersectionality also creates tensions, posing challenges to the movement's cohesion and its translation into practice. The objectives here are threefold: first, to explore feminism in its normative and descriptive dimensions, as well as in practice; second, to trace its historical development, distinguishing between the various waves and traditions that emerged in response to specific socio-political contexts; and third, to critically examine foundational concepts such as the sex/gender distinction, patriarchy, and the public/private divide. Using a qualitative approach grounded in historical and discursive analysis, this research engages with texts from liberal, radical, socialist, and post-colonial traditions, ultimately highlighting areas of internal disagreement that continue to shape feminist theory

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and activism.

1.1. The Historical Roots of Feminism

The term "feminism" carries multiple, often contested meanings. Some scholars use it to describe a specific political movement that emerged in Europe and the United States, while others apply it more broadly to any belief that women face systemic injustice—even if the precise nature of that injustice remains debated. Originally, in the mid-nineteenth century, the word referred simply to "the qualities of females." Its modern political usage gained traction after the First International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892, when the French term féministe began appearing regularly in English to describe advocacy for women's equal rights based on the principle of sexual equality. Many accounts of feminism's history adopt a wave model. First-wave feminism is typically located in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, centered on the campaign for women's suffrage. According to this narrative, feminist momentum waned between the world wars, only to be revived in the late 1960s and 1970s as second-wave feminism. More recently, transformations since the 1990s have been labelled third-wave feminism. Some scholars now speak of a fourth wave, characterized by digital activism, social media campaigns, and a renewed focus on global solidarity, sexual harassment, and trans rights.

Yet this periodization has drawn significant criticism. By focusing narrowly on specific moments of activism in the West, it overlooks the long history of resistance to male domination across cultures and eras, effectively erasing the contributions of non-Western and earlier movements. Even within Europe and the United States, the wave framework neglects ongoing feminist efforts between the 1920s and 1960s, as well as activism outside mainstream circles—particularly among working-class women and women of colour. For instance, the suffrage movement itself was marred by racial exclusion, with organizations like the National American Woman Suffrage Association often marginalizing Black suffragists such as Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, who fought for both racial and gender justice. An alternative approach defines feminism by its political ideas, specifically the commitment to women's equal rights. This has the advantage of recognizing feminist efforts beyond the Western women's liberation movement. However, it also invites controversy, as it frames feminism within a liberal political framework. While most feminists would agree that equal rights are a necessary goal, many argue that rights alone are insufficient. Women's oppression, they contend, is not limited to the denial of legal or political rights; it is embedded in social structures, cultural norms, and even individual consciousness.

The global dimension of feminist history further complicates any simple narrative. In India, for example, social reformers like Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai engaged in feminist activism in the nineteenth century, challenging caste oppression and patriarchy long before the term "feminism" gained currency. Similarly, in Latin America, the mujerista movements and indigenous women's organizing have produced distinct feminist traditions that resist easy categorization within Western wave frameworks. Recognizing these diverse genealogies is essential for a truly global understanding of feminist thought.

1.2. Normative and Descriptive Dimensions

Feminism, in many of its forms, rests on two interconnected claims. The first is normative: it asserts how women ought to be treated, drawing on some conception of justice or moral principle. The second is descriptive: it maintains that, as a matter of fact, women are not treated in accordance with that standard. Together, these claims provide a rationale for political action, making feminism not merely an academic exercise but a movement for social change. For instance, a liberal feminist perspective might define feminism through the following propositions:

- **Normative:** Men and women are entitled to equal rights and respect.
- **Descriptive:** Women currently face disadvantages in rights and respect relative to men.

Disagreements within feminism can arise regarding either claim. Feminists may differ on what constitutes justice or injustice—whether in terms of equality, oppression, or disadvantage—or on which aspects of women's lives are harmful or unjust. Similarly, disagreements with non-feminists can involve either the normative or descriptive claim. Some non-feminists may accept the normative principle of equal rights but dispute the claim that women are disadvantaged; others may reject the underlying moral framework altogether.

The philosopher Susan James offers a schematic definition: feminism is grounded in the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged relative to men, and that this situation is illegitimate. This general characterization leaves room for diverse interpretations of what oppression means, cautioning against viewing feminism as a single philosophical doctrine or a unified political programme. Some would prefer to define feminism solely by its normative commitments—that is, as the belief that women are entitled to equal rights or respect, regardless of whether one believes current conditions are unjust. But such a definition risks diluting the movement's political character, making it harder to capture the disagreements that animate feminist debate, and weakening the sense of shared purpose that unites those who seek concrete social change. The relationship between normative and descriptive claims also raises epistemological questions. How do feminists know what women's experiences are? Who has the authority to speak about women's oppression? These questions have given rise to important debates about standpoint theory, which holds that marginalized groups possess distinctive epistemic advantages in understanding social relations. Feminist epistemologists such as Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway have argued for situated knowledges—the idea that all knowledge is partial and shaped by social position—challenging the notion of a single, objective truth about gender relations.

1.3. Waves and Traditions: A Complex Evolution

The wave metaphor, though contested, remains a useful starting point for understanding feminism's evolution—provided its limitations are acknowledged. First-wave feminism, spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain and the United States, concentrated on de jure inequalities, especially suffrage. Figures like Mary Wollstonecraft, often seen as a foundational influence, shaped the thinking of suffragettes, whose campaigns led to women gaining the vote in 1918 (for some) and 1928 (for all) in Britain. Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) remains a seminal text, arguing that women's apparent intellectual inferiority was a product of inadequate education rather than natural deficiency. Second-wave

feminism, emerging in the early 1960s, expanded the movement's focus. It encouraged women to see aspects of their personal lives—domestic labour, sexuality, family dynamics—as deeply political, shaped by broader power structures. While first-wave feminism emphasized formal rights, second-wave feminism turned to issues like discrimination, oppression, and cultural representation. Influential texts such as Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) critiqued the post-war idealization of domesticity, while Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) provided a philosophical foundation for understanding woman as the "Other." The second wave also saw the emergence of consciousness-raising groups, which transformed personal experiences into collective political analysis.

Third-wave feminism, which gained prominence in the 1990s, challenged what it saw as the essentialist tendencies of the second wave. Critics argued that earlier feminism had often assumed a universal female identity based on the experiences of middle-class white women. Third-wave theory incorporated perspectives from women of colour, post-colonial theory, critical theory, queer theory, and ecofeminism. Its concerns included workplace harassment, maternity leave policies, sexual violence, and the intersections of race, class, and sexuality. Rebecca Walker's 1992 article "Becoming the Third Wave" marked a generational shift, emphasizing individuality, ambiguity, and the rejection of rigid ideological boundaries. Fourth-wave feminism, while not universally recognized, is often associated with the rise of digital activism in the 2010s. The #MeToo movement, #TimesUp, and campaigns like #YesAllWomen and #BringBackOurGirls exemplify this wave's reliance on social media to amplify voices, document injustices, and mobilize global solidarity. Fourth-wave feminism is characterized by its attention to sexual harassment, consent culture, trans rights, and the intersectional analysis pioneered by earlier scholars. Alongside these waves, several distinct feminist traditions have emerged, each offering distinct analyses and strategies:

Liberal feminism, popular in the mid-twentieth century, holds that all individuals are created equal and deserve equal rights. It attributes gender inequality to socialization that privileges men, despite women possessing equal capacities. Liberal feminists advocate for equal opportunities in political, economic, and social spheres. However, critics argue that liberal feminism focuses too narrowly on legal reform, failing to address deeper cultural and structural issues, and often overlooks race and class. Notable liberal feminists include Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and contemporary figures like Martha Nussbaum, whose capabilities approach expands the liberal framework to address substantive freedoms. Marxist feminism draws on Friedrich Engels' analysis in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1884), which argued that women's subordination stems not from biology but from social relations. In capitalist societies, class relationships are seen as the root cause of women's oppression. Men are socialized into exploitative roles at work and replicate these dynamics at home. For Marxists, women's liberation requires overthrowing capitalism and building more equitable social systems. Marxist feminists such as Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai were active in revolutionary movements, arguing that women's emancipation was integral to socialist transformation.

Socialist feminism links class structure to gender oppression. It argues that Western society undervalues women's domestic labour because it does not produce tangible goods for exchange, thereby granting men power over women. Socialist feminists advocate for ending both class and gender hierarchies, emphasizing collective action and the integration of race, ethnicity, and other differences—contrasting with liberal feminism's individualistic focus. Key socialist feminist texts include Heidi Hartmann's "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," which critiques the subordination of feminist concerns within Marxist movements, and the work of the Combahee River Collective, which articulated an integrated analysis of race, gender, and class. Radical feminism identifies patriarchy—the systematic domination of women by men—as the primary source of gender oppression. Radical feminists seek to dismantle rigid gender roles and the sex-gender system that enforces them. The movement includes divergent strands: radical-libertarian feminists emphasize women's control over their sexuality and challenge sexual norms, while radical-cultural feminists valorize femininity as superior to masculinity and focus on combating pornography, rape, and abuse. Radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon argued that pornography constitutes a violation of women's civil rights, sparking intense debates within feminism about sexuality, free speech, and the nature of patriarchal power.

Ecofeminism links patriarchy to environmental degradation, arguing that male domination harms both women and nature. It calls for using women's insights to foster harmonious coexistence. Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva critique the gendered dimensions of development and environmental exploitation, drawing on post-colonial perspectives to challenge Western frameworks that separate nature from culture. Black feminism insists that sexism and racism are inseparable. Black feminists contend that the liberation of Black women requires the eradication of all interlocking systems of oppression—racism, sexism, and class exploitation—and that such liberation would ultimately benefit everyone. The Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement articulated this vision, coining the term "identity politics" to describe the necessity of organizing around multiple, intersecting identities. Scholars such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw have developed this analysis, with Crenshaw introducing the concept of intersectionality to describe how social identities converge to produce distinctive experiences of marginalization.

Post-colonial feminism critiques Western feminism's universalizing tendencies, arguing that the movement has often imposed its priorities on women in the Global South. Scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her influential essay "Under Western Eyes," critiqued the representation of "Third World Women" as a monolithic, oppressed category, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of agency and resistance within diverse cultural contexts. Post-colonial feminists emphasize the importance of attending to colonial histories, nationalist movements, and the complex negotiations women undertake within their own societies.

1.4. Core Concepts in Feminist Thought

i). The Sex/Gender Distinction

A foundational contribution of feminist theory is the distinction between sex and gender. Sex refers to biological differences between males and females; gender denotes the cultural meanings, roles, and expectations built upon those differences. This distinction is crucial because the subordination of women has historically been justified

through biological determinism—the idea that women's inferior status flows naturally from their biology. By challenging this reasoning, feminists open the way to seeing gender hierarchies as socially constructed and therefore changeable. This distinction has also been subject to critique. Some feminists, particularly within queer and trans studies, have questioned the stability of the sex/gender binary itself. Judith Butler's work on gender performativity argues that sex is itself a gendered category, discursively produced through repeated performances. Intersex and trans experiences further complicate the distinction, revealing the variability of biological sex and the cultural construction of both sex and gender. Contemporary feminist debates grapple with these complexities, exploring how to maintain the political utility of the sex/gender distinction while acknowledging its limitations.

ii). Varieties of Patriarchy

Kate Millett, an early radical feminist, drew on Max Weber's concept of domination to argue that the relationship between the sexes has historically been one of male dominance expressed through both social authority and economic power. For Millett, patriarchy is not a matter of individual male behavior but a systemic structure. Her 1970 work Sexual Politics laid the groundwork for understanding patriarchy as a pervasive system of power that operates across social, political, and cultural domains.

The historian Gerda Lerner defines patriarchy as the institutionalization of male dominance over women and children within the family, extending to society at large. While this does not mean every man holds power over every woman, it establishes an ideology of male superiority and women's subordination. Importantly, patriarchy takes different forms across regions and historical periods. Uma Chakravarti, for example, distinguishes between the experiences of tribal women and those in highly stratified caste societies, and notes variations between nineteenth-century India and contemporary industrialized nations. Scholars increasingly use the term "patriarchies" to capture this fluidity, revealing how patriarchal structures intersect with class, caste, race, nation, and religion. Zillah Eisenstein's "capitalist patriarchy" highlights the mutual reinforcement of capitalist class relations and gender hierarchy, while Chakravarti's "brahminical patriarchy" illuminates the intersection of caste and gender in the Indian context.

Patriarchy operates not only through control over women's sexuality—often enforced through monogamous marriage—but also through control over their labour. Women's productivity, both inside and outside the home, is often managed by men, who may decide whether women can work outside. This control is reinforced by limiting women's access to productive resources, creating economic dependency, and restricting their mobility through social norms. The enforcement of dress codes, veiling practices, and spatial segregation in various cultures exemplify the material and symbolic dimensions of patriarchal control. The sexual division of labour extends into paid work, where occupations are gendered, and work associated with women is systematically devalued and underpaid. Teaching and nursing, for instance, are predominantly female professions yet receive lower compensation compared to similarly skilled male-dominated fields. Feminists argue that this reflects the cultural devaluation of work seen as an extension of women's domestic roles. Moreover, the persistence of the gender pay gap, occupational segregation, and the "glass ceiling" in corporate and political leadership attest to the enduring power of patriarchal structures even in contexts where formal equality has been achieved. Thus, feminists contend that women's subordination is not rooted in immutable biology but in social and cultural values, institutions, and ideologies. Issues such as the division of labour, sexuality, and reproduction must therefore be understood not as natural facts but as political questions open to transformation.

1.5. Rethinking the Public/Private Divide

The distinction between public and private spheres has been central to Western political thought. In liberal theory, it defines the legitimate scope of state authority: the public realm is subject to regulation, while the private—encompassing the family and sexuality—is protected from interference. In Marxist theory, Friedrich Engels argued that women's oppression began when housework shifted from a public, communal activity to a private, isolated one. For Engels, women's emancipation required their entry into public production. Feminist scholars from both liberal and Marxist traditions have challenged this dichotomy as both conceptually flawed and politically harmful. Liberal feminists argue that the public/private split has historically excluded the family from the values of justice and equality. The liberal "individual" was implicitly the male head of household, whose freedom from state interference included authority over the women, children, and servants in his private domain. As a result, oppression within the family was rendered invisible to political theory. Carole Pateman's The Sexual Contract (1988) provides a powerful critique of social contract theory, arguing that the original contract establishing political authority was simultaneously a sexual contract that subordinated women.

Socialist feminists add that the Marxist framework, focused on production for the capitalist market, overlooks the sphere of reproduction—the unpaid work of bearing and raising children and maintaining the household. This work, they argue, is not merely a superstructural issue but foundational to the capitalist economy. It sustains the labour force both daily and generationally, yet remains unrecognized as real work. By exposing the interdependence of production and reproduction, socialist feminists contest the notion of separate spheres. The "domestic labour debate" of the 1970s—centered on whether housework produced surplus value—exemplified the effort to theorize women's unpaid labour within a Marxist framework.

Despite broad agreement that the public/private distinction is detrimental to women, feminists diverge on its implications for political strategy. In the United States, some feminists have used the rhetoric of privacy to advance women's rights. Landmark Supreme Court decisions, such as Roe v. Wade (1972) and the 1965 ruling on contraception, invoked a constitutional right to privacy to secure reproductive autonomy. From this perspective, privacy—historically unavailable to women, who were not recognized as full individuals—can become a tool for liberation if extended equally.

In contrast, many feminists—particularly within the Indian women's movement—reject this approach. Influenced by the radical feminist slogan "the personal is political," they argue that framing issues like domestic violence, child abuse, and rape as private matters has shielded them from legal scrutiny. Bringing these issues into the public realm has been essential to securing accountability. For these feminists, the right to privacy often serves to protect patriarchal power within the family. They note, for example, that when abortion is framed

as a privacy right, the state may disclaim any obligation to fund it, and control over reproductive decisions can remain with husbands or fathers. In this view, the goal is not to safeguard privacy but to ensure that the state—despite its paternalistic tendencies—can be compelled to intervene against gender-based violence. The public/private dichotomy also has significant implications for understanding violence against women. Feminist legal scholars have shown how the legal system's historical reluctance to intervene in "private" matters such as domestic violence and marital rape reflected a gendered understanding of state authority. Campaigns to criminalize these forms of violence represent efforts to challenge the public/private distinction and establish women's right to bodily integrity as a matter of public concern.

1.6. Contemporary Debates and Future Directions

Feminist theory continues to evolve in response to new challenges and contexts. Transgender rights have emerged as a site of significant debate within feminism, with some feminists advocating for the inclusion of trans women as women and others articulating positions that critics label trans-exclusionary. These debates reflect deeper questions about the nature of gender, the politics of identity, and the boundaries of feminist solidarity. Similarly, the relationship between feminism and neoliberal capitalism has come under scrutiny. Critics argue that mainstream feminism has been co-opted by corporate interests, producing a depoliticized "lean-in" feminism that focuses on individual advancement rather than collective liberation. This "neoliberal feminism" has been criticized for ignoring structural inequalities and abandoning the movement's more radical commitments. Global feminist movements continue to address urgent issues, including climate justice, militarism, refugee rights, and the resurgence of authoritarian politics. Intersectional approaches have become increasingly central, with feminists attending to the complex ways gender intersects with colonialism, racial capitalism, and ecological crisis.

1.7. Conclusion

In many parts of the world today, women have gained a degree of independence and a range of choices that would have been unimaginable to earlier generations. Some have reached elite positions in politics, business, and academia. Yet these gains are unevenly distributed across different groups of women, and significant inequalities persist. Women remain underrepresented in political leadership and legislative bodies; they work longer hours than men when paid and unpaid labour are combined, yet receive far less financial reward; they are disproportionately affected by poverty; and their reproductive and sexual choices remain constrained. On a broader scale, societies continue to be organized around dichotomous conceptions of gender, prescribing specific identities, roles, and behaviours—though the content of these prescriptions varies widely across and within nations. The traditional notion that women are intellectually and socially inferior to men still holds sway in certain contexts. In rural areas of less developed nations, many women enjoy little personal autonomy. Even in societies where women have gained formal rights and responsibilities, men continue to dominate political life. The rise of states, classes, and major religions has historically reinforced male dominance, and capitalism has often deepened these patterns. Today, feminism is frequently described as being in crisis or decline. The widespread enthusiasm and grassroots activism of earlier decades have, in some quarters, given way to fragmentation, defensiveness, and a loss of momentum. Yet the movement's enduring contribution lies in its insistence that gender hierarchies are neither natural nor inevitable—and that their dismantling requires not only legal reform but a fundamental reimagining of social, economic, and cultural life. The diversity of feminist perspectives, far from being a weakness, reflects the movement's capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and to address the complex, intersecting forms of oppression that continue to shape women's lives globally. As feminism moves forward, its ability to embrace multiplicity while maintaining a commitment to justice will remain its greatest strength. In an era marked by resurgent patriarchal politics, climate crisis, and technological transformation, feminism's capacity to forge transnational solidarities while attending to local specificities will determine whether it remains a vital force for dismantling entrenched systems of gender-based oppression.

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