**Topic Page:** Feminism

**Definition:** Feminism from Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary

(1895) 1: the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes 2: organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests

**fem•i•nist** \-nist\ n or adj

**fem•i•nis•tic** \-fe-mə-\nis-tik\ adj

Summary Article: Feminism

From Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations

The concept of feminism is not universal and has many forms (e.g., liberal, radical, womanism) and definitions. However, there are three characteristics that are shared by most, if not all, forms of feminism. First is the recognition that women are treated differently than men, and are in the subordinate role in society. Second, feminists view gender and gender roles as socially constructed (and thus capable of change) and as differentially valued within society. Third, feminism holds that women can be autonomous and self-reliant. The main goal of feminism is gender equality.

**Brief History**

Discussions of women's position relative to men's go back at least as far as the 12th century, although "feminism" did not emerge until the mid-18th century. Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women, published in 1792, is considered the first feminist text. Early North American feminists struggled with competing loyalties: family vs. self, abolition vs. suffrage, and change vs. comfort, among others. In 1869, John Stuart Mill published The Subjection of Women, which distinguished between women's biological abilities and social construction; for example, it differentiated between the ability to bear children and the need to stay at home. It is a critical text because it was written by a man and therefore considered more credible by a male-dominated society.

Modern feminist movements are referred to as “waves.” The waves of feminism in the United Kingdom and the United States have similar timelines, although other countries have their own progressions. The first wave in the United States lasted approximately 60 years, from 1860 to 1920, and focused on gaining the vote for women. The second wave, in the 1960s and 1970s, is often prominent in definitions and descriptions of feminism. While many actions of the second wave were attempts to make family life more equitable for women, there were also extreme changes in society, both within and outside the feminist movement. The movement of the 1960s left out many women of color, often focusing on White, middle-class issues such as the right to employment and the distribution of household labor. The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in Roe v. Wade in 1973 made abortion legal, granting women control over their own bodies, and sparking a debate that has continued for over 30 years. Extreme actions covered by the media (e.g., marches, bra-burning, single-issue protests) managed to alienate more moderate feminists, distancing more women from what became a very
political label. The political climate during the 1980s and 1990s was difficult for feminism, and women continued to avoid the label “feminist” into the next decade. This is the era during which the third wave of feminism began.

Relevance to Intergroup Relations
Women constitute half of the world's population, and the majority hold a socially subordinate role to men. Compared to men, women experience inequalities in social, political, economic, and domestic realms. Feminism has brought to the forefront several issues relevant to intergroup relations, including (a) feminist identities; (b) stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against women; (c) rejection of dominant ideologies; and (d) collective action and social change.

Feminism as Identity
Females today may believe in feminist ideals but disavow the label “feminist.” This is part of the third wave battle, in which women are fighting to maintain the rights achieved during the second wave, but still struggle against many of the obstacles of 50 years ago. While women may have achieved much success in the workplace, their roles at home may resemble those of their grandmothers. During the 1980s and 1990s, conservative groups tried to undermine the achievements of the second wave, portraying feminists as angry, antimale, bra-burning, home-wrecking, lesbian, and so on. Consideration of this negative portrayal is key to understanding why many feminist women choose not to label themselves as such.

Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination
Societal attitudes toward women are mixed, encompassing both positivity and negativity. Researchers have identified two key characteristics on which women, and social groups in general, are judged: warmth (or likability) and competence. Women who fulfill traditional gender roles, such as housewives and mothers, are consistently viewed as very warm but not very competent. People view them as having low social status, and the common emotions felt toward these women are pity and sympathy. However, people feel more positively toward traditional women and tend to help and protect them. In contrast, women who fulfill nontraditional gender roles, such as career women and feminists, are viewed as not very warm but very competent. Society views these women as having high social status and in competition with men. Thus, emotions commonly felt toward these women are envy and jealousy, but people tend to cooperate and associate with these groups due to their high status.

Women who are highly identified with their gender are more likely to be aware of discrimination against women. However, many women recognize sexism toward women as a group but deny that sexism affects them personally. Part of this denial may be due to the fact that sexism, like racism, has become more subtle and difficult to detect.

Social psychologists have identified two distinct forms of sexism, hostile and benevolent. Hostile sexism is the traditional form in which people hold openly negative attitudes toward women. Hostile sexists view women, particularly feminists, as competitors with men for jobs and power. In contrast, benevolent sexism reflects a consistent research finding termed the “women are wonderful” effect. Benevolent sexists view women as pure and deserving of men's protection. Women are viewed as complements to men, as men's partners in heterosexual relationships in which women fulfill their traditional gender roles of wife, mother, and nurturer.

Women are less likely to endorse hostile sexism than men, but women are equally likely to endorse
benevolent sexism, especially in highly sexist cultures. On the surface, benevolent sexism appears to be positive and provides women with protection and domestic power. However, benevolent sexism actually enforces inequality between women and men. Benevolent sexism in a sense keeps women “in their place” and prevents their mobility in employment and attainment of economic and social power.

Benevolent sexism rewards women who maintain traditional gender roles by providing them with affection and protection. Women who violate traditional gender roles often are subject to the effects of backlash. The backlash effect occurs when stereotype violators are penalized for their violating actions. Women who appear masculine in any way can be seen as violators of gender norms, and they may be sanctioned for it—for example, by being excluded from a social group. Feminists often face the backlash effect as they work toward autonomy and independence.

Women who experience backlash are faced with the dilemma of whether to claim discrimination and seek justice. Research has shown that women pondering whether to report discrimination worry about retaliation and being seen as troublemakers. These fears are reasonable, as research suggests that women who claim discrimination are viewed as complainers, are derogated, and are blamed for their situation. Further, women have reported anger toward other women whose claim of sexism makes their gender group look bad. The negative social consequences for reporting discrimination may prevent women from doing so, which further perpetuates inequality.

**Feminism and Dominant Ideologies**

Identification with feminism involves rejecting some dominant ideologies or belief systems. Thus, feminism commonly involves disidentification with some of the core values and standard practices in U.S. society. A fundamental ideology in the United States and many other cultures is that of meritocracy. A meritocratic system is defined by the assumptions that people who work hard will get ahead in life, that people get what they deserve, and that anyone can succeed in life regardless of their circumstances. A meritocratic worldview conflicts with feminism because it does not recognize societal barriers, such as discrimination, as an influence on life outcomes. Further, people who endorse a meritocratic worldview regard victims of discrimination and inequality as deserving these outcomes. Feminism as a belief system recognizes that inequality exists and not all people are treated equally or have the same opportunities; thus, being successful is not due just to hard work. Feminists understand that women have less economic and social power and fewer resources because of unequal opportunities, sexism, and discrimination.

Endorsing a meritocratic worldview has consequences for women's well-being. First, women who endorse a meritocratic worldview are less likely to perceive discrimination. Thus, women who may have less life success due in part to discrimination may blame themselves for their inability to get ahead in life. In contrast, women who reject a meritocratic worldview are more likely to perceive discrimination and recognize it as one cause of their inability to get ahead.

Cultural belief systems, such as meritocracy, serve to justify the status quo. That is, people endorse the system and see the world in its current form as fair and just. A meritocracy places the cause of events internally, as due to a person's own actions. If society believes people are responsible for their own life outcomes, then social change is not needed and inequalities continue. An example of a self-harming consequence of women's endorsement of a meritocratic system is women's perception of entitlement to pay. Women can feel less entitled than men to a high salary for comparable work.
Another dominant ideology in the United States that is relevant to feminism is romantic idealism. U.S. society continues to endorse traditional gender roles in romantic relationships, where men pursue women in courtship and women play a passive role in sexual intimacy. Many women implicitly believe that their ambitions can be fulfilled through their romantic partner, and women's endorsement of the male "hero" is linked to their attainment of less leadership and lower achievement in education and work. Thus aspects of romantic relationships between heterosexual men and women may be challenged by feminist beliefs, and research has shown that heterosexuals do not equate beauty and romance with feminism.

**Collective Action and Social Change**

Attitudes toward women have steadily become more positive since 1970, showing more support for women's employment and education, as well as for the sharing of household duties by husband and wife. In the United States this is consistent for conservatives and liberals, and does not vary by region—except in the southern United States, where people show less agreement with these attitudes than is shown by those in other regions. It should be noted that in some parts of the world improvements are less evident.

Feminism is not exclusive to women, although the media would portray it as such. Men have the same ability as women to recognize the societal disparities between genders, realize that such inequality can be changed, and know that women can survive without men. Studies have shown that women's relationships with feminist men have resulted in healthier romantic relationships for both men and women. Both men and women report greater stability and sexual satisfaction with feminist partners. Thus men can serve as allies and partner with women to work for gender equality.

After the second wave of feminism there was a "postfeminist" movement that rejected some feminist ideas as having no merit. Postfeminism encouraged personal choice, and implied that women could have a career, beauty, motherhood, and a good sex life without any sacrifice. Besides ignoring political issues, it romanticized domestic life while not addressing the issues of women across the nation. However, continuing the work of the women before them, women have been waging small battles to change their corner of the world, and this could be considered the heart of the third wave of feminism. While they may not accept the label "feminist," women around the world are working to better their lives and the lives of others in a way that acknowledges and tries to lessen the disparity between the positions of men and women in society. This humanistic movement may be the new feminism, bound by the fight against oppression.

**See also**

Collective Movements and Protest, Discrimination, Gender and Behavior, Gender Roles, Ideology, Modern Sexism, Sexism

**Further Readings**

- Glick, P.; Fiske, S. T. An ambivalent alliance: Hostile and benevolent sexism as complementary


Casad, Bettina J. and Kasabian, Alian S.

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Harvard

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