Third wave feminism is a contemporary form of U.S. feminism known for a mixture of political, social, and cultural activism. Beginning in the early 1990s, third wave feminism continues to provide a vibrant basis for American feminist advocacy and scholarship. The term third wave is derived from a feminist historical model that presents U.S. feminism as a series of waves (discussed further in this entry). Third wave feminism is frequently compared to the preceding second wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. Third wave feminism has singular elements (e.g., its ties to mainstream and alternative popular culture) while also sharing continuities with prior feminist movements (e.g., prioritizing women's paid work and reproductive rights).

While there is not one authoritative definition of third wave feminism, it is typically understood to be a movement that emphasized an intersectional approach to feminism, as it made connections between different social justice issues. Rather than solely framing issues around women's oppression, third wave feminists claimed to be truly inclusive and address the ways in which racism and other forms of oppression contributed to the perpetuation of women's oppression. They argued for a holistic approach to social justice and took on bias within U.S. feminism that had largely been perceived as a white, middle-class women's movement.

Third wave feminism continues to address issues related to the American family, such as women's pursuit of equal pay, sexual harassment, life/work balance, domestic work, elder care, sexual violence, sexual rights, reproductive justice, and reconfiguring or challenging normative gender roles in media, politics, and other social arenas.

**Claiming the Third Wave**

The wave model of feminism developed during the 1960s and 1970s as women activists identified and claimed the history of U.S. women's rights activism. Calling themselves “second wavers,” 1960s and 1970s feminists used an aquatic metaphor to situate their place in U.S. feminist history. This model identified the first wave as focused on achieving women's suffrage, beginning with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and ending with securing the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 that guaranteed women's right to vote.

The wave model represented the 1920s to 1960s as a period of feminist inactivity after the failure to gain further rights for women and post–World War II cultural emphasis on women's domesticity. Marking their wave as beginning with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, second wave feminists saw themselves as taking up U.S. feminism's mantle as they fought sexism—from legally sanctioned marital and labor inequalities to violence against women. Major successes of the movement included gaining legal access to abortion as well as the passage and implementation of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that banned sex discrimination in federally funded education. The decline of second wave feminism in the 1980s was marked by failed attempts to gain formal equality through the Equal Rights Amendment, an antifeminist backlash, and internal feminist tensions around sexual politics. Thus, the reemergence of feminism in the early 1990s became the “third wave,” as Generation X women articulated and practiced their wide-ranging approaches to feminism.
The controversial 1991 Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings brought sexual harassment to national attention as law professor Anita Hill formally accused Thomas of harassing her while she worked for Thomas during his tenure as the head of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission. Attacks on Hill's credibility as well as the lack of women's descriptive representation in the U.S. Senate underscored women's marginalization in U.S. political and work life. The Thomas-Hill controversy formed the political backdrop for Rebecca Walker's 1992 article “Becoming the Third Wave” in Ms. magazine as she articulated a call for a resurgent, youth-driven feminism.

Walker cofounded the Third Wave Direct Action Corporation (later, the Third Wave Foundation) that year. The organization's “Freedom Summer ’92” voter registration campaign highlighted one tactic taken up by third wave feminists. The fall elections proved to be pivotal as a record four women were newly elected to the U.S. Senate, a result hailed by media outlets as “The Year of the Woman” and helping further feminist efforts to promote women's political leadership. As the 1990s continued, young feminists' efforts were grouped under the “third wave” moniker.

Navigating Feminist Generations

The wave model is also a means of expressing a generational approach to feminism in which former generations are viewed as “mothers” and the current generation as “daughters.” As second wavers found their political foremothers in suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony while embracing a broad-based approach to feminism, they set the groundwork for third wave feminists to demarcate their generation's approach to feminism. Many third wave feminists came into feminism and found feminist audiences through the communities supported by the rise of academic feminism. Beginning in the late 1970s, feminist publishing houses circulated influential feminist essays, poetry, and research.

As women's studies grew, largely young feminists received formal training in topics such as women's history and feminist theory. Third wave feminists in works such as The Fire This Time picked up the critiques of mainstream second wave feminism (racism, homophobia, classism) made by contemporary feminists to claim that third wave feminism simultaneously continued the feminist struggle of the second wave while not relying on a singular, central identification with “woman” or “feminism.” The wave model situates third wave feminists within a longer progress narrative of the U.S. feminist movement while continuing to produce a vexed relationship with past feminisms.

A key problematic of the wave model is its erasure of the multiple forms of feminist activism that took place, foregrounding a narrow set of leaders and issues that render a picture of a homogenous, liberal movement. In the case of third wave feminism, the movement draws on the work of second wave feminists, benefits from 1980s feminist activism and scholarship, as well as includes collaboration between feminist generations. As a result, third wave feminism can be understood as both continuing to draw on the feminist wave narrative to demarcate a generational shift while being interwoven with second wave and 1980s feminisms and feminists.

The April 25, 2004, March for Women's Lives on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., with an estimated attendance of 500,000 to 1 million, highlighted a continuing commitment to the feminist issue of reproductive justice while increasing engagement of a range of women's concerns across differences of race and class.

Third Wave Culture and Debates
As the third wave arose in the 1990s, feminists drew on a mix of media to convey their political views on issues such as body image and sexual violence and create a wide-ranging community. Riot grrrl zines, self-published or do-it-yourself (DIY) photocopied and circulated works, grew out of a broader punk music practice of zine making in the 1980s. Riot grrrl developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s as largely young women formed music groups that addressed feminist themes in their music, such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, L7, and Heavens to Betsy. Growing out of the riot grrrl cultural scene, zines enabled young feminists to create uncensored, personal works that expressed their anger at women’s oppression. Riot grrrl culture grew to become a cultural space in the 1990s where feminists critiqued the limiting social norms they encountered, and developed their own feminist counterculture.

Despite a decline in the number of feminist publishing houses, feminism-themed works continue to be produced by mainstream and alternative book publishers, providing feminists across settings with a significant body of literature to engage alongside DIY works. Such publications have provided one forum to debate the meaning and need for feminism in the 21st century. Rebecca Walker has shifted from arguing for an expansive feminism to calling for a move away from gender-centered feminism and claiming that second wave feminism promoted antimotherhood with a lasting negative effect on her generation of women. Walker reflects broader concerns about unacknowledged racial and class privileges by some feminists and a failure by feminism to create a means for women “to have it all.”

In 2013, Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of social networking Web site Facebook, authored the book Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead. Her work raised debate among feminists about the goals of contemporary feminism. Some interlocutors see her work as a positive expression of feminist principles and the continued struggle to break through the workforce’s glass ceiling (the seemingly intractable barrier to women's career advancement). Other feminists have critiqued her text as creating a narrow path for women of economic privilege to make gains while ignoring the ongoing oppression of less economically advantaged women and men.

The arguments made by book authors in their works and media interviews serve as the basis for ongoing feminist dialogues on key social issues through blogs; social networking sites; feminist magazines and online entities such as Ms. Magazine, Bitch, and Bust; and online-based Jezebel, The Feminist Wire, and Crunk Feminist Collective. Divides within third wave feminism at times relate directly to feminist publications, as Manifesta coauthors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards simultaneously critiqued the negative culture of Ms. Magazine and the girlie feminism of magazines such as Bust and Bitch. Their approach foregrounds a tension in third wave feminism as many sought to continue the struggle against violence against women while promoting a sex-positive attitude.

Begun in the 1970s, Take Back the Night marches and vigils continue on campuses and cities throughout the country as feminists protest sexual and domestic violence. In conjunction with productions such as Eve Ensler’s The Vagina Monologues, efforts to address sexual assault on campuses and in the military as well as to combat dating and domestic violence, feminists have raised greater awareness and support of these issues. Nevertheless, there does continue to be a range of social attitudes toward issues such as sexual violence, as conservative feminists, commentators, and politicians have expressed skepticism of punishments against perpetrators of sexual violence and misconceptions that women cannot become pregnant when raped.

In conjunction with a continued lack of interest in identifying as “feminist” by the general public as well as by popular media figures, third wave feminism continues to struggle with negative representations...
of the movement as inherently man-hating or overly political correct.

Alongside the long-standing negative stereotypes of feminism, the rise of girl power consumer culture in the 1990s incorporated feminist attitudes of women's empowerment into largely gender normative, sexualized representations of women. From musical acts such as Britney Spears and the Spice Girls to the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, cultural products consumed and critiqued by third wave feminists both popularized some feminist ideals of women's empowerment and also provide a rationale for postfeminist attitudes. Building on this cultural shift, some feminists’ focus on developing burlesque or feminist pornography has been derided as ignoring more critical issues women face, such as access to reproductive services or equal pay.

Proponents of these activities as feminist practices reply that through the exploration of sex-positive feminism, they are countering misogynistic sexual cultures and making feminism more attractive. Slutwalks, originating in Toronto, Canada, in 2011, inspired similar marches throughout the United States. These marches emphasized women's right to wear whatever they want in public without risking sexual violence or being shamed for their appearance, thus illustrating the mixed approach used by many third wave feminists. Simultaneously foregrounding women's sexuality and confronting sexism, largely women took to the streets of their communities to publicly advocate feminism. Mixed responses within feminist circles to Slutwalks demonstrate that third wave feminism continues to be a multivocal movement advocating women's rights throughout society.

**See Also:** Feminism; Gender Roles; Myth of Motherhood; Working Mothers

**Further Readings**


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