

46. Feminism

Women are at a disadvantage globally. With few exceptions, women have been, and continue to be, excluded from positions of high power, prestige, and wealth. Feminism demands the equality of all human beings despite their gender identity. To do this, the overarching goal of feminism is to level inequities between women and men. The feminist movement, feminist research, feminist thought, and feminist methodology lead us closer to achieving equality among men and women.

Defined by bell hooks, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (1984). Feminist sociology takes the standpoint of women's experiences to examine how patriarchal and male-dominated institutions, rules, customs, and norms disadvantage women in social, political, and economic contexts. Sociologist and Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1990) writes that for women, shared experiences of oppression and struggle against that oppression give them a particular standpoint. Refusing to essentialize, rejecting objectivity, and accepting that a universal truth does not exist are some tenets of post-structuralist feminist theory (Weedon 1997). Embracing that all women have unique standpoints that inform their perspectives, it is imperative to recognize that no research approach—qualitative, quantitative, ethnographic, theoretical, or empirical—best illustrates a feminist method (DeVault 1996). There are several feminist methods, schools of feminist thought, and approaches to feminist research.

Several schools of thought exist for conducting feminist research (B. A. Ackerly and True 2020). The most popular approaches among earlier waves of feminism, however, were the liberal, Marxist, post-modernist, and post-colonialist schools of thought. Scholars within these traditions focused on understanding the roles of freedom and equality, the means of production, the deconstruction of gender binaries, and the role of colonialism in women's lives. Feminist theory has explored how the "woman" category is created and exists only in its subservient relationship to the "male" (Butler 2006). On the other hand, queer feminist theory imparts that the social construction of identities, including

sexuality, can change over time and is thus impossible to place into finite categories. Queer feminist theory suggests that removing categories altogether is liberating and necessary to understand human behavior.

Advances in feminist thought now include a variety of approaches, such as anti-colonial feminism, Black feminism, disability feminism, ecofeminism, psychoanalytic feminism, queer feminism, and radical feminism (B. A. Ackerly and True 2020). Collectively, these schools of thought are useful in the diverse ways researchers can conceptualize the approach best suited for their project (B. Ackerly and True 2010). There is not one feminist method or thought that captures the range of feminist positions.

As a research paradigm, feminism and feminist methodologies are potent tools. How women interact within the political world, women-led social movements, women's political behavior, and their representation within political institutions structure how, and if, women are politically empowered (Sapiro 1984). Feminist scholarship emerged from a need to disrupt the status quo and masculinist ideologies in the social sciences. Feminist scholars, like other scholars, use the methods that are best suited for the research they are conducting and that can move the needle on the feminist agenda. Naming pivotal feminist movements is needed to contextualize the outgrowth of feminist-oriented scholarship and scholarly debates (B. Ackerly and True 2010). To understand how feminist research developed, it is imperative to understand the four waves of the feminist movement.

White, upper-middle-class women led the first wave of the feminist movement initially (Butler 2006). In 1851, the Women's Suffrage Movement, beginning at Seneca Falls, united women around the lack of voting rights. However, women's rights advocates existed before the language of feminism. Abolitionist Sojourner Truth combined women's rights and slavery's abolition in her 1851 speech, "Ain't I a Woman?". American women did not get the right to vote until 1920.

The beginning of the second wave of the feminist movement coincided with the publishing of Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* and the African Americans' Civil Rights Movement. Friedan (1963 [2013]) tapped into American women's frustration with gender inequity in the household. Through the National Organization of Women (NOW),

the organization she led, Friedan leveraged the protest climate of the Civil Rights Movement to advance women's causes and interests through rallies and demonstrations. Despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—which banned gender-based discrimination—feminists continued to fight to increase women's equality and legislate feminist causes.

While white women's voices and concerns primarily dominated the United States' feminist movement, feminists and the feminist movement thrived beyond the United States. Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015 [1983]) anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, organized the writing of queers, Latinas, and women at the borderlands as subjects of feminist research, on topics of race, gender, sexuality, and nativity, by writers from the "Third World." This anthology introduced a global perspective on women's issues and provided an avenue for non-Western feminists to connect. Race, sexuality, and gender expression are relevant for lesbian and queer women who reject Western feminists' dominance in feminist spaces (Lorde and Clarke 2007). Again, there is no singular experience for women, and it is imperative to refrain from essentializing women's experiences for forced commonality (Brown 1992). For Black women, women of color, and indigenous women, a universal feminist standpoint *also* intersects with their racial, ethnic, and national identities.

The third wave of feminism also broadened the topics addressed by feminists to include topics that impacted women worldwide. To further cement that feminism is a global project, the United Nations adopted the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international rights treaty. In 1979, CEDAW, although now ratified in many countries, aimed to expand women's access to reproductive rights, sexuality, inheritance, and property rights, access to credit, and allow women in the workforce. Similarly, the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) emphasized feminism's global reach. TWWA centered on the voices of women of color worldwide, particularly those confronting challenges in their lives as brought upon by gender, race, class, and imperialism. Feminists against imperialism, in India, at the time were advocating for their freedom from British rule and gender equality simultaneously (Mohanty 1984). Today, feminism remains Western-led,

despite women and girls' worldwide efforts to achieve gender parity.

For American women, the end of the third wave also coincided with electoral and representational change sparked by women's awareness and consciousness of sexual harassment in the workplace. The "year of the woman" in 1991–1992 is defined by an unprecedented number of American women elected to office (Dolan 1998). Professor Anita Hill testified about sexual harassment by Clarence Thomas to the Senate Judiciary Committee. Hill's testimony pushed against women believing harassment is an individual misfortune rather than a common experience shared by multiple women (Brown 1992). A chief concern among feminists is combatting sexual abuse globally. Most notably "Denim Day" raises awareness of how institutions fail to hold rapists accountable. In 1996, the Italian Supreme Court overturned a rape conviction because of the survivor's jeans. Denim Day demonstrates feminist international solidarity. Combatting sexual abuse continues to mobilize anger for women, which started the #MeToo movement of 2006 and beyond. The "personal as political" for women.

Globally, women are vastly under-represented in politics compared to men, which remains a challenge to the representation of women and feminist issues ("Women's Representation," 2022). Women elected officials are primarily white, followed by Black women, Latinas, Asian American/Pacific Islanders, Middle Eastern, and Native Americans. This is troubling since female legislators are more likely to propose, sponsor, and vote for bills related to women's issues—such as education and health-care—regardless of party and advocate for legislation that favors disadvantaged and minoritized populations (Paxton, Kunovich, and Hughes 2007). Despite women making great strides in elected positions globally, the positions women hold are often less powerful than their male counterparts (Paxton and Hughes 2015). Women's ascent to executive leadership positions is context-dependent and based on institutional structures, party selection processes, quotas, and influential institutions like religion (Jalalzai 2013; Paxton and Hughes 2015). Sexism among the public prevents women from winning elected office.

Lastly, the fourth wave of feminism continues one objective of the third combatting women's harassment. Contemporary

feminism has radical commitment (hooks 2000). Hip-hop feminism, nearly a 30-year-old field, is a broader space among Black and women-of-color feminisms and hip-hop feminist studies that takes an intersectional approach to contemporary issues. Developed during the rise of critical masculinity studies and hip-hop studies, this genre of feminism engages with women in hip-hop culture that spans the genres of music, literature, film, and cultural spaces (Durham, Cooper, and Morris 2013). Hip-hop feminism is a bold articulation of the messiness of women's lives that are often portrayed politically in binary terms. As Joan Morgan notes, hip-hop feminists call for a form of "feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays" (Morgan 2000, 59). This term distinctly calls for dismantling essentialist claims or feminist turf wars about who or what gets called a feminist. This is key. Hip-hop feminists do not conform to traditional or second- and third-wave versions of feminism that seek to theorize in abstract forms that are often used solely to deconstruct and critique rather than to build a new vision of politics (Isoke 2013).

What we learn from contemporary feminism is that women's under-representation in the public sector has dire consequences. Without feminist methods, women's perspectives are invisible. A feminist methodology is a shared commitment to center the diversity of women, use science as a mechanism that can reduce harm and consequences toward women, and advance change in women's lives (DeVault 1996). Despite the contributions of feminist scholarship, the critiques around feminist methodology are that it may not be "objective" despite scholars employing a range of methods and demonstrating the utility of feminist methodologies in advancing scientific knowledge (Eichler 1997).

Women's experiences were mainly absent in social science research before feminist academics. Because of feminists' persistent activism, women's private experiences represent their "personal" concerns but are also public through their theory-building efforts within feminist approaches. Across disciplines, feminist researchers must remain accountable to the goals of feminism and use research to empower women. Including women's voices in the research is imperative to achieving these goals (B. Ackerly and True 2010).

Overall, feminism is a powerful tool in research. Feminism serves as a political goal

but also a research methodology. Feminism frames social movements but also electoral priorities. Feminists and feminist movement(s) have advocated for women's rights in four distinct periods, each progressing in different ways toward equality. Centering women's voices is a simple tool to reach equality.

For political sociology, political science, and sociology, there's an imperative to interrogate feminist thought and women's local and global political activism to the mainstream. By studying feminism, the power that men wield over women is exposed. Scholars interested in incorporating feminism into their research agenda should (1) center women's voices, with particular attention to women of marginalized racial, ethnic, and national identities, (2) ensure that gender is an analytic category rather than a placeholder as a comparison to men, (3) contextualize how patriarchy and heteronormativity influence social, economic, and political outcomes, despite its invisibility. There are vast opportunities to expand feminist research, including developing novel methodologies, new theories, and paradigms, increasing the influence of marginalized women, and clarifying feminism as the struggle women face diversifies in contemporary society.

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