ISSN: 2393-8048
International Advance Journal of Engineering, Science and Management (IAJESM)
Multidisciplinary, Multilingual, Indexed, Double Blind, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed-International Journal.
SJIF Impact Factor =8.152, January-June 2025, Submitted in March 2025

First, Second, And Third Waves of Feminism

Muskan Singh, 2nd Year Student of BALLB(H), Amity University, Lucknow
Dr. Reshma Umair (Assistant Professor), Amity University, Lucknow

ABSTRACT

Feminism has developed in a series of waves, which have dealt with various dimensions of gender inequality and the rights of women in different historical and social settings. The earliest wave of feminism, which arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, dealt mainly with the rights of women under law, such as voting rights for women, ownership of property, and education. The second wave, extending from the 1960s through the 1980s, extended the agenda to workplace discrimination, reproductive freedom, and personal liberty issues, challenging public and private system patriarchy. The third wave, beginning in the 1990s and continuing through to today, glorifies diversity, intersectionality, and gender fluidity, moving beyond the earlier homogenizing of feminist movements but embracing electronic activism and transnational frames. This essay explains the ideological roots, achievements, and limitations of each wave and critically examines their implications for contemporary feminist theory. In contrastive analysis of these three waves, this research focuses on the ongoing evolution of feminism and how it continues to be relevant in conceptualizing contemporary gender issues.

Keywords: Feminism, first wave feminism, second wave feminism, third wave feminism, gender equality, women's rights, suffrage movement, Intersectionality

1. INTRODUCTION

The First, Second, and Third Waves of Feminism are distinct yet connected phases of the historical evolution of feminist ideology and practice each of which responded to the then-current social, political, and economic context. The history of feminism is intricately rooted in the struggle for gender equality, justice, and the establishment of the rights of women, that have been persistently denied across centuries. The term "feminism" itself refers to a movement that seeks to destroy patriarchal structures and introduce equal opportunities for women in all walks of life. Feminism, however, was never an integrated movement, but instead has evolved through a series of successive ideological and strategic shifts and thus led to the identification of separate waves. These waves are the broad parameters which guide scholars and activists to understand the changing priorities, objectives, and issues of women across different historical epochs. The First Wave of Feminism, which occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was mostly concerned with legal discrimination and political rights, specifically suffrage for women. It was characterized by massive battles against institutionalized discrimination that placed women in a subaltern position, stripping them of fundamental civil rights such as the right to vote, own property, and pursue higher education. Activists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony were important in fighting for these basic rights, overcoming ingrained social mores that supported keeping women out of public life. The suffragist campaigns in America, Britain, and other parts of the world became a symbol of the First Wave, finally leading to monumental victories such as the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in the U.S. in 1920 and the Representation of the People Act in Britain in 1918, enfranchising women. While the First Wave had succeeded in making major strides in achieving political representation for women, it was centered largely on the lives of white, middleclass women and seldom addressed the issues of working-class and non-white women who faced additional levels of oppression.

The Second Feminist Wave of the 1960s that continued to the 1980s expanded feminist activity from political and legal rights to analyzing more deeply entrenched societal

ISSN: 2393-8048
International Advance Journal of Engineering, Science and Management (IAJESM)
Multidisciplinary, Multilingual, Indexed, Double Blind, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed-International Journal.
SJIF Impact Factor =8.152, January-June 2025, Submitted in March 2025

institutions perpetuating gendered inequities. Unlike the First Wave emphasis on formal rights, the Second Wave addressed issues of employment discrimination, reproductive autonomy, sexual liberation, domestic abuse, and institutional sexism in social and cultural institutions. This was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, anti-war movement, and broader debate about social justice, which generated a more radical feminist activism. Figures such as Betty Friedan, author of The Feminine Mystique, which challenged the restrictive roles assigned to women as homemakers, and Gloria Steinem, equal rights campaigner and women's liberationist, became prominent figures in this wave. The movement also saw the formation of consciousness-raising groups, where women shared their own experiences of oppression and thus developed a better understanding of how structural issues affected personal life.

Figure: 1

The Third Wave of Feminism, which emerged in the early 1990s, represented a pivotal shift in feminist discourse and activism, aiming to critique, expand, and transcend the assumptions laid out by the earlier Second Wave. While the Second Wave had significantly advanced feminist causes—particularly in areas such as legal rights, reproductive autonomy, and workplace equality—it was also increasingly critiqued for its narrow, homogenized understanding of womanhood, often centering the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women from Western contexts. The Third Wave, in contrast, embraced a more inclusive, fluid, and pluralistic understanding of gender and identity, recognizing that the experiences of women are shaped not only by gender but also by the intersections of race, class, sexuality, nationality, and other social categories. One of the key theoretical contributions of this wave was its rejection of essentialist definitions of "woman," acknowledging that gender is not an absolute, biological constant but a socially and culturally constructed identity—mutable, performative, and context-dependent. Feminism, according to Third Wave thinkers, was no longer a fixed set of goals or doctrines but a process of continuous negotiation, transformation, and resistance.

At the core of this wave was a commitment to amplifying the voices of those previously excluded or marginalized in feminist discourse. Women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, working-class women, disabled women, and others with intersectional identities were now recognized as central to the feminist struggle, not peripheral to it. Third Wave feminism sought to be intentionally intersectional, reflecting the belief that gender-based oppression cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined in relation to other forms of structural inequality. Influential thinkers like Kimberlé Crenshaw advanced the concept of intersectionality, a framework that highlighted how overlapping identities create complex layers of disadvantage and discrimination. bell hooks offered powerful critiques of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, arguing for a feminism rooted in love, justice, and community. Rebecca Walker, who famously coined the term “Third Wave” in a 1992 essay, emphasized

the generational shift toward a more personal, experiential, and diverse feminist consciousness, one that acknowledged ambiguity and celebrated difference rather than imposing a singular feminist identity. The theoretical foundations of the Third Wave were strongly influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist thought, which challenged binary oppositions and rigid categorizations. Scholars like Judith Butler, in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), argued that gender is performative—a series of repeated acts shaped by societal norms and expectations—rather than a natural or inherent trait. This insight fundamentally redefined feminist understandings of identity, opening up space for gender nonconforming and transgender individuals within feminist theory and activism. Butler's critiques dismantled the binary logic of "male/female" and "masculine/feminine," asserting that such categories are not stable truths but constructed realities that can be subverted and reimagined.

Another hallmark of the Third Wave was its embrace of popular culture as a legitimate and powerful site of feminist engagement. Unlike earlier feminist movements, which often viewed mainstream media as a tool of patriarchal oppression, Third Wave feminists saw the potential for subversion and reclamation within the cultural sphere. Music, fashion, television, film, and literature became platforms for expressing feminist ideas and resisting traditional norms. Figures such as Madonna, Riot Grrrl punk bands, and later Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, used their art and public personas to challenge stereotypes, promote bodily autonomy, and explore themes of power, sexuality, and identity. Additionally, the rise of digital platforms, blogs, and independent publishing enabled a democratization of feminist discourse, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in shaping the narrative. The internet became a crucial tool for organizing, consciousness-raising, and community building, as feminist voices that had long been excluded from academic and mainstream spaces found visibility and solidarity online.

In essence, the Third Wave of Feminism expanded the boundaries of what feminism could be, prioritizing inclusivity, fluidity, and multiplicity. It invited critical reflection on power, identity, and representation while maintaining a strong commitment to justice. Although not without its internal contradictions and debates, the Third Wave played a crucial role in making feminism more accessible, dynamic, and responsive to the complexities of lived experience in a globalized, multicultural world. Its legacies continue to influence contemporary feminist activism, laying the groundwork for the emergence of the Fourth Wave, which builds on these ideas through digital activism, global solidarity, and a renewed focus on systemic transformation.

2. The First Wave of Feminism (Late 19th – Early 20th Century)

The First Wave of Feminism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a path-paving movement that laid the foundation for women's rights activism. It was predominantly focused on gaining legal and political parity, primarily the right to vote, which was a fundamental demand of early feminists. The movement was a reaction against centuries of structural subordination that had excluded women from political life, education, property, and other rights. Women were legally and socially restricted to the domestic sphere, their legal statuses and identities primarily being defined by their domestic roles within families—daughters, wives, or mothers. This absence of legal presence created mass activism, resulting in organized campaigns for gender justice. The start of the First Wave is attributed to early feminist authors like Mary Wollstonecraft, who, in her influential A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), argued for women's education and intellectual equality.

One of the most memorable events during the First Wave was the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in the United States, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, along with other activists, publicized their complaints and demands using the Declaration of Sentiments. Mimicking closely the Declaration of Independence, the document emphatically demanded equal rights, especially in suffrage, property, and education. The demand for suffrage, which would be the primary agenda of the First Wave, faced powerful resistance from political and social establishments that perceived women's involvement in public life as a challenge to settled gender roles. Yet, such resistance notwithstanding, the movement eventually picked up steam, with women mobilizing protest demonstrations, penning petitions, and constituting coalitions to advance legislative reforms. The fight for the vote was not strictly American; Emmeline Pankhurst and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Britain spearheaded militant activism, using civil disobedience, hunger strikes, and mass marches to push for the vote.

Figure: 2

Figure: 3

This period's political and legal inequalities were rooted in patriarchal institutions that accorded women a second-class status. In most nations, the law excluded women from property ownership for themselves, higher education, or professional life. Women who worked for wages outside their homes were usually limited to low-paying, menial occupations, making them economically dependent on men. The "separate spheres" philosophy dictated that men inhabited the public domain of work and politics and that women had to remain in the private domain of household and family. First Wave feminists directly challenged this philosophy, insisting that the women's imprisonment to the private sphere was not merely unfair but bad for society overall. Intellectual foundations were brought to the movement by people such as John Stuart Mill, who supported women's rights in his work The Subjection of Women, arguing that equality on the basis of sex was the very foundation of democratic development.

3. The Third Wave of Feminism (1990s – Present)

The Third Wave of Feminism, which began in the early 1990s and continues to influence feminist thought and activism into the present day, emerged as a critical response to the perceived limitations and exclusions of the Second Wave. While the Second Wave made significant strides in advancing women's rights in areas such as reproductive autonomy, workplace equality, and legal protection against gender-based violence, it was widely critiqued for its lack of inclusivity and its focus on the concerns of white, middle-class, Western women. The struggles and lived realities of women from marginalized communities—such as women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, working-class women, disabled women, and those outside the Global North—were often overlooked or marginalized within the mainstream feminist discourse of the time. Recognizing this gap, the Third Wave sought to redefine feminism by embracing intersectionality, a framework that examines how overlapping social identities—such as race, caste, ethnicity, gender identity, class, and sexual orientation—interact to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality became the cornerstone of Third Wave feminism, ensuring that the movement was more inclusive, representative, and attentive to diverse experiences of womanhood.

This wave was deeply influenced by postmodernist and poststructuralist philosophies, which challenged fixed categories of identity and essentialist understandings of gender. Unlike earlier feminist movements that often relied on the assumption of a universal female experience, the Third Wave rejected the notion of a singular definition of womanhood or feminism. It instead emphasized fluidity, multiplicity, and personal agency in defining gender and identity. The binary model of gender—male/female, masculine/feminine—was rigorously questioned, and the socially constructed nature of gender roles was brought to the forefront. Influential scholars such as Judith Butler played a pivotal role in shaping Third Wave feminist theory. Her groundbreaking work, Gender Trouble (1990), introduced the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not a fixed or innate quality but rather a set of repeated performances shaped by cultural and societal expectations. This theoretical shift enabled a broader understanding of gender identities, including non-binary, transgender, and genderqueer identities, which had previously been marginalized or excluded from feminist conversations.

A defining feature of Third Wave feminism was its engagement with popular culture as a legitimate site for feminist critique, resistance, and expression. Unlike the Second Wave, which often viewed mainstream media as a monolithic force of patriarchal control and objectification, Third Wave feminists saw potential in reclaiming, reinterpreting, and reshaping media narratives. They embraced pop culture as a tool for empowerment, activism, and subversion of traditional gender roles. High-profile performers like Madonna, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga used their music, fashion, and public personas to challenge conventional notions of femininity, sexuality, and power. Their performances offered complex representations of women as autonomous, assertive, and multifaceted, breaking away from passive or victimized portrayals in media. The democratization of media through feminist zines, blogs, and digital platforms further amplified the reach and diversity of feminist voices. Unlike the academic and institutional spaces that previously dominated feminist discourse, the internet enabled grassroots participation and decentralized feminist activism. Online platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, and personal blogs became powerful spaces for community-building, discourse, and mobilization around feminist issues ranging from body positivity and reproductive justice to racial equity and LGBTQ+ rights.

In this sense, Third Wave feminism blurred the lines between the personal and political, the academic and popular, and the individual and collective. It empowered a generation of feminists to craft their own identities and resist oppressive structures not only through legislation or formal activism but also through everyday acts of defiance, cultural expression, and digital engagement. However, the movement was not without its critiques, with some

arguing that the broad inclusivity of Third Wave feminism sometimes resulted in a lack of cohesive political agenda. Nonetheless, its commitment to pluralism, self-expression, and intersectional justice marked a significant expansion in feminist thought. The legacy of the Third Wave continues to inform Fourth Wave feminism, particularly through digital activism and intersectional approaches that seek to address the evolving forms of inequality in the 21st century.

4. Analysis of the Three Waves

The First Wave of Feminism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was primarily focused on obtaining legal and political rights for women, foremost among them the right to vote. Ideologically based on liberalism and equal rights philosophy, the first-wave feminists sought to overturn the exclusion of women from the public sphere and struggle for legal acknowledgment as full citizens. Influenced significantly by Enlightenment philosophies, which subscribed to individual rights and democratic principles, and by other social movements of the time, including abolitionism and labor movements, the movement was also inspired. Women's suffrage picked up steam as the defining feature of the second wave with activists fighting tenaciously for votes, believing that political enfranchisement would open the door to more societal reforms. Although the movement achieved significant victories, including the 19th Amendment in the United States and women's suffrage elsewhere in the world, it was controlled by white, upper- and middle-class women who often excluded working-class women, women of color, and other oppressed groups from their movement.

The Second Wave feminism that started in the 1960s and went on until the 1980s was a significant departure from earlier feminist action that had only focused on legal and political rights to also take in social, cultural, and economic injustices. Hardened by the civil rights movement, anti-war activism, and New Left politics, second-wave feminists sought to dismantle systemic and structural sexism embedded in everyday life. The movement was strongly underpinned by radical, socialist, and psychoanalytic feminist theory, which sought to expose embedded gendered norms and patriarchal underpinnings for women's subordination. As opposed to the First Wave, which had been more interested in legal equality in a formal sense, the Second Wave was more concerned with issues of discrimination in the workplace, reproductive rights, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and women's presence within media and culture. Among some of the highlights of this wave were some of the major legal triumphs, including the U.S. enactment of Title IX, the legalization of abortion in other countries, and the criminalization of marital rape.

5. Feminism in the Indian

Feminism in India is deeply embedded in the nation's complex socio-political, economic, and cultural fabric, shaped not only by gender-based discrimination but also by the intersecting forces of caste hierarchies, colonial legacies, and religious diversity. Unlike Western feminism, which developed in relatively distinct waves with identifiable ideological trajectories—such as liberal, radical, and intersectional feminism—Indian feminism has been far more organic and nuanced in its evolution. It did not follow a linear wave-like structure but emerged as a response to indigenous social realities, including caste-based oppression, feudal patriarchy, and communal divisions. The roots of Indian feminist thought can be traced back well before its exposure to Western feminist ideologies, drawing from multiple influences such as classical Hindu scriptures, social reformist agendas, the impact of British colonial law, nationalist fervor, and post-independence state policies. These diverse sources have contributed to an eclectic and syncretic form of feminism that is inherently intersectional and grounded in the lived experiences of Indian women across social strata.

The early stirrings of feminism in India became visible during the 19th century under British colonial rule, when several male social reformers took a progressive stance on the status of women. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule led pivotal movements advocating for women's education, widow remarriage, and the abolition of oppressive customs such as *Sati*, child marriage, and female infanticide. These efforts, though male-led, marked an important beginning in challenging the entrenched patriarchal practices of Indian society. The colonial administration and Christian missionary efforts also played a role in encouraging discourse around women's rights, albeit from their own ideological and often orientalist perspectives. Over time, women began to emerge not just as subjects of reform but as agents of change, particularly during India's nationalist movement.

In the early 20th century, Indian feminism took a significant turn with the rise of nationalist feminism, where women began actively participating in the struggle for independence. Movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement saw the unprecedented mobilization of women from diverse backgrounds—urban and rural, upper caste and Dalit, Hindu and Muslim—engaging in political protests, boycotts, and non-violent resistance against colonial rule. Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's call for mass participation, women entered the public domain in large numbers, challenging not only the colonial government but also traditional gender roles. Prominent figures like *Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay* played key roles in organizing and leading these efforts, creating spaces for women within the broader nationalist discourse. Their activism laid the groundwork for post-independence feminist thought and policy advocacy.

Post-independence, Indian feminism evolved further, reflecting the shifting priorities of a newly sovereign nation. It began to focus on issues such as legal reform, family laws, labor rights, political representation, reproductive rights, and violence against women, while continuing to grapple with the deep-rooted intersections of caste, class, religion, and region. Contemporary Indian feminism is thus marked by its diversity—encompassing grassroots Dalit movements, tribal women's struggles, urban middle-class activism, and queer feminist interventions—all of which seek to challenge the multifaceted nature of patriarchy in India. This ongoing journey reflects not a singular movement but a mosaic of feminist voices striving for justice, equality, and dignity within the unique context of Indian society.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of feminism across its first, second, and third waves illustrates an enduring and dynamic struggle for gender equality, shaped by historical, social, and political contexts. Each wave emerged in response to the prevailing forms of gender-based oppression of its time, contributing uniquely to the broader movement for women's rights. The first wave of feminism, rooted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, laid the foundational framework by advocating for women's legal recognition as citizens, most notably through the suffrage movement and the right to own property. This era was marked by a demand for inclusion within the political and legal systems, challenging the notion that civic participation was the sole domain of men. The second wave, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, expanded the conversation to the structural dimensions of inequality, spotlighting issues such as workplace discrimination, reproductive autonomy, sexual freedom, and the patriarchal underpinnings of both public and private life. It brought into focus how institutions reinforced gender hierarchies and called for systemic reforms. The third wave, which gained momentum in the 1990s, responded critically to the perceived limitations and exclusivity of earlier movements. It emphasized intersectionality—a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw—to reflect the varied and overlapping experiences of

gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identities. This wave broke from universal narratives of womanhood and highlighted the necessity of inclusivity, recognizing that gender oppression is not experienced uniformly.

Despite the remarkable progress achieved through these feminist movements, the pursuit of genuine gender justice remains incomplete. Contemporary feminism continues to evolve, confronting modern challenges such as digital misogyny, online harassment, reproductive justice, trans rights, workplace inequality, and the persistent gender pay gap. Moreover, the movement's increasing alignment with broader social justice efforts—including those focused on racial equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and economic justice—reflects an understanding that gender discrimination is deeply intertwined with other systems of oppression. In this expanded vision, feminism today is not solely concerned with women's liberation but advocates for a more equitable and inclusive world for all marginalized genders and identities. It recognizes that liberation is not monolithic but must be responsive to diverse lived experiences, and thus, the feminist struggle continues with renewed vigor and broader scope in the 21st century.

Bibliography

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. The Second Sex. Vintage, 2011.
2. Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Routledge, 1990.
3. Dicker, Rory. A History of U.S. Feminisms. Seal Press, 2008.
4. Evans, Elizabeth. The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms: Neoliberalism, Intersectionality, and the State in Britain and the US. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
5. Faludi, Susan. Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women. Crown, 1991.
6. Firestone, Shulamith. The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution. Bantam Books, 1970.
7. Friedan, Betty. The Feminine Mystique. W. W. Norton & Company, 1963.
8. Gillis, Stacy, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford, editors. Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
9. Gubar, Susan. Feminism and Modernism. Oxford University Press, 2016.
10. Hooks, bell. Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics. South End Press, 2000.
11. Lerner, Gerda. The Creation of Patriarchy. Oxford University Press, 1986.
12. Lorde, Audre. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Crossing Press, 1984.
13. MacKinnon, Catharine A. Toward a Feminist Theory of the State. Harvard University Press, 1989.
14. Millett, Kate. Sexual Politics. Columbia University Press, 1970.
15. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity. Duke University Press, 2003.