

Four Waves of Feminism

By Martha Rampton

This piece was originally published online in conjunction with the Fall 2008 issue of [Pacific magazine \(http://magazine.pacificu.edu\)](http://magazine.pacificu.edu). Martha Rampton is a professor of [history \(/future-undergraduates/academics/areas-study/history\)](/future-undergraduates/academics/areas-study/history) and director of the [Center for Gender Equity \(/about-us/centers/center-gender-equity\)](/about-us/centers/center-gender-equity) at Pacific University. Her specialty is the early medieval period with an emphasis on social history and the activities and roles of women. She holds an MA in medieval history from the University of Utah and a doctorate in medieval history from the University of Virginia.

It is common to speak of three phases of modern feminism; however, there is little consensus as to how to characterize these three waves or what to do with women's movements before the late nineteenth century. Making the landscape even harder to navigate, a new silhouette is emerging on the horizon and taking the shape of a fourth wave of feminism.

Some thinkers have sought to locate the roots of feminism in ancient Greece with Sappho (d. c. 570 BCE), or the medieval world with Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) or Christine de Pisan (d. 1434). Certainly Olympe de Gouge (d. 1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (d. 1797) and Jane Austen (d. 1817) are foremothers of the modern women's movement. All of these people advocated for the dignity, intelligence, and basic human potential of the female sex. However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that the efforts for women's equal rights coalesced into a clearly identifiable and self-conscious movement, or rather a series of movements.

The first wave of feminism took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emerging out of an environment of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics. The goal of this wave was to open up opportunities for women, with a focus on suffrage. The wave formally began at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 when three



hundred men and women rallied to the cause of equality for women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (d.1902) drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration outlining the new movement's ideology and political strategies.

In its early stages, feminism was interrelated with the temperance and abolitionist movements and gave voice to now-famous activists like the African-American Sojourner Truth (d. 1883), who demanded: "Ain't I a woman?" Victorian America saw women acting in very "un-ladylike" ways (public speaking, demonstrating, stints in jail), which challenged the "cult of domesticity." Discussions about the vote and women's participation in politics led to an examination of the differences between men and women as they were then viewed. Some claimed that women were morally superior to men, and so their presence in the civic sphere would improve public behavior and the political process.

The second wave began in the 1960s and continued into the 90s. This wave unfolded in the context of the anti-war and civil rights movements and the growing self-consciousness of a variety of minority groups around the world. The New Left was on the rise, and the voice of the second wave was increasingly radical. In this phase, sexuality and reproductive rights were dominant issues, and much of the movement's energy was focused on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex.

This phase began with protests against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City in 1968 and 1969. Feminists parodied what they held to be a degrading "cattle parade" that reduced women to objects of beauty dominated by a patriarchy that sought to keep them in the home or in dull, low-paying jobs. The radical New York group called the Redstockings staged a counter pageant in which they crowned a sheep as Miss America and threw "oppressive" feminine artifacts such as bras, girdles, high-heels, makeup and false eyelashes into the trashcan.

Because the second wave of feminism found voice amid so many other social movements, it was easily marginalized and viewed as less pressing than, for example, Black Power or efforts to end the war in Vietnam. Feminists reacted by forming women-only organizations (such as NOW) and "consciousness raising" groups. In publications like "The BITCH Manifesto" and "Sisterhood is Powerful," feminists advocated for their place in the sun. The second wave was increasingly theoretical, based on a fusion of neo-Marxism and psycho-analytical theory, and began to associate the subjugation of women

with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother. Sex and gender were differentiated—the former being biological, and the latter a social construct that varies culture-to-culture and over time.

Whereas the first wave of feminism was generally propelled by middle class, Western, cisgender, white women, the second phase drew in women of color and developing nations, seeking sisterhood and solidarity, claiming "Women's struggle is class struggle." Feminists spoke of women as a social class and coined phrases such as "the personal is political" and "identity politics" in an effort to demonstrate that race, class, and gender oppression are all related. They initiated a concentrated effort to rid society top-to-bottom of sexism, from children's cartoons to the highest levels of government.

One of the strains of this complex and diverse "wave" was the development of women-only spaces and the notion that women working together create a special dynamic that is not possible in mixed-groups, which would ultimately work for the betterment of the entire planet. Women, due whether to their long "subjugation" or to their biology, were thought by some to be more humane, collaborative, inclusive, peaceful, nurturing, democratic, and holistic in their approach to problem solving than men. The term eco-feminism was coined to capture the sense that because of their biological connection to earth and lunar cycles, women were natural advocates of environmentalism.

The third wave of feminism began in the mid-90's and was informed by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. In this phase many constructs were destabilized, including the notions of "universal womanhood," body, gender, sexuality and heteronormativity. An aspect of third wave feminism that mystified the mothers of the earlier feminist movement was the readoption by young feminists of the very lip-stick, high-heels, and cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines that the first two phases of the movement identified with male oppression. Pinkfloor expressed this new position when she said that it's possible to have a push-up bra and a brain at the same time.

The "grrls" of the third wave stepped onto the stage as strong and empowered, eschewing victimization and defining feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, not as objects of a sexist patriarchy. They developed a rhetoric of mimicry, which appropriated derogatory terms like "slut" and "bitch" in order to subvert sexist culture and deprive it of verbal weapons. The web is an important tool of "girlie feminism." E-zines have provided "cybergrrls" and "netgrrls" another kind of women-only space. At the same time — rife with the irony of third-wave feminism because cyberspace is disembodied — it permits all

users the opportunity to cross gender boundaries, and so the very notion of gender has been unbalanced in a way that encourages experimentation and creative thought.

This is in keeping with the third wave's celebration of ambiguity and refusal to think in terms of "us-them." Most third-wavers refuse to identify as "feminists" and reject the word that they find limiting and exclusionary. Grrl-feminism tends to be global, multi-cultural, and it shuns simple answers or artificial categories of identity, gender, and sexuality. Its transversal politics means that differences such as those of ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc. are celebrated and recognized as dynamic, situational, and provisional. Reality is conceived not so much in terms of fixed structures and power relations, but in terms of performance within contingencies. Third wave feminism breaks boundaries.

The fourth wave of feminism is still a captivating silhouette. A writer for *Elle Magazine* recently interviewed me about the waves of feminism and asked if the second and third waves may have "failed or dialed down" because the social and economic gains had been mostly sparkle, little substance, and whether at some point women substituted equal rights for career and the atomic self. I replied that the second wave of feminism ought not be characterized as having failed, nor was glitter all that it generated. Quite the contrary; many goals of the second wave were met: more women in positions of leadership in higher education, business and politics; abortion rights; access to the pill that increased women's control over their bodies; more expression and acceptance of female sexuality; general public awareness of the concept of and need for the "rights of women" (though never fully achieved); a solid academic field in feminism, gender and sexuality studies; greater access to education; organizations and legislation for the protection of battered women; women's support groups and organizations (like NOW and AAUW); an industry in the publication of books by and about women/feminism; public forums for the discussion of women's rights; and a societal discourse at the popular level about women's suppression, efforts for reform, and a critique of patriarchy. So, in a sense, if the second wave seemed to have "dialed down," the lull was in many ways due more to the success of the movement than to any ineffectiveness. In addition to the sense that many women's needs had been met, feminism's perceived silence in the 1990s was a response to the successful backlash campaign by the conservative press and media, especially against the word feminism and its purported association with male-bashing and extremism.

However, the second wave only quieted down in the public forum; it did not disappear but retreated into the academic world where it is alive and well—incubating in the academy. Women's centers and women's/gender studies have become a staple of virtually all universities and most colleges in the US and Canada (and in many other nations around the world). Scholarship on women's studies, feminist studies, masculinity studies, and queer studies is prolific, institutionalized, and thriving in virtually all scholarly fields, including the sciences. Academic majors and minors in women's, feminist, masculinity and queer studies have produced thousands of students with degrees in the subjects. However, generally those programs have generated theorists rather than activists.

Returning to the question the *Elle Magazine* columnist asked about the third wave and the success or failure of its goals. It is hard to talk about the aims of the third wave because a characteristic of that wave is the rejection of communal, standardized objectives. The third wave does not acknowledge a collective "movement" and does not define itself as a group with common grievances. Third wave women and men are concerned about equal rights, but tend to think the genders have achieved parity or that society is well on its way to delivering it to them. The third wave pushed back against their "mothers" (with grudging gratitude) the way children push away from their parents in order to achieve much needed independence. This wave supports equal rights, but does not have a term like feminism to articulate that notion. For third wavers, struggles are more individual: "We don't need feminism anymore."

But the times are changing, and a fourth wave is in the air. A few months ago, a high school student approached one of the staff of the [Center for Gender Equity \(/about-us/centers/center-gender-equity\)](https://www.pacificu.edu/about/centers/center-gender-equity) at Pacific University and revealed in a somewhat confessional tone, "I think I'm a feminist!" It was like she was coming out of the closet. Well, perhaps that is the way to view the fourth wave of feminism.

The aims of the second feminist movement were never cemented to the extent that they could survive the complacency of third wavers. The fourth wave of feminism is emerging because (mostly) young women and men realize that the third wave is either overly optimistic or hampered by blinders. Feminism is now moving from the academy and back into the realm of public discourse. Issues that were central to the earliest phases of the women's movement are receiving national and international attention by mainstream press and politicians: problems like sexual abuse, rape, violence against women, unequal pay, slut-shaming, the pressure on women to conform to a single and unrealistic

body-type and the realization that gains in female representation in politics and business, for example, are very slight. It is no longer considered "extreme," nor is it considered the purview of rarified intellectuals to talk about societal abuse of women, rape on college campus, Title IX, homo and transphobia, unfair pay and work conditions, and the fact that the US has one of the worst records for legally-mandated parental leave and maternity benefits in the world.

Some people who wish to ride this new fourth wave have trouble with the word "feminism," not just because of its older connotations of radicalism, but because the word feels like it is underpinned by assumptions of a gender binary and an exclusionary subtext: "for women only." Many fourth wavers who are completely on-board with the movement's tenants find the term "feminism" sticking in their craws and worry that it is hard to get their message out with a label that raises hackles for a broader audience. Yet the word is winning the day. The generation now coming of age sees that we face serious problems because of the way society genders and is gendered, and we need a strong "in-your-face" word to combat those problems. Feminism no longer just refers to the struggles of women; it is a clarion call for gender equity.

The emerging fourth wavers are not just reincarnations of their second wave grandmothers; they bring to the discussion important perspectives taught by third wave feminism. They speak in terms of intersectionality whereby women's suppression can only fully be understood in a context of the marginalization of other groups and genders—feminism is part of a larger consciousness of oppression along with racism, ageism, classism, ableism, and sexual orientation (no "ism" to go with that). Among the third wave's bequests is the importance of inclusion, an acceptance of the sexualized human body as non-threatening, and the role the internet can play in gender-bending and leveling hierarchies. Part of the reason a fourth wave can emerge is because these millennials' articulation of themselves as "feminists" is their own: not a hand-me-down from grandma. The beauty of the fourth wave is that there is a place in it for all – together. The academic and theoretical apparatus is extensive and well honed in the academy, ready to support a new broad-based activism in the home, in the workplace, and in the streets.

At this point we are still not sure how feminism will mutate. Will the fourth wave fully materialize and in what direction? There have always been many feminisms in the movement, not just one ideology, and there have always been tensions, points and counter-points. The political, social and intellectual feminist movements have always

been chaotic, multivalenced, and disconcerting; and let's hope they continue to be so; it's a sign that they are thriving. ■

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