

"Feminism" by Karen Offen

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Feminism

The term "feminism" and its derivatives originated in France during the late 19th century. *Féminisme* was then commonly used as a synonym for "women's emancipation." French dictionaries have erroneously attributed the invention of the word "féminisme" to Charles Fourier in the 1830s, but in fact its origins remain uncertain. The first self-proclaimed *féministe* was the French women's suffrage advocate Hubertine Auclert, who from 1882 on used the term in her periodical, *La Citoyenne*, to describe herself and her associates. The words gained currency following discussion in the French press of the first "feminist" congress in Paris, sponsored in May 1892 by Eugénie Potonie-Pierre and her colleagues from the women's group *Solidarité*.

By 1894-1895 the terms "feminism" and "feminist" had crossed the English Channel to Great Britain, and before 1900, they were appearing in Belgian, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Greek, and Russian publications. By the late 1890s the words had jumped the Atlantic to Argentina, Cuba, and the United States, though they were not commonly used in the United States much before 1910. During the 20th century, the words also entered non-Western languages.

Much historical work on feminism focuses on intellectual or political aspects. The social bases of feminism have been explored, however; many feminist movements have drawn primarily from middle-class women (and some men), and explanations for the lesser involvement of other social groups reach deep into social history. Feminism has also roused responses, both favorable and hostile, that must be part of any gender history of Western society since the later 19th century. The expansion of feminist activism, though linked to ideological and political change, also relates to the massive social changes in gender roles and individual opportunity brought by the industrial revolution and subsequent developments—again, a fundamental social link. Though tensions between sociohistorical and other approaches to the history of feminism remain, the subject has a larger place in modern Western social history.

The concept of feminism (viewed historically and comparatively) encompasses both a system of ideas and a movement for sociopolitical change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society. It addresses imbalances of power between

the sexes that disadvantage women. Feminism posits the notion of gender, or the differential social construction of the behavior of the sexes, based on their physiological differences, as the primary category of analysis. By so doing, feminism raises issues concerning personal autonomy or freedom but not without constant reference to basic issues of societal organization. In Western societies, these issues have centered on the long-standing debate over the family and its relationship to the state, and underlying this debate, on the historically inequitable distribution of political, social, and economic power between the sexes. Feminism opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with men's claims to define what is best for women without consulting them; it thereby offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization, and control mechanisms. It seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy but not sexual dualism as such.

Feminism is necessarily pro-woman. However, it does not follow that it must be anti-man; indeed, in time past, some of the most important advocates of women's cause have been men. Feminism makes claims for a rebalancing between women and men of the social, economic, and political power within a given society, on behalf of both sexes in the name of their common humanity, but with respect for their differences. As a historical movement in the Western world, open to penetrating comparative study, the fortunes of feminism have varied widely from one society to another, depending on the possibilities available within a given society for the expression of dissent through word or deed. Feminist protest, which can be documented as early as the 15th century in Europe, erupted in sporadic collective action during the French Revolution, followed by much larger and better organized movements around 1900. Feminism experienced some decline between the world wars and a new surge of organizational activity since the 1960s. Feminism can be viewed as a rapidly developing major critical ideology, or system of ideas, in its own right. As an ideology, feminism incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international scope, one whose developmental stages have historically been dependent on and in tension with male-centered political and intellectual discourse but whose more recent manifestations transcend the latter. Feminism must be viewed as not intrinsically a subset of any other Western religious or secular ideology, whether Catholic or Protestant Christian,

Judaic, liberal, socialist, or Marxist (although historically a feminist critique has emerged within each of these Western traditions by initially posing the question "And what about women?"). In order to comprehend fully the historical range and possibilities of feminism, however, the origins and growth of these ideas must be located within a variety of cultural traditions, and situated in terms of the historical experiences of different social groups of women and men.

The specific claims that have been made by feminists at particular times and in specific places in European, Australian/New Zealand, Canadian, and United States history range from arguments for ending the maligning of women in print, for educational opportunity, for changes in man-made laws governing marriage, for control of property and one's own person, and for valuation of women's unpaid labor along with opportunities for economic self-reliance; to demands for admission to the liberal professions, for readjustment of inequitable sexual mores and ending prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation, for control over women's health, birthing, and child-rearing practices, for state financial aid to mothers, and for representation in political and religious organizations (symbolized in Western societies not only by the vote but also by access to public office). Such claims can all be seen as culturally specific subsets of a broader challenge to male pretensions to monopolize societal authority, that is, to patriarchy or male rule. At the same time, each of these claims addresses a structural issue, a problematic practice with political dimensions, which transcends the boundaries of the Western world and has applicability to the experience of women in other societies. Goals that are particular to specific cultural settings, such as rights equal to those granted men and gaining the vote for women, or short-range issues of strategy and tactics, such as combatting legalized prostitution or opposing cliterodectomy, should not be seen as coterminous with the phenomenon of feminism understood as a historical whole.

Based on such a broad cross-cultural understanding of feminism, feminists can be identified as any persons, female or male, whose ideas and actions (insofar as they can be documented) show them to meet three criteria: (1) they recognize the validity of women's own interpretations of their lived experience and needs and acknowledge the values women claim publicly

as their own (as distinct from an aesthetic ideal of womanhood invented by men) in assessing their status in society relative to men; (2) they exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at, or even anger over institutionalized injustice (or inequity) toward women as a group by men as a group in a given society; and (3) they advocate the elimination of that injustice by challenging, through efforts to alter prevailing ideas and/or social institutions and practices, the coercive power, force, or authority that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture. Thus, to be a feminist is necessarily to be at odds with male domination in culture and society, in whatever geographical location or situation in historic time. [See also Divorce; Economics (Economic and Social History); Education; Feminist Theory; Law/Legal History; Marriage/Remarriage; Motherhood; Sense of Self/Individualism; Women's History]

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