

Feminism

Introduction

Feminism — The Big Idea

At its heart, **feminism** rests on two bold, unshakable beliefs:

1. **Women are disadvantaged** — not just by bad luck, but through the **mobilisation of biases**. This means society's rules, traditions, and systems often tilt the playing field without us even noticing. Biases aren't just in people's heads; they're woven into how politics, law, work, and family life operate.
2. **This disadvantage can — and should — be overturned.** Feminism isn't just an observation; it's a **call to action**. It says: inequality isn't natural, it's constructed — and anything constructed can be dismantled.

Historical Roots

Some people think feminism is a modern invention — but its **roots run deep**.

- **Ancient Greece** — *Plato*, in his work *The Republic*, imagined a society where women could be **guardians** just like men, educated equally and participating fully in civic life.
- **Ancient China** — There were debates about women's roles centuries ago, with thinkers challenging Confucian restrictions. The seeds of questioning inequality were there long before “feminism” had a name.

Why start here? Because feminism isn't just a Western or 20th-century idea — it's a global, historical **struggle against the mobilisation of biases**, and it's been evolving for over 2,000 years.

First Wave Feminism — The Traditional Era

This wave is where **feminism** first took shape as an organised movement — and it had **two main streams**.

1. Liberal Feminism — *The Individualist Dream*

Picture the mid-19th century: railways **roaring**, factories **buzzing**, and in the middle of it, a bold idea — **women are individuals** with the same rights as men.

- **Principle:** Built on **individualism** and **liberal values**.
- **Belief:** Women's preference for family and domestic life wasn't oppression but a *natural impulse* — and a willing choice.
- **Blind spot:** Mostly **privileged women** — white, middle-class, from developed societies — so it ignored the deep inequalities of **class** and **race**.

Key Figures & Moments:

- **Mary Wollstonecraft** (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792) — argued that if women gained the **vote**, other disadvantages would vanish.
- **Seneca Falls Convention (1848)** — issued the **Declaration of Sentiments**, a thunderclap for equality.
- **J.S. Mill** in the **1867 Second Reform Act** — argued society must be organised by **reason**, not the *accident of birth*.

Liberal feminism was about **unlocking the gates** — but only for some.

2. Socialist Feminism — *The Economic Revolution*

Now imagine another camp of thinkers saying:

"Wait — this isn't just about legal rights. Inequality between sexes is **woven into the economic structure itself**."

- **Friedrich Engels** (*The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884) traced the story:
 - In **pre-capitalist societies**, **mothers' rights** thrived.
 - With **capitalism** came **patrilineality** — marking the **"world historic defeat of the female sex"**.
- Under capitalism:
 - Women became a **reserve army of labour** — called in when needed, discarded when not.
 - Their main role? Producing the **next generation of workers** for the capitalist machine.
- **Economic independence** was the only cushion against **alienation** and **frustration**.
- Meanwhile, **male breadwinners** enjoyed **high status** at home, cementing inequality.

Socialist feminism wasn't asking for just a vote — it wanted to **rebuild the whole system**.

So, the first wave gave us two tracks:

- *Liberal Feminism* — change the laws.
- *Socialist Feminism* — change the system.

Second Wave Feminism — Radical Beginnings

Even after the **vote was won**, many women were asking themselves:

"If we're legally equal... why do I still feel so trapped?"

Betty Friedan & *The Feminine Mystique* — Naming the Nameless

In 1963, Betty Friedan dropped a book that hit suburban America like a lightning bolt: *The Feminine Mystique*.

- She gave words to what millions of housewives felt: a **"problem with no name"** — a deep, gnawing **despair** and **unhappiness**.
- **Cause?** A powerful **cultural myth** — the idea that a woman's true fulfilment came only from **domestic life**:
 - Being a good wife
 - Raising children
 - Keeping a perfect home
- This myth actively **discouraged** women from:
 - Entering **employment**
 - Engaging in **politics**
 - Participating in **public life**

It wasn't just about "choice" anymore. Friedan revealed that **culture itself was a cage** — invisible but suffocating.

Radical Feminism's Big Shift:

If **First Wave** feminists fought **legal barriers**, the **Second Wave** turned the spotlight on **cultural and social conditioning** — the subtle ways society keeps women in "their place."

Core Themes

Redefining the Political — The Personal is Political

Traditionally, politics was thought to happen **out there** — in parliaments, protests, and policies. The home? That was "private," "natural," and off-limits.

Radical feminists blew this apart. They argued:

- **Politics exists wherever social conflicts exist** — and yes, that includes the **bedroom**, the **kitchen**, and the **family dinner table**.
- The **sexual division of labour** — public men, private women — wasn't "natural." It was **political**.

Cynthia Enloe's Challenge — *Where are women?*

In war, diplomacy, or economics, political theory often erased women completely. Enloe's question exposed that **women's absence** from political discourse was itself a political act.

Susan Moller Okin's Argument

The family isn't a cosy apolitical haven — it's a **training ground for patriarchy**. Inside it:

- **Violence**
- **Domination**
- **Subordination**

Children grow up learning the **patriarchal order**, which then runs the state and civil society.

State Intervention? Yes.

Radical feminists wanted laws and policies to reach into the so-called "private" sphere:

- Reform **personal law**
- Strengthen **rape law**
- Support **child-rearing** with **nurseries** and **workplace crèches**

While **liberals** worried this would "politicise the private sphere," **radicals** said that was exactly the point — because the **private** was already deeply **political**.

The Essence: No more hiding oppression behind "that's just the way things are at home." For radical feminists, the home was as much a site of power struggle as the halls of government.

Sex and Gender

The old belief — *biology is destiny* — claimed that men and women's different bodies made their social roles **natural**.

Feminists challenged this by separating:

- **Sex** → Biological differences (chromosomes, anatomy, physiology)
- **Gender** → Cultural roles, expectations, and stereotypes of **masculinity** and **femininity**

Simone de Beauvoir's Revolution

In *The Second Sex*, she declared:

“Women are made, they are not born.”

What does that mean? Society **constructs** womanhood — shaping girls into “The Other” against a male norm.

Drawing on **Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism**, she stressed:

- **Existence precedes essence** → You are not born with a fixed purpose; you create yourself.
- **Good faith** → Believing in yourself.
- **Bad faith** → Handing your identity to God, tradition, or authority instead of claiming it.

Androgyny & Genderless Personhood

Some feminists argued for **androgyny** — embracing both male and female traits. The ideal?

- **Sex** becomes irrelevant to what jobs you hold, how you dress, or the life you choose.
- Society moves toward **genderless personhood** — where you're just *you*, not “man” or “woman” first.

Debates Within Feminism

- **Difference feminists** → Emphasise essential, biological differences between the sexes, sometimes valuing “feminine” traits society undervalues.
- **Post-modern feminists** → Even “sex” might not be a fixed, binary biological fact.
- **Trans movement** → Sees gender as **self-identification**, challenging the male/female binary entirely.

The Essence: The shift from “biology decides” to “society decides” — and now, to “the individual decides” — is one of the most radical transformations in how we think about human identity.

Patriarchy – The System of Male Power

At its core, patriarchy is about **power relations between men and women**.

It's not just about a few bad individuals — it's a network of laws, customs, values, and behaviours that keep **male dominance** in place.

How It Works in Different Contexts

- **Developed countries:**

- Physical violence & sexual intimidation
- *#MeToo movement* — Alissa Milano’s call against Harvey Weinstein exposed how power in entertainment was intertwined with sexual exploitation.
- **Susan Brownmiller** → Sex itself can be an **institution** of patriarchy, used to control women.
- **Developing countries:**
 - **FGM** (female genital mutilation)
 - Bride murders / dowry deaths
 - **Feminisation of poverty** — where neoliberal policies cut social safety nets, pushing women into the most precarious work.

Three Feminist Analyses of Patriarchy

1. **Liberal feminism** → Patriarchy = **unequal rights**. Solution: change the laws, give equal opportunities.
2. **Socialist feminism** → Patriarchy’s roots are **economic**. Linked to capitalism, which benefits from unpaid domestic labour and women as a reserve army of labour.
3. **Radical feminism** → Patriarchy is **institutionalised and systemic**. It’s not a side-effect — *sex itself* is the base of women’s oppression.

The Essence:

Patriarchy isn’t just “men ruling women” — it’s a **self-reinforcing system** that can adapt to new economies, new technologies, and even new legal frameworks. That’s why dismantling it takes more than changing laws — it requires changing culture, economics, and even how we think about gender and sexuality.

Equality Feminism – “We want the same rules for everyone”

- **Liberals:** Focus on **legal and political equality** — voting rights, equal pay, anti-discrimination laws.
- **Socialists:** Push for **economic equality** — restructuring the economy so women aren’t trapped in low-paid work.
- **Radicals:** Extend equality to **family and personal life** — childcare, domestic work, **bodily autonomy**, and even **sexual fulfilment**.



Their core belief: oppression comes from being *excluded* from what men already have.

Difference Feminism – “We don’t want to be men — we want liberation through difference”

- They **reject male identification** — they don’t see equality as simply “fitting into men’s mould”.
- They **emphasise women’s creativity and empathy** over aggression.
- **Cultural feminists:** Celebrate *women’s unique experiences* — childbirth, menstruation, women’s art, and nurturing roles.

Big Critiques & Bold Ideas

- **Iris Marion Young:** Warns that *universal citizenship* can become **colour-blindness** — ignoring how women, minorities, and marginalised groups have different lived realities. She calls this **differentiated citizenship**.
- **Ti-Grace Atkinson:** Advocates **political lesbianism** — not necessarily about sexual orientation, but as a *feminist practice* of rejecting men as sexual partners to break dependence.

The Essence:

Equality feminists say: “Give us the keys to the house!”

Difference feminists say: “We’re not moving into your house — we’re building our own.”

Both are asking: How do we value women — by making them equal *to men*, or by recognising their own distinct worth?

Third Wave (1990s)

Deradicalisation – Post-feminism steps in

Some voices start saying: “Hey, the big battles are over — we’ve already won!”

This **post-feminism** isn’t necessarily anti-feminist, but it marks a retreat from **uncompromising positions**, claiming many feminist **objectives were achieved**.

Of course, not everyone agrees — but it changes the tone of the movement.

Intersectionality – The web of oppressions

Then comes a **breakthrough: intersectionality**.

Coined to recognise **multiple social identities**, it looks at how **sexism, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia interlock**.

- **Black feminism** — led by voices like **Bell Hooks** — says: “The experience of a Black woman is not just ‘woman’ + ‘Black’ added together — it’s unique and must be understood on its own terms.”

Fragmentation – Feminism gets more complex

This wave isn’t one big marching block — it’s splintering into **many overlapping strands**:

Post-structuralism (Michel Foucault)

- Power isn’t just about who’s in charge — it’s woven into **systems of thought**.
- We start questioning the idea of a *fixed* “female identity” — instead, gender is shaped by **discourse**.

Trans theory

- Explores **gender nonconformity**.
- **Judith Butler** drops a bombshell: gender is **not something you are**, but something you **do** — a **repeated performance**.

Difference feminism & TERF debates

- Some difference feminists raise concerns about **male-bodied individuals in women’s spaces**, sparking the divisive **TERF** (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) debates.

Queer theory (Teresa de Lauretis)

- Rejects fixed sexual identities and **heteronormativity** — celebrating the fluid and diverse.

Ecofeminism (Vandana Shiva)

- Links women's **closeness to nature** with care for the environment — challenging industrial and patriarchal exploitation of the Earth.

The Essence:

If the first wave fought for the vote, and the second fought for liberation in public and private life — the **third wave** says: “*There’s no single way to be a woman — or even to define womanhood.*”

It’s messier, more inclusive, more academic, more personal — and it refuses to fit neatly in one box.

Future

From Fringe to Mainstream

Once upon a time, feminism was seen as a radical, outsider movement. Now?

- It’s part of **mainstream politics**.
- Embedded in **public services** — think gender-sensitive budgeting, workplace harassment policies, maternity leave laws.
- Rooted in **civil society** — from NGOs to school curricula.

This is a huge win: the **principles of feminism** have become *normal*.

But here’s the twist — The Risk of Integration

When a movement becomes part of the establishment, it can also become **blunted**.

- **Unity is harder** — because once you’re mainstream, there’s less urgency and more *internal disagreements*.
- Some fear feminism may lose its **radical edge** — the drive to challenge deep systems of **patriarchy**, **capitalism**, and **racism**.
- This is what some call **NGO-isation** — activism becoming polite, bureaucratic, and safe.

Recent events connected to what we’ve studied

#MeToo (2017–present) — *Patriarchy & Second Wave echoes*

- Exposed **sexual intimidation** and **institutional cover-ups** — like Harvey Weinstein.
- A clear example of Susan Brownmiller’s idea that **sex is used as a tool of control**.

Roe v. Wade overturn (2022) — *Radical feminism & bodily autonomy*

- In the US, the Supreme Court rolled back abortion rights, reigniting the debate over **state control of women’s bodies**.
- Radical feminists see this as proof that **patriarchy never truly left**.

Iran’s “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement (2022) — *Intersectionality & public/private divide*

- Triggered by **Mahsa Amini’s death** in custody over hijab laws.
- Shows how **state control**, **patriarchy**, and **cultural oppression** intersect — in a context very different from the West.

Trans inclusion debates — *Sex vs. Gender, Third Wave fragmentation*

- Public disputes over **sports categories**, **bathroom access**, and **prisons** link directly to the **TERF debates** we discussed.
- Shows the ongoing tension between **difference feminism** and **gender performativity** ideas.

Climate justice activism — *Ecofeminism*

- Figures like **Vandana Shiva** influence movements like Fridays for Future, which link **environmental destruction** with **patriarchal exploitation**.

The Essence:

The future of feminism will be a balancing act — keeping its **radical heart** while working inside mainstream structures. The challenge is making sure that “gender equality” isn’t just a *policy checklist*, but remains a **living, breathing movement** willing to challenge the status quo.

PYQ

1. “The legal subordination of one sex to another is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human development.” (J. S. Mill). Comment. 2023,15
2. Feminist critique of the State" 2021, 10
3. Critically analyze the feminist critique of the state." 2020, 20
4. Comment on: Women has always been mans dependent, If not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality (Simone de Beauvoir). 2009, 20
5. Distinguish between liberal ferminism and radical feminism. 2019,15
6. Comment on: Eco-feminism. 2017, 10
7. Discuss Feminist theory of the State. 2016, 15
8. Difference between Liberal and Radical forms of Feminism. 2012, 10
9. Comment on: ' Personal is political.' 2010, 20
10. Distinguish between liberal feminism and socialist feminism in detail. 2010, 30
11. Comment on: "Personal is political" 2013, 10