

Feminism is thought to have flourished in three major time periods in the United States. The first period was in the late 1800s to early 1900s during the struggle to establish women's right to vote. Suffrage for women was won in 1920. The second major period was during the 1960s and 70s when feminists focused on equal pay for equal work, reproductive freedom, and other various campaigns. The third period is widely debated, but is thought to have started in the 1990s up to the present day with its focus on a variety of topics such as sexual freedom, women's autonomy from political restrictions and intersectionality (see "Intersectionality" sheet for more information).

What is feminism?

Feminism, in general, is understood to be the belief, attitude and action that work toward women's rights and the equality between men and women. The cheeky definition states, "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people." Contrary to its seemingly simple definition, feminism has garnered numerous stereotypes and hefty public backlash. Throughout its history, minority groups have criticized the dominantly white, heterosexual, cisgender feminist movements for being exclusionary, which has often resulted in a variety of separate feminist communities. However, despite widespread controversy, the women's movement has resulted in many gains for gender equality in the United States, including women's right to vote, access to reproductive health care, increased equal opportunities in education and an advancement in public visibility of gender inequality.

Feminism on... Social Justice

Social justice can be broadly defined as striving for progressive policies, social activism and basic equality for all people. Social justice activism is typically coordinated in response to repressive policies or legislation, oppressive social environments, and/or any action or belief that inhibits a person's access to their human rights. Social justice often promotes solidarity between various groups in order to achieve equality. Feminist efforts are frequently created within a social justice framework.

Feminism on... Reproductive Rights

The term "*reproductive rights*" refers to access to birth control/contraception for men and women, availability of family planning measures, access to protection against STI's, safe and legal access to abortion and accurate information about prevention of disease and unwanted pregnancy—including comprehensive sex education in schools. Reproductive rights have been a major political domain for feminist activism, particularly since the mid 1900s. In 1973, *Roe v. Wade* legalized access to abortion for women in the United States. Since its passage, counter efforts have continuously attempted to limit women's access to abortion by passing legislation that impose age restrictions, limitations based on gestation periods, required parental consent for women under 16, among others. It should also be noted that not all people who identify as feminists support abortion or other reproductive rights, but many feminists consider a woman's right to choose if/when she wants to bear children a basic human right. Additionally, a person's religious beliefs may also influence their stance on reproductive rights.

Feminism on... Body Image

Body image is how we see and feel about our physical bodies. A healthy body image can help a person feel positive and confident in themselves. Historically, many feminists started body positive campaigns in the 1990s as a response to negative images of women in the media. Many of these efforts continue today because of the exploitation and sexual objectification of female bodies in advertising and other forms of media. Contemporary feminists have also begun “fat positive” campaigns in order to reject common stereotypes that being “overweight” is unhealthy. (*For more information, check out the film Miss Representation from the MSU Women’s Resource Center*).

Feminism on... Sex Work

Sex work includes any sexual activity that results in an exchange of payment. Historically, feminist organizations have demonized sex work as a form of patriarchal oppression. However, many present day feminist activists have begun campaigns to organize unionization and protections for sex workers. These feminists are often referred to as “sex-positive” feminists - who believe sex work can be sexually empowering. On the other hand, sex slavery/trafficking is protested by feminists as an infringement of a person’s human rights. People (typically women) involved in sex slavery/trafficking are often sold into it against their will.

Feminism on... Pornography

Pornography has long been a topic that feminists have protested as a form of oppression that objectifies and dehumanizes women. Historically, feminists have equated pornography, or the graphic nudity of women in photography and film, to a form of sexual violence. However, some contemporary feminists and women’s rights activists disagree with these views and instead argue that pornography can be empowering if the woman believes her participation in pornography is beneficial to her. Regardless, pornography is a topic that is widely debated within many social justice communities.

Where can I find more information about these topics?

MSU Women’s Resource Center

<http://wrc.msu.edu>

517-353-1635

332 Union Building

Center for Gender in Global Context

<http://gencen.isp.msu.edu/>

517-353-5040

206 International Center

Health4U

<http://health4u.msu.edu>

517-353-2596

330 Olin Health Center

Feminist Majority Foundation

National feminist organization and publisher of *Ms. Magazine*.

<http://www.feministmajority.org>

National Organization for Women

National women’s rights organization.

<http://www.now.org>

Feministing

Feminist blog established in 2004, which covers topics ranging from politics to sexual health.

<http://www.feministing.com>