

## Beyond the Myths: A Comprehensive Exploration of Feminism

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Cite this paper as: Sudesna Sarma, (2025) Beyond the Myths: A Comprehensive Exploration of Feminism. *Journal of Neonatal Surgery*, 14 (5s), 423-426.

### ABSTRACT

Feminism remains vital in addressing the ongoing complex issues, as well as addressing the new challenges of global nature, like the rights of transgender individuals and the global fight for reproductive justice. Many men too have embraced feminism, understanding that gender stereotypes and roles also restrict their behavior, emotions, and opportunities. This paper aims to explore the historical evolution, multifaceted nature and address the common misconceptions of feminism. Here an attempt has been made to find out the reasons behind these myths and to provide a defense, along with some examples against these accusations.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism, as a movement for gender equality, is not a singular ideology but rather an evolving collection of ideas, theories, and practices that addresses the multifaceted struggles of women and other marginalized genders. While its origin can be traced back to centuries, its impact today extends to all spheres of life, influencing various fields from politics to philosophy, media, and beyond. However, despite its widespread influence, feminism is often misunderstood. A myriad of myths and misconceptions corrupts the perception of what feminism truly stands for, causing it to be misrepresented as a radical or divisive ideology. The rise of anti-feminist rhetoric, especially by those who feel threatened by the shifting gender power dynamics, often paints feminists as "man-haters". Media portrayals of extreme or radical feminist views, especially those in the 1970s or 80s, have also contributed to this stereotyping practices.

These debates are critical in understanding the diverse, often conflicting positions within feminism, from the pursuit of gender equality and the eradication of patriarchal structures to the ways in which feminism intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other identity categories.

By addressing key myths and exploring how feminist theory has evolved across different waves, this paper seeks to provide a more comprehensive analysis of feminism.

### 2. THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINIST THOUGHT:

Feminism is not a monolithic ideology, and it has evolved through several waves, each responding to the social and political conditions of its time. It is a dynamic and evolving movement that has undergone significant transformations over the course of its history.

#### 1. First-Wave Feminism (1848-1940):

First-wave feminism is said to have emerged in the late 19th century. The primary focus of this phase was put on securing legal rights for women, particularly the Right to Vote. Feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Cady challenged the notion that women were incapable of reason. The suffrage movement marked a turning point in the fight for women's rights. However, the first wave was limited by its focus on white, middle and upper-class women, excluding the voices of working-class women, women of colour, and immigrant women.

#### 2. Second-Wave Feminism (1963 – 1980):

The second wave expanded the scope to include more dynamic issues like sexual freedom, workplace equality, reproductive rights, and gender roles. Iconic figures such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Bell Hooks questioned traditional gender norms and advocated for social change through grassroots activism and legal reforms. Betty Friedan's book "The Feminine Mystique" (1963) sparked widespread awareness of women's domestic oppression. This phase introduced the notion of "Personal is Political," recognizing that private, individual issues such as sexual violence or reproductive control are deeply

intertwined with social and political structures. However, as the second wave focused heavily on the experiences of middle-class white women, it faced critiques from women of colour and working-class feminists, leading to the emergence of a more intersectional approach later on.

### **3. Third-Wave Feminism (1990 – Early 2000)**

Third-wave feminism, emerging in the 1990s introduced a more intersectional perspective. It tried to examine how race, class, and sexual orientation intersect with gender. This phase put forward a critique of earlier feminism's lack of inclusivity, highlighting the experiences of women of colour, LGBTQ+, disabled women and working-class women. It is characterized by a focus on diversity and inclusion. Third wave feminists also engaged in critical analysis of media representations of women and sexuality, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and empowered vision of femininity.

### **4. Contemporary Feminism (2010 – Present):**

Contemporary feminism continues to address gender equality through global activism, social media platforms, and advocacy for diverse issues such as, Reproductive Justice, and LGBTQ+ rights. Feminism today remains fluid, with ongoing debates over topics like trans rights, gender identity and so on. The movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp brought widespread attention to issues of sexual harassment and violence, highlighting the voices of survivors. The emphasis on global feminism is also increasingly gaining popularity, as feminist activism expands beyond the West to address issues like economic inequality, colonialism, and political violence in non-Western countries.

## **3. COMMON MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FEMINISM:**

The myths about feminism are often rooted in societal prejudices, historical misinterpretations, and deliberate misrepresentations. Here are some of the most common myths about feminism, along with the reasons behind the prevalence of these myths and explanations to debunk them:

### **1. Myth: Feminism is Only for Women**

The misconception that feminism is "only for women" is a myth and fails to acknowledge the movement's commitment and efforts to challenge all forms of gender-based oppressions, including patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia. The reason behind such misconception can be traced back to historic women's suffrage and rights movements, which mainly centered around women. However, Feminists try to include a much broader range of voices, including men, LGBTQ+, cisgender, transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming individuals. For example, the 'HeForShe' campaign launched by UN Women and supported by various global leaders and celebrities like Emma Watson, challenges this myth by promoting the idea that men should also advocate for gender equality. Hence, Feminism at its core, advocates for gender equality.

### **2. Myth: Feminism is Anti-Men**

It is strongly accused by many that feminism as an ideology is an anti-men propaganda and seeks to undermine the rights of men. In reality, feminism advocates for gender equality and seeks to dismantle the patriarchy that harms both women and men. The feminist critique the toxic masculinity culture, which imposes rigid gender roles on men and highlights how societal expectations of manhood restrict emotional expression and reinforce harmful behaviors. The root cause behind this myth is and always will be Patriarchal narratives that frame gender equality as a "zero-sum game". This leads to the misinterpretation that empowering women means disempowering men.

### **3. Myth: Feminists Want Women to Dominate Men**

Feminism is most of the time wrongly perceived as a tool for advocating female superiority and taking over positions of power traditionally held by men. However, Feminists strive for a gender sensitized society where all the individuals, irrespective of gender, have equal access to opportunities, rights, and responsibilities. The reason behind this myth can be the misunderstandings partly influenced by misrepresentation in media and by extremists who advocate for misandry. This myth can be considered as a projection of fear and insecurity about shifting power dynamics. Hence the root cause can be diagnosed as Gender-based power struggles that have historically led some to believe that empowerment of one group must come at the expense of the other. Also, the controversy around radical feminists or fringe groups like the "Feminist Fight Club" can sometimes popularize this sort of myths. However, such groups represent only a small portion of the feminist movement and are not representative of mainstream feminist views, which seek equality, not dominance.

### **4. Myth: Feminism is About Making Women More Masculine**

When women are encouraged to step into roles or behaviors traditionally associated with men (like being assertive in the workplace), it can be seen as feminists trying to "make women like men". The Root Cause behind this myth is that the Societal norms have long associated femininity with passivity and submission, while masculinity is associated with assertiveness and dominance. The supporters of Feminism challenge these limiting ideas, leading to the misunderstanding that it seeks to erase femininity. For example, when former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ran for president in 2016, she

faced criticism for being “too masculine” because of her assertive leadership style. Feminists, however, argue that Clinton should be able to express herself with strength and confidence without being labelled as “too masculine”.

#### **5. Myth: Feminism is a Western Concept**

Some people believe that feminism is a Western, white, middle-class ideology that doesn't apply to other cultures or countries. While the Western feminists have historically been the most visible during the suffrage movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, feminist movements have been active globally for centuries. Feminism has roots in many different cultures, and scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Bell Hooks argue for a more inclusive, global feminism. Feminism in non-Western societies often intersects with anti-colonial movements, economic justice, and the fight for human rights, emphasizing that gender oppression is a global issue. This view disregards the long histories of feminist activism in other parts of the world and reinforces the false idea that feminism is culturally specific. For example, the Global South has long had feminist movements that address issues unique to their communities. In India, feminist figures like Kavita Krishnan have been outspoken about issues such as sexual violence and caste-based discrimination. Similarly, in Africa, Wangari Maathai advocated environmental justice and women's empowerment.

#### **6. Myth: All Feminists Are the Same**

Feminism is often misinterpreted as a monolithic ideology with one universal belief system. However, Feminism is diverse and includes various schools of thought, such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, ecofeminism, and intersectional feminism. Different feminist groups emphasize different issues, including economic justice, reproductive rights, environmental issues, and the intersections of race, class, and gender. There is no single “feminist agenda,” but rather a range of perspectives united by the goal of gender equality. The reason behind this myth can be the oversimplification of feminist movements by the media, along with the lack of nuanced coverage of different feminist ideologies, fuels this myth.

#### **7. Myth: Feminism is No Longer Needed**

People tend to equate the progress women have made in certain areas (such as voting rights, employment, and education) with the end of gender inequality. In reality, gender inequality persists in many forms as marginalized genders still face pay gaps, underrepresentation in leadership roles, gender-based violence, and systemic discrimination. The visibility of a few successful women does not reflect the systemic issues still at play. For example, the #MeToo movement, which gained momentum in 2017, demonstrated the continued relevance of feminism.

#### **8. Myth: Feminism is Against Femininity**

Feminism is often misinterpreted as a movement that only values women who work outside the home and hate Stay-at-Home Moms that care for children or challenge traditional family structures. In reality, Feminists argue that women should have the autonomy to make these decisions without judgment or societal pressure. The core of feminist thought is freedom of choice and the dismantling of societal norms that restrict women's agency. For example: In her book ‘Lean In’, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg... advocates for women to “lean in” to their careers, but she also stresses that women should not be judged for choosing to be stay-at-home mothers. Feminists reject the idea that a woman's worth is determined by her decision to work outside the home or raise children.

Societal pressure to view femininity as inherently tied to subordination and weakness leads to the misconception that feminism is opposed to these qualities. In reality, feminism doesn't oppose femininity; instead, it challenges the idea that certain traits or roles are inherently feminine or masculine. feminism aims to decouple feminine traits from inequality, allowing women to express femininity on their own terms.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

These above highlighted points show how the myths about feminism can be addressed by challenging them in various contexts. In summary, we can say that Feminism is a broad multifaceted movement that advocates for equality and justice for all, and these sorts of myths often arise from historical misunderstandings, patriarchal societal structures, media misrepresentations, and sometimes the complexity of feminism itself. By challenging these myths and promoting a more nuanced understanding of feminism, it is possible to move toward a more inclusive, informed, and empowering discourse about gender equality. After deliberating discussions and debates, we can establish that Feminism does not inherently oppose traditional gender roles and rather, it seeks to free individuals from the constraints imposed by society's rigid definitions of gender. Feminists argue that everyone irrespective of their gender should have the right to define their own identity and life choices outside of socially prescribed gender norms. Despite its far-reaching impact, feminism remains a subject of intense debate and is often misunderstood. Myths and misconceptions about feminism continue to distort the movement's objectives and undermine its significance. Women should be able to embrace qualities traditionally viewed as “masculine” or “feminine,” as they see fit, without judgment. These myths about feminism often come from misunderstandings or intentional misrepresentations of the movement's goals and values. In conclusion we can say that Feminism's ongoing fight for equality continues to transform societies and remains an essential force in the pursuit of justice.

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