Demystifying Contemporary Feminism

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by

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> Feminists who keep their gaze fixed across the Atlantic, looking to Big Sister America for guidance, often fail to remember that American feminists have not actually achieved all that much. This is a country with no statutory maternity rights, that has never managed to adopt the Equal Rights Amendment after almost a century of campaigning, that falls in the bottom half of the world rankings for female political representation, and that has never had a female head of state… It is also the world headquarters of the porn industry (Perry).

The current state of American feminism does not indicate that women are guaranteed the basic rights of equality. Viewed as a world leader in its strides towards the notion of progress, the United States has the political, social, and economic resources needed to help remedy the inequalities between men and women. However, sexual inequality remains both a social construct and a reality with implications in the workplace, schools, and other institutions. It may be argued that the American identity and deep history of traditional gender roles have halted female progress and contributed to its stagnant status in world politics.

An analysis of American feminism indicates that feminism, as a concept, appears to be both hypocritical and divisive. Feminism and its associated meanings lack a definition that is universally understood and applicable, and often, its very meanings result in women categorizing themselves and others as "correct" or "incorrect" feminists, depending on their use and interpretation of the term. Thus, the very term "feminist" proves problematic and obscures the goal.

In an effort to reconcile the unkempt status of the term "feminist," I will rely heavily on the work of Dr. Karen Offen, a senior scholar at the University of Stanford who uses the roots of American history in her analysis of feminism. In her work, *Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach,* Offen proposes a definition of the term. She begins by describing two

historical approaches to feminism in America and relies on the traditions and outcomes of each to supplement her own definition. Alas, she arrives at a logical and sound conclusion that the path toward women's equality depends on embracing an understanding of feminism that recognizes the unique characteristics of the woman (Offen 151). She recommends that the return to a successful feminist movement in America relies more on the relation of women to others than on their individual pursuits, which will serve as the foundation for my criticism of contemporary feminism, guide the historical narrative of the successful and unsuccessful achievements of feminists, and finally supplement my recommendations for contemporary feminism.

Feminism: Toward a Definition

Defining feminism involves many factors. Its meaning has varied across time, expanded, and condensed, flexed and morphed to meet the needs of women in their fight for equality. For this reason, some may argue that the term "feminism" is abortive. If there is no clear, universal application, then it lacks effect. This is partially true; however, the United States is still far from achieving women's equality. For this reason, we need feminism to have meaning, beginning with a correct definition to unify its movement and decode the path toward equality. To arrive at such a definition, we might begin with the various interpretations of feminism that sometimes have led women astray.

Sorting out these various definitions out requires what Dr. Offen describes as categorizing an "individualist" versus a "relational" understanding of feminism. Relational feminism, "...proposed a gender-based but egalitarian vision of social organization. They [relational feminists] featured the primacy of companionate, non-hierarchical, male-female couple as the basic unit of society," (Offen 135). Relational feminism identifies those characteristics which distinguish the female from the male in society and uses those distinctions

as the basis for the equality argument (Offen 136). The theory of relational feminism was considered dominant up until the twentieth century in the Western World, and it was not until after the beginning of this century that the slow, and continuous shift toward an individualist understanding of feminism occurred (Offen 135). Individualist feminism is a theory that "...emphasized more abstract concepts of individual human rights and celebrated the quest for personal independence," (Offen 135). In many ways, the individualist argument for feminism eliminates the distinctions on which relational feminism depends, going so far as to exclude biological distinctions such as "childbearing and its attendant responsibilities," in terms of its definition (Offen 136). For all the differences that relational feminism relies on for the argument for equality, the individualist theory seeks to extinguish, claiming that the biology and sex-linked affiliations of the woman are not significant in the conversation of equality. The divergence of these two understandings, which seemingly stand against each other in the quest for how women's equality can be fundamentally achieved, is a point of disagreement in defining feminism.

Offen's distinction of the two main theories of feminism reveal a divide in feminist understanding, but also offer a complex range of conditions, to which many feminist authors cannot associate their theories with one or the other. Prominent feminist writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft (who I will expound upon in my historical overview of feminism) as well as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, both of whom influenced and sustained the argument for women's suffrage, did not adequately confine themselves to a single theory. Wollstonecraft's work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women,* a seeming individualist theory, acknowledges the inherent biological characteristics women have for childbearing and mothering (Offen 136). Similarly, Stanton first argued that women's voices were essential in matters of national policy because they offered seemingly different approaches and considerations. A few short years later, Stanton

argued in favor of a woman's "...birthright to self-sovereignty," emphasizing a more equilateral approach to women's equality; one that didn't necessarily distinguish them from men as she once had claimed (Offen 136). These early feminist authors demonstrate a problem in the categorization of definitions: a correct definition may very well include both individualist and relational components when defining feminism.

Feminism cannot merely be one or the other, relational, or individualist. A more comprehensive understanding would incorporate both. Additionally, as Offen argues, when feminism associates itself too narrowly with one theory or the other, it fails to accurately account for all that feminism as a concept has to offer. Offen offers a definition of feminism as, "A concept that can encompass both an ideology and a movement for sociopolitical change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination in a given society" (Offen 151). Furthermore, a definition of feminism should consider, "...The social construction of the sexes," which raises the question, particularly in the West, about the relationship of the family to the state. It also forces us to consider the responsibility of the government in its protection and reinforcement of the family unit. This is not to say that the traditional family unit is essential to feminism, nor that feminism should merely concern itself with only a 'traditional' understanding of the family unit and its respective roles. Instead, feminism must make sense out of the obligations that the state has to family and how that support is critical and unique to the woman. Within the family structure, Offen claims that a definition of feminism would "...directly oppose women's subordination to men in the family and in society," (151). Although feminism requires a pro-woman approach, it does not constitute being "anti-man." In fact, throughout history, any progress toward equality for women has depended on the support and effort from male allies (Offen 151). In summary, "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," (Offen 152).

In her definition, Offen references components of both relational and individualist feminist theory. To employ this definition, and possibly see feminism working toward equality, we might observe that where we are in accord with her definition. For instance, as Offen argues in her conclusion, the United States overemphasized the notion of individualist feminist theory following the ratification of the nineteenth amendment. As a result, feminism has continued to stray farther from a relational understanding, barreling on towards the ultra-individualist understanding that is alive and well in contemporary feminism.

Gender equality, "refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys," ("Gender Mainstreaming: Strategy for Promoting Gender Equality"). Equality for women will most likely consider, as Offen claims, "equality in difference," (139). This difference does not merely refer to the biological distinctions between men and women, but also the distinctions within culture and society. This understanding of equality suggests that it is the relationship of women to those social and cultural institutions where equality is not affirmed and yet to be actualized. A consideration of how women are unique in their role and interaction with various social and cultural structures may lead to a better understanding of how feminism relates to the aquisition of these rights and what the movement must address before equality can be formally achieved.

To sort out the various meanings of the term "feminism" we might consider investigating its history. Historians and scholars generally classify four periods in feminist history, dubbed "waves" of feminism (Rampton). These waves are generally classified by a breakthrough in the quest for equal rights for women and motivated by other factors that influence society and the

woman's role at a particular time. Each wave has addressed pertinent matters but nonetheless has failed to resolve the major issues of gender inequality.

The Story of American Feminism: The First Wave

First-wave feminism is generally associated with the women's suffrage movement, and the history surrounding the association of women as subjects of the private sphere in American society. Before 1848, pre-industrial America placed the home and the personal farm at the center of production and livelihood. The rise of capitalism and industrialization transformed the workforce, and thus the woman's role as homemaker. As men increasingly began leaving home and accepting factory jobs where they earned wages the burden of self-reliance that came with farming eased. For women, however, it reinstated their role in society as the homemaker, "...Women were not paid for work in the home. With the availability of manufactured goods, a woman's role as a producer within the home was reduced," ("Role of Women"). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the "true American woman" was the one who could competently manage a household, tend to the needs of husband and children, and create a pleasant and morally healthy environment ("Role of Women"). The image of women as responsible caretakers of men who labored, contributed to the social acceptability of women as home bound.

For a few women, the rise of industrialization opened opportunities for them to take positions in factories, but with limitations. The "Lowell Experiment" is regarded as one of the first attempts at transitioning women from the home to the workplace. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, in Lowell, Massachusetts, Francis Cabot Lowell founded the country's first mass-scale textile production using the cotton loom. Lowell's vision was expanded, with multiple mills connected by water canals scaling the countryside. By 1843, the production center was the largest industrial center in the United States ("Role of Women"). Investors sought cheap

labor, which could be supplied by the rural women of New England who were interested in earning wages. The textile industry was one of the first to strategically seek out this young generation of women for a few reasons. First, these women were near marriage and child-bearing age, which prevented the establishment of a permanent working class in their factory. High turnover prevented the industry from retaining women for too long, thus making their careers short-lived. Secondly, the industry was able to hire women at much lower wages than their male counterparts due to the low social value assigned to women. As inferior persons, their monetary compensation was acceptably less. Although their conditions for work were challenging, the Lowell experiment would come to influence the first attempted movement advocating for women's equality in the workplace.

By 1843, "...more than 30,000 women had left farms to work in the city's ten main textile companies," ("Role of Women"). The textile industry intended to prevent the permanency of female presence in the workforce, but it housed its employed women together in boarding houses. Living in these communities gave women a sense of unity and solidarity through difficult working conditions. Women were controlled, regulated, required to attend mandatory church services, and adhere to strict standards of behavior ("Role of Women"). Years after the initial strikes at the Lowell center, where workers protesting a decrease in wages, women attempted to form the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. The union petitioned for legislation that would implement a maximum workday of ten hours ("Role of Women"). Though a thoughtful effort, women lacked the essential knowledge, experience, rights, and political influence needed to properly organize and implement these changes. The unsuccessful protests split the unity of women in textile work between those who spoke out and those who wanted to remain neutral. As women took on these treacherous labor roles, it became more apparent than ever during their failure to assemble that among the remaining rights that restricted women, the

male's ability to vote and own property were some of the most important and impactful. It was those essential rights that made it possible for men to collectively bargain for their own interests, just as women were attempting to do. Though unsuccessful, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association was the spark that would ignite this movement of collective unity, and a motivator behind the Seneca Falls Convention 1848, which is often considered the beginning of collective and assembled feminist effort in America.

The Seneca Falls Convention, often referenced as the "birthplace" of feminism, was held on July 19th and 20th, 1848. The convention brought together female and African American activists to discuss equal rights efforts. During the convention, The Declaration of Sentiments, a mocked-up version of the Declaration of Independence, was composed detailing the inconsistencies in both social equality and voting rights for women in America ("On this day"). Author Elizabeth Stanton argued, for the first time, that women had been molded to fit the "private" sphere of society and a testament to their roles as homemakers and mothers which kept them physically restricted to the home for the wellbeing of society.

Stanton's writings about the private sphere were influenced by the early writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, a critic of the theory that women are naturally subject to a subordinate social status. Wollstonecraft defends her view that society has oppressed women by claiming they have a "natural ignorance… Just as the poor were forced into servility and to unquestioned submission to authority, so were women denied the powers of rationality," (Cornut-Gentille d'Arcy). Women were positioned to remain inferior because they were allowed to remain ignorant in the private sphere and the institutions of society formed an environment where they never had to overcome this ignorance. This allowed women to be dependent on men for deficiencies they could not overcome legally, economically, and educationally (Cornut-Gentille d'Arcy). However, once women were acknowledged as having the same level of rationality as men,

Wollstonecraft was adamant that the result would be their independence of thought, and thus individual pursuit for rights in other areas of society. Social progress would be made, she claimed, "If women were able to pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence…" (Cornut-Gentille d'Arcy). Inspired by Wollstonecraft's understanding of rights that entitled women to the same level of independence, Stanton authored many resolutions, including ones addressing education and property rights. In the end, however, only suffrage was ratified by the assembly ("On this day").

Although the promise of suffrage was partially intended for women, the pursuit of voting rights for African Americans was well underway. During the Civil War, the promise of suffrage, "was used as leverage against the abolition movement," ("On this day"). Although women had received the support of African Americans at the Seneca Falls Convention and were seen as allies in their quest for rights, women were seemingly dissatisfied with the idea of black men earning the right to vote before they did. *The Myth of Seneca Falls* details a group of suffragettes angered at the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, despite their initial support of African American suffrage (Teterault 3). As a reminder of the suffrage movement's roots, the Seneca Falls Convention began annually hosting anniversary events, "...With each anniversary, the story became more elaborate and complex, creating a false narrative that the event was more than it seemed," ("On this day"). The anniversary events had issues themselves, excluding poor women, black women, and other minorities from attending.

Although it is true that Seneca Falls had influence in the pursuit of women's suffrage, the actual event bore more weight in the fight for African American suffrage than for women in the years immediately following the event. The narrative that has been composed following the Seneca Falls Convention is a testament to how women's history is interpreted and continues to be understood, claims Teterault (3). Women are consistently looking back, peering into the past

to use the works and influence that their predecessors gave them to recycle the theories and ideas that were once understood as being successful. No better place was there to compile these separate events than into one main event in women's history, known as the Seneca Falls Convention, which represents the culmination of hundreds of years of feminist thought and philosophy finally put into one location at a unique time.

First-wave feminism set a precedent for how most feminist efforts would progress, by using the efforts and ideas of the previous waves as inspiration for the next, with each wave pushing the agenda a bit farther. In addition, first-wave feminism was arguably one of the most collective efforts feminists based on the theory of relational feminism. Women campaigned for the right to vote based on characteristics that made them distinct, yet equal to men, to demonstrate that sex did not quantify an inferior status ("On this day").

Seventy years following the original Seneca Falls Convention, the 19th Amendment was finally ratified. A victory for women, that "...led to the work of prominent feminist leaders in the 1950s and 60s," ("On this day"). It is important to note that although the 1920 ratification was a large step for women in their quest for equal rights, many women were left out of these initial victories, including women of color and those of lower socioeconomic status. The lack of recognition of black women would fuel feminist efforts going into the civil rights era as women of color faced unique challenges to overcoming the obstacles of society that white and Caucasian women did not.

The Story of American Feminism: The Second Wave

Second-wave feminism was a collective movement formed in response to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The second-wave movement was collective, unified, and powerful due to its coexistence with the civil rights movement. Events surrounding second-wave feminism included the woman's role post-World War II, labor and employment rights, as

well as the discrepancies between black and white women, which posed a threat to the unification of civil rights and feminist movements. Additionally, the sixties marked a turning point in the quest for women's independence with the creation of the birth control pill and the emergence of radical feminism, identified by its dependence on what Offen dubs the "individualistic theory" of feminism which would spill into the third and fourth wave.

The World War II woman is generally depicted by "Rosie The Riveter" imagery, which illustrated the role women held in society during wartime. As men were pulled into the war effort overseas and at home, the vacancies in factories caused the United States economy to plummet. To restore the economy at home, factories that produced war materials quickly opened their doors to women. "Rosie" was used as a type of propaganda, encouraging women to be "patriotic" by seeking out factory work, and "doing their part" to help win the war (Stephen Ambrose, D-Day, 488 cited by The National World War II Museum). Rosie is depicted with a stern look on her face, her shirt sleeves rolled up, and a bandana holding her hair back. The image is an obvious depiction of women setting down their "beauty" roles and becoming laborers. The need for women in the workforce changed society's understanding of the "ideal" woman. Women were still expected to maintain their homemaker duties on top of their new employment, "When men left, women "became proficient cooks and housekeepers, managed the finances, learned to fix the car, worked in a defense plant, and wrote letters to their soldier husbands that were consistently upbeat." (Stephen Ambrose, D-Day, 488 cited by The National World War II Museum). This was an era that helped to establish the false narrative that women had to be both full-time caretaker and have place in the workforce to be considered 'successful' in society.

Some women also had opportunities to serve in combat during World War II in new capacities. Women took over some of the clerical positions in the military so that those men

could fight. Others also had more direct roles, “They drove trucks, repaired airplanes, worked as laboratory technicians, rigged parachutes, served as radio operators, analyzed photographs, flew military aircraft across the country, test-flew newly repaired planes, and even trained anti-aircraft artillery gunners,” (The National World War II Museum). Roles in the war effort also included nurses and medical professionals who aided overseas. By the end of World War II, 350,000 women had served abroad or at home (The National World War II Museum).

The aftermath of World War II may be considered one of the great motivators of second-wave feminism. As men returned home, they wanted to reclaim their factory jobs and original roles in the workforce which women had now held for several years. Factories began firing women, returning their positions to men. Other jobs that women held were dissolved due to the lack of demand for war materials. Women who had served in the war faced barriers to re-entering society, because veterans’ programs, benefits, and insurance did not apply to them at that time. The nation that had depended on the service and work of women failed to address the serious injustices and inequalities women faced at the end of the war. Women were angered by their lack of status after serving in such important capacities for such a long time. The propaganda of Rosie the Riveter continued, displaying Rosie as the woman who left her job and returned to her home to pursue her true purpose in life as a homemaker (The National World War II Museum). Despite this propagandized attempt to redefine the role of women in society, women were enraged, their fight to redefine this role had merely begun.

Following World War II, the staggering birthrate increase was also taking its toll on America. By the beginning of the 1960s, the population of the United States had begun to rival India’s (“The Pill and the Women's Liberation Movement"). The baby boom had taken full effect in post-war society. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique,* one of the first major literary critiques of this reality and its effects on women. Friedan writes, “In the fifteen

years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture, (18). In the fifties, America sustained a shift in public sentiment that supported female autonomy and progress. The status quo once again promoted young marriages and careers of childbearing, with a record number of childbirths among college-age women. Women were commonly having three-to-four children by the age of 25 and then faced another 15-20 years of fertility ("The Pill and the Women's Liberation Movement"). The age of women getting married was on a steady decline, averaging the age of 20. Additionally, fewer women were attending university in the mid-1950s than had been in the 1920s, "A century earlier, women had started the fight to gain access to higher education; now girls went to college to find a husband," (Friedan 16). Fewer young women entered the workforce at all and instead went straight from their primary school education to work in the home. For married women, it became commonplace to take up part-time, secretarial work as a means of putting their husbands through school or providing another small, steady income to assist with bills. "In the late fifties, a sociological phenomenon was suddenly remarked: a third of American women now worked, but most were no longer young, and very few were pursuing careers," (Friedan 17). Friedan's writing discusses a 1956 *Life* magazine triumphing the revival of the domestic American woman. The magazine rejoiced, "The movement of American women back to the home," (17).

These statistics would begin to change in the mid-1950s and into the beginning of the 1960s, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the introduction of the birth control pill. As a result, the numbers of female employment began to rise, reaching a new high that exceeded the female employment numbers during World War II ("The Pill and the Women's Liberation Movement"). Soon after, women received the rights entitled to them by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, encouraging them to seek other occupations and destroying barriers that had

restricted them from entering professional and collegiate programs. Additionally, the introduction of the birth control pill had profound effects on women's ability to pursue alternative careers.

A small group of feminists had been conspiring for years against the "...disproportionate burdens women bear by caring and rearing children," ("The Pill"). The pill came as a solution because it gave women control over their reproduction and introduced a new idea of reproductive rights that were unique to women. More women were now capable of attending and graduating from universities before having children. As a result, the number of children per household decreased, and the average age of childbearing increased in the years to come ("The Pill").

The birth control pill, and the right for women to use it, did not come to exist without public backlash and legal questions. In 1965, a case regarding the right of couples to use birth control made its way to the Supreme Court for interpretation. An 1879 law in Connecticut stated that "any person who uses any drug, medicinal article or instrument for the purposes of preventing conception shall be fined…" ("Griswold v. Connecticut 1965"). The law also criminalized assistance in providing or prescribing medications that prevented pregnancy. After two medical professionals were fined for prescribing contraceptives, they appealed the ruling, which inevitably ended up in the United States Supreme Court as *Griswold v. Connecticut.* The justices ruled that the law, "...violated a right to marital privacy," ("Griswold v. Connecticut 1965"). This right to marital privacy was considered a right implicit in the Constitution, albeit the justices varied on where exactly that right was to be found.

Another barrier women who wanted use birth control faced were the dangerous health effects and lack of women in the medical field and pharmaceutical industry. The birth control pill was one of the first medications produced by pharmacists and prescribed by physicians that women did not take when they were sick; Instead, women were to take it when they were healthy

as a preventative drug. Public response was reluctant to this idea of preventative medicine, so much that many women were hesitant to try it. Although it was deemed as a potentially liberating drug for many women, it was also staunchly criticized for its effectiveness and safety.

The criticisms came to light in 1970, during a Senate hearing on other drugs that were shown to have lasting side effects on women ("Senate Hearings on the Pill"). Senator Gaylord Nelson was already deeply involved in pharmaceutical trials when he decided to take on the birth control pill, calling dozens of male medical experts to testify on its dangers ("Senate Hearings on the Pill"). After learning that their doctors were not required to disclose the possible side-effects of such medication and had not adequately educated them on taking it, many women faced unintended long-term health effects. Feminist groups protested the hearings, condemning the lack of care and concern that medical companies were giving to women who were prescribed the pills. Furthermore, the trials went on without a single woman being called to testify ("Senate Hearings on the Pill"). The hearings gained the attention of the media which relayed the hearings and the feminist protests across America.

As a result of the Senate hearings, more regulations were put into place regarding the composition of birth control. The hormone levels in the pill were required to be decreased, and years later, doctors would be required to give all patients a written piece of material describing the instructions, content, and possible side effects of taking medication ("Senate Hearings on the Pill"). As an initial response to the hearings, women feared consuming the pill, and not being properly educated on the risks and side effects. However, in the years following the hearings and the reform that was required, it once again was sought after, reaching a record-high number of nineteen million women using the birth control pill in the United States alone ("Senate Hearings on the Pill").

The 1960s illustrates one of the most essential turning points in the United States' understanding of feminism and its associated issues. The introduction of the birth control pill gave power to women which some men perceived as a dangerous. Additionally, the woman's responsibility to control the prevention of pregnancy fundamentally changed the understanding of reproductive rights. The right to prevent, conceive, abort, or raise a child was associated solely with the woman. As Offen explains, defining feminism is impossible without the acknowledgment of those characteristics which are inherently female, such as pregnancy and motherhood. Birth control, and its aftermath, however, somewhat diminished male responsibility and established a precedent for women's rights and reproductive rights as indistinguishable and inherently individualistic. Second-wave feminism was deeply concerned with the right to personal sovereignty or autonomy. This individualist understanding that a woman can decide for herself what she wished to do with her body became a popular sentiment and was reflected by the Supreme Court that ruled in favor of a woman's right to self-determination in *Roe v. Wade* (1973).

The Story of American Feminism: Black Feminists

Another important outcome of second-wave feminism concerned African American feminism and their presence in the feminist effort. The contributions of second-wave feminists who lived through the Civil Rights era would be authored between the categorized "waves" of second and third wave feminism but are nonetheless essential to a proper understanding of black women and their role in the feminist effort. The inability to fit the contribution of black feminists tightly into a "wave" proves problematic in adequately assimilating the work of black women into the story of feminism.

In her work *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*, Alice Walker first coins the term "womanist" to describe a black feminist or feminist of color. She claims a womanist is, "… A

woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually…Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility… Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female." (Walker xi). In the final words of her definition, Walker claims, "purple is to lavender as womanist is to feminism," (Walker xi). Within this distinction, Walker offers one of the first major criticisms of feminism: its exclusivity. This problem was evident up through the second wave but remains in contemporary feminism. As Walker describes, there is a need for womanism when feminism is not enough, particularly because feminism excludes the aid of men where it is needed. Womanism includes the possibility of men in the fight for equality because, "being a black woman and having learnt to survive in the hostile white world, she has known the pain of being the 'Other'" (Walker qtd in Geetha et al.). The fundamental difference in Walker's understanding of equality versus the traditional feminist understanding is based on her experience as black and experiencing racial discrimination. By relinquishing any sense of hate, black women, and women in general, will truly be free. She offers this theory as a criticism of early feminist movements which turned men and women, black and white, against one another in the quest for equality based on a false understanding that some "group" must be superior (Geetha et al. 220).

Walker seeks to re-establish the identity of black women, encouraging them to not forget their mothers and grandmothers who helped to lay the foundation for where they walk today (Geetha et al. 221). For without this history, they would not exist. Walker's contribution to the feminism as a theory of growth and history which is tied back to women before her is unique and reflective of an understanding of black and female as inseparable. When she assesses the status of "black black women" in America, Walker accounts for the way black (not light-skinned) women have been characterized incorrectly in literature and throughout history, allowing a faulty understanding of black black women to perpetuate. This defective message is conveyed through

white authorship and based around a disingenuous understanding of blackness which falsely attributes black persons as whiter than they were (301). Walker claims that the literature surrounding the black experience is one of the main contributors of the misunderstanding surrounding black women, claiming "...their [white authors] depictions of themselves and black people as whiter than we are has led to a crippling of the imagination and of truth itself for which we pay dearly– in anger, hurt, envy, and misunderstanding– to this day (Walker 301).

A black woman's identity as a woman, Walker describes, is inseparable from her identity as black. Prior to the academic movement toward intersectionality, Walker was already associating the racial and gender identities as interrelated. Walker provides a narrative, including poetry, speeches, and discussions in her analysis of black feminism which provide a lens on the forgotten and ignored contributions of black authorship and black feminist thought that are instrumental in the fight for equality.

The Story of American Feminism: The Third Wave

Third wave feminism began in the early nineties and is marked by the rise of sexual assault awareness, the new concept of "intersectionality" and the definition of feminism as primarily individualistic. Third-wave feminism is known as radical feminism, a definition based on an extreme version of individualism. Radical, or extreme individualist feminism, emerged with a new understanding of oppression and the social institutions which foster a patriarchal structure.

With third-wave feminism, sexual violence and sexual assault become topics that women were more apt to discuss openly. Anita Hill was one of the first women of color to take the stand and testify against a Supreme Court Justice nominee. In 1991 Hill testified against Clarence Thomas, accusing him of sexual assault during the time she worked for him at both the Department of Education and the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission ("Feminism: The

Third Wave"). Although the justice was still confirmed, Hill's testimony influenced other women to come forward and prompted the implementation of workplace protections and encouraged schools and other institutions to develop awareness about unwanted sexual imposition ("Feminism: The Third Wave").

Women of the third wave fully embraced the new concept of "intersectionality" which is defined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as a concept combining gender, class, race, ethnicity, and other identifying indicators as interconnecting and related as people seek to find their place in society ("Feminism: The Third Wave"). Because of Crenshaw's theory, black feminist authorship was featured more often during the third wave, influencing many black women to write accounts of their experiences as women of color, but also as women of low socioeconomic background, or persons of different sexual identities. This type of scholarship had not been seen regularly prior to the third wave. It influenced new groups of women to begin writing about their feminist experience, particularly because so many of them felt left behind or were the daughters and descendants of those who had been left out of previous feminist movements which were tailored to white, middle-class women ("Feminism: The Third Wave"). In fact, it was Rebecca Walker, daughter of prominent second-wave feminist Alice Walker, who claimed that the political climate was 'different' enough to recognize that a new wave of feminism was emerging ("Feminism: The Third Wave").

Third-wave feminism also became the grounds on which radical interest groups formed. During this period, women began questioning the reality of everything social, from music, to art, and even their own sexuality. It was a time of exploration and staunch opposition to non-female agendas. Women assembled radical groups to protest societal norms and question the status quo. One example included the "Guerilla Girls," a radical group formed in opposition to the abundant female nudity in the art world ("Feminism: The Third Wave"). Other women formed punk rock

bands called “Riot Grrl bands” to protest a male-dominated industry and bring the efforts of protest into music (“Feminism: The Third Wave”).

Third-wave feminism brings light to new authors and was influential in promoting black female scholarship. Additionally, the senatorial testimony by Anita Hill encouraged a new expectation and reinstated the right of women to fight back against sexual crimes which most often affected them. However, third-wave feminism also brings into the twenty-first century, an understanding of feminism that is radical and divisively individualistic. As a result of the affiliations of many third-wave feminists, the goals of feminism become less focused on the movements toward equality, and more about the destruction of ideas, policies, or reputations of people who have the potential to contradict the radical feminist agenda. To harken back to Offen’s warning, the third wave becomes incredibly “anti-male” (151). In addition, the feminist movement strays away from political action, influence, and strategies, and assumes a cultural influence that appeals to young women but lacks effectiveness in the quest for political equality.

The Story of American Feminism: The Fourth Wave

Fourth wave feminism remains a point of contention in the academic world. Some feminist scholars argue that the movement from academia back to a primarily cultural movement is evidence of a new wave of feminism (Rampton). The aftermath of third-wave feminism left a fractured understanding of the movement and its associated ideas. As some feminist scholars suggest, after the concept of intersectionality dominated the academic world, “Feminism no longer just refers to the struggles of women; it is a clarion call for gender equity,” (Rampton). Furthermore, the dawn of the technological age introduced an entirely new set of communication and expanded the accessibility of information and ideas to contemporary feminists. Some feminists disagree on whether the media and technology constitute the establishment of a new

"wave," yet an overwhelming majority agree that "the internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism," (Munro).

The Problems with Contemporary Feminism:

The unrest surrounding the definition of a fourth wave does not prevent an assessment of the current state of feminist affairs in America. Due to the infancy of the fourth wave, I will refer to this fourth wave as "contemporary feminism" in the following analysis to properly account for the wave as it exists currently.

Fourth-wave feminism is composed of a young generation of women who align themselves with narrow, radical policies. The attitudes of this generation of feminists promote abolition of sex in favor of a gender-fluid understanding of feminism (Perry). In the past, feminist writings that discuss the similarities between men and women have been influential in the pursuit of equal rights, works such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women.* Early progressive feminists did not argue that men and women are fundamentally the same, but that their capacities to reason were equal (Cornut-Gentille d'Arcy). This was important to building the case for suffrage, education rights, etc. While the similarities between men and women are important, disregarding the differences, and clearing the slate of all the unique challenges, traits, and characteristics of womanhood in favor of a gender-fluid society harms the female experience. As Offen states in her analysis of feminism, a good definition and understanding must have a component of relational feminism, "The identification of women's characteristics in relation to men" (Offen). The overarching theme of contemporary feminism has glossed over what is supposed to be the focus of feminism: Women (Perry).

Contemporary feminism has morphed into a social movement advocating for a plethora of social issues and addressing the areas of victimization that women can inflict upon themselves because of past oppression. This is dangerous because it attempts to flip the power imbalance in

the opposite direction, sometimes promoting a female-dominated agenda and dismissing the goal of "equality." Outside of academia, the cultural movement of radical feminism concerns itself with all social issues, "...anti-racism, criticisms of the criminal justice system, and the questioning of bourgeois sexual norms…" however, no one follows up these efforts by asking, "And how will this affect women?" (Perry). This is not to say that these alliances are unwarranted. The feminist movement has a history of aligning itself with promoting the rights of the marginalized and oppressed (Rampton). The concern arises when feminism is associated with such a variety of things that no one can conceptualize it any longer. Contemporary feminism seems to suggest that to be feminist, one must also associate themselves with an agenda of other social and political issues. This obscures the goal and decentralizes the focus from equality for women to the activism of any number of other issues.

The contemporary movement idolizes sexual liberation and individualism and disregards the importance of unity between men and women in the quest for equal rights. Contemporary feminism has morphed into a generalized social movement promoting inclusive gender equality which harms the very cause it seeks to advance. Addressing the issues of the inequalities facing women requires first putting women at the center of the cause. The aftermath of third-wave feminism promotes phrases like, "'equality for all genders' which have become increasingly fashionable," (Bianco). Such generalizations obscure a clear understanding of who is included in the pursuit of feminist efforts. This is undermined by the failure to distinguish between "sex" and "gender." Sex may be defined as, "...the classification of either male or female according to reproductive organ and organ function and is generally identified at birth" (Mazure). Whereas gender is regarded as a self-representation, "...on the basis of the individual's gender presentation," (Mazure). This distinction was a product of late second and early third-wave feminism which was the first to use the concept of intersectionality. This understanding, though

important in the understanding of women and their perspectives, dramatically changed the way feminism was defined.

As women of the radical wave began addressing these overlapping identities, there was an expansion in the ideas and identities associated with feminism. Although this growth was positive, because it allowed more women to identify with the movement, it promoted an extremely individualist understanding of feminism. As the individualist understanding was accepted, there was no longer a need for the concepts of relational feminism and its affiliated ideas, such as the distinctions between sex and gender and their relationship to the goals of equality for women. However, many feminists continue to argue that without such a distinction, "We cannot address or end the systemic oppression of women if we refuse to center women in that fight" (Bianco). If feminism is equated with the pursuit of equal rights for anyone regardless of their sexual or gender identity, the understanding of how equal rights can be formally achieved for women is muddled. An improper understanding of what feminism is obscures any understanding of how equality can be achieved.

It may be argued that women are still far from claiming their basic right to equality because we have deviated from Offen's understanding of feminism which requires feminism to be pro-woman, pro-relational, and pro-individualist. Instead, since the third wave, women have maintained a narrow individualist understanding of feminism. By relying on this understanding, women cancel any opportunity for alliances and community inside and outside of the movement. This false understanding has caused women to resent any notion of a "common female experience". Women on both sides of the political aisle have turned against one another and lost sight of any commonality that would unify them. If women refuse to address the hypocrisies between policy and ideological associations, and maintain their narrow definition of feminism, any lasting effect on basic equality will cease to exist.

Contemporary feminism hides many hypocrisies. The two dominating feminist theories that Offen describes have polarized themselves between the political parties of the left and right. Women who identify themselves as more conservative are likely to be gender-critical feminists who have been overwhelmingly rejected and dubbed "bigots" and "enemies of progress" for criticizing the gender-fluid movement (Bianco). Women who have opposed issues like trans-activism and claim that the biological differences between men and women are legitimate and have a place in the discussion of women's rights are accused of being hateful and discriminatory. Conservative feminist Susanna Rustin writes, "Understanding sexual difference to be an important facet of human experience, we seek a form of equality that recognizes it." This traditional view of the difference between sex and gender is influenced by the feminist adaptation of Simon de Beauveaur's 1949 publication *The Second Sex,* wherein she claims that the experiences of people, male or female, change the way the world is observed and therefore understood (Rustin). Furthermore, this view does not denounce the reality of gender identities, merely that biological characteristics affect how women overcame their state of oppression in past feminist efforts and that it will matter in the future acquisition of equal rights.

Conservative feminists face challenges, particularly by dismissing the term "feminism" altogether. Women who align themselves with more conservative political candidates are subject to scrutiny by progressive feminists. Furthermore, conservative feminists are unlikely to protest or speak out on women's issues. They take a more relaxed approach and, as Yancey-Bragg writes, "...simply don't advocate for the same structural and institutional changes that [progressives] and traditional feminists historically have." Conservative women also tend to have a narrow perception of feminism. If there is not a personal affiliation with injustice, they are not likely to object. The criticism facing conservative women is their lack of regard for the theories of intersectionality and "overlapping identities" that liberal women incorporate into their

understanding of feminism (Yancey-Bragg). Conservative women, too, have lost touch with asking the fundamental question: “How will this affect women?” or perhaps more relevant to their political ideology, “How will this affect other women?” outside of a particular demographic (Perry).

The two competing contemporary feminist theories have a bigger impact than merely being at odds in their interpretations of the role of feminism in society. Each side has set barriers against the other, identifying policies that claimed to constitute a true “feminist” of their party. The polarization has placed women into tribes, competing for power and ridiculing each other based on policy affiliation (Yancey-Bragg). In recent years, feminism is primarily attributed to one’s stance on abortion rights. Those who oppose abortion for legitimate reasons cannot be considered “feminist” by the pro-choice movement, even if they support all other aspects women’s equality. Examples of this polarization are found all over America. In 2017, Herndon-De La Rosa founded a pro-life group, advocating against abortion, as well as other socially accepted policies. After initially receiving an invitation from the 2017 Women’s March, her group was removed from the event for its stance on abortion rights (Yancey-Bragg). The exclusion of women from feminism based on the support of narrow policies is dangerous and supports Offen’s analysis that feminism cannot just be for the mothers or the single women who have never had children, for women who have had abortions, or women who are trying to conceive; it must be for all, simultaneously, and support those themes that unify them (157).

Self-determination and individualism continue to be a dominant themes in American feminism, however, their implications have been dubbed problematic in the quest for women’s equality. Contemporary feminism elaborates the past achievements of second-wave feminism and is overly concerned with maintaining the sexual freedoms of women in society. Furthermore, sexual preferences have drawn the attention of feminists who advocate for free sexual expression

and a disregard for traditionally monogamous relationships (Perry). Women who have spoken out against the negative effects of this sexual freedom and the casual hookup culture have been silenced.

In addition to the social attitudes toward sex, the United States is the leading pornography producer in the world, accounting for two-thirds of the world's pornography sites based out of California (Zolfagharifard). Whether this statistic is telling of feminists' attitudes toward self-determination, or the nature of American society and economics is not certain. However, women who have actively spoken out against the potential abuse of women in the sex industry "...find themselves rejected on the left," (Perry). Although the feminist author Andrea Dworkin maintained a variety of ambiguous positions surrounding women and their sexuality, her criticism of pornography in the 1970s is relevant still today. She maintained that politics would never be possible for women so long as they treated the sex industry as any other place of work (Perry). Radical feminism has continued to advocate for the acceptance and normalization of women in the porn industry, reflecting the attitudes of many women who consider it a fundamental right to subject themselves to such conditions. More telling, however, is the support and profit that the American economy generates from the production of it, prompting a question of what true feminism is, and why an industry that openly exploits women is seemingly in favor of it.

The contemporary feminist movement seems no closer than its predecessors to affirming the basic rights of female equality. In her work detailing the current state of feminism in the United States, author Jo Reger argues in her article, "Everywhere and Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States," that contemporary feminism involves a paradox. Feminism, though seemingly everywhere, in the news, in what we read, on our televisions, and in our everyday lives, has little to show for the substantial progress since the second wave (Reger 186).

In fact, the term "feminism" has infiltrated so much that, "it appears to be apolitical and meaningless," (186). Women wrap themselves up in the comfort of a cultural "movement" that exists by placing themselves in situations that appear to be unifying, such as posting on social media, assembling in marches that are un-unified and incohesive, and by claiming their title as "feminist" because it gives them a personal satisfaction. Contemporary feminism has become more affiliated with the sphere of culture and less with the sphere of politics. Reger addresses these two competing forces claiming that the new approach "...is not a retreat from the political but instead a strategy shaped by the experience of coming into feminism in a political generation," (186). Culture, although influential in shaping policy and public sentiment, often becomes a closed vehicle of change that includes and excludes based on the ideas deemed appropriate at a certain place and time. It might be argued that the culture of contemporary feminism is not particularly beneficial in the political context of equal rights.

It seems then that the contemporary, or fourth-wave feminism is not on track to secure the basic rights of equality for women. Feminism as a movement needs a set of cohesive goals that are clearly understood, providing an opportunity for both sides of the political aisle to have a place in the pursuit of equality. Women ought to see themselves as individuals with unique roles and talents in society and understand those relationships with others when defining feminism and the efforts of the feminist movement. Furthermore, for equality to be actualized, women must find a way to promote the goals of equality in the context of political action. In its current form as a cultural movement, contemporary feminism seeks to bring about change in sentiment and attitude and it can continue to garner awareness and advocacy. However, institutional change can only be actualized in a political context with acts of legislation that enforce the changes necessary to promote equality.

Feminism: A Path Forward

The above assessment of contemporary feminism might entail some recommendations on how feminism can be effective and support the goals of equality. As previously identified, the issue with contemporary feminism (the fourth wave) ultimately rests on its definition as only individualistic. It neglects any components of relational feminism which are essential to a full understanding. Women should forego the understanding that to be "feminist" one must concern herself only with herself and her will. The acquisition of equal rights is not a goal merely for single women, or for women of a particular political party, but for all women. This involves relaxing the grasp on the purely individualistic understanding of feminism. Offen offers a suggestion: "...to reshape the world to our own purpose by 'rethinking' the male-dominated family and its politics in a manner that incorporates, rather than neglects, the sociopolitical dimensions of women's experience," (156). For example, applying Offen's understanding of the problem of the family in the United States, would force a look at the policies surrounding maternity and family leave. The United States is one of six countries, and one of three industrialized nations in the world that does not require paid maternity leave by law ("More than 120 Nations"). Furthermore, the International Labor Organization claims that "119 countries meet the International Labor Organization standard of 12 weeks of leave, with 62 of those countries providing for 14 weeks or more. Just 31 countries mandate a maternity leave of less than 12 weeks…" The United States is among those 31 that offer 12 or less weeks of maternity leave.

When Offen's incorporation of the woman's experience regarding matters of childbirth and motherhood are incorporated into this understanding of feminism, it becomes apparent that it is not just single women who face the burdens of gender inequality, it is married women, married mothers, and single mothers. No woman is excluded from the structure of a society which makes

it impossible for women to be both mother and worker, to maintain a role in the family and maintain a career. These inherent characteristics make women unique, and therefore to achieve equality, social structure should account for those differences. Equal pay for women could constitute a reconsideration of maternity and parental leave, which would allow for women to be paid adequately for their time off. Equality could require a reconsideration of the accessibility and affordability of childcare, particularly during the early, developmental stages of a child's life. In essence, achieving formal equality for women would require amending those social institutions which currently make it impossible for women to have both a career and be a mother, because many other inequalities women face stem from the tension between these two roles.

However, as Offen suggests, the issues pertaining the compatibility of motherhood and career rarely make their way into the conversation over feminism. This is where contemporary feminism being based only on the individualist theory falls short; it excludes many women, and inadvertently excludes many of the problems that need to be overcome for formal equality to be achieved. Offen claims,

> Such a vision [of feminism] must be capacious enough to include the concerns of women who are married as well as women who are single, women who are mothers as well as women who do not choose motherhood… It must speak to poor women as well as wealthy women, and women of various ethnic backgrounds and religious persuasions. It must also include men whose self-concept is not rooted in domination over women. Such a vision will encompass the best features of both the past and present relational and individualistic frameworks (157).

The above assessment of the state of contemporary feminism details the shortcomings of its definition, its ineffectiveness as a movement, and its inadequate role in affirming the basic rights of equality. As we continue to ponder the idea of women's equality, I would propose that

the feminist movement take a lesson from Alice Walker's understanding of womanism and its goals of unity. As Offen states, feminism is not true feminism unless it is meeting every woman in some way and reflecting her unique role in the public space. Feminism has the possibility of bringing about necessary change if it can once again reclaim its space in the political discussion as a pro-woman and pro-peace argument. An argument for equality, instead of an argument of hate for the 'other' sex (Walker xi).

To reclaim this argument and make feminism as a movement effective, I encourage this new generation of feminists to peer back into history. As Walker advises, we should appreciate and learn from our mothers, grandmothers and those women who walked before us. Real progress has been made throughout American history, and women have their predecessors to credit for this. However, women continue to fight for basic equality.

As stated previously, equality is related to the opportunity and fairness in the interactions of women to various social and cultural institutions. Therefore, equality for women comes at some expense. This expense may be a re-evaluation of how important society views the roles of women as both worker and mother and plans to remedy the strain imposed by these dualling responsibilities. Equality would place a financial responsibility on society to provide women with the capital and resources essential to balancing these two roles. A request I would suggest, that is unlikely to be granted. Women have been juggling these responsibilities forever, and the significance given to aiding and resolving these challenges has been scarce. A society that cares about the importance of their women as mothers and as workers would remedy the effects which hold women back regarding healthcare and reproductive rights, economic and wage gaps, and the inequities associated with childcare. American society chooses not to do so. I would suggest this reflects the attitude of a society which prioritizes its institutions as they exist over women's equality. This does not mean that the fight for women's equality or feminism as a concept and

movement should be abandoned, but that equality will be difficult to obtain and even more difficult to enforce.

There remains a need for feminism with a definition that is clear and effectively communicated. Although the goals of equality are difficult to conceptualize, change is possible. As feminism grows into its fourth wave, I propose that contemporary feminists reclaim a proper understanding of feminism with both individualist and relational components and promote a sense of community among men and women devoted to the notion of equal rights. Without this community, women are merely individual, each standing alone in the fight for equality.

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