

# A Historical Examination of Philosophical Foundations of Feminism

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## **Abstract:**

Since the beginning of human civilization, our lives have been greatly shaped by a certain code of conduct and ideals set by society. The principle of the division of labor is followed in every society, assigning roles to individuals based on their capabilities and mental dispositions. Paradoxically, it has been observed that women were deprived of their rights due to social conditioning, and their roles were confined to household chores only. This can be attributed to biased perceptions and entrenched social prejudices that support the notion that women are less capable than men and are not fit to participate in the socio-economic and political systems. It was a great hurdle on the part of women to reach their highest potential as they remained bound by societal constraints for a long period, suppressing their freedom and excluding them from substantial roles in the management of political affairs.

Political thought, as a subject, lays the foundation of ideas that describe the relationship between individuals and the state. We will find many narratives regarding women in the discourses of Political Philosophers at different stages of history. Against this backdrop, it becomes imperative to shed light on how their ideas have shaped our thoughts processes over years.

Analyzing the multitude of their thoughts will significantly contribute to our understanding of the concept of feminism, which has become a highly important topic in current academic discourse. In the contemporary period, feminists worldwide advocate for greater freedom and equality for women in every sphere of life. Hence, there is a need for a sincere effort to comprehend how prominent Western political philosophers have articulated their ideas on feminism from multifaceted angles.

**Key words:** Civilization, Division of Labour, Gender Equality, Feminism etc.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Feminism creates an extensive framework of views and ideals within the vast social and political effort focused at attaining heightened equity for women. Operating as the core principle, feminism creates and guides the trajectory of the women's movement, inevitably shaped by its aims. Women strive for justice throughout many aspects of life, adopting a broad assortment of strategies in pursuit of this purpose.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout history, women have constantly participated in campaigns for their rights and emancipation across varied worldwide settings. Nevertheless, the formation of feminism as a unified political movement, marked by the different traits touched upon below, achieved its maximum expression in the twentieth century. The beginnings of current feminism may be predominantly attributed to Western nations, however it was significantly impacted by socialist doctrines and practices, as well as anti-imperialist and nationalist movements in the third world. Notably, the 1960s saw the expansion of women's

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<sup>1</sup> Fiss, O. M. (1994). What is feminism. Ariz. St. LJ, 26, 413.

liberation groups in practically every Western country, marking a critical point in the history of feminism on a worldwide scale.<sup>2</sup>

Early feminism, particularly the first wave of the women's movement, displayed strong imprints of liberal beliefs and values. A crucial element in this history came at the period of the French Revolution when women started to concretely partake in political activity. By the middle of the 19th century, the women's movement had identified its basic aims. One important leader in this shifting context was Mary Wollstonecraft, often recognized as a pioneering role in the feminist discussion. She authored her primary essay, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," against the background of the French Revolution. On this work, she established a solid argument arguing the entitlement of women to rights and advantages similar to those provided to males, based on the idea that women, too, are inherently "human beings." Wollstonecraft thought that the split idea of gender would progressively fade in relevance within the fields of politics and social institutions, provided women received access to education and were regarded as autonomous, thinking individuals in their own right.<sup>3</sup>

John Stuart Mill, profoundly touched by his companion and lover Harriet Taylor, authored "The Subjection of Women" in 1869. Within this significant work, Mill offered the fundamental argument fighting for the balance of women's rights with males, notably highlighting the incorporation of women in the right to vote. The initial wave of feminism concluded with the attainment of female voting, a huge triumph originally obtained in New Zealand in 1893.<sup>4</sup>

Socialist feminism, which rose to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century, differs greatly from liberal feminism in that its principles go beyond the idea that women only face legal or political disadvantages that can be overcome by achieving equal opportunities or equitable legal rights. On the other hand, proponents of socialist feminism say that the complex dynamics of gender relations are profoundly rooted in the structure of the social and economic system. They say that women won't truly have a chance at independence until there is a huge shift in society—some are even pushing for a social revolution. The primary premise of socialist feminism is that one can only comprehend the origins of sexism in the context of greater social and economic factors.

Friedrich Engels' classic article "The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State" ([1884] 1976) presents the definitive exposition of this essential principle. Engels argued that the emergence of capitalism and the formation of private property came with a fundamental shift in women's social standing. Family arrangements in pre-capitalist civilizations were shared in nature, and the notion of the "mother right," which refers to the transmission of property and social position via matrilineal lineage, became generally acknowledged. But capitalism, which was built on men's dominance over private property, worked to diminish "mother right," resulting to what Engels refers to as "the global historical defeat of the female sex." Engels asserted—and in broad accord with a number of current socialist feminists—that the family unit serves as the major mechanism for the enslavement of women.

A substantial portion of socialist feminism clings to neo-Marxism, which acknowledges the intricate interplay of political, social, cultural, and economic factors in society. Because of this, they keep clear of a simple economic determinism while evaluating women's financial condition and instead concentrate on the intellectual and sociological underpinnings of sexism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Friedman, M., Metelerkamp, J., & Posel, R. (1987). What is feminism? And what kind of feminist am I?. *Agenda*, 1(1), 3-24.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies An Introduction*, PALGRAVE, London, 2017, pp-296-331.

<sup>4</sup> John Hoffman and Paul Graham, *Introduction to Political Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2015, p-315.

<sup>5</sup> Heywood, *Political Ideologies An Introduction*, pp-316-317.

'Second-wave' feminism which arose during 1960s was characterized by radical outlook. The *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan marked the resurgence of feminist thought in the 1960s. She highlighted what she called 'the problem with no name', by which she meant the sense of despair and deep unhappiness many women experience because they are confined to a domestic existence and are thus unable to gain fulfillment in a career or through political life.<sup>6</sup>

The second wave of feminism came to an understanding that the gain of political and legal rights did not properly address the underlying concerns contained within the 'women's question'. It became obvious that feminist beliefs gradually changed towards more extreme and occasionally revolutionary standpoints. Notable literary works like Kate Millet's "Sexual Politics" (1970) and Germaine Greer's "The Female Eunuch" (1970) significantly expanded the boundaries of what was traditionally considered 'political' by placing a heightened focus on the emotional, psychological, and sexual aspects of female subjugation.

The main goal of second-wave feminism went beyond mere political enfranchisement, wanting instead the wider idea of 'women's freedom' as supported by the growing Women's freedom Movement. This pursuit couldn't be achieved simply through governmental changes or law revisions. Contemporary feminists claimed that achieving such a goal needed a deeper and possibly revolutionary social change. It was known that true freedom for women went beyond laws and involved a thorough reworking of social norms and values.<sup>7</sup>

#### **VIEWS ON FEMINISM AMONG THE KEY POLITICAL PHILOSOPHERS:**

Plato, known as the founder of Political idealism, expounded upon his ideas of women in his seminal book "The Republic," specifically stated within Book V and Book VII. Within "The Republic," Plato delineates the structure of his ideal society, incorporating an explanation of gender roles and the status of women within it. Book V of "The Republic" represents Plato's inaugural appreciation of women. He avowedly acknowledged the intellectual capabilities of women, pushing for their equal access to opportunity for the development of talents and capacities. Plato further contends that women, particularly from the upper echelons of society, should be burdened with specific societal tasks comparable to those assigned to males within an ideal society. He fought for equivalent education for both genders, argued for guardian-class women's release from household labor and childcare to serve the state, and advocated for equal opportunity for women to advance to offices of government. Plato's notion of a communal system for wives aimed at releasing Athenian women from the limitations of family duty, therefore enlisting them in the service of the state. However, Plato's option slanted towards the majority of males, since he argued that it should be men of virtue, not women, who should be largely stressed in governance and leadership.<sup>8</sup>

Aristotle, the father of Political science, expressed his views on women in his works, such as "Politics" and "Nicomachean Ethics. He argued that the intellectual capacity and mental disposition of the women is inferior to men. In "Politics," Aristotle engaged in a comprehensive discourse concerning the conceptualization of an ideal state and the delineation of roles allocated to distinct societal constituents therein. According to him, the subordinate position of women in the society is inevitable pointing out his assumption that men's position in the society is superior because of natural settings, and so no comparison could be made between them in terms of judging their rational or intellectual capacities. Thus, he holds the belief that it is a call on the part of the nature that men should exercise the power of having control over women by presenting his argument that women are like incomplete and deformed versions of men (Politics, Book I, Part 13). He defines a man's virtue in relation to a specific ability and defines a women's

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.298-299

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.299

<sup>8</sup> [Trevor J. Saunders](#), *Plato, The laws*, Penguin classics, United Kingdom, 1970, pp.202-26.

virtue in relation to a specific inability, causing him to conclude that women should not be allowed in public spaces because women are more emotional and less capable of reason and self-control.<sup>9</sup>

Later on, Aristotle views on women received a numerous criticism by later political thinkers and scholars who stood for gender equality.

During the medieval and post-medieval era, the writings of political philosophers often reflected a prevailing view of women as having an inferior status. This view persisted even as new ideas and philosophies emerged. Niccolò Machiavelli, commonly seen as the pioneer of modern political philosophy, has indeed encountered backlash for his depiction of women, which some view as promoting misogyny. In Jean Bethke Elshtain's publication "Women and War" (1987), Machiavelli is criticized for influencing the notion that women are innately non-combative and inherently unable to fulfill the duties of militarized citizenship. This view perpetuated the idea of women's inherent incapability in political and military realms.<sup>10</sup> In Chapter XXI of "The Prince," he states, "The weakness of women in maintaining their states arises from the fact that they have no arms and no laws". This statement reflects the prevailing notion at the time that women were not fit for leadership or active political participation.<sup>11</sup>

The social Contractualists like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jaques Rousseau have also expressed their views on the role of women. They have varying views on women within the context of their political theories.

Hobbes talks about marriage and family in his books *The Elements of Law*, *De Cive*, and *Leviathan*. He thinks that there does not exist a significant difference between men and women in terms of their physical and mental abilities because he finds no variations between the two as far as their strength and wisdom are concerned when they are living in tune with the nature. A family comes into picture when a man and a woman come together and decide to get married after tying the knot. The husband or father gains control over the family through an agreement between him and the woman, which is called paternal power. Paternal power is needed for a family to exist.<sup>12</sup>

John Locke, a significant player in the birth of classical liberalism, particularly addressed concerns concerning women's rights in his important book, "Two Treatises of Government," which premiered in 1689. While this essential book did not thoroughly go into the issue of women's rights, Locke did build upon the notion of equality among individuals in a state of nature, so implying that women, like to men, have intrinsic natural rights. However, Locke's stance on the subjugation of women to males was justified via a logic based in the declaration of men's apparently larger innate skills and physical powers compared to women. In this context, Locke's perspective acceded to the existing socio-legal norms that dictated the subjugation of women to their husbands, an accord apparent in the "laws of mankind and customs of nations."<sup>13</sup>

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's perspective on women can be found in his work "The Social Contract," published in 1762. On the similar note, Rousseau pointed out that there are certain weaknesses in women in terms of their physical strength which provides strong motivation to men to perform some important social roles.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Jowett, *Aristotle's Politics*, Forgotten Books, London, 2018, 1994. PP-12-13

<sup>10</sup> Edward C. Tolman, 'On the Woman Question in Machiavelli,' *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 67. No. 2, 2005, [Cambridge University Press](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521875414), pp. 229-255.

<sup>11</sup> N. H. Thomson, *Niccolò Machiavelli The Prince*, Penguin Books, United Kingdom, PP-61

<sup>12</sup> Hiroshi Kobayashi, 'The Marriage and the Family in Thomas Hobbes's Politics,' *J-Stage*, vol.31, 2001, published by The Society of English Studies pp. 83-100.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Nyland, 'John Locke and the social position of women,' *History of political economy*, vol.25 No.2, 1993, Published by Duke University Press, pp.39-63.

He also stated that women have less rational abilities than men. Further, he argued that women are naturally suited to the private sphere of family and domesticity, while men are suited to the public sphere of politics and governance. Rousseau's ideas contributed to the exclusion of women from political participation and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles during his time.<sup>14</sup>

### **LIMITATIONS AND CRITICISMS OF THEIR VIEWS:**

The historical perspectives on women's roles and capabilities, as expressed by philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, have been widely debated and criticized for their limitations and implications for gender equality.

While Plato advocated for women's education and participation in the guardian class, he ultimately limited women's roles by prioritizing men in positions of power. His notion of women as inherently less virtuous than men perpetuated gender inequalities. Plato's vision of women's equality was conditional, and he did not challenge the underlying patriarchy that restricted women from full political participation. His ideal state still relegated women to specific roles, reinforcing gender norms.

Aristotle's belief in the inherent intellectual inferiority of women led to their exclusion from public life. He justified the subordination of women based on their supposed emotional nature and inability to reason. Aristotle's views have been widely criticized for perpetuating gender stereotypes and justifying the subjugation of women. His ideas have been largely discredited in modern discussions of gender equality.

Machiavelli's depiction of women as weak and unable to govern or lead armies contributed to the idea that women were unfit for political leadership, further entrenching gender biases. Machiavelli's views have been criticized for promoting misogyny and excluding women from active political and military roles.

While Hobbes and Locke acknowledged the potential equality of men and women in a state of nature, they both justified women's subordination based on perceived gender differences, with Locke even citing innate male superiority. These philosophers' arguments for women's subordination have been criticized for perpetuating traditional gender roles and inequalities. Their views did not align with their broader arguments for individual rights and equality.

Rousseau's belief in women's physical and intellectual weaknesses led to their exclusion from political life, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Rousseau's views have been criticized for supporting gender stereotypes and restricting women to the private sphere, which hindered their political participation and agency.

The limitations of these philosophers' views on women are evident in their reinforcement of gender stereotypes, their failure to challenge the patriarchy of their times, and their justifications for the subordination of women. While these historical perspectives played a role in the development of political thought, they have been widely criticized and largely rejected in modern discussions of gender equality and women's rights. Contemporary feminist thought has worked to challenge and overcome these limitations to advocate for gender equity and inclusivity in political and social spheres.

### **CURRENT TRENDS OF FEMINISM:**

The term "Third Wave feminism" and some of its key principles were popularized by Rebecca Walker in her 1992 article, "Becoming the Third Wave," published in Ms. Magazine. In this article, Walker emphasized the need for a new, more diverse, and intersectional feminism that could address the evolving issues of the time. Her work has been foundational in shaping the Third Wave feminist movement.

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<sup>14</sup> G. D. H. Cole, Jean-Jacques Rousseau The social contract, Digireads.com, 2018, PP-11-35

Third-wave feminism is a modern movement that emerged in the 1990s, building on the achievements and challenges of previous feminist waves. It seeks to address a wide range of issues with a focus on inclusivity, diversity, and individuality.

Unlike earlier waves that mainly concentrated on women's legal and political rights, third-wave feminism recognizes that gender discrimination is complex and intersects with factors like race, sexuality, and class. It aims to be more inclusive, welcoming of diverse backgrounds and experiences.

One of the key ideas of third-wave feminism is the rejection of one-size-fits-all solutions. It values personal choice and empowerment, emphasizing that a woman can choose her path, whether it's a career, motherhood, or both. It seeks to break down stereotypes and norms that limit women's choices and opportunities.

Intersectionality is a central theme, recognizing that women of different backgrounds face unique challenges. It promotes solidarity and understanding among all women while acknowledging the specific struggles faced by marginalized groups.

Third-wave feminism also places great importance on using new media and technology to spread its message. It leverages social media, blogs, and online activism to connect with a global audience.

In essence, third-wave feminism is about the individual's right to define their identity and path, while advocating for gender equality on a broader scale. It encourages a more diverse and inclusive perspective on feminism, understanding that the fight for gender equality is multifaceted and involves many intersecting issues.<sup>15</sup>

While some may question its precise start, many claim that a fourth wave of feminism begun around 2012, concentrating on crucial concerns such as sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture. A major part of this wave was the employment of social media to highlight and resolve these challenges. This wave gathered pace in reaction to many high-profile occurrences. In December 2012, a terrible occurrence happened when a young lady was subjected to a savage gang rape in India, resulting to her untimely death. This incident provoked both local demonstrations and worldwide indignation. Subsequently, in 2014, the Gamergate movement arose, supposedly trying to better ethics in video game journalism. However, it developed into a harassment campaign targeting "social justice warriors," notably women who raised concerns to gender stereotypes in video games. These ladies experienced a deluge of murder and rape threats. Against this context, Donald Trump's win over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential election played a significant role. Trump has made harsh statements against women, leading a grandmother to plan a march on Washington, D.C., the day after the election. This notion immediately gathered support and turned into a plea for societal revolution, notably about gender equality. Known as the Women's March, this campaign developed to cover rallies statewide and abroad. On January 21, 2017, the day after Trump's inauguration, the Women's March saw participation from an estimated 4.6 million people in the United States, perhaps making it the biggest single-day protest in the nation's history. Perhaps even more influential was the Me-Too campaign, first founded in 2006 in the United States to assist survivors of sexual abuse, especially women of color. The movement acquired worldwide notoriety in 2017 after it was discovered that film mogul Harvey Weinstein had, for years, sexually harassed and raped women in the entertainment business with impunity. Subsequently, survivors of sexual harassment and assault, irrespective of their ethnic origins, recounted their stories on social media under the hashtag #MeToo. The movement spread over the coming months, resulting to the condemnation of countless

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<sup>15</sup> Becoming the Third Wave Ms;Jan 1992; 2, 4; ProQuest pg. 39

influential individuals across multiple industries, including politics, business, entertainment, and the news media.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, this historical examination of the philosophical foundations of feminism has illuminated the evolving discourse on gender equality and the roles of women in society. Throughout history, influential philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle shaped prevailing notions of women's capabilities and societal roles. These early ideas often restricted women's participation in political, economic, and social spheres.

Plato's recognition of women's intellectual potential and call for their education marked a progressive perspective, but his ideal state still prioritized men. Aristotle, on the other hand, argued for women's inherent inferiority and their exclusion from public life, reinforcing gender stereotypes.

These limitations persisted into the medieval and post-medieval eras, where political philosophers like Machiavelli portrayed women as incapable of leadership, perpetuating traditional gender roles. These perspectives have faced criticism and backlash from later thinkers advocating for gender equality.

The emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s brought new, radical ideas to the forefront, highlighting the personal, psychological, and sexual aspects of female oppression. It was a crucial moment in pushing back against conventional gender norms.

The current trend, often referred to as third-wave feminism, has embraced diversity, inclusivity, and intersectionality. It recognizes that gender discrimination intersects with race, sexuality, and class, promoting individual choice and empowerment. Social media plays a vital role in spreading the movement's message and connecting with a global audience.

Furthermore, a potential fourth wave of feminism has emerged, marked by its focus on issues such as sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture. Social media has played a pivotal role in addressing and raising awareness of these concerns. High-profile incidents, such as the Me Too movement and the Women's March, have brought attention to gender equality on a global scale.

In light of these historical and contemporary perspectives, feminism continues to evolve, challenging and reshaping societal norms and advocating for greater gender equality. The ongoing struggle for women's rights and empowerment remains a dynamic force in the modern world.

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