

# The impact on british society of second wave feminism

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This essay will examine the impact on British society of second wave feminism. It will discuss first wave and then second wave feminism, and analyse the impact feminism has had in some areas of British society.

Although feminist history is usually discussed in waves, this does not mean that in the periods in between there was no feminist activity. Similarly, the grouping together of feminist movements into first and second waves can mask the diversity that exists both within and between the two waves.

Although feminists have been more active at certain periods in time, it is more accurate to see feminism not as emerging in waves but as a continuum of thought and action (Freedman, 2001). First wave feminism has been termed *de jure*, or by law, because it 'was a political movement aimed at challenging the lack of rights for women in the public sphere. The right to vote, own property and obtain an education were vital demands of the first feminist movement' (McLaughlin, 2003: 1). Before the Second World War women were seen not as individuals but as an extension of their husband.

This inequality could be seen in nearly all aspects of a woman's life but what was seen as most important at the time was getting the vote for women.

Suffragettes from the 18th to early 20th century, perhaps the most famous being Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst, took direct action. Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and through using tactics such as violence and arson the suffragettes managed over all to get the most discriminatory laws amended (Walters, 2005).

Evans (1977: 239) believes " One of the major drives behind feminism was the need felt by middle class women to reassert their superiority of status

over socially or racially inferior men to whom political and social change was bringing rights and thus status, which they were... denied. " The 1960's was a period of substantial social and cultural change for Great Britain. The Cultural Revolution swept away the old Victorian values and austerity of the 1950's and a new period of permissiveness began. The affluence of the economic boom meant for the first time young people had their own money to spend.

Influences from America, such as rock and roll, technological advances and teen fashion created a counter-culture based on the freedom of expression (Marwick, 2003). The young embraced the consumer society and the new era of sexual liberation and openness creating a generation gap as the young rebelled against the stricter values of the older generation (Raymond, n. d). The emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement in the late 1960's re-energised the older generations of feminists and existing feminist organisations (Welch, 2009).

Dahlerup (1986: 2) has commented " Second-wave feminism simply indicates a new impetus to this movement which has experienced periods of bloom, strength, and visibility, alternating with periods of more quiet, dogged, struggle to better women's position in a male-dominated society. " Second wave feminism merged de jure and de facto (unofficial) inequalities to build on the successes of the first wave and to revive old failures and to redefine some issues (Rosen, 2001). Betty Friedan is universally regarded as one of the founding mothers of second wave feminism.

In her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) Friedan argued that millions of American housewives found the role of mother and housewife mapped out for them by society was repressive and even dehumanising (Boucher, 2003). Three distinct ideological currents emerged from second wave feminism. Firstly, liberal feminism is an ideology that expands on many of the beliefs of first wave equal rights feminists. Both see women's rights as human rights and believe politics should be used to break down gender inequalities.

The concept of equal opportunity is central for liberal feminists as they believe women don't need special treatment they just need opportunities for individuals to succeed. Secondly, radical feminism is centred on the female body and women's roles and experiences in society. They believe female inequality is based on their biological differences from men, women's role in reproduction and patriarchies control of the female body. Thirdly, socialist feminists believe both gender inequalities and economic factors cause women's oppression.

Where radical feminists believe eliminating only sexism is the way to end oppression, socialist feminists believe both capitalism and sexism must be addressed (Freedman, 2001). Using the slogan "... the personal is political, feminists have developed an analysis of power as all pervasive, and democracy as everywhere significant" (Phillips, in Herd, 1993: 93). This phrase stood for the idea that only by looking at people's private lives, as well as the public institutions of law, politics and work, is it possible to understand why women are treated unequally to men.

Liberalisation was also a significant aim of the Women's Liberation Movement. Wilson and Weir (1986: 96) stated that: " In the word liberation were encapsulated both the notions of 'sexual liberation' in circulation in the 1960's and also the inspiration that Western radicals, and particularly the youth and student movements, drew from the national liberation struggles of developing countries... " The rise of second wave feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement impacted significantly on British society, so much so that the changes their campaigns brought are still felt today.

Women's participation in the labour market is one such area. Although women were increasingly gaining employment in greater numbers, they still were paid lower wages and had less chance of upward mobility than men. Feminists encouraged women to join trade unions which led to the Dagenham strike over the Ford motor company's skills based wages system. Although they did not succeed in gaining equal pay they did get a wage rise and the strike gave the whole move a boost of confidence and courage (Rowbotham, 1997). Over the past four decades, the proportion of women in employment has grown markedly.

At the start of 1971, the employment rate for women was 56 per cent compared with 70 per cent in the three months to December 2008. This increase compares with a similar-sized decrease in the employment rate for men over the same period, with the male employment rate falling from 92 per cent to 78 per cent (ONS, 2009). One demand of the Women's Liberation Movement was the right to equal pay. The Labour government gave in to feminist pressure and introduced the 1970 Equal Pay Act. This stated that a

female employee was entitled to equal pay if the work she did was similar or the same to that of her male counterparts.

The impact of this legislation, together with other important factors such as the opening up of higher paid work to women, has been to narrow the differential between the hourly earnings of men and women. In 1986, the hourly earnings of women working full-time in Great Britain were 74 per cent of those of men, whereas in 2000 they had risen to 82 per cent. The differential between men and women working part-time is smaller, for example women's hourly earnings were 88 per cent of those of men in 2000 (ONS, 2009). Another feminist demand was that of equal education and job opportunities.

In 1975 the Sex Discrimination Act was introduced which made it illegal to deny an individual access to education on the grounds of their gender. It also made it illegal for schools to stop females studying certain subjects or for universities to operate quota systems which restrict the proportion of female students to subjects such as medicine (Dale and Foster, 1986). In 1975 35% of undergraduate students were female, this increased to 48% by 1995; traditional gendered subjects still exist however as how only one sixth of students studying home economics are male (Abercrombie and Warde, 2002).

Although the majority of feminist ideas in the 1970's were considered outrageous, this has now changed and they are widely accepted. The highlighting of male rape and violence by feminists means it has become a

focus for debate and action over the years. There has also been an extensive institutionalisation of feminist concerns into a wide area of voluntary organisations, professional associations and other institutions.

One example is the large number of organisations set up to specifically help female victims of rape and violence such as the Rape Crisis Federation and Women's Aid (Abercrombie and Warde, 2002). The ideological impact of feminism has so far been much greater than any changes in women's material position... Unfortunately the emphasis on ideology and its subjective operation in the individual has too often meshed with the emphasis on individual change that was always a strand within women's liberation, with the result that personal life-styles, more amenable, at least within the middle class, to change than late monopoly capitalism, appear to be the main target of feminism' (Wilson and Weir, 1986, in Welch, 2009: 8). Politically, feminism has won rights for women over the years.

However, even though all women won the right to vote by 1928, women are still very under represented in Parliament. Although classed as equal formerly, women still do not have equality of access to public positions. Female MP's make up a very small proportion of the total number with women winning only 18% of the seats in the House of Commons in the 1997 election. Although this is higher than previous years, Britain is still well behind other countries in Western Europe (Abercrombie and Warde, 2002). Feminists have also made other impacts on society such as campaigning against male violence.

Whether or not Britain is now a more equal society is open debate but the inequalities the feminists sought to end have also created problems. One such example is with employment. The fact that women can now do any type of employment has had its negative impacts. A study by Blosser (2000) found that women find it harder to cope with more stressful jobs than men and the number of women off work with stress increases more each year. The social aspect of the feminist fight for equality has also had negative aspects for women. Policy that made it easier for women to divorce their husband has resulted in more single parent families.

Even though feminists have won in demands for child care, the stress of being a single parent and working is extremely difficult for some parents to deal with. A study by Higgins (n. d) claims that although 52% of female parents are now employed, this coupled with caring for children and doing household tasks is proving to be stressful and too much for some parents. The social stigma that used to be attached to a woman entering a pub alone or smoking in public no longer exists. Unfortunately this has impacted negatively on women's health and the gap between the number of men and women who smoke closes each year (ASH, 2007).

The equal status between men and women means the number of women who drink heavily has been rising over the years (ONS, 2009). The number of women addicted to class A drugs is also rising fast, especially to cocaine and heroin, and the number of women giving birth to drug addicted children is also increasing (n. a, 2008). In conclusion, it is evident that since 1945 second wave feminism has impacted substantially on a number of areas of



British society. Although it is debateable to what extent women and men in the UK are equal, feminism has made advances in areas such as employment and education.

Women now have more freedom and the stigma that surrounded issues such as abortion and contraception has decreased. This is not to say that all of these impacts are positive, because in some areas, such as women's alcohol intake and drug use, the impacts are definitely negative. Overall, it seems that second wave feminism has failed to overcome the problems that beset the first wave, and the question that has to be asked is whether the positive discrimination of feminism has done more harm than good?