**The Feminist Movement**Feminism, a belief in the political, economic and cultural equality of women, has roots in the earliest eras of human civilization. It is typically separated into three waves: first wave feminism, dealing with property rights and the right to vote; second wave feminism, focusing on equality and anti-discrimination, and third wave feminism, which started in the 1990s as a backlash to the second wave’s perceived privileging of white, straight women. From Ancient Greece to the fight for women’s suffrage to women’s marches and the #MeToo movement, the history of feminism is as long as it is fascinating. Here is everything you need to know about the fight for gender equality. Feminism in parts of the western world has gone through three waves. First-wave feminism was oriented around the station of middle- or upper-class white women and involved suffrage and political equality. Second-wave feminism attempted to further combat social and cultural inequalities. Third-wave feminism is continuing to address the financial, social and cultural inequalities and includes renewed campaigning for greater influence of women in politics and media. In reaction to political activism, feminists have also had to maintain focus on women’s reproductive rights, such as the right to abortion.   
**What is Feminism?**  
The term “feminism” has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. For example, some writers use the term “feminism” to refer to a historically specific political movement in the United States and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices. Although the term “feminism” has a history in English linked with women’s activism from the late nineteenth century to the present, it is useful to distinguish feminist ideas or beliefs from feminist political movements, for even in periods where there has been no significant political activism around women’s subordination, individuals have been concerned with and theorized about justice for women. So, for example, it makes sense to ask whether Plato was a feminist, given his view that some women should be trained to rule (*Republic*, Book V), even though he was an exception in his historical context (see, e.g., Tuana 1994).  
**First-wave feminism**   
The French Revolution was a catalyst for debate regarding women’s emancipation. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* from August 26, 1789, which declared that “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights” (art. 1), suggests that equality was granted to all human beings. However, and despite women’s participation during revolutionary times, the successive assemblies granted elements of civil equality to women (especially in matters of inheritance), but refused to give them the political equality that was demanded, among others, by the mathematician and deputy marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), as well as the woman of letters Olympe de Gouges (1748 or 1755-1793), who in 1791 published the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen.*By confining women to the domestic sphere in this way, the French First Republic proved itself to be profoundly anti-feminist, depriving women of rights as fundamental as the right of assembly and the right to participate in expressing the general will.  
This paradox prompted criticism abroad, for instance the English philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft’s (1759-1797) 1792 response to Talleyrand’s (1754-1838) report of the preceding year to the Assemblée constituante, which had affirmed that women should only receive a domestic education. She denounced the unjust and incoherent character of women’s submission. That same year, the mayor of the Prussian city of Königsberg, Theodor G. von Hippel (1741-1796), anonymously published a text in which he argued for improving the civil status of women. Feminist demands emerged in similar fashion in a number of European countries during the 1790s, including France, the Dutch Republic, and states and principalities in Italy and Germany. Napoleon, who was crowned Emperor in 1804, nevertheless equipped France that same year with a retrograde Civil Code with regard to gender equality, which validated the submission of married women to their husbands and consecrated the authority of the *pater familias*. Owing to the Napoleonic conquests, this Civil Code was imposed on—or served as a model for—most of Europe, exacting a heavy price on gender relations in Europe up through the mid-twentieth century.  
The new European order which arose from the Congress of Vienna (1815) was not by nature inclined to promote reform movements, even more so those of a feminist nature. Nevertheless, the social utopia developed by the Frenchman Charles Fourier (1772-1837), for whom the people’s progress depended on women’s progress towards liberty, along with the reflections of Saint-Simonians on women’s liberty, which they explored in all its aspects without taboos, were discussed in neighbouring countries during the 1820s and 1830s. The first Saint-Simonian women’s newspapers, such as *La Femme libre,* which was published and written exclusively by women, promoted the circulation of these ideas.  
During the revolutions of the “People’s Spring” in 1848, women could be seen on barricades and in democratic clubs in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Prague, Frankfurt, Milan, Barcelona, Cologne, Venice, and Stockholm. Taking up the demands for rights and equality in their own name, they called for the right to participate in affairs of state, pursue an education, enjoy freedom in marriage, and divorce. Jeanne Deroin (1805-1894) in Paris and Karoline Perin (1808-1888) in Vienna called for women’s suffrage, and founded women’s democratic clubs, such as the one in Paris centred around Eugénie Niboyet (1796-1883) and her newspaper *La Voix des femmes*.In the ensuing restoration phase, the anti-feminist reaction was harshly felt, as the governments of continental Europe closed women’s clubs and associations and forbade women from expressing themselves in the political press. From 1850 in German states and the Austrian Empire, women not only did not obtain equality at the civil level, but were also legally forbidden from any activity of a political nature, measures that excluded them from a public sphere that was being built at the time.  
Was a period of feminist activity and thought, that occurred within the time period of the 19th and early 20th century throughout the world. It focused on legal issues, primarily on gaining women’s suffrage (the right to vote).  
During the First Wave, there was a notable connection between the slavery abolition movement and the women’s rights movement. Frederick Douglass was heavily involved in both movements and believed that it was essential for both to work together in order to attain true equality in regards to race and sex.   
The first women’s rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York (now known as the Seneca Falls Convention) from July 19-20, 1848, and advertised itself as “a convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman”. While there, 68 women and 32 men—100 out of some 300 attendees, signed the Declaration of Sentiments, also known as the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments. The principal author of the Declaration was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who based it on the form of the United States Declaration of Independence. She was a key organizer of the convention along with Lucretia Coffin Mott, and Martha Coffin Wright. Charlotte Woodward, alone among all 100 signers, was the only one still alive in 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment passed. Woodward was not well enough to vote herself.  
  
 **Second-wave feminism**   
is a period of feminist activity and thought that first began in the early 1960s in the United States, and eventually spread throughout the Western world and beyond. In the United States the movement lasted through the early 1980s.  
Whereas first-wave feminism focused mainly on suffrage and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality (*e.g.*, voting rights, property rights), second-wave feminism broadened the debate to a wide range of issues: sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, de facto inequalities, and official legal inequalities. Second-wave feminism also drew attention to domestic violence and marital rape issues, establishment of rape crisis and battered women’s shelters, and changes in custody and divorce law. Its major effort was the attempted passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the United States Constitution, in which they were defeated by anti-feminists.   
In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration approved the combined oral contraceptive pill, which was made available in 1961. This made it easier for women to have careers without having to leave due to unexpectedly becoming pregnant. The administration of President Kennedy made women’s rights a key issue of the New Frontier, and named women (such as Esther Peterson) to many high-ranking posts in his administration.

In 1963 Betty Friedan, influenced by Simone De Beauvoir’s book “The Second Sex,” wrote the bestselling book “The Feminine Mystique” in which she explicitly objected to the mainstream media image of women, stating that placing women at home limited their possibilities, and wasted talent and potential. The perfect nuclear family image depicted and strongly marketed at the time, she wrote, did not reflect happiness and was rather degrading for women. This book is widely credited with having begun second-wave feminism. Watch this video about the success and impact of Friedan’s book.  
**The Era of Feminist Congresses (1890-1914)**  
During the nineteenth century, feminist movements emerged and developed in the framework of the nation state. In areas where such a state was lacking or in multi-ethnic states (Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires), they became established in connection with nationalist movements, which highlights the specific role of women in the transmission of national culture (Poland, Bohemia, Ukraine, Bulgaria). Many feminists were involved in other social movements, which were as numerous as they were varied: anti-slavery, religious, pedagogical, hygienist, unionist, liberal, socialist, anarchist, and pacifist. The numerous and complex links between these movements were established and displayed during international congresses that brought together activists on the European scale and beyond.

The two largest feminist internationals were the International Council of Women (ICW, created in 1888), and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA, 1904). With 7 million members from 24 countries, the ICW brought together 2,000 women in Berlin in June 1904 for the International Conference of Women, which revolved around the four primary areas of activity of the associations it represented: women’s education, professional training and employment, social institutions, and the legal status of women. Organized internationally within the IWSA, the women’s suffrage movement emphasized the universal character of women’s rights and presented itself as a human rights movement. Comparisons between countries enabled it to exert pressure on national political decision makers.

The proletarian women’s movement also organized at the international level. In 1907, female German workers called for the First International Conference of Socialist Women in Stuttgart, with women agreeing on the demand for unrestricted suffrage. It was during the Second International Conference in Copenhagen in 1910 that Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) proposed to simultaneously organize an International Women’s Day in Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, and Switzerland, to be held on March 19, 1911.  
Aside from a minority of pacifist women, who in April 1915 created the Women’s International Committee (and later League) for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the First World War put a temporary halt to women’s internationalism and brought a halt to feminist demands. With the declaration of war, women’s associations in all countries suspended their demands in order to serve the nation and prove their patriotism. Women were mobilized in the war effort of  
warring countries, although protest returned as the conflict continued. The year 1917 saw female workers go on strike and protest for better working conditions and higher pay, such as the “*midinettes*” working as seamstresses in Paris, or the “*munitionnettes*” working in war factories. In Russia, the revolution of February 1917 was launched by women’s protests held on International Women’s Day. Owing to the overthrow of monarchies and the political upheaval resulting from the end of the war, women won the right to vote in multiple European countries (Russia in 1917, Germany, Austria, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and the United Kingdom in 1918, the Netherlands and Luxembourg in 1919), where they henceforth participated in political parties and held seats in national parliaments.  
**Women And Work**  
Women began to enter the workplace in greater numbers following the [Great Depression](https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/great-depression-history), when many male breadwinners lost their jobs, forcing women to find “[women’s work](https://www.history.com/news/working-women-great-depression)” in lower paying but more stable careers like housework, teaching and secretarial roles.

During [World War II](https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/world-war-ii-history), many women actively participated in the military or found work in industries previously reserved for men, making [Rosie the Riveter](https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/rosie-the-riveter) a feminist icon. Following the [civil rights movement](https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement), women sought greater participation in the workplace, with equal pay at the forefront of their efforts

The [Equal Pay Act](https://www.history.com/topics/womens-rights/equal-pay-act) of 1963 was among the first efforts to confront this still-relevant issue.

**Third-wave feminism** refers to several diverse strains of feminist activity and study, whose exact boundaries in the history of feminism are a subject of debate, but are generally marked as beginning in the early 1990s and continuing to the present. The movement arose partially as a response to the perceived failures of and backlash against initiatives and movements created by second-wave feminism during the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, and the perception that women are of “many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, and cultural backgrounds”. This wave of feminism expands the topic of feminism to include a diverse group of women with a diverse set of identities.   
**On the Feminist Front, From One Post-war Period to Another (1920-1960)**The involvement of women in the war effort shook representations of virile superiority. During the 1920s, both the world and fashion changed. In major European capitals during the “Roaring Twenties,” clothing and haircuts shrank (tomboy haircut). However, the “modern woman,” the smoking female student, or the working and financially independent woman remained in the minority. In reality, gender relations did not deeply change, with societies aspiring to a return to normality.

Under the leadership of both Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952), a member of the communist government that arose from the October Revolution, and Inessa Armand (1874-1920), a member of the party’s Central Committee, Russia became the country to grant women the most rights: equality of spouses with regard to children, systematic granting of divorce by mutual consent, protection for pregnant workers, maternity leave, free and easy access to abortion. Reforms to the Family Code (1918 and 1926), along with the measures taken during the 1920s to promote the integration of women in political and economic life, led to hopes of a profound change in gender relations. However, from the late 1920s, a new Stalinist model took hold, which reasoned in terms of power and embarked on a controlling natalist policy. Soviet authorities, who wanted to restore family order and prevent any form of “feminist deviationism,” closed the women’s section of the Central Committee (created in 1919) and decreed the women’s question resolved. During the 1930s, the recently granted rights (abortion, divorce) were abolished or largely evaded, in favour of a pro-family and natalist policy.

In countries where women had won the right to vote following the war, political parties courted them and worried about the consequences of this right in terms of political majorities. New questions emerged for female activists, such as how to rise to political office, and how to act on all fronts in order to obtain other rights. The mobilization for the right to vote continued in France and Italy, albeit without success until the end of the Second World War. Feminists everywhere met with strong resistance, amid societies in transformation marked by a tense social and political context.

In France, only a small minority of feminists belonging to the neo-Malthusian branch denounced the passage of the natalist law from July 31, 1920, which banned all information regarding contraception and abortion. The French feminist Avril de Sainte-Croix (1855-1939) took up the torch of international struggle against regulated prostitution (abolitionist movement), the trafficking of women and children, and for preventative medicine for venereal diseases. Maria Vérone (1874-1938), the journalist and president of the French League for Women’s Rights, published numerous articles on the law of single mothers, divorce, condition of war widows, the housing crisis, pacifism, and equal pay for equal work. During the 1930s, she shared the struggle of a new international association that divided feminist circles. Born in Berlin in June 1929, and known for its virulence and dynamism, Open Door International: For the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker fought for professional gender equality and against specific protections for women workers, notably denouncing the ban from working at night or working in mines or underground. Meanwhile, all feminist branches agreed on opposing the exclusion of married women from the working world, one that had been implemented in many countries facing economic crisis, with the exception of France, Sweden and Norway.

In a Europe that was anything but peaceful, pacifist women redoubled their efforts to change the paradigm in international relations, and to prevent the dangers of arms proliferation. Within the women’s unions for the League of Nations (LN), women from various European countries mobilized and strove to successfully complete the pacifying project of the LN. WILPF rallied women around major causes, and in 1932 gathered eight million signatures for a petition on disarmament.

Fascist regimes in Italy and Nazi Germany sought to regain control over women. Once feminist associations were forbidden (in 1933 in Germany, 1938 in Italy), female activists were reduced to silence, and women were enlisted in large women’s organizations under the authority of the party. During the Second World War, as customary in times of war, sexuality, especially that of women, was subject to heightened control, and sexual violence was used as a weapon of war and for purges.

In the aftermath of the conflict, political rights were finally granted to women in a number of countries in Western Europe (France 1944, Italy 1945, Belgium 1948) and the Balkans (Croatia and Slovenia 1945, Albania 1946, Yugoslavia 1947), while in Southern Europe Greek, Portuguese, and Cypriot women—along with women from Switzerland—were still kept away from the ballot box. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognized both gender equality and equality between spouses. A number of Western European countries inscribed gender equality in their new constitutions (France 1946, Italy 1947, Federal Republic of Germany 1949). During the 1950s, the perception of sexuality evolved, especially that of young people, although European societies during the baby boom wanted stay-at-home mothers, and had difficulty dissociating sexuality and procreation. Allowing access to contraception was the difficult struggle led by family planning associations.  
**The “Movement Years” West of the Iron Curtain (1960s to 1980s)**In communist countries east of the Iron Curtain, gender equality was part of state ideology, which especially promoted work-family balance for women and liberalized abortion (1955 in the USSR, 1956 in Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Romania, 1957 in Czechoslovakia, 1960 in Yugoslavia, and 1972 in the GDR, in other words well before Western European countries), but stigmatized feminism as a “bourgeois” deviance and a subversive movement. The Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), which was of communist persuasion, promoted women’s rights at the international level, and helped women’s associations in the young states emerging from decolonization.

In Western democracies the protest movements of the late 1960s created a favourable context for the emergence of what is called second wave feminism in the United States (Women’s Lib) and Western Europe. It was not so much a matter of winning equal rights, but of achieving effective equality—including within the “private” sphere of the family, marriage, and sexuality—as well as the material and cultural “liberation” of women. The exclusion of men from most women’s groups and collectives was considered to be an indispensable condition for the emancipation of women. Organized in “consciousness-raising groups,” committees and networks of varying sizes and shapes, feminists preferably acted on the local level on projects often social in nature: campaigns for reproductive control (access to the contraceptive pill and abortion liberalization), creation of press outlets (over 400 feminist periodicals in the FRG between 1973 and 1980), women’s seminars or universities, and shelters for battered women.  
This movement favoured spectacular actions covered by the media and used the weapon of provocative language. In August 1970, a dozen French feminists placed a spray of flowers at the foot of the Arc de Triomphe in memory of the wife of the unknown soldier, “more unknown than the unknown soldier.” The French Women’s Liberation Movement (Mouvement pour la libération des femmes, MLF) was born. In April 1971, the “Manifeste des 343 salopes” [Manifesto of 343 Sluts], who had the courage to say “I had an abortion” and demand free access to contraception and abortion, appeared in the periodical *Nouvel Observateur.* Taking inspiration from this action, a few weeks later German women, including the journalist Carola Stern (1925-2006) and the actress Romy Schneider (1938-1982), launched the *“Wir haben abgetrieben”* (We had abortions) press campaign in the FRG, in the large circulation magazine *Stern*.

In line with these international mobilizations, the UN declared 1975 as the “Year of the Woman,” and in 1979 adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.  
The political influence of feminism, which was visible on the international scale, translated in many countries into the adoption of legislative reforms and programs promoting gender equality during the 1970s and 1980s, and later into efforts to stop sexual harassment and sexist violence. For example, in 1970, the Italian Parliament approved a law on divorce, and partially decriminalized abortion in 1978. In England, the Equal Pay Act of 1970 was followed in 1975 by the Sex Discrimination Act and the Employment Protection Act against wrongful termination in cases of pregnancy, and in 1976 by the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act as well as the Sexual Offenses (Amendment) Act, to strengthen women’s rights in the face of sexual violence. In Spain the death of Franco in 1975 and the democratic transition brought about a revival of feminism. The codification of women’s rights reflected recognition of their struggle, which went hand in hand with institutionalization, especially political (attribution of dedicated ministries, implementation of quotas in certain political parties in the FRG during the 1980s) and academic (creation of chairs for women’s and gender history). This is referred to as state feminism, especially the kind developed in Scandinavian countries and France during the “Roudy years” (1981-1986).  
Some feminist activists, referred to as femocrats, became involved in political parties and institutions in order to gain new reforms. On the opposing end were others who were more radical, and wanted to remain independent, but could not avoid a drop in the mobilization of women.  
**Feminism and the Diversity of Women**  
To consider some of the different strategies for responding to the phenomenon of intersectionality, let’s return to the schematic claims that women are oppressed and this oppression is wrong or unjust. Very broadly, then, one might characterize the goal of feminism to be ending the oppression of women. But if we also acknowledge that women are oppressed not just by sexism, but in many ways, e.g., by classism, homophobia, racism, ageism, ableism, etc., then it might seem that the goal of feminism is to end all oppression that affects women. And some feminists have adopted this interpretation (e.g., Ware 1970, quoted in Crow 2000: 1).  
Note, however, that not all agree with such an expansive definition of feminism. One might agree that feminists ought to work to end all forms of oppression—oppression is unjust and feminists, like everyone else, have a moral obligation to fight injustice—without maintaining that it is the mission of feminism to end all oppression. One might even believe that in order to accomplish feminism’s goals it is necessary to combat racism and economic exploitation, but also think that there is a narrower set of specifically feminist objectives. In other words, opposing oppression in its many forms may be instrumental to, even a necessary means to, feminism, but not intrinsic to it. For example, bell hooks argues:  
Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice. (hooks 1989: 22)  
On hooks’ account, the defining characteristic that distinguishes feminism from other liberation struggles is its concern with sexism:  
Unlike many feminist comrades, I believe women and men must share a common understanding—a basic knowledge of what feminism is—if it is ever to be a powerful mass-based political movement. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, I suggest that defining feminism broadly as “a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression” would enable us to have a common political goal…Sharing a common goal does not imply that women and men will not have radically divergent perspectives on how that goal might be reached. (hooks 1989: 23)

hooks’ approach depends on the claim that sexism is a particular form of oppression that can be distinguished from other forms, e.g., racism and homophobia, even though it is currently (and virtually always) interlocked with other forms of oppression. Feminism’s objective is to end sexism, though because of its relation to other forms of oppression, this will require efforts to end other forms of oppression as well. For example, feminists who themselves remain racists will not be able to fully appreciate the broad impact of sexism on the lives of women of color—nor the interconnections between racism and sexism. Furthermore because sexist institutions are also, e.g., racist, classist, and homophobic, dismantling sexist institutions will require that we dismantle the other forms of domination intertwined with them (Heldke & O’Connor 2004). Following hooks’ lead, we might characterize feminism schematically (allowing the schema to be filled in differently by different accounts) as the view that women are subject to sexist oppression and that this is wrong. This move shifts the burden of our inquiry from a characterization of what feminism is to a characterization of what sexism, or sexist oppression, is.  
As mentioned above, there are a variety of interpretations—feminist and otherwise—of what exactly oppression consists in, but the leading idea is that oppression consists in “an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people” (Frye 1983: 10–11). Not just any “enclosing structure” is oppressive, however, for plausibly any process of socialization will create a structure that both limits and enables all individuals who live within it. In the case of oppression, however, the “enclosing structures” in question are part of a broader system that asymmetrically and unjustly disadvantages one group and benefits another. So, for example, although sexism restricts the opportunities available to—and so unquestionably harms—both men and women (and considering some pairwise comparisons may even have a greater negative impact on a man than a woman), overall, women as a group unjustly suffer the greater harm. It is a crucial feature of contemporary accounts, however, that one cannot assume that members of the privileged group have intentionally designed or maintained the system for their benefit. The oppressive structure may be the result of an historical process whose originators are long gone, or it may be the unintended result of complex cooperative strategies gone wrong.  
Leaving aside (at least for the moment) further details in the account of oppression, the question remains: What makes a particular form of oppression sexist? If we just say that a form of oppression counts as sexist oppression if it harms women, or even primarily harms women, this is not enough to distinguish it from other forms of oppression. Virtually all forms of oppression harm women, and arguably some besides sexism harm women primarily (though not exclusively), e.g., body size oppression, age oppression. Besides, as we’ve noted before, sexism is not only harmful to women, but is harmful to all of us.

What makes a particular form of oppression sexist seems to be not just that it harms women, but that someone is subject to this form of oppression specifically because she is (or at least appears to be) a woman. Racial oppression harms women, but racial oppression (by itself) doesn’t harm them because they are women, it harms them because they are (or appear to be) members of a particular race. The suggestion that sexist oppression consists in oppression to which one is subject by virtue of being or appearing to be a woman provides us at least the beginnings of an analytical tool for distinguishing subordinating structures that happen to affect some or even all women from those that are more specifically sexist (Haslanger 2004). But problems and unclarities remain.  
First, we need to explicate further what it means to be oppressed “because you are a woman”. For example, is the idea that there is a particular form of oppression that is specific to women? Is to be oppressed “as a woman” to be oppressed in a particular way? Or can we be pluralists about what sexist oppression consists in without fragmenting the notion beyond usefulness?  
Two strategies for explicating sexist oppression have proven to be problematic. The first is to maintain that there is a form of oppression common to all women. For example, one might interpret Catharine MacKinnon’s work as claiming that to be oppressed as a woman is to be viewed and treated as sexually subordinate, where this claim is grounded in the (alleged) universal fact of the eroticization of male dominance and female submission (MacKinnon 1987, 1989). Although MacKinnon allows that sexual subordination can happen in a myriad of ways, her account is monistic in its attempt to unite the different forms of sexist oppression around a single core account that makes sexual objectification the focus. Although MacKinnon’s work provides a powerful resource for analyzing women’s subordination, many have argued that it is too narrow, e.g., in some contexts (especially in developing countries) sexist oppression seems to concern more the local division of labor and economic exploitation. Although certainly sexual subordination is a factor in sexist oppression, it requires us to fabricate implausible explanations of social life to suppose that all divisions of labor that exploit women (as women) stem from the “eroticization of dominance and submission”. Moreover, it isn’t obvious that in order to make sense of sexist oppression we need to seek a single form of oppression common to all women.  
A second problematic strategy has been to consider as paradigms those who are oppressed only as women, with the thought that complex cases bringing in additional forms of oppression will obscure what is distinctive of sexist oppression. This strategy would have us focus in the United States on white, wealthy, young, beautiful, able-bodied, heterosexual women to determine what oppression, if any, they suffer, with the hope of finding sexism in its “purest” form, unmixed with racism or homophobia, etc. (see Spelman 1988: 52–54). This approach is not only flawed in its exclusion of all but the most elite women in its paradigm, but it assumes that privilege in other areas does not affect the phenomenon under consideration. As Elizabeth Spelman makes the point:  
…no woman is subject to any form of oppression simply because she is a woman; which forms of oppression she is subject to depend on what “kind” of woman she is. In a world in which a woman might be subject to racism, classism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, if she is not so subject it is because of her race, class, religion, sexual orientation. So it can never be the case that the treatment of a woman has only to do with her gender and nothing to do with her class or race. (Spelman 1988: 52–3)  
Other accounts of oppression are designed to allow that oppression takes many forms, and refuse to identify one form as more basic or fundamental than the rest. For example, Iris Young describes five “faces” of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and systematic violence (Young 1980 [1990a: ch. 2]). Plausibly others should be added to the list. Sexist or racist oppression, for example, will manifest itself in different ways in different contexts, e.g., in some contexts through systematic violence, in other contexts through economic exploitation. Acknowledging this does not go quite far enough, however, for monistic theorists such as MacKinnon could grant this much. Pluralist accounts of sexist oppression must also allow that there isn’t an over-arching explanation of sexist oppression that applies to all its forms: in some cases it may be that women’s oppression as women is due to the eroticization of male dominance, but in other cases it may be better explained by women’s reproductive value in establishing kinship structures (Rubin 1975), or by the shifting demands of globalization within an ethnically stratified workplace. In other words, pluralists resist the temptation to “grand social theory”, “overarching metanarratives”, “monocausal explanations”, to allow that the explanation of sexism in a particular historical context will rely on economic, political, legal, and cultural factors that are specific to that context which would prevent the account from being generalized to all instances of sexism (Fraser & Nicholson 1990). It is still compatible with pluralist methods to seek out patterns in women’s social positions and structural explanations within and across social contexts, but in doing so we must be highly sensitive to historical and cultural variation.  
**Feminism as Anti-Sexism**However, if we pursue a pluralist strategy in understanding sexist oppression, what unifies all the instances as instances of sexism? After all, we cannot assume that the oppression in question takes the same form in different contexts, and we cannot assume that there is an underlying explanation of the different ways it manifests itself. So can we even speak of there being a unified set of cases—something we can call “sexist oppression”—at all?  
Some feminists would urge us to recognize that there isn’t a systematic way to unify the different instances of sexism, and correspondingly, there is no systematic unity in what counts as feminism: instead we should see the basis for feminist unity in coalition building (Reagon 1983). Different groups work to combat different forms of oppression; some groups take oppression against women (as women) as a primary concern. If there is a basis for cooperation between some subset of these groups in a given context, then finding that basis is an accomplishment, but should not be taken for granted.  
An alternative, however, would be to grant that in practice unity among feminists cannot be taken for granted, but to begin with a theoretical common ground among feminist views that does not assume that sexism appears in the same form or for the same reasons in all contexts. We saw above that one promising strategy for distinguishing sexism from racism, classism, and other forms of injustice is to focus on the idea that if an individual is suffering sexist oppression, then an important part of the explanation why she is subject to the injustice is that she is or appears to be a woman. This includes cases in which women as a group are explicitly targeted by a policy or a practice, but also includes cases where the policy or practice affects women due to a history of sexism, even if they are not explicitly targeted. For example, in a scenario in which women are children’s primary caregivers and cannot travel for work as easily as men, then employment practices that reward those who can travel can be deemed sexist because the differential is due to sexist practices. The commonality among the cases is to be found in the role of gender in the explanation of the injustice rather than the specific form the injustice takes. Building on this we could unify a broad range of feminist views by seeing them as committed to the (very abstract) claims that:  
(Descriptive claim) Women, and those who appear to be women, are subjected to wrongs and/or injustice at least in part because they are or appear to be women.  
(Normative claim) The wrongs/injustices in question in (i) ought not to occur and should be stopped when and where they do.  
We have so far been using the term “oppression” loosely to cover whatever form of wrong or injustice is at issue. Continuing with this intentional openness in the exact nature of the wrong, the question still remains what it means to say that women are subjected to injustice because they are women. To address this question, it may help to consider a familiar ambiguity in the notion “because”: are we concerned here with causal explanations or justifications? On one hand, the claim that someone is oppressed because she is a woman suggests that the best (causal) explanation of the subordination in question will make reference to her sex: e.g., Paula is subject to sexist oppression on the job because the best explanation of why she makes $10.00 less an hour for doing comparable work as Paul makes reference to her sex (possibly coupled with her race or other social classifications). On the other hand, the claim that someone is oppressed because she is a woman suggests that the rationale or basis for the oppressive structures requires that one be sensitive to someone’s sex in determining how they should be viewed and treated, i.e., that the justification for someone’s being subject to the structures in question depends on a representation of them as sexed male or female. For example, Paula is subject to sexist oppression on the job because the pay scale for her job classification is justified within a framework that distinguishes and devalues women’s work compared with men’s.  
Note, however, that in both sorts of cases the fact that one is or appears to be a woman need not be the only factor relevant in explaining the injustice. It might be, for example, that one stands out in a group because of one’s race, or one’s class, or one’s sexuality, and because one stands out one becomes a target for injustice. But if the injustice takes a form that, e.g., is regarded as especially apt for a woman, then the injustice should be understood intersectionally, i.e., as a response to an intersectional category. For example, the practice of raping Bosnian women was an intersectional injustice: it targeted them both because they were Bosnian and because they were women.  
Of course, these two understandings of being oppressed because you are a woman are not incompatible; in fact they typically support one another. Because human actions are often best explained by the framework employed for justifying them, one’s sex may play a large role in determining how one is treated because the background understandings for what’s appropriate treatment draw invidious distinctions between the sexes. In other words, the causal mechanism for sexism often passes through problematic representations of women and gender roles.  
In each of the cases of being oppressed as a woman mentioned above, Paula suffers injustice, but a crucial factor in explaining the injustice is that Paula is a member of a particular group, viz., women. This, we think, is crucial in understanding why sexism (and racism, and other -isms) are most often understood as kinds of oppression. Oppression is injustice that, first and foremost, concerns groups; individuals are oppressed just in case they are subjected to injustice because of their group membership. On this view, to claim that women as women suffer injustice is to claim that women are oppressed.  
Where does this leave us? “Feminism” is an umbrella term for a range of views about injustices against women. There are disagreements among feminists about the nature of justice in general and the nature of sexism, in particular, the specific kinds of injustice or wrong women suffer; and the group who should be the primary focus of feminist efforts. Nonetheless, feminists are committed to bringing about social change to end injustice against women, in particular, injustice against women as women.  
**Approaches to Feminism**  
Feminism brings many things to philosophy including not only a variety of particular moral and political claims, but ways of asking and answering questions, constructive and critical dialogue with mainstream philosophical views and methods, and new topics of inquiry. Feminist philosophers work within all the major traditions of philosophical scholarship including analytic philosophy, American pragmatist philosophy, and Continental philosophy. Entries in this *Encyclopedia* appearing under the heading “feminism, approaches” discuss the impact of these traditions on feminist scholarship and examine the possibility and desirability of work that makes links between two traditions. Feminist contributions to and interventions in mainstream philosophical debates are covered in entries in this encyclopedia under “feminism, interventions”. Entries covered under the rubric “feminism, topics” concern philosophical issues that arise as feminists articulate accounts of sexism, critique sexist social and cultural practices, and develop alternative visions of a just world. In short, they are philosophical topics that arise *within* feminism.

Approaches to feminist philosophy are almost as varied as approaches to philosophy itself, reflecting a variety of beliefs about what kinds of philosophy are both fruitful and meaningful. To spell out such differences, this section of the SEP provides overviews of the following dominant (at least in more developed societies) approaches to feminist philosophy.  
All these approaches share a set of feminist commitments and an overarching criticism of institutions, presuppositions, and practices that have historically favored men over women. They also share a general critique of claims to universality and objectivity that ignore male-dominated theories’ own particularity and specificity. Feminist philosophies of most any philosophical orientation will be much more perspectival, historical, contextual, and focused on lived experience than their non-feminist counterparts. Unlike mainstream philosophers who can seriously consider the philosophical conundrums of brains in a vat, feminist philosophers always start by seeing people as embodied. Feminists have also argued for the reconfiguration of accepted structures and problematics of philosophy. For example, feminists have not only rejected the privileging of epistemological concerns over moral and political concerns common to much of philosophy, they have argued that these two areas of concern are inextricably intertwined. Part 2 of the entry on [analytic feminism](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/femapproach-analytic/) lays out other areas of commonality across these various approaches. For one, feminist philosophers generally agree that philosophy is a powerful tool for understanding  
ourselves and our relations to each other, to our communities, and to the state; to appreciate the extent to which we are counted as knowers and moral agents; [and] to uncover the assumptions and methods of various bodies of knowledge.  
For another, feminist philosophers all generally are keenly attuned to male biases at work in the history of philosophy, such as those regarding “the nature of woman” and supposed value neutrality, which on inspection is hardly neutral at all. Claims to universality, feminist philosophers have found, are usually made from a very specific and particular point of view, contrary to their manifest claims. Another orientation that feminist philosophers generally share is a commitment to normativity and social change; they are never content to analyze things just as they are but are instead looking for ways to overcome sexist practices and institutions.  
Such questioning of the problematic of mainstream approaches to philosophy has often led to feminists using methods and approaches from more than one philosophical tradition. As Ann Garry notes in part three of the entry on [Analytic Feminism](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/femapproach-analytic/) (2017), it is not uncommon to find analytic feminists drawing on non-analytic figures such as Beauvoir, Foucault, or Butler; and because of their motivation to communicate with other feminists, they are more motivated than other philosophers “to search for methodological cross-fertilization”.  
Even with their common and overlapping orientations, the differences between the various philosophical approaches to feminism are significant, especially in terms of styles of writing, influences, and overall expectations about what philosophy can and should achieve. Analytic feminist philosophy tends to value analysis and argumentation, Continental feminist theory values interpretation and deconstruction, and pragmatist feminism values lived experience and exploration. Coming out of a post-Hegelian tradition, both Continental and pragmatist philosophers usually suspect that “truth”, whatever that is, emerges and develops historically. They tend to share with Nietzsche the view that truth claims often mask power plays. Yet where Continental and pragmatist are generally wary about notions of truth, analytic feminists tend to argue that the way to  
counter sexism and androcentrism is through forming a clear conception of and pursuing truth, logical consistency, objectivity, rationality, justice, and the good. (Cudd 1996: 20).  
These differences and intersections play out in the ways that various feminists engage topics of common concern. One key area of intersection noted by Georgia Warnke is the appropriation of psychoanalytic theory, with Anglo-American feminists generally adopting object-relations theories and Continental feminists drawing more on Lacan and contemporary French psychoanalytic theory, though this is already beginning to change (entry on [intersections between analytic and continental feminism](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/femapproach-analy-cont/)). The importance of psychoanalytic approaches is also underscored in Shannon Sullivan’s essay [Intersections Between Pragmatist and Continental Feminism](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/femapproach-prag-cont/). Given the importance of [psychoanalytic feminism](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-psychoanalysis/) for all three traditions, a separate essay on this approach to feminist theory is included in this section.  
No topic is more central to feminist philosophy than sex and gender, but even here many variations on the theme flourish. Where analytic feminism, with its critique of essentialism, holds the sex/gender distinction practically as an article of faith (see the entry on [feminist perspectives on sex and gender](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/) and Chanter 2009), Continental feminists tend to suspect either (1) that even the supposedly purely biological category of sex is itself socially constituted (Butler 1990 and 1993 or (2) that sexual difference itself needs to be valued and theorized (see especially Cixous 1976 and Irigaray 1974.  
Despite the variety of different approaches, styles, societies, and orientations, feminist philosophers’ commonalities are greater than their differences. Many will borrow freely from each other and find that other orientations contribute to their own work. Even the differences over sex and gender add to a larger conversation about the impact of culture and society on bodies, experience, and pathways for change.  
**Interventions in Philosophy**Philosophers who are feminists have, in their work in traditional fields of study, begun to change those very fields. The *Encyclopedia* includes a range of entries on how feminist philosophies have intervened in conventional areas of philosophical research, areas in which philosophers often tend to argue that they are operating from a neutral, universal point of view (notable exceptions are pragmatism, poststructuralism, and some phenomenology). Historically, philosophy has claimed that the norm is universal and the feminine is abnormal, that universality is not gendered, but that all things feminine are not universal. Not surprisingly, feminists have pointed out how in fact these supposed neutral enterprises are in fact quite gendered, namely, male gendered. For example, feminists working on environmental philosophy have uncovered how practices disproportionately affect women, children, and people of color. Liberal feminism has shown how supposed universal truths of liberalism are in fact quite biased and particular. Feminist epistemologists have called out “epistemologies of ignorance” that traffic in not knowing. Across the board, in fact, feminist philosophers are uncovering male biases and also pointing to the value of particularity, in general rejecting universality as a norm or goal.  
**Important women in the feminist movement  
Simone de Beauvoir**   
An outspoken political activist, writer and social theorist, in 1949 de Beauvoir wrote The Second Sex, an ahead-of-its-time book credited with paving the way for modern feminism. In the influential (and at the time, extremely controversial) book, de Beauvoir critiques the patriarchy and social constructs faced by women. The Second Sex was banned by The Vatican and even deemed "pornography" by some—a fearless start to the fight for feminism.  
**Eleanor Roosevelt**  
Roosevelt became the first First Lady to take on responsibilities beyond merely hosting and entertaining in the White House. Before her tenure as First Lady, she was already outspoken and involved with women's issues, working with the Women's Trade Union League and the International Congress of Working Women. From 1935 to 1962, Roosevelt wrote "My Day," a newspaper column that addressed women's work, equality and rights before there was even a word for "feminism"—the social issues at the time were considered "controversial," especially for that of a First Lady to speak about. After her time as First Lady, she became the first US delegate to the United Nations, served as first chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights and also chaired JFK's President's Commission on the Status of Women to promote equality and advise on women's issues.  
**Marlene Dietrich**  
While her efforts didn't directly fight for women's rights, Dietrich made a contribution to feminism through fashion. The Hollywood actress wore trousers and men's suits during a time where it was considered extremely scandalous and taboo; both on screen and privately, once almost being arrested for wearing pants in public during the 1930s. She was famously quoted saying, "I dress for the image. Not for myself, not for the public, not for fashion, not for men." Dietrich's way of dressing went on to influence generations of women after her, lending many the confidence and power of wearing a suit.  
**Betty Friedan**The American writer and activist penned The Feminine Mystique in 1963, which is often credited for sparking the second wave of feminism that began in the '60s and '70s. Friedan spent her life working to establish women's equality, helping to establish the National Women's Political Caucus as well as organizing the Women's Strike For Equality in 1970, which popularized the feminist movement throughout America.  
**Gloria Steinem**  
Aptly referred to as the "Mother of Feminism," Gloria Steinem led the women's liberation movements throughout the '60s and '70s—and continues to do so today. Co-founder of the feminist themed Ms. Magazine and several female groups that changed the face of feminism including Women's Action Alliance, National Women's Political Caucus, Women's Media Center and more. All of her efforts led to her induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993 and in 2013 she was honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Steinem continues to be a trailblazer for feminism today, most recently with her Viceland series, WOMAN, and post-election action for young girls and women.  
**Angela Davis**  
A trailblazing voice for black women, Davis played a crucial part in the Civil Rights movement. The political activist was a key leader in the Black Power movement, and though some of her more radical positions and role in political protests have been deemed controversial, she has relentlessly fought to champion the progress of women's rights for over six decades. She most recently served as an honorary co-chair for the Women's March on Washington in 2017.  
**Bell hooks**  
The American author was known for her social activism that was often mirrored through her writing of oppression, women's rights and race. Some of bell hooks' most notable works include Ain't I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism and The Feminist Theory in which she declared, "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression."  
**Barbara Walters**  
Not only was Walters the first female co-host of a news show (although at the time she earned only half of her male co-workers), she also became the first female co-anchor of an evening news broadcast for ABC News. From the '70s until today, Walters paved the way for not only women in journalism but for women in the entire workforce.  
**Coretta Scott King**Although most known for her marriage to Martin Luther King Jr. and her work with Civil Rights, Coretta Scott King devoted much of her life to women's equality. She helped found NOW (National Organization for Women) in 1966 and played a key role in the organization's development. In her efforts for women's rights, King was also notably the first woman to deliver the class day address at Harvard.  
**Maya Angelou**  
Through her literature, public speaking and powerful writing, Maya Angelou inspired both women and African Americans to overcome gender and race discrimination. In 2011, Angelou was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her works that spanned over 50 years including 36 books, seven autobiographies and over 50 honorary degrees.