

A Feminist Perspective on *Zootopia*:

The Phenomenon of Sexism and the Wave of Feminism in American Society Nowadays

Abstract: The film *Zootopia* is a metaphor for the gender discrimination in today's American society by depicting the phenomenon that Judy and other female animal characters are not valued in the workplace. Sexism is a long-standing problem in American society and it continues nowadays. However, the rise of several feminist movements has also improved this phenomenon to some extent. This article is dedicated to exploring the connotation of feminism, examining sexism, recalling the history of the feminist movement and discussing its future in America. The presentation and analysis of this article are based on statistics, facts and previous studies.

Keywords: sexism, feminism, feminist movement, *Zootopia*

1. Introduction

Disney's animated film *Zootopia* has captured global attention not only for its innovative storytelling but also for its profound exploration of themes such as prejudice, discrimination, and personal perseverance. Through the journey of its protagonist, Judy Hopps, the movie serves as a metaphor for the struggles faced by women in the workplace, reflecting broader issues of gender inequality that persist within American society and beyond. While the United States has seen significant progress in addressing gender disparities through various feminist movements since the early 20th century, sexism remains a pervasive and deeply ingrained societal challenge. The recent resurgence of feminist activism, exemplified by movements like #MeToo, has reignited public discourse on gender equality, prompting a reevaluation of current conditions and strategies to further advance women's rights. Despite the

extensive literature on gender inequality and the feminist movement, there is still a need for more nuanced and contemporary analyses. This article aims to reveal the current status of gender discrimination in America, increase readers' understanding of the feminism, and try to promote the development of the feminist movement and promote social equality.

2. The meanings of feminism: from *Zootopia* to reality

2.1 Feminism: from *Zootopia* to reality

In *Zootopia*, the character of Judy Hopps, the first rabbit to become a police officer in Zootopia, serves as a representation of breaking traditional gender roles. Throughout the film, Judy faces challenges and prejudices because of her gender and species, which reflects real-world issues of discriminations against women in traditionally male-dominated fields. However, in the face of doubts and prejudices, Judy did not get discouraged, but through her own efforts and persistence to achieve social recognition. Judy is undoubtedly a powerful female figure, suggesting that women are capable of excelling in any career or field they choose.

However, the character of the Deputy Mayor, Bellwether, introduces a more complex perspective on feminism. Bellwether is a woman of considerable stature and ambition within the world of *Zootopia*. Her path, however, veers off course due to systemic oppression under the incumbent mayor and her own burgeoning desire for power. Seizing upon deep-seated prejudices, she endeavors to sow discord between herbivores and carnivores, cunningly leveraging her unassuming demeanor to mask her true intentions. Ultimately, her machinations are brought to light by Officer Judy Hopps. As a female figure, Bellwether's trajectory underscores the challenges women face in professional environments marred by gender discrimination. Her willingness to resort to unethical tactics forms a stark contrast with Judy's unwavering idealism and integrity.

When it comes to real life, feminism is a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and

social equality of the sexes.^[1] Feminism holds the position that modern societies are patriarchal — they prioritize the male point of view — and that women are treated unjustly in these societies.^[2] Efforts to change this include fighting against gender stereotypes and improving educational, professional, and interpersonal opportunities and outcomes for women.

2.2 A global perspective on the current state of sexism in America

Nowadays, America has made strides toward closing the gender gap, especially in areas like educational attainment and health parity. However, challenges remain prominent in economic participation, opportunity, and political empowerment. Despite that, America ranking 43rd out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, indicating a relatively high position globally. For comparison, China ranks only 102nd out of 146 countries surveyed. Countries have not made equal progress in closing the gender gap, and there are still too many women suffering from sexism, more than that we can imagine. According to the *Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, it will take another 134 years to achieve gender equality.^[3]

3. The wave of feminism in America: from the historical struggle to the present

3.1 The history of feminist movement in America

The roots of feminism in America stretch back centuries, with the organized feminist movement traditionally traced to the eighteenth century and evolving through to the present day. American feminism is typically categorized into four waves, each characterized by distinct goals and achievements.^{[4][5]}

First-wave feminism emerged in the mid-19th century and spanned until 1945, encompassing both America and several European nations. This era commenced with the Seneca Falls Convention, the first women's rights convention, held at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York, on July 19 and 20, 1848.^[6] The wave culminated in the achievement of women's suffrage, symbolized by the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

Second-wave feminism, which began in the early 1960s and lasted through the late 1970s to early 1980s, expanded the feminist agenda beyond voting rights. It addressed a broader spectrum of issues including sexuality, family structures, domestic roles, workplace equality, reproductive rights, as well as de facto and legal inequalities.^[7] This period was marked by significant social change and activism, notably ending with the feminist sex wars that highlighted debates within the movement itself.

Third-wave feminism arose in the early 1990s and continued into the new millennium. This phase introduced more nuanced and diverse perspectives, embracing intersectionality, sex positivity, ecofeminism, transfeminism, and postmodernist theories. Third-wave feminists sought to address the complexities of identity and challenged the norms established by earlier movements.

Fourth-wave feminism, emerging around 2012, represents a resurgence driven largely by social media platforms that have facilitated rapid communication and mobilization. Focused on combating sexual abuse, harassment, violence, the objectification of women, and workplace sexism, this wave has been defined by its digital activism and global connectivity.

Each wave of feminism has built upon the successes and challenges of the previous one, reflecting changing societal attitudes and the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

3.2 The achievements of the feminist movement in America

The feminist movement in America has achieved significant milestones in advancing women's rights and equality, contributing to profound legal, social, and cultural transformations.

One of the most pivotal achievements was the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, granting women the right to vote. This landmark victory laid the foundation for subsequent feminist efforts, marking a critical turning point in the struggle for gender equality.

Building on this success, second-wave feminism brought about important legal

reforms. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 aimed to eliminate wage disparities based on sex, while Title IX of 1972 prohibited sex discrimination in federally funded educational institutions, significantly impacting women's access to education and sports.

Reproductive rights were advanced through the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973, which legalized abortion nationwide, empowering women to make personal reproductive choices. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 provided crucial protections against domestic violence and sexual assault, fostering a culture of accountability and support for victims.

Increased political representation is another significant achievement. From Shirley Chisholm becoming the first African-American woman elected to Congress in 1968 to Kamala Harris being inaugurated as the first female, Black, and South Asian Vice President in 2021, more women are entering leadership roles. This has led to greater influence over policy-making and advocacy for comprehensive reforms.

Third and fourth-wave feminists have addressed intersectionality and challenged traditional gender norms, promoting diversity and inclusivity. Movements like #MeToo have raised awareness of sexual harassment and abuse, fostering a culture of accountability and empowering survivors.

In conclusion, the feminist movement in America has made considerable strides in legal reforms, social progress, and political representation. While challenges remain, these achievements highlight the ongoing commitment to gender equality and the continuous efforts required to address remaining disparities.

4. The remaining problems and prospects of American feminism

4.1 The remaining problems

4.1.1 The current gender gap in America

Despite significant strides in advancing women's rights, America continues to confront notable gender gaps across various domains. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, the U.S. ranks 43rd out of 153 countries, underscoring areas that require sustained attention.

In the realm of economic participation and opportunity, America has closed only 76.5% of its gender gap, indicating that women still earn less than men and are underrepresented in leadership positions and high-paying industries.^[3]

In terms of educational attainment, America has achieved full parity. There is no gap between men and women in America, either in literacy or at all levels of education.^[3] However, due to gender stereotypes and biases, women still encounter barriers through their pursuit of careers in science, mathematics, and so on.

Political empowerment remains another critical area of concern, with America having closed just 25.1% of its gender gap.^[3] Women hold fewer seats in Congress and state legislatures compared to their male counterparts, and America has no woman head of state in the past 50 years. This lack of political empowerment limits their influence in making decisions and advocating for gender equality policies, potentially making it more difficult to politically advance gender equality.

Health and Survival indicators show a 97% closure rate, suggesting near-parity.^[3] However, reproductive rights remain contentious. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 has led to restrictive abortion laws in several states, impacting women's access to safe and legal abortions.^[8] Access to contraception also varies significantly across regions, influenced by political and social factors, thereby affecting women's health and survival outcomes.

4.1.2 The forces of anti-feminism

Anti-feminist forces pose significant challenges to the feminist movement. Political opposition from conservative groups often resists feminist reforms, particularly regarding reproductive rights and workplace equality. Policies that restrict abortion access or undermine equal pay legislation can hinder progress. Cultural resistance, rooted in traditional gender norms and stereotypes, persists in many communities, reinforcing patriarchal structures. Media portrayals and societal expectations perpetuate these norms, limiting women's opportunities and

autonomy. Economic barriers, including economic inequality and systemic discrimination, create obstacles for women, especially those from marginalized communities. Lack of affordable childcare, unequal pay, and limited career advancement opportunities exacerbate these challenges. Additionally, backlash against progress can occur as feminist movements gain momentum, with critics viewing feminist efforts as threats to established power structures, leading to increased resistance and opposition.

4.2 The prospects: take the movement #MeToo as an example

We are currently in a new wave of feminism, exemplified by movements like #MeToo, which underscores the potential for transformative change. Initiated in 2017, #MeToo emerged as a powerful campaign against sexual abuse and harassment, providing a platform for individuals to share their experiences.^[9] This movement has brought unprecedented attention to these issues, fostering a culture of accountability and support for survivors.

#MeToo has empowered countless individuals to come forward, breaking the silence and stigma surrounding sexual misconduct. It has led to significant changes in workplace policies and legal frameworks, enhancing protections for victims and promoting safer environments. High-profile cases have resulted in resignations, prosecutions, and institutional reforms, demonstrating the impact of collective action.

The movement has also sparked broader cultural shifts, encouraging discussions about consent, power dynamics, and gender equality. It has inspired related movements addressing intersectionality and promoting inclusivity, reflecting the evolving nature of contemporary feminism. By mobilizing diverse voices, #MeToo has pushed for systemic changes that address the root causes of gender inequality.

While challenges remain, #MeToo continues to inspire new generations of activists. Its legacy lies in fostering solidarity and driving systemic changes toward a more equitable society, free from sexual harassment and abuse.

5. Conclusion

Zootopia serves as a poignant allegory for the gender discrimination and sexism still prevalent in contemporary society, particularly through its protagonist, Judy Hopps. Her struggles to break through professional barriers and be taken seriously reflect real-world challenges women face in various settings, highlighting themes of prejudice, perseverance, and inequality.

While the feminist movement has achieved significant milestones—from securing suffrage to addressing legal and social disparities—substantial work remains. The Global Gender Gap Report 2024 underscores persistent inequalities: women continue to earn less than men, are underrepresented in leadership roles, and encounter barriers in STEM fields. Issues like political empowerment and reproductive rights, particularly following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, remain contentious and divisive.

Anti-feminist forces continue to present challenges, but movements like #MeToo exemplify resilience, adaptability, and the drive for systemic change. These efforts underscore the importance of sustained activism and policy reform to dismantle persistent inequality and injustice.

In conclusion, while gender discrimination remains entrenched, the feminist movement has proven its resilience. Campaigns like #MeToo illuminate the potential for progress, driving lasting change and pushing society toward a more equitable future—one free from discrimination and abuse.

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