

The Future of Feminism: What is Prompting the Fifth Wave?

By Gail Debono



Despite historical disagreement on the meaning of the term feminism, there is global consensus that the term incorporates both a political and an intellectual movement (McAfee, 2018, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). While the latter is interested in the theoretical ideal, the former comprises activism on the ground for the amelioration or emancipation of the status of women in society. At the risk of over-simplification, the evolution of the feminist movement has passed through four historical periods - dubbed as waves - which despite broadly sharing common goals, have been characterised by remarkably diverse methods of achieving them. Although each wave succeeded another in terms of time, an observation of key processes in each of the movements would highlight that each wave stemmed from a shift in the perspectives of the women (and men) at the heart of it.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, out of an environment of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics, rose the first wave of feminism which brought with it the suffragette movement and the white woman's right to vote; the waves that followed brought legislation for equality in pay, criminalisation of domestic violence, and

female sexuality and reproductive rights, narrowing the disparity between white man and white woman (Delao, 2021). In the meantime, class and race came into the mix, whereby the proponents sought to establish equality by celebrating differences across all facets of women's lives and fighting for the privilege of not being labelled or stereotyped by one's gender, race, or social class. The last decade has seen an emergence of what has been called the fourth wave of feminism. Its proponents tend to fight systemic white male privilege. It has continued the third wave fight against gendered stereotypes and is all for deconstructing gender norms. This fourth wave also saw the dawn of online feminist activism with movements such as the #metoo movement and Time's Up, which brings me to my question: Where is feminism today?

As with previous waves, variances in opinions on key issues are driving new divides in modern-day feminists. Although some may regard feminists who think differently from them as undermining the fight, others would disagree. As is the case in any movement, many are grateful to differences in opinions that ensure that the feminist movement in its entirety progresses through changes in society. Some would

agree that these divides are pushing feminism into a fifth wave.

Fourth wave feminists today, more than ever, employ identity politics whereby every issue is seen as a gender issue. Feminists are divided – for example - over transgender theory, and their stance on the issue depends on which identity politics they employ. Not all women are ready to concede that being a woman is a matter of spirituality and identity rather than physical attributes – and this results in some feminists denouncing transgender women while others feel that the feminism fight should encompass transgender women too. Germaine Greer – adored for years by feminists, and then vilified over her opinion that rape victims should be named along with perpetrators because they have nothing to be ashamed of – is of the opinion that transgender women can never be women. She goes on to give her reasons, which centre around the biology of women, and this has earned her the transphobic label as well as solidifying her anti-feminist one by feminists who do not agree with her (Burton-Cartledge, 2015). Judith Butler, on the other hand, believes that while biology is determined at birth, gender is a discursive construction. Some feminists will fight for trans women to compete in female-only sports; while others argue that these feminists are undermining the identity of ‘woman’ that they have fought so hard for. Those who are for the inclusion of trans women in the definition of women, label others transphobic, while feminists on the other side of the spectrum, label these feminists misogynistic and accuse them of attempting to cancel the meaning of the word woman.

Fourth wave feminists also differ in terms of the scope of their feminism. Those who employ identity politics and subscribe to critical, postmodernist notions and theories such as intersectionality - who might be better suited to the “Progressive” or “Leftist” epithet than they are to the “feminist” one - are united in their harsh critique of advanced economies in the West, criticising such societies on the basis of the inherent, structural patriarchy undergirding them and in turn, the secondary status they bestow upon women - especially racial/ethnic minorities - in comparison to men. Feminists of this ilk, however, tend to use a different yardstick and a comparatively attenuated approach in their appraisal of other, non-Western societies, as they may consider any sort of criticism of non-Western ways of life as racism or even cultural violence. Others - those who consider themselves feminists first - are more likely to call out certain non-Western cultures within which the structural impediments for women are comparatively irrefutable.

One conundrum faced by identity politics is that we all have more than one identity and this causes dissonance in those who purport to classify themselves into one, such as that of woman, liberal, catholic, and conservative. It is in fact identity politics that are causing the largest divide between fourth wave feminists and those who do not identify with their stance. In a time when women have broken more glass ceilings than any other faction of society in history, fourth wave feminists are referring to our societies as patriarchal. They bash men for being masculine, coining - and liberally using - words like ‘manspreading’ and ‘mansplaining’ while simultaneously promoting women who exhibit such behaviours. They speak of ‘toxic masculinity’ everywhere and exhibit a great deal of ‘fragile femininity’ where everything is hurtful, women are victims, and men are perpetrators. Of course, toxic masculinity exists, but it is not the only form of masculinity that does. It is as if fourth-wave feminists are no longer trying to fight inequality, or to redress the balance, but to be taking issues to the other extreme, tilting the balance of inequality in favour of women, as if they are seeking retribution for past sins of men.

The fourth wave of feminism, much like each one before it, brings with it a divide among feminists - the fifth seeing the fourth-wave proponents as victimising themselves and other women, while fourth-wave feminists see the emerging fifth wave as concerned only with their personal advancement rather than that of all women in all spheres of society around the globe. Fifth wave feminists counteract this by saying that it is only by presenting as equal - and different, and that is ok - that women are treated as such. This is reminiscent of the debate over post-feminism going back to the 1980s.

The fifth wave of feminism is characterised by the dichotomous dilemma of pushing for the female to be represented in top positions across many sectors, but not wanting to highlight any difference in gender when it comes to the performance of the roles in those top positions, and naturally – that the pay received for the work performed in those positions to reflect the work rather than the gender of the worker. In fact, fifth-wave feminism has come full circle, denouncing the very desire to work, noting employment as enslavement (Moran, 2012). Fifth wave feminists are distrustful of government - and that includes female politicians. They see fourth wave feminists as doing more to further victimise women than to promote them as equals. Through the fifth wave, the woman is seen as far more than her gender. Fifth wave feminists are not afraid to criticise other females who deserve it, because women are in fact equal, and that makes them no less accountable than their male counterpart.

While the first four waves of feminism were characterised by proponents aiming to bring about change in the existing political systems of the time, fifth wave feminism is all about tearing down the current systems and rebuilding them into ones that are inclusive of all marginalised groups, and they regard current politicians - regardless of their gender - as the antithesis to progress in this regard. This is most evident in the US, where Kamala Harris is the first woman, first black and first south Asian person to hold the office of the Vice President; at face value, one would expect women - most especially those who are black and South Asian - to stand behind her, but that is not completely true. One finds that many black women were worried about what a Biden-Harris presidency might mean for black people, insisting that one looks at Harris' past policy as a judgement of character or political competence, rather than judging her on race or gender alone. Much like the previous waves of feminism, the fifth movement is arising out of a shift in perspective of its proponents.

In Malta recently, this divide was seen in the recent gender-corrective mechanism applied to the House of Parliament, whereby fourth-wave feminists argued that over time, this would create a gender-balanced parliament. Many disagreed with the mechanism being implemented at all, and there were assorted reasons given for this which are best left to another discussion, except for those women who were vehemently against the mechanism being implemented because they felt that it was insulting to offer women the advantage. Many a public and private discussion were held on the matter. Those women who felt affronted by rather

than a sense of justice from this mechanism - consciously or even perhaps unwittingly - share some characteristics with fifth-wave feminists, and some earlier versions of feminism - even if some might not even identify as feminists at all. These women are saying that sharing gender with a parliamentarian does not make them feel any more represented by that person. With the current polarising issue of reproductive rights, where many women have been vociferous on both sides of the argument, it is evident that gender does not denote representation.

A worrying trend highlighted by Murray (2019) is not what proponents of any societal faction believe, but the way in which those who are of opposing views are ostracised or labelled as bigoted, bringing discussion to a halt, or preventing discussions from taking place in the first instance.

As is often the case with other waves of feminism, it is not always easy to distinguish between fourth- and fifth- wave feminists; much as with other beliefs, individuals might be liberal on one issue and conservative on another. And that is not necessarily a terrible thing either. Indeed, if feminism can move away from rigid identity politics, those who consider themselves feminists - including activists and scholars - may be far more comfortable aligning themselves on individual issues, rather than being boxed into exclusive discourses.

Where I see fifth wave feminism heading is towards an era where women do not see themselves as victims of a patriarchal society, but rather, as already equal to the male counterpart and ready to accept nothing less; an era

whereby one is held accountable to their responsibilities towards society, regardless of their gender; and hopefully an era where disagreements on the issue are discussed far more freely.

Each wave of feminism has driven away feminists who disagree with it - and as a result - moved on to create a new faction of people who declare that "I am a feminist, but..." for fear of being seen as somebody who pushes the previous wave's





agenda in its entirety. Such divides - although conflictual in their emergence – are pivotal to any movement. The discussions which emerge from them may help drive waves forward in relation to changing societies. Regardless of the discourses of each wave of feminism, and the divides that rose from them, each of the waves were products and producers of respective social contexts; the fifth wave is no exception.

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- Gail Debono is a Forensic Psychologist in corrections and private practice. She is also a Humanist Celebrant under the auspices of the Malta Humanist Association. She is President of the Malta Chamber of Psychologists and sits on the committees of the boards of the EMDR Association of Malta and Humanist Association. Her research interests lie in the understanding of the onset of crime as a means to foster criminal rehabilitation and reintegration.*