

# Feminism is so 70s, we're all Postfeminists now

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Bachelor of Arts

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## Abstract

Postfeminism could be considered an ongoing development in the history of feminism. Alternatively, it can be seen as a form of antifeminism or *faux feminism*. The following thesis is a reaction against the postfeminist sentiment which argues that feminism is an ideology of the past, or in need of significant reconfiguration. Rather, I argue that feminism continues to be an exciting movement capable of bettering the lives of Australian women. Feminism is an emancipatory ideology which seeks to free women from patriarchy by employing strategies such as protest and consciousness raising. Feminist activism has brought many changes to women's lives, including woman suffrage, workplace reform, and the institution of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislature. Such achievements show that feminism is worthwhile, despite the criticism of authors such as Naomi Wolf, Christina Hoff Sommers, and Camile Paglia who suggest that today's feminism ought to move in a different direction from that of the Second Wave. However, women continue to experience injustices similar to those identified by feminists of the 70s, such as the existence of informal barriers which negatively impact women's political participation, the lack of women in decision making positions in business, and the physical violence that women are subjected to. Modern day women ought to embrace feminism and seek to achieve the goals such as those laid out by Aune and Redfern in *Reclaiming the F-Word: The New Feminist Movement* – liberating women's bodies; ending violence against women; transforming politics and work; and reclaiming feminism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Given its revolutionary objectives and its challenge to patriarchy, feminism has always come under attack from those who feel threatened by its desire to redistribute power. Currently, those critical of feminism debate its continuing relevance, asking simplistic questions such as: how can feminism still be relevant when women have gained so much? Aren't we all post-feminist now? Surely feminism is now nothing but a 70's relic? This thesis will argue that the answer to these questions remains a resounding no. Feminism is far from irrelevant. Though feminism has made significant gains in areas such as the workplace, politics, and sexuality, there remains much more to do. As Murphy notes, "while women have had the vote in Australia since 1902, their concerns are still inadequately represented" (Murphy, 2002, page 2). These concerns are both numerous and varied: women still earn less than men and are more likely to be in part time or casual work (Burrow, 2004), men continue to hold the majority of power positions in politics and academia (White, 2001, page 1), and violence against women continues to be an issue of significance (Amnesty International, 2009). Though women have gained many formal rights, such as suffrage and the introduction of equal opportunity legislation, the male experience continues to be the norm. Pettersson argues that in the binary relationship between male and female, characteristics considered masculine continue to be viewed as superior to those labelled feminine (Pettersson, 2007, page 11). This thesis shall discuss such concerns, and why they matter, as well as exploring feminist thought more broadly and providing a critical analysis of postfeminism.

In order to conduct an informed and meaningful discussion, I must first explore what is meant by the term feminism. A standard dictionary definition suggests that feminism is a "doctrine that advocates equal rights for women" (Princeton University, 2011). While obtaining equal rights is an aim of feminism, this definition is inadequate. Though feminism is in part a set of ideas, it is also a social and political movement which aims to emancipate women from patriarchy (Gamble,

2001, page vii). Because of this aim of emancipation, feminism is the ideal ideology for bringing women change. Though many ideologies may aim to achieve societal change, feminism is the one school of thought which focuses on the experiences of women and sex based inequalities. There also exists an intimate relationship between the two sides of feminism, for theoretical debate and practical feminist activity inform one another in an iterative fashion. Feminism is also diverse in its aims and goals, thus there have come to exist a number of different strands of feminist thought. At the core of feminism is the aim of eliminating inequality, yet there is much contestation over why such inequality exists and how best to address it (Van Acker, 1999, page 6). Liberal feminists suggest that institutional change is needed to end discrimination, Marxist feminists blame capitalism for inequalities between the sexes, and radical feminists argue that patriarchy and the sociology of gender are the roots of the problem (Wearing, 1996, pages 9 – 14). It is also notable that the concept of patriarchy is not unique to radical feminism; patriarchy is discussed throughout feminist thought. In its most early sense, the term patriarchy refers to a family situation, in which a male leader (the father of his people) has control over the dependent female members of his household (Wearing, 1996, page 21). Feminists have reworked this definition and related it to society as a whole, arguing that men have control over economics, society, and politics. A patriarchal society is also designed to reproduce itself through culture, norms, and institutions, thus ensuring patriarchy continues to last.

Postfeminism is a most slippery term which has a variety of different meanings. It can be a form of antifeminism which argues that women have abandoned feminism and have turned instead to “dressing like bimbos, yet claiming male privileges and attitudes” (Gamble, 2001, page 43). Or, postfeminism may be *faux feminism*, claiming to celebrate women whilst reducing them to sex objects. Newer feminist writings have also been described as postfeminist simply because they were written after the Second Wave. This type of postfeminism may challenge,



but does not necessarily reject, earlier feminisms (Brooks, 1997, page 4). McRobbie describes yet another style of postfeminism as “a process in which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined” (McRobbie, 2009, page 11). Debate within such postfeminist circles tends to centre on “issues of victimisation, autonomy and responsibility” (Gamble, 2001, page 43). This diversity of postfeminist thought allows for some postfeminisms to be more valid than others. It is the nature of the feminist project to reassess traditional understandings of a variety of concepts, however, postfeminist arguments that suggest feminism is irrelevant or that earlier forms of feminism are to ‘blame’ for current dilemmas of women are, in my view, inconsistent with the broader aims of feminism.

The setting for this discussion on the continuing relevance of feminism is modern day Australia. Feminism has sometimes been criticised for not paying enough attention to race and class issues (Vernon, 2003, page 1). However, the experiences of minority groups are so complex and unique that to speak about them in a generalised manner and place them alongside other groups would not allow for much detail or sensitivity, it is for that reason that they are not a focus of this particular study. It is also notable that those who present post-feminist arguments do not tend to focus on minority groups. For example, well known postfeminist Naomi Wolf identifies the beauty industry as a key source of tyranny within women’s lives and argues that women are negatively affected by their desire to adhere to traditional stereotypes of Western beauty (Whelehan, 1995, page 217). For migrant women, who face issues such as language barriers and racism (Kirner, 1995, page 1), Wolf’s preoccupation with beauty may seem petty. Thus, in order to criticize postfeminism, I must focus on the same groups that postfeminists write about.

In researching the relevance of feminism to modern day Australia, I have looked primarily at secondary sources. This has involved consulting a vast number of feminist texts. The work I have found most influential is Dux and Simic’s *The Great Feminist Denial* (Dux and Simic, 2008). This Australian piece of writing presents

a similar, though not identical, argument to my own. The authors suggest that feminism has come to be wrongly blamed for a number of societal ills now facing women. Such ills include parenting issues, the difficulty of balancing home and work life, and women's increased involvement in hyper sexualised activities such as pole dancing. Dux and Simic defend feminism against such accusations whilst pondering why feminism has come to have such a negative image. Like Dux and Simic, I wish to defend feminism against its detractors, though I also argue in this thesis that feminism is not the cause of such problems, but rather, the solution. Another work I have found to be influential is Aune and Redfern's *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement* (Aune and Redfern, 2010). Aune and Redfern argue against the concept of postfeminism and suggest that while feminism may be *portrayed* as unattractive, it remains highly relevant. What is particularly significant about this work was the way in which the authors set an agenda for what feminism's next goals should be. Aune and Redfern state that today's feminists should be concerned with liberating their bodies, gaining equality in the workplace and the home, eradicating sexism in popular culture and finding a way to end violence against women (Aune and Redfern, 2010, page 17). Though this work is written in relation to Britain, much of what it says can be applied to the Australian context.

It has also been necessary for me to study a number of texts labelled as postfeminist. I focused my research on works by Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff Sommers and Camille Paglia, the latter of which famously stated that 'if civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts' (Whelehan, 1995, page 235). Wolf has written on subjects such as the beauty industry and adolescent sexuality (Mears, 2011) and theorises that earlier feminisms constructed women as victims (Wolf, 1993, page xvii). Hoff Summers is highly critical of modern feminism, and offers up her own brand of ideology – "equity feminism" which does not see sociological gender constructs as inherently problematic (London, 2011). Roiphe came to prominence by asserting that rape was

not as rampant or as traumatic as earlier feminists had suggested (Traister, 2007). Like the previously mentioned authors, Paglia questions the feminism of the past few decades and aims to reshape current feminist thought, asserting that gender differences arise solely from our biological sex (Whelehan, 1995, page 235). The works of such post-feminists will be discussed and criticised in greater detail in Chapter 3.

In researching, I have also accessed much online material, and have paid particular attention to news media and the feminist blogosphere. I have found the news media, in both print and digital form, to have a confused attitude toward feminism. For example, in most instances the Western Australian publication *The Sunday Times* has adopted the post-feminist line of attack by criticising 1970's feminism, recently publishing an opinion piece which labelled iconic 1970s feminist Germaine Greer a "publicity seeking hound" who created a career out of "men-hating, mudslinging that was meant to change the world" (Bartlett, 2011, page 57). The author of the article did not seem particularly well versed in feminism, misspelling the surname of Naomi Wolf in his piece. Although the attack on Greer was not unexpected given the vast amounts of both positive and negative attention she receives, I was surprised to find that only two months earlier *The Sunday Times* had published an article with distinct feminist leanings. The article lamented the high incidence of sex based discrimination in the workplace and provided statistics which supported the need for greater awareness about harassment (Phillips, 2011). Examples such as these have led me to believe that while the media appears to be supportive of feminist aims, such as equality in the workplace, it is critical of women who openly identify themselves as feminists. By identifying Greer (a controversial figure who is far from universally accepted by feminists) as the face of feminism, a caricature is created. Feminism is not presented as a diverse ideology - its aims and ideas are ignored. Instead, the attention is placed on one individual woman who has been the focus of a fair amount of criticism, controversy and even hate. This is a

classic attempt to undermine feminism by focusing on the alleged misbehaviour of an individual rather than the movement as a collective whole. Throughout my thesis I have drawn on the media and treated it as both a reflection of popular thought and an opinion maker.

The feminist blogosphere has also proved to be a useful online source of information and opinion. Feminist blogging features elements of both activism and consciousness raising (Dux and Simic, 2008, page 66). Some blogs are highly interactive, allowing users to comment on posts and thus engage in discussion with one another. Consequently, a thriving, online feminist community has emerged. Feminist bloggers debate a variety of topics, such as the entertainment industry, ideological differences between various schools of feminism, the phenomenon of *SlutWalk*, and even advertisements featuring talking vaginas (Angyal, 2011). However, I am aware that blogs are not an academic space inhabited by experts within the field of feminism, yet, they are at the least a very useful starting point. Blogs give angry, passionate women a forum in which to express their discontent with the patriarchy and their hope for what it may transform into. Blogs are a breeding ground for discussion and new ideas, whilst also being a place in which laypeople may come to learn more without being intimidated. The fact that so many feminist blogs exist, and that they are actively used, also aids in countering the argument that women have lost interest in feminism. Clearly, a number of people are still interested excited by feminism and are keeping up with its new forms and manifestations.

This thesis is organised into three chapters and also contains an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter, entitled *The Nature of Feminism*, provides an introduction to feminist thought and activity. Though I have already summarised the term, I aim to take this further and explore feminism as both an emancipatory ideology and a political and social project. This will necessitate further discussion on patriarchy and other elements of feminist theory. I will also look at feminist ideas

and arguments. Thus, different schools of feminist thought shall be discussed, with particular attention paid to more dominant ideological strands such as liberal, socialist, Marxist and radical Feminism. The strategies employed by feminists in order to further their cause will also be considered. Feminist activism may come in many forms, such as consciousness raising and protest. Throughout Chapter 1 I wish to emphasise that there is a certain relationship between the practical and theoretical sides of feminism. While feminist action is informed by ideology, such action also helps the academic world to better understand feminism.

Chapter 2, *The Achievements of Feminism* is a discussion of feminist history. By looking at how much feminism has achieved in the past I aim to argue that it is a potent force capable of going on to accomplish much more in the future. Looking at the history also aids in providing a more comprehensive understanding of feminism itself. In discussing feminism's past successes I shall pay particular attention the 19<sup>th</sup> century movement and feminism of the 1970's and 1990's. 19<sup>th</sup> century feminism, sometimes known as the First Wave, was a time in which women stepped forward and demanded their political rights - the most prominent of which was the vote. The 1970's, or the Second Wave, was a time of great social, economic and political change. The decade also spawned a vast amount of feminist literature. The 1990's were also an interesting time for feminism, for while phrases such as 'empowerment' and 'girl power' entered the vocabularies of many women, a rise in antifeminist sentiment also took place. The decade was also neoliberal in nature, with women focusing on personal growth and individualism rather than a social or collective movement.

The third chapter of this thesis – *Why We Still Need Feminism* focuses on the crux of my argument. Its first half shall be dedicated to exploring postfeminist arguments and different styles of postfeminism. The second part of the chapter argues that whilst women have made many gains as a result of the First and Second Waves, we still need feminism because women continue to remain unequal in a

number of areas. These areas can be categorised under business and the workplace, politics, and the body / sexuality. Feminism has achieved much in the past, and has proven itself capable of making more gains for women in the future. Thus I argue that in order to better their lives, present day women should utilise the tool of feminism, drawing upon both modern and traditional forms of feminist argument and activity. I aim to explore not only what still needs to be done, but also how change should occur.

Thus concludes the introduction of this thesis. The core argument of the following chapters is that feminism remains not only highly relevant to modern women, but is necessary for achieving change. Though women have come a long way since the inception of feminism, there is still much to be done. While some may suggest that feminism has already achieved its goals and that women have come far enough, I argue that while formal equality has been mostly achieved, substantive equality has not. Institutional barriers that, in the past, stopped women from achieving in their careers or pursuing the same freedoms as men have been outlawed, yet patriarchy remains deeply ingrained in our culture. Although feminism, in its modern form, has been around for over a hundred years, patriarchy has existed for thousands. Thus it cannot be simply eradicated in only a few decades. Though Australian society is accepting toward the idea that the sexes should be equal, women are not being treated equally in practice. Women continue to experience discrimination, objectification and violence, because of their gender. This does not mean the women of Australia are doomed to drown in masculine culture, rather it means that we must continue to work toward creating a more egalitarian society. Feminism can aid in doing this, helping men and women alike to understand the nature of oppression and how best its effects can be minimized.