The waves of feminism explained [Adapted]
By Constance Grady
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As the #MeToo movement barrels forward, as record numbers of women seek office, and as the Women's March drives the resistance against the Trump administration, feminism is reaching a level of cultural relevance it hasn't enjoyed in years. It's now a major object of cultural discourse — which has led to some very confusing conversations because not everyone is familiar with or agrees on the basic terminology of feminism. And one of the most basic and most confusing terms has to do with waves of feminism.

People began talking about feminism as a series of waves in 1968 when a New York Times article by Martha Weinman Lear ran under the headline "The Second Feminist Wave." "Feminism, which one might have supposed as dead as a Polish question, is again an issue," Lear wrote. "Proponents call it the Second Feminist Wave, the first having ebbed after the glorious victory of suffrage and disappeared, finally, into the sandbar of Togetherness."

The wave metaphor caught on: It became a useful way of linking the women's movement of the '60s and '70s to the women's movement of the suffragettes, and to suggest that the women's libbers weren't a bizarre historical aberration, as their detractors sneered, but a new chapter in a grand history of women fighting together for their rights. Over time, the wave metaphor became a way to describe and distinguish between different eras and generations of feminism.

It's not a perfect metaphor. "The wave metaphor tends to have built into it an important metaphorical implication that is historically misleading and not helpful politically," argued feminist historian Linda Nicholson in 2010. "That implication is that underlying certain historical differences, there is one phenomenon, feminism, that unites gender activism in the history of the United States, and that like a wave, peaks at certain times and recedes at others. In sum, the wave metaphor suggests the idea that gender activism in the history of the United States has been for the most part unified around one set of ideas, and that set of ideas can be called feminism."

The wave metaphor can be reductive. It can suggest that each wave of feminism is a monolith with a single unified agenda, when in fact the history of feminism is a history of different ideas in wild conflict.

It can reduce each wave to a stereotype and suggest that there's a sharp division between generations of feminism, when in fact there's a fairly strong continuity between each wave — and since no wave is a monolith, the theories that are fashionable in one wave are often grounded in the work that someone was doing on the sidelines of a previous wave. And the wave metaphor can suggest that mainstream feminism is the only kind of feminism there is, when feminism is full of splinter movements.

And as waves pile upon waves in feminist discourse, it's become unclear that the wave metaphor is useful for understanding where we are right now. "I don't think we are in a wave right now," gender studies scholar April Sizemore-Barber told Vox in January. "I think that now feminism is inherently intersectional feminism — we are in a place of multiple feminisms."

But the wave metaphor is also probably the best tool we have for understanding the history of feminism in the US, where it came from and how it developed. And it's become a

fundamental part of how we talk about feminism — so even if we end up deciding to discard it, it's worth understanding exactly what we're discarding.

Here is an overview of the waves of feminism in the US, from the suffragettes to #MeToo. This is a broad overview, and it won't capture every nuance of the movement in each era. Think of it as a Feminism 101 explainer, here to give you a framework to understand the feminist conversation that's happening right now, how we got here, and where we go next.

The first wave: 1848 to 1920

People have been suggesting things along the line of "Hmmm, are women maybe human beings?" for all of history, so first-wave feminism doesn't refer to the first feminist thinkers in history. It refers to the West's first sustained political movement dedicated to achieving political equality for women: the suffragettes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

For 70 years, the first-wavers would march, lecture, and protest, and face arrest, ridicule, and violence as they fought tooth and nail for the right to vote. As Susan B. Anthony's biographer Ida Husted Harper would put it, suffrage was the right that, once a woman had won it, "would secure to her all others."

The first wave basically begins with the Seneca Falls convention of 1848. There, almost 200 women met in a church in upstate New York to discuss "the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women." Attendees discussed their grievances and passed a list of 12 resolutions calling for specific equal rights — including, after much debate, the right to vote.

The whole thing was organized by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who were both active abolitionists. (They met when they were both barred from the floor of the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London; no women were allowed.)

At the time, the nascent women's movement was firmly integrated with the abolitionist movement: The leaders were all abolitionists, and Frederick Douglass spoke at the Seneca Falls Convention, arguing for women's suffrage. Women of color like Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, and Frances E.W. Harper were major forces in the movement, working not just for women's suffrage but for universal suffrage.

But despite the immense work of women of color for the women's movement, the movement of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony eventually established itself as a movement specifically for *white* women, one that used racial animus as fuel for its work.

The 15th Amendment's passage in 1870, granting black men the right to vote, became a spur that politicized white women and turned them into suffragettes. Were they truly not going to be granted the vote before former slaves were?

"If educated women are not as fit to decide who shall be the rulers of this country, as 'field hands,' then where's the use of culture, or any brain at all?" demanded one white woman who wrote in to Stanton and Anthony's newspaper, the Revolution. "One might as well have been 'born on the plantation.'" Black women were barred from some demonstrations or forced to walk behind white women in others.

Despite its racism, the women's movement developed radical goals for its members. First-wavers fought not only for white women's suffrage but also for equal opportunities to education and employment, and for the right to own property.

And as the movement developed, it began to turn to the question of reproductive rights. In 1916, Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the US, in defiance of a New

York state law that forbade the distribution of contraception. She would later go on to establish the clinic that became Planned Parenthood.

In 1920, Congress passed the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote. (In theory, it granted the right to women of all races, but in practice, it remained difficult for black women to vote, especially in the South.)

The 19th Amendment was the grand legislative achievement of the first wave. Although individual groups continued to work — for reproductive freedom, for equality in education and employment, for voting rights for black women — the movement as a whole began to splinter. It no longer had a unified goal with strong cultural momentum behind it, and it would not find another until the second wave began to take off in the 1960s.

Further reading: first-wave feminism
A Vindication of the Rights of Women, Mary Wollstonecraft (1791)
Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1848)
Ain't I a Woman? Sojourner Truth (1851)
Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors: Is the Classification Sound? A Discussion on the Laws Concerning the Property of Married Women, Frances Power Cobbe (1868)
Remarks by Susan B. Anthony at her trial for illegal voting (1873)
A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf (1929)
Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings, edited by Miriam Schneir (1994)

The second wave: 1963 to the 1980s

The second wave of feminism begins with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which came out in 1963. There were prominent feminist thinkers before Friedan who would come to be associated with the second wave — most importantly Simone de Beauvoir, whose *Second Sex* came out in France in 1949 and in the US in 1953 — but *The Feminine Mystique* was a phenomenon. It sold 3 million copies in three years.

The Feminine Mystique rails against "the problem that has no name": the systemic sexism that taught women that their place was in the home and that if they were unhappy as housewives, it was only because they were broken and perverse. "I thought there was something wrong with me because I didn't have an orgasm waxing the kitchen floor," Friedan later quipped.

But, she argued, the fault didn't truly lie with women, but rather with the world that refused to allow them to exercise their creative and intellectual faculties. Women were right to be unhappy; they were being ripped off.

The Feminine Mystique was not revolutionary in its thinking, as many of Friedan's ideas were already being discussed by academics and feminist intellectuals. Instead, it was revolutionary in its *reach*. It made its way into the hands of housewives, who gave it to their friends, who passed it along through a whole chain of well-educated middle-class white women with beautiful homes and families. And it gave them permission to be angry.
And once those 3 million readers realized that they were angry, feminism once again had cultural momentum behind it. It had a unifying goal, too: not just political equality, which the first-wavers had fought for, but social equality.

"The personal is political," said the second-wavers. (The phrase cannot be traced back to any individual woman but was popularized by Carol Hanisch.) They would go on to argue that problems that seemed to be individual and petty — about sex, and relationships, and access to abortions, and domestic labor — were in fact systemic and political, and fundamental to the fight for women's equality.

So the movement won some major legislative and legal victories: The Equal Pay Act of 1963 theoretically outlawed the gender pay gap; a series of landmark Supreme Court cases through the ’60s and ’70s gave married and unmarried women the right to use birth control; Title IX gave women the right to educational equality; and in 1973, *Roe v. Wade* guaranteed women reproductive freedom.

The second wave worked on getting women the right to hold credit cards under their own names and to apply for mortgages. It worked to outlaw marital rape, to raise awareness about domestic violence and build shelters for women fleeing rape and domestic violence. It worked to name and legislate against sexual harassment in the workplace.

But perhaps just as central was the second wave’s focus on changing the way society thought about women. The second wave cared deeply about the casual, systemic sexism ingrained into society — the belief that women’s highest purposes were domestic and decorative, and the social standards that reinforced that belief — and in naming that sexism and ripping it apart.

The second wave cared about racism too, but it could be clumsy in working with people of color. As the women’s movement developed, it was rooted in the anti-capitalist and anti-racist civil rights movements, but black women increasingly found themselves alienated from the central platforms of the mainstream women’s movement.

The Feminine Mystique and its “problem that has no name” was specifically for white middle-class women: Women who had to work to support themselves experienced their oppression very differently from women who were socially discouraged from working. Earning the right to work outside the home was not a major concern for black women, many of whom had to work outside the home anyway. And while black women and white women both advocated for reproductive freedom, black women wanted to fight not just for the right to contraception and abortions but also to stop the forced sterilization of people of color and people with disabilities, which was not a priority for the mainstream women’s movement. In response, some black feminists decamped from feminism to create womanism. (“Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender,” Alice Walker wrote in 1983.)

Even with its limited scope, second-wave feminism at its height was plenty radical enough to scare people — hence the myth of the bra burners. Despite the popular story, there was no mass burning of bras among second-wave feminists.

But women did gather together in 1968 to protest the Miss America pageant and its demeaning, patriarchal treatment of women. And as part of the protest, participants ceremoniously threw away objects that they considered to be symbols of women’s objectification, including bras and copies of Playboy.

That the Miss America protest has long lingered in the popular imagination as a bra-burning, and that bra-burning has become a metonym for postwar American feminism, says a lot about the backlash to the second wave that would soon ensue.

In the 1980s, the comfortable conservatism of the Reagan era managed to successfully position second-wave feminists as humorless, hairy-legged shrews who cared only about petty bullshit like bras instead of *real* problems, probably to distract themselves from the loneliness of their lives, since no man would ever want a (*shudder*) feminist.

“I don’t think of myself as a feminist,” a young woman told Susan Bolotin in 1982 for the New York Times Magazine. “Not for me, but for the guy next door that would mean that I’m

a lesbian and I hate men."

Another young woman chimed in, agreeing. "Look around and you'll see some happy women, and then you'll see all these bitter, bitter women," she said. "The unhappy women are all feminists. You'll find very few happy, enthusiastic, relaxed people who are ardent supporters of feminism."

That image of feminists as angry and man-hating and lonely would become canonical as the second wave began to lose its momentum, and it continues to haunt the way we talk about feminism today. It would also become foundational to the way the third wave would position itself as it emerged.

Further reading: second-wave feminism
The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir (1949)
The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan (1963)
Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape, Susan Brownmiller (1975)
Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination, Catharine A. MacKinnon (1979)
The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979)
Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism, bell hooks (1981)
In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose, Alice Walker (1983)
Sister Outsider, Audre Lorde (1984)

The third wave: 1991 to ????

It is almost impossible to talk with any clarity about the third wave because few people agree on exactly what the third wave is, when it started, or if it's still going on. "The confusion surrounding what constitutes third wave feminism," writes feminist scholar Elizabeth Evans, "is in some respects its defining feature."

But generally, the beginning of the third wave is pegged to two things: the Anita Hill case in 1991, and the emergence of the riot grrrl groups in the music scene of the early 1990s.
In 1991, Anita Hill testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee that Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her at work. Thomas made his way to the Supreme Court anyway, but Hill's testimony sparked an avalanche of sexual harassment complaints, in much the same way that last fall's Harvey Weinstein accusations were followed by a litany of sexual misconduct accusations against other powerful men.

And Congress's decision to send Thomas to the Supreme Court despite Hill's testimony led to a national conversation about the overrepresentation of men in national leadership roles. The following year, 1992, would be dubbed "the Year of the Woman" after 24 women won seats in the House of Representatives and three more won seats in the Senate.
And for the young women watching the Anita Hill case in real time, it would become an awakening. "I am not a postfeminism feminist," declared Rebecca Walker (Alice Walker's daughter) for Ms. after watching Thomas get sworn into the Supreme Court. "I am the Third Wave."

Early third-wave activism tended to involve fighting against workplace sexual harassment and working to increase the number of women in positions of power. Intellectually, it was rooted in the work of theorists of the '80s: Kimberlé Crenshaw, a scholar of gender and critical race theory who coined the term *intersectionality* to describe the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect; and Judith Butler, who argued that gender and sex are separate and that gender is performative. Crenshaw and Butler's combined influence

would become foundational to the third wave's embrace of the fight for trans rights as a fundamental part of intersectional feminism.

Aesthetically, the third wave is deeply influenced by the rise of the riot grrrls, the girl groups who stomped their Doc Martens onto the music scene in the 1990s.

"BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives," wrote Bikini Kill lead singer Kathleen Hanna in the Riot Grrrl Manifesto in 1991. "BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak."

The word *girl* here points to one of the major differences between second- and third-wave feminism. Second-wavers fought to be called *women* rather than *girls*: They weren't children, they were fully grown adults, and they demanded to be treated with according dignity. There should be no more college girls or coeds: only college women, learning alongside college men.

But third-wavers liked being girls. They embraced the word; they wanted to make it empowering, even threatening — hence *grrrl*. And as it developed, that trend would continue: The third wave would go on to embrace all kinds of ideas and language and aesthetics that the second wave had worked to reject: makeup and high heels and high-femme girliness.

In part, the third-wave embrace of girliness was a response to the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s, the one that said the second-wavers were shrill, hairy, and unfeminine and that no man would ever want them. And in part, it was born out of a belief that the *rejection* of girliness was in itself misogynistic: girliness, third-wavers argued, was not inherently less valuable than masculinity or androgyny.

And it was rooted in a growing belief that effective feminism had to recognize both the dangers and the pleasures of the patriarchal structures that create the beauty standard and that it was pointless to punish and censure individual women for doing things that brought them pleasure.

Third-wave feminism had an entirely different way of talking and thinking than the second wave did — but it also lacked the strong cultural momentum that was behind the grand achievements of the second wave. (Even the Year of Women turned out to be a blip, as the number of women entering national politics plateaued rapidly after 1992.)
The third wave was a diffuse movement without a central goal, and as such, there's no single piece of legislation or major social change that belongs to the third wave the way the 19th Amendment belongs to the first wave or *Roe v. Wade* belongs to the second.
Depending on how you count the waves, that might be changing now, as the #MeToo moment develops with no signs of stopping — or we might be kicking off an entirely new wave.

Further reading: third-wave feminism
Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Judith Butler (1990)
The Beauty Myth, Naomi Woolf (1991)
"Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991)
"The Riot GRRRL Manifesto," Kathleen Hanna (1991)
Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, Susan Faludi (1991)

The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order, edited by Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller (1999)
Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics, bell hooks (2000)
Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture, Ariel Levy (2005)

The present day: a fourth wave?

Feminists have been anticipating the arrival of a fourth wave since at least 1986, when a letter writer to the Wilson Quarterly opined that the fourth wave was already building. Internet trolls actually tried to launch their own fourth wave in 2014, planning to create a "pro-sexualization, pro-skinny, anti-fat" feminist movement that the third wave would revile, ultimately miring the entire feminist community in bloody civil war. (It didn't work out.)

But over the past few years, as #MeToo and Time's Up pick up momentum, the Women's March floods Washington with pussy hats every year, and a record number of women prepare to run for office, it's beginning to seem that the long-heralded fourth wave might actually be here.

While a lot of media coverage of #MeToo describes it as a movement dominated by third-wave feminism, it actually seems to be centered in a movement that lacks the characteristic diffusion of the third wave. It feels different.

"Maybe the fourth wave is online," said feminist Jessica Valenti in 2009, and that's come to be one of the major ideas of fourth-wave feminism. Online is where activists meet and plan their activism, and it's where feminist discourse and debate takes place. Sometimes fourth-wave activism can even take place on the internet (the "#MeToo" tweets), and sometimes it takes place on the streets (the Women's March), but it's conceived and propagated online.

As such, the fourth wave's beginnings are often loosely pegged to around 2008, when Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were firmly entrenched in the cultural fabric and feminist blogs like Jezebel and Feministing were spreading across the web. By 2013, the idea that we had entered a fourth wave was widespread enough that it was getting written up in the Guardian. "What's happening now feels like something new again," wrote Kira Cochrane. Currently, the fourth-wavers are driving the movement behind #MeToo and Time's Up, but in previous years they were responsible for the cultural impact of projects like Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, in which a rape victim at Columbia University committed to carrying their mattress around campus until the university expelled their rapist.

The trending hashtag #YesAllWomen after the UC Santa Barbara shooting was a fourth-wave campaign, and so was the trending hashtag #StandWithWendy when Wendy Davis filibustered a Texas abortion law. Arguably, the SlutWalks that began in 2011 — in protest of the idea that the way to prevent rape is for women to "stop dressing like sluts" — are fourth-wave campaigns.

Like all of feminism, the fourth wave is not a monolith. It means different things to different people. But these tentpole positions that Bustle identified as belonging to fourth-wave feminism in 2015 do tend to hold true for a lot of fourth-wavers; namely, that fourth-wave feminism is queer, sex-positive, trans-inclusive, body-positive, and digitally driven. (Bustle also claims that fourth-wave feminism is anti-misandry, but given the glee with which fourth-wavers across the internet riff on ironic misandry, that may be more prescriptivist than descriptivist on their part.)

And now the fourth wave has begun to hold our culture's most powerful men accountable for their behavior. It has begun a radical critique of the systems of power that allow predators to target women with impunity.

Further reading: fourth-wave feminism
The Purity Myth, Jessica Valenti (2009)
How to Be a Woman, Caitlin Moran (2012)
Men Explain Things to Me, Rebecca Solnit (2014)
We Should All Be Feminists, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014)
Bad Feminist, Roxane Gay (2014)