

# **A Dilemma For Modern Women Who May Embrace Feminism While Upholding Cultural Practices: A Literature Review**

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## **Abstract**

*At the centre of some cultural practices in modern societies are prejudices that characterize women as incapable of voting or working, or having a voice. The meaningful living of women has also been threatened by some patriarchal elements in different cultures. This article analyses the dilemma faced by women who choose to embrace feminism and uphold cultural practices in contemporary societies. Relevant articles for the analysis were systematically searched on three research databases, including Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The search hits (587) were streamlined to only 16 using a set of inclusion-exclusion criteria. The data analysis was anchored by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic approach. Findings revealed that the four waves of feminism, which the world has experienced, were reactions to perceived societal injustice to women. It was noted that the feminist reaction grew stronger as the patriarchal traits in the society stereotype women as inferior to men in participating in socio-economic functions or taking care of their bodies. These findings were then discussed using evidence-based arguments in the literature. It is concluded that the champions of women's rights and liberty should look out for implicit patriarchal implications that may follow a successful feminist campaign.*

**Keywords:** feminism, culture, patriarchy, society, women

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## **I. Introduction**

Are there cultural practices that run in conflict with women's rights and freedom? There seems to be a plethora of evidence, signposting that such practices are numerous and growing in contemporary societies. For example, according to the Nobel prize-winning economist Claudia Goldin, society requires continuous births to prevent human extinction, yet it discriminates against women when they leave work to take care of pregnancy and childbirth (Goldin, 2023). In all human societies, this is an existential practice which the rise of feminism in part sought to correct (Perrin, 2024). This article explores the structure and dynamics of feminism in the modern world. It also explains the dilemma being experienced by women in meeting the dictates of feminism while upholding the cultural practices around them. Given several prejudices against modern women, feminism is a hot topic whose analysis and discussion often generate social, religious, and political considerations (Saeidzadeh, 2023). Therefore, this article was packaged to reduce the likelihood of intellectual conflicts it might exude.

Feminism is the ideological movement that challenges age-old practice that places women below men in all or specific phases of life (Mohajan and Mohajan, 2022). A feminist is anyone who believes that the rights of an average woman are subdued by some patriarchal arrangements in society and calls for the reversal of such arrangements (Fotaki and Pullen, 2024). Although there are men who feel and act as feminists, most feminists are expectedly to be women, hence the slogan *women fighting for women* (Wilson, 2023). The word 'feminism' often generates mixed emotions whenever it is used (Saeidzadeh, 2023). While the feminists maintain positive nuances as they argue for gender equality and women's rights, others with patriarchal identities generally feel attacked and refer the feminists as seeking to place women above men (Saeidzadeh, 2023).

So far, the world has witnessed four waves of feminism. The first wave was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the feminist activists campaigned for women's rights to vote and own property (Weldon et al., 2023). The second wave of the feminist movement began in the 1960s, advocating for women's rights to make the personal decision to work or not to work (Pew Research Centre, 2023; Ng and McGowan, 2022; Warhol, 2016). In the 1990s, having recorded some remarkable achievements on the women's liberty to participate in the workforce, several feminist groups renewed their calls for women's individual choices on their sexuality (Fetner, 2022). This was termed the third wave of the feminist movement, aiming to further liberate women in what they can do with their bodies (Grachev et al., 2022). The final wave of feminism, which began in the 2010s, is otherwise referred to as the # MeToo movement. It sought to end sexual molestation and rape culture against women in all societies (Jaffe et al., 2021).

The remainder of this paper is organised into four sections. Section II presents the methodology framework that is adopted to collect relevant data in this study. Section III analyses emerging findings from the data. Section IV discusses the findings with particular attention to the parity between the findings and other available evidence in the literature. Finally, the article concludes in Section V by noting the implications of recent developments on the future outlook of feminism.

## **II. Methodology**

This study is a systematic review of the literature. This was anchored on a systematic search and analysis of relevant articles in the recent literature. To achieve this, keywords in the research title were identified. These are: feminism, cultural practice, dilemma, society, and woman. These keywords were launched on three research databases (Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar). To enhance the search hits, synonyms of the keywords were also combined in the databases. The Boolean operators OR and AND were applied to mix similar and different keywords (and their synonyms). Altogether, 587 hits were returned across the databases. The search results were excessive for the scope of the present study. Therefore, a set of five inclusion-exclusion criteria was used to select only 16 articles for this study. These criteria include publication in the period 2014-2024, English as the language of publication, article passing through the peer-review process, evidence-based study, and article containing no stereotypes. The selected articles were then appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool. After obtaining fair features of the selected articles, they were analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) approach of thematic analysis. The approach proceeded in six steps.

First, there was a familiarity with the data. In this context, the data were the selected articles. Second, codes were generated across the data. These codes represent the commonly used words and phrases across the articles. Altogether, 40 codes were identified. Third, candidate themes were signposted from the codes. Fourth, the preliminary themes were reviewed along the structure of the selected articles – this aided the identification of relevant articles to be used to analyse each theme. Fifth, the themes were finally formed as four, outlining women's rights, advancement, liberation, and protection. Finally, the themes were analysed and discussed comparatively with evidence in the existing literature. Braun and Clarke's (2006) theme-development approach was followed systematically. This helped in addressing all elements of research in each selected article. A distinction was made between the data analysis and discussion of findings. The former was anchored on the selected data while the latter was based on other evidence by past authors who have conducted research, writing or commentary with similar orientation as the present one. This follows the recommendation of Braun and Clarke (2012) while commenting further on the method of synchronizing all available information regarding a phenomenon of interest to the researcher. Nevertheless, the selected data provided the baseline for picking out relevant pieces from the additional evidence.

## **III. Thematic (Data) Analysis**

This section analyses the themes using the selected data. The articles were distributed evenly across the themes: four articles were appraised as relevant to analysing each theme. There was no instance of an article overlapping across more than one theme. The analysis proceeds as follows:

### *Theme one: women's rights and cultural practices*

The women's right to vote dominated the first wave of the feminist campaign. The campaign was successful in most societies, even though the success was not simultaneous (Weldon et al., 2023; Benjamin and Schwab, 2021). The women's right to vote was first passed by New Zealand in 1893 (Benjamin and Schwab, 2021). This was followed by Australia (1902), Finland (1906), Canada (1918), the UK (1918), and the US (1920). Many other countries followed suit as they gained independence from their colonial rulers (Benjamin and Schwab, 2021). Nevertheless, as the right to vote was granted to women in many modern societies, the developing dilemma for women is the cultural practice of their sharing the same political views as their husbands or partners to maintain domestic peace (Roessner, 2020; Rubio-Marin, 2014). That is, when women have a different political choice or leaning from their husbands or partners, the home might experience friction (Rubio-Marin, 2014). This represents a key unexpected consequence of the women's suffrage movement (Roessner, 2020).

### *Theme two: women's advancement and cultural practices*

The feminist struggle has also painstakingly considered the freedom of women to work and empower themselves. This was the key talking point of the second wave of feminism. Shortly after women had accomplished their suffrage rights, the Great Depression of the 1930s occurred, causing many men to lose their jobs (Brostrom, 2019). Being the only breadwinners, the men saw a drastic fall in their economic power (Brostrom, 2019). The rationale for women's participation in the labour market then became apparent. There was limited denial from anyone that women should work, albeit in teaching, nursing, and secretarial roles (Brostrom, 2019). The following World War II also saw many women actively participating in the military (Falconi et al.,

2020). This unlocked the pathway to women's active participation in economic and military activities. Then, due to a decline in the world population after the War, there was a need to 'refill' the Earth with new people. This led to the patriarchal baby-boomer campaign, creating the awareness that women should have many births to replace those that have been lost to the War (Bouk, 2018). This campaign ran in conflict with the women's participation in workplaces – working and procreating can sometimes be mutually exclusive (Wuestenenk and Begall, 2022). This was the major backdrop to the second wave of feminism.

*Theme three: women's liberation and cultural practices*

At the core of societal prejudices on women's sexuality is female genital mutilation (FGM) which constrains a woman's sexuality right from when she was a little child – there used to also be FGM cases involving female adolescents and young adults (Grachev et al., 2022). The call out of this improper act has led to shared reasoning in the contemporary world that FGM is all wrong and should be abolished completely (Yount et al., 2020) – it is a crime in elite societies in America, Europe and Asia. According to Dura et al. (2023), the propensity to become sexually active is higher among women with no history of FGM than in women with history of FGM. As a result, there is a large pool of (young) modern women who have unplanned pregnancies (Dura et al., 2023). This informed another feminist argument that women should have the rights to keep or abort pregnancies (Klausen, 2024). However, modern women clamouring for such rights have a tendency to face backlashes (even from women) in societies which are currently experiencing falling fertility rates (Klausen, 2024).

*Theme four: Women's protection and cultural practices*

During the feminist call out of around 2014-2017 (the Me Too movement), there were shocking revelations from millions of women who stated that they had faced sexual harassment, inappropriate touching, and offensive gestures from their male colleagues, acquaintances, and managers at their workplaces (Jaffe et al., 2021). This had been a long practice until women decided to voice out the sexual violence and threatening pressure they faced while relating to men (Maier, 2023). Some women reported that they were serially raped (Langen, 2024). This sexual violence often involves men with whom they have a work relationship, such as celebrities, CEOs, political leaders, and other figures who inappropriately believe that women are sexual objects that they can explore during work hours (Langen, 2024). The Me Too movement (or the most recent feminist wave) offered women who were dying in silence the opportunity to reveal the sexual atrocities that they might have experienced from men (Maier, 2023). Nevertheless, an ensuing dilemma for women on this is that some remained silent out of fear of losing their jobs – this was not uncommon among women who were breadwinners of their families (Zimmerman et al., 2024).

## **IV. Discussion Of Findings**

*Gender pay gap*

While women generally start their careers with a comparable wage rate to men, the gender pay gap develops and widens as both genders progress in their careers over the long term (Pew Research Centre, 2023). Barring the structural factors such as years of experience, level of education, skill set, and nature of work, an oft-cited non-structural reason for women collecting lower pay than men is that women take more leave days (due to maternity and child care) from work than men (Pew Research Centre, 2023). However, Harvard economist Claudia Goldin pioneered the research and evidence on the flawed gender gap and the sociological rationale why women should be fairly compensated for their contribution to human existence. Goldin separated facts from emotions to argue that women's contribution to societal continuity and prosperity is grossly undervalued in modern societies (Perrin, 2024). By paying women less and treating them as less-important workers, the contemporary society has been wrong in its judgment of women's contribution to social progress (Goldin, 2019; 2014).

In Goldin's arguments, the society needs labour to be productive and the labour is supplied from the pool of children who grow to become working adults (Goldin, 2021). When women take work leave to manage pregnancy, childbirth or child care, they are taking active position to ensure that future workers (today's newborns) are properly conceived, delivered or nurtured. "Where would the future workers emerge from if women remain at work without breaks just like men?" asked Goldin (2021). Yet, the patriarchal society sees women as contributing less to productivity than men. This flawed social construct lowers the value of women's contribution in the job market. A key outcome of Goldin's researches is that, if it is analysed with unbiased thinking, women deserve to be paid decently for their role in economic prosperity and social development (Goldin et al., 2020; Goldin, 2014). Their temporary exit from workplaces during pregnancy and childbirths is to supply children (future workers) to the society (Goldin, 2021; Goldin and Katz, 2018). This connotes that without the forbearance of women to carry the burdens of pregnancy and childbirth, society cannot exist indefinitely (Goldin, 2021). By extension, in ideal settings, women should be paid for every child they supply to society (Goldin, 2021).

The celebration of Goldin's work by the Nobel committee in October 2023 – she was the sole recipient of the prestigious award – confirmed the narrative that if feminism is discussed and understood without emotion, there would be more recognition of women's contribution to labour productivity and the development of society. This will create an objective background to closing the gender gap in the labour market. Perhaps Goldin's work inspired the US-based Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who often pushes the saying that if we all understand the women's contribution in society, "we should all be feminists" – the saying is the title of Adichie's book, which was published in 2014.

#### *Abortion rights*

The debate on women's rights on abortion has been unresolved, and this has generated social, economic, and political consequences in many countries (Lang, 2015) – the most recent is the US election. The comeback of Donald Trump as the US president-elect is an indication that Americans are not fully convinced to dislike anyone who challenges women's abortion rights. Of course, the feminists and their organisations campaigned in favour of Kamala Harris, who promised to uphold women's right to abortion (Sherman et al., 2024). "A pregnant woman should be able to decide whether abortion is good or bad for her," she said in her Presidential rally in Minnesota (Weissert et al., 2024). However, the re-emergence of Trump, whose campaign rhetoric included that women should be limited in abortion rights, might indicate that the US society remains somewhat patriarchal concerning whether women can decide to have kids or not (Shamin, 2024). While abortion rights are only one of the many campaign punchlines of the Republican and Democratic parties, it is hard to completely attribute the election victory of Trump to his clampdown on feminists' campaign on abortion rights.

Analysing the issue more critically, with falling birth rates in Western societies, the feminist idea of women's rights on abortion may be far from widely shared success anytime soon (Dench et al., 2024; Fernandez and Juif, 2023). This is because such success would imply that births would keep falling, subjecting human existence to demographic risks (Fernandez and Juif, 2023). Some political analysts and commentators on the 2024 US election have therefore maintained that campaigning for women's rights on abortion, in the face of falling birth rates, is a political miscalculation from the US Democratic Party and its presidential candidate Kamala Harris (see, for example, Tyson, 2024; Stanley, 2024). The conflict between women's rights on abortion and the cultural practice of women giving birth, therefore, puts the typical woman in a dilemma. While society wants women to commit to births to reverse the falling birth rates, typical women would be required to jettison their rights to keep or terminate pregnancies to meet the societal targets. This represents a dilemma for the women who fight for women's rights in modern societies.

A growing argument is that the fall in birth rates in developed societies is associated with the rise of homosexuality and transgender culture, most noticeably from the beginning of the 21st century (Fort et al., 2024; Larsen, 2023). This argument is popularised by societies (mostly in Africa and Asia) where same-sex relationship is legally disallowed (Larsen, 2023). In consequence, feminists in those societies who campaign for women's rights to have romantic relationships with fellow women are labelled as acting in deviance to the cultural practice, subjecting them to social backlash (Larsen, 2023). This makes it difficult for one to embrace feminism and uphold cultural practices in a patriarchal society with conservative judgment on women's rights on sexuality, and romantic relationships with men (Fort et al., 2024). Even in developed countries, there are clashes of interests among the so-called lovers of demography and those on the sides of women's rights. A notable American pushing the narrative that women's rights on fertility should be limited is Elon Musk, who owns the social media company X (formerly Twitter). His attack on women's freedom on X on 17 November 2024 read: "Instead of teaching fear of pregnancy, we should teach fear of childlessness," he posted (Musk, 2024). Arguably, this is a subtle way of implying that women unnecessarily have the fear of having a kid, which represents a clampdown on women who choose not to have a child. To be sure, Musk is currently the richest man in the world (Bloomberg, 2024) and has more than 205 million followers on X. This suggests that his anti-feminist views can potentially influence the thinking and behaviours of millions of men and women worldwide.

#### *Women as breadwinners*

From another perspective, the cultural practice in many societies wants women to work to support their household (Manchester et al., 2020). In heterosexual marriages, about 18% of households in Western countries (and 10% in developing countries) have the financial responsibilities resting on the working wives (Ferrari et al., 2024; Kowalewska and Vitali, 2024). At the same time, the societies currently require more couples to have a preference for kids (Dench et al., 2024). This is a marital decision that generally causes some working women to be temporarily out of the workplace to manage the process of conceiving and giving birth (Perrin, 2024). Yet, the procreating women face wage and other work-related discrimination just because they choose to give birth, to please themselves, and by extension, society. This is a gross injustice to such women (Goldin et al., 2024; Perrin, 2024; Ferrari et al., 2024). According to Gauci et al. (2023) and Hackett et al. (2024), the source of workplace discrimination that women experience remains inconceivable. Discrimination is a major factor pushing lots of

women into feminism (Gauci et al., 2023). As women fight for their right to fair wages and favourable working conditions, they are often met with masculine attacks, name-calling, and further discrimination at their workplaces (Hackett et al., 2024). Some women have their remuneration withheld, promotion delayed, or even experience summary dismissal from work (Hackett et al., 2024). This further fuels the waves of feminism in society.

By implication, the average working woman, who is exploring her fertility, is inundated with the pressure of meeting the performance indicators at their workplace and maintaining the well-being of their household (Hackett et al., 2024). There is a dilemma for the woman to decide whether to keep to the work demands or support their family (Torres et al., 2024; Koekemoer et al., 2023). On the one hand, the so-called career women sacrifice their home management to meet their work demands – this is common among educated women in developed countries or elite societies in developing countries (Torres et al., 2024). On this note, such women may be off home for many days or weeks to meet work demand while their husbands or partners stay at home to manage the children's wellbeing. On the other hand, some women stay off work altogether (or voluntarily resign from their jobs) to take care of their family – this is common among less-educated women in developing countries (Koekemoer et al., 2023).

Given these alternative implications, it becomes somewhat difficult for the new women to decide their own best interests. For married women who choose to work and then get pregnant, the fear of work-related discrimination often makes them to consider abortion (Dench et al., 2024). This is because, where masculine working environment is in place, the women are made to feel threatened by their pregnancies (Ferrari et al., 2024). In some cases, their work trips are rationed or work portfolios reduced, with a corresponding cut on their pay. This is a major factor making women in elite societies to vote for abortion whenever they have a voice (Torres et al., 2024). In the end, the patriarchal society frowns at falling birth rates while positioning women as incapable to decide whether to keep their pregnancies (Nallo and Koksai, 2023). And when women keep pregnancies, the society discriminates against them in the job market (Nallo and Koksai, 2023). This creates a perception of social injustice for women and widens the pool of feminism in society (Perrin, 2024). Again, Goldin (2023, 2021) was clear in reminding everyone that there is no objective reason for the occurrence of the gender pay gap in society.

However, the Western culture that permits women to be the household breadwinner has not spread in most other less-developed African and Asian societies (Saad et al., 2022; Akanle and Nwaobiala, 2020; Bornstein et al., 2016). In this latter case, it is common for a marriage to break down because the wife earns more than the husband (Saad et al., 2022). This tells that the husband vehemently acts to stifle his wife's potential to earn more. This may occur by preventing her from receiving further education, discouraging her from applying for high-paying jobs, controlling the kind of business she can do, etc (Shah, 2023). The common cliché is that if the husband does not stay '5 steps' ahead of his wife, he is bound to lose his masculine authority over her (Akanle and Nwaobiala, 2020). For example, the extreme case of this overt display of masculine ego is common in Northern Nigeria, where women are prevented from receiving any form of education (Adeyemi et al., 2023). Over there, the young girl's parents erroneously believe that she does not need education because her existence is simply for childbirth and child care (Adeyemi et al., 2023). Thus, young girls in Northern Nigeria get married very early, before reaching 20: about 44% get married before they reach 18 (Save the Children International, 2021). In another sense, being the breadwinner of the family implies foregoing having family time to spend with the children (Ene-Obong et al., 2018). While the feminist war on gender equality concerning women participation in job market has been markedly won in advanced countries, the cultural practice in developing countries is still displeased with the wife working while the husband takes care of the home (Shah et al., 2024; Adeyemi et al., 2023; Akanle and Nwaobiala, 2020). The general perception is that home management is a woman's role, and a family with such role reversal is unsparingly condemned by society (Adeyemi et al., 2023). Thus, feminist groups in low-income countries championing the rights of women to contribute to family income may experience a dilemma when their cause meets cultural rejection from the people.

#### *Women and education*

Education of the girl child has also received attention in recent times. In some societies, particularly in low-income countries, before this period, the education of the girl child was considered optional while it was compulsory for the boy child (Psaki et al., 2022). In the reasoning of the society leaders, a girl's fertility is delayed or destroyed if she stays long in school (Psaki et al., 2022). For example, in some societies in sub-Saharan Africa, the women's quest to have unlimited access to education clashes with the cultural practice that requires them to have uncontrolled, early births (Evans et al., 2024). In many cultural settings in sub-Saharan Africa, a woman without a child faces social stigma and undue disadvantage in social gatherings (Evans et al., 2024). This makes women in such societies consider having children to uphold the cultural practice (Evans et al., 2024). Nonetheless, by staying longer in school (for example by attaining university education), most educated women are noted to get married late and may struggle to have children: women have less biological chances to conceive and give births as they are closer to the upper end of their child-bearing age (Kim, 2023; Impicciatore and Tomatis, 2020).

This raises concerns of whether the expected benefits of higher education is socially healthy for women who live in birth-conscious societies (Kim, 2023).

Given that about 23% of young women in less-developed countries (LCD) are educated beyond secondary school while the rate is 67% for women in advanced countries (World Bank, 2024), it is noted that the average fertility rate of women in LCD is at least three times that of women in developing societies (Roser, 2024). The simultaneous occurrence of women's low level of education and high birth rates in LCDs suggests that there is a trade-off between women's education and their fertility. In more liberalised societies such as Canada, the US and Western Europe, women have the liberty to make the personal decision of having zero demand for kids without social ridicule (Brini, 2020). With the social implications for no-child couples relaxed in those societies, it can be said that gender equality and individuality have been moderately achieved in those societies (Brini, 2020). It is worth noting that the falling birth rates in these liberalised societies is associated with current, developing calls for couples to reconsider their no-child lifestyles (Bhattacharjee et al., 2024).

## V. Conclusive Summary

In conclusion, from the foregoing, it is clear that lending a voice in a feminist campaign has social implications for women. As modern societies are organised with certain prejudices against women, a feminist woman is bound to face a dilemma between fighting for women's causes and upholding cultural practices. This is because while most cultural practices are primarily designed to place women under the men's authority, feminism is the ideological campaign to question such practices. This makes feminist campaigns to succeed only if the women are ready to get themselves rid of the patriarchal cultural practices they face. The rights to vote, to work, to dress, to participate in politics, etc are examples of feminist campaigns which were won because cultural practices were challenged. Even when the society welcomes a feminist demand, there is an implicit cultural practice (to the advantage of men) which the embrace was meant to preserve. For example, the women's right to work was tactically welcomed in order to elevate the household (men's) income. In a heterogeneous setting where the woman does not share her income with her husband, the society labels the behaviour as questioning the authority of the man. In many cases, this may kick-start the rounds of breakdown of the family. This tells that the society that gives women the freedom to work does not give them the freedom to spend their money the way they like. This may perhaps explain why independent women are not socially welcomed in some African and Asian societies. A key lesson for feminists is that whenever they run a successful campaign, they should be on the lookout for hidden cultural practice(s) which the success may conflict with. This can help plan a counterattack when a cultural practice is manifested to overshadow a won battle.

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