



The Truth About Feminism: The Unaligned Targeted Audiences of White and African American Feminists

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Abstract. Human rights would always be an important issue across the globe, and feminism is one of the most significant branches of human rights that people need to focus on. Although feminism usually tackles on the specific rights that women should have in general, it was different for feminists of different ethnicities. However, this specific problem within feminism was never really fully discussed. Hence in this paper, the root causes of the differences in different ethnicities' feminism would be analyzed, in order to truly understand what should be achieved in future years in order to bring the branches of feminism back together, and help the process of fighting for women's rights more efficient and unified. Using different primary and secondary sources from both African American and white feminists, both perspectives of ethnically different feminists shall be discussed, and the differences and how those differences were created would be further elaborated later on. As a main conclusion of the paper, the causes of those said differences would be the different groups of people that feminists of different ethnicities fought for.

Keywords: Feminism · Ethnicity differences · Human rights

1 Introduction

Feminism is always part of an ongoing fight for women to earn their deserved individual rights, ever since late nineteenth centuries until the modern society. From the very beginning, where feminists have advocated for rights to vote and rights to decide for issues that might influence their entire lives, to the modern world where feminists have continued to fight for newer and more varied rights for women after their original suffrage goals were fulfilled. For example in the more recent news as to the creation of this paper, different states in the U.S. were trying to ban abortion rights for women, especially since the Supreme Court have shown signs of taking down the *Roe v. Wade* case. [1] The case was an important landmark in the entire feminism history for the U.S., because provided women the rights for abortion. If this case was taken down by the Supreme Court, then most states would then ban abortion since there were nothing else to back women up. Hence, feminists have started to protest again for their own rights. However, the differences between modern and past feminists' advocated topics could be seen from

this piece of news, since it would show how much women's ideologies have progressed throughout the course of history, which would be perfectly reflected through the things they were asking for themselves. Although feminism notions were not as widespread in time periods that were even earlier from the time periods that have been mentioned at the beginning, women have always attempted to advocate for themselves and for other fellow women in different forms. From different public speeches and essays to forming various organizations and having protests, feminism has seeped into everyone's lives through feminists' constant effort of trying to have feminism ideologies being introduced and imprinted into everyone's lives, and that there were even different types of feminism being branched off from the original feminism as time went on. However, as there were many researches being done on feminism and its general causes and effects, there was one factor that was commonly failed to be considered by many, which was the inherent differences of feminism between different groups of people. In general, feminists have the common goal of fighting for various rights of women and overall gender equity, such as the right to get equal education, the right to have equal pay, and etc. But would every single aspect of feminism be the same for every women on the planet? Of course not — different women have different backgrounds, different societal influences, different living environment, and etc. All of those differences would potentially shift the entire focus on feminism by those women that have went through different experiences in life. Therefore, in order to focus on how those differences among different groups of women were created, this paper would be specifically be focusing on the ethnical aspect, and also on the differences between African American feminists and white feminists as the most notable examples. As an overview of the general structure for the essay, the African American feminism and white feminism shall be discussed separately in different paragraphs, and another paragraph would be used to analyze how those two feminisms are different and what have caused them to be different. In the conclusions, extra thoughts and proposals in regards to resolving those differences among feminism would be provided. Now here's the important question: but why is this issue of differences between different kinds of feminism important? There are several reasons. First of all, by studying feminism in different perspectives, especially in relations to aspects of ethnicities, we would better understand feminism's true notions and also how feminism would exist in various forms throughout history. Second, through studying feminism of different ethnicities, the underlying racism would also be analyzed at the same time since feminism would not be fully brought out unless everyone has the same basic civil rights first. Without equal civil rights, feminism would never be the same for all women, in which completely overturned the actual goal of feminism. Also, it would show the correlations between different areas of human rights, and connecting those different areas together would result in a deeper understanding of each area separately. Lastly, through studying about the differences in feminism, the true notion of making feminism equal for every women would also be encouraged through evidences. It could be inferred that when civil rights are fought to be the same for everyone, why should feminism be different? Therefore, with the context aforementioned in mind, the topic that shall be discussed in this essay is the differences between African American feminism and white feminism and what would have been the root cause to these differences. In which an answer shall also be provided, which is that the root cause to all of those said differences would be

the fact that different feminists of different ethnical groups were fighting for targeted populations of different sizes.

1.1 Source Introduction

Before further elaboration of the topics aforementioned, some of the major sources that would be used and referenced throughout the entire paper shall be introduced. As a note, the specific time period that the essay would be focused on is mainly surrounding the 20th century, therefore most of the sources that would be used are in or close to that time period. However, newer sources shall be used as well, in order to show the progressions and changes within the feminism ideologies. First, the book *Between the World and Me* will be used. This book was written by the African American author Ta-Nehisi Coates in 2015, and although he was not a significant figure in feminism, the book would be used in order to explain further upon civil rights for African Americans in general, and used to relate to human rights ideologies to the African American feminism that would be introduced later in the paragraph. The book itself, however, was about the author Coates' perspective on racism and his opinions on the racial-related incidents that have happened in his time in the form of letters to his son. More information about the book's content and my opinion on said content would be further elaborated in the paper. Second, the Combahee River Collective Statement from 1977 will be used. It was written by the Combahee River Collective, and it was composed of lesbian Black feminists that was one of the most significant group that have fought for African American feminism. In the statement, they have talked about their definition of what feminism meant to African Americans, and also their ultimate goals that they wanted to achieve for African American women. Among the text, there were also many analyzations of the collective upon the living environment for African Americans as well, and more about the said information shall be discussed in the paper. [2] Third, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan was used in order to elaborate upon the perspective of white feminism. In the book, Friedan have described the historical progression of white feminism, and it was also one of the most notable pieces of feminism notions. This piece would support the paper's further discussion about white feminism. Fourth, *Women's Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice* by Margaret A. McLaren published in 2019 was also used in order to talk more about white feminism. In this book, McLaren discussed about one of the perspectives about how feminism was different for different groups of people, similar to this essay. However, she believed that it was more about the societal and economical aspect that made feminism different for everyone, mainly due to the differences in ideologies that different societal and economical experiences of people would cause. [3] This point would also be further elaborated in this essay, as it serves as one of the foundational arguments of the paper. Lastly, other minor sources would be used throughout the essay, in order to elaborate and support a basis for argument fragments. For example, news about feminism and other human rights issues would be used and referenced to in the paper, in order to. It is to be noted that similar arguments have been proposed prior to the creation of the essay, however this paper would elaborate upon more points on the same topic, and also based upon the said pre-existing arguments.

2 African American Feminism Elaboration

First, the argument of African American feminism being more about group rights shall be discussed. Especially in the past, the basis for African Americans to not have their deserved civil rights would be due to the slavery. In several notable periods such as the Great Explorations era and the Industrial Revolution periods, African Americans were basically used as slaves, which slowly built up to the way that they are getting treated nowadays. Even through the decades of African Americans advocating for their own rights, it is still hard for them to not be oppressed in everyday life. Namely from the Jim Crow Laws to frequent usages of racial slurs in classrooms in daily life, it is obvious to infer that civil rights were not served for African Americans. [4] In the book *Between the World and Me*, the author expanded upon that notion through his own words, giving multiple examples of incidents related to African Americans and how the persecutors were being begged for lighter punishment, an example that Coates provided was that “I remember Dr. Mable Jones, Prince’s mother, speaking of her son’s death as a call to move from her comfortable suburban life into activism. I heard several people ask for forgiveness for the officer who’d shot Prince Jones down”. [5] In the quote, Prince Jones was an African American man that was shot in the year 2000 by a white police officer. The mention of the Jones’ death helped Coates develop his argument further, as to why he believed racism would never, or at least extremely difficult to overcome, especially with the mentality of the majority that did not pity the victim. He also talked about how the collective fates of African Americans were already laid out by white people, where no one could “save them (African Americans) from the mark of plunder and the gravity of our particular world”. [6] In the quote, the plunder and the gravity was referring to the approaching danger of white people, which the author was trying to warn his son about. Similar concepts of Coates’ argument were also exhibited in African American feminism. In the Combahee River Collective Statement, the Combahee River Collective were discussing about their definition of African American feminism, in which the feminists believed that it was “the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face”. [7] This representation of not only African American women but also all other women have shown how they cared about the rights of women as a whole, and that although not stated directly, the incoming oppression towards women of color would only be combatted if those women have worked together. It was also included in the text about how they were persecuted by both white and African American communities, despite the fact that the feminists fought for both African American women and the men as well. [7] This point also correlates back to Coates’ argument as aforementioned: racism would be hard to resolve with people’s negative mentality. Especially in the feminists’ case, as they have explicitly stated that they have faced various oppression from different groups of people in the society, including people of their own ethnicities. Those oppression made African American feminism a very hard cause to fully be brought out. As the arguments have connections, it would only prove even further the fact that African American feminism, or African American civil rights in general, would only be easier to resolve when people cared more about the rights of the group. Without the entire group’s rights being brought out, the specific individual cases would never be resolved as there would still be opposing voices. Hence, from here, it is very obviously to see how African Americans have fought

for the collective rights of the entire ethnicity in general. But it wouldn't be true to say that it was not possible for the African American feminists to resolve the rights of an immense group, as the way that these words were put into actions has many examples as well. As an example, one of the creators of the Combahee River Collective, Harriet Tubman, has helped many slaves with other famous women (such as Sarah Fosssett) to escape from slave states through the famous Underground Railroad into safer regions. [8] Examples like this could show the actual impacts of how African American feminists (and human right activists in general) were indeed fighting for the rights of collective group, and prove that it was not impossible for the goal of bringing out group rights to be accomplished. But here's the question — why did the feminists think and act like this? This is mainly due to the historical background of African Americans in general. Many significant examples, like during the Jim Crow Laws period in the U.S. during the 20th century, have all shown how the African Americans were persecuted upon in extreme ways, along with the fact that notions like Abolitionism only prevailed because it was related to other factors such as politics among different European countries and the suppression of violence. [9] All of this would condense down to the major theme of racism of the entire group of African Americans, in which eventually affected the ideologies of the African American feminists. This point would be elaborated multiple times, but since historically speaking the feminists had to save their own lives first from being killed first, they would have no intentions of having thoughts about individualism and self-growth yet, which would only come later when true freedom is achieved for all African Americans, hence the feminists' ultimate goal.

2.1 White Feminism Elaboration

Now, the focus shall be shifted to the white feminists. From the famous Seneca Falls Convention to the "We Can Do It" poster, white feminism has always brought people the most iconic symbolisms to remember. The most notable aspect of those symbolisms would be how they were all focused more on calling upon women to emphasize on their own power and to achieve better things for themselves and for others around them, even outside of their own households. This aspect could be shown in various sources; in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan mainly talked about how women in the 50s overly embraced the "housewife" life style, and how they should have been "respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world", thus women's lives would not feel "empty" and "incomplete". She also talked about how women should have the freedom to make choices that would make themselves happy, instead of for anyone else. [10] From the source, it would be clear to see that Friedan's emphasis on women's (especially women of the 50s in the context of the source) transition from the housewife to an independent person was a clear representation of what white feminists were mainly aiming for, in relations to the goals of the feminism. The changes of individualism was the most notable aspect of feminism, in order to break free from the typical stereotypes upon how women should "stay in the kitchen" and support the family only, instead of treating women like their own human beings. Similar points were shown in different sources as well, as the author Wini Breines wrote about the way that white women were being persecuted in various ways in the entire society, and how those persecutions eventually moulded those white women to be concerned with not only feminism but also the "politics of inequality,

racism, exploitation, and imperialism". [11] Those white feminists started to notice far more beyond feminism itself, and wanted to bring out the individualistic growth for everyone. But why would the white feminists focus more upon this individualism? In *Women's Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice*, McLaren argued that white feminism focused more about "civil and political rights rather than the social and economic rights", and that "the stark inequality of wealth between industrialized countries in the global North and poorer countries in the global South" reflects the "privilege of those who can leave aside questions of basic survival". [3] McLaren explicitly stated how she believed that white feminism focused more on individualism because of their economic situation, and that this economic and societal situation was also what made the white feminism distinct from feminism of different ethnical groups. The main cause for the differences in economies between white people and people of color would be the Industrial Revolution, which would also be a cause of racism as aforementioned. This specific time period has made white people extremely rich before the notions of feminism have even become widespread, and thus formed a large economic gap between different countries and different racial groups already. [12] During the same period, cultures, economies, and society grew rapidly for the white people, therefore laid a firm basis for white women to develop their thoughts. Also, through looking at the Industrial Revolution, it would be reasonable to infer that white feminists would generally live out a more safe and fulfilled life compared to African American feminists, and here is what furthered the differences between their thoughts. There is a psychological concept of hierarchy of needs, developed by the American humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow, in which a pyramid was used to demonstrate on how people's purposes in life change because of fulfillments of different physical and mental factors. In the pyramid, the lowest layers would be for people to fulfill their physiological and safety needs (i.e. security and food) in order to have self-actualization. There are also other layers within the pyramid, such as friendship and love, but the most important part of the concept was that self-actualization was above everything else. Without one single factor from the lower layers, the top layer would be difficult to achieve. [13] In the case of African American women, most of them did not even have their physiological needs fulfilled due to the surrounding racism, hence they would be more focused upon rights for the entire group, since they did not achieve the full on self-actualization part yet. Vice versa, since white women already have fulfilled their basic needs, due to the development of their own countries, they would have been able to move on to higher levels along the hierarchy of needs and start focusing on things like individualism. However, it is not to say that white women did not entirely avoid themselves from oppression. Along the way of history, white women have also faced oppression from white men, which inherently built up the need for white feminism, and also the creation of stereotypes such as women having to be the "housewife" without any other choices to become, in which this point was also mentioned before in the paragraph. But when compared to African American feminists, more oppression would go to that group of women, therefore the gap between the goals of the two groups of feminists was further enlarged. Thus, it could be concluded that white feminists were more focused upon the rights of the individual, for the reason that they were more physiologically-fulfilled in comparison to African American feminists.

2.2 Comparison Analyzation

Now it comes down to the final question: through acknowledging the fact that the feminists of the two different racial groups have different targeted population, how would this difference cause feminism itself to become different? For this question, the answer would be that the different goals would lead to different foci on feminism, in which diverges the actual accumulated growth of feminism. In The Combahee River Collective Statement, the feminists have talked about how they believed that the social costs for fighting for feminism with the identity of being African Americans were “comparatively much higher than for white women”, which especially was about how white feminists would not be persecuted as harshly even if they were all fighting for women’s rights, since “which [solidarity issues] white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors”. [7] This quote have also shown the Collective’s opinion on white feminists, which they believed that white feminists would go through an easier way to fight for feminism since there weren’t as much oppression. Although the similar point was exhibited in earlier paragraphs, when the feminists talked about how they were persecuted by both African Americans and white people through being feminists, the source also talked about the “social cost”. The social cost as a type of cost itself for African American feminists to have to spend in order to fight for the feminism cause was enough for most people to refrain from touching the topic of feminism. Hence, the overall progression of African American feminism would be entirely hindered due to the negative social responses, in which caused feminism itself to be different for African American feminism along with the differences in the targeted population as aforementioned. When compared to white feminists, the progress of fighting for feminism became comparatively easier for those feminists, because they would not have to have as severe of a social cost for them to fight for their own rights. However, this is not to degrade upon any groups’ effort, as those differences in the progress of fighting for feminism did not separate the ultimate goal for all feminists to fight for more rights for women, but rather only diverged the way that feminism would go off for feminists of different racial groups. Another point would be that, since the African American feminism was also developed under the foundations and frameworks of Abolitionist movements, the type of feminism itself became inherently different from white feminism, which did not need to focus too much on the general civil rights. As aforementioned, the African American feminists had to deal with people’s negative mentality towards African Americans while fighting for feminism. This matched with general African American’s ideologies, proving that the African Americans needed to go through the same system in order to resolve the different civil rights issues. Therefore, it would be reasonable to infer that the African American feminists had to deal with general human rights issues for the racial group in general regardless of their ultimate cause. In which this aspect was way different from the white feminists, as they didn’t need to go through the same process. Thus, the different goals of feminism have formed under the social structure and overall societal status quo overtime, and have led to the differences within the overall feminism itself. This divergence of feminism would not support the ultimate cause. Even if the African American feminists have successfully resolved the right for the entire group someday in the future, the next step for them to do would be to fight for the same causes of the white feminists, which would be the individual rights

and self-growth. Here, when the two groups of feminists have finally started to fight for the same thing, it would already be way less efficient in comparison to if the two groups never diverged from the same branch in the very first place. However, since the divergence has already happened due to inevitable historical reasons, it would be critical for the feminists to find a solution towards the differences between their ideologies. In the meantime, to keep fighting for feminism would be the best thing to do.

3 Conclusion

As a conclusion, the essay has discussed separately about both the African American and white feminism, how the two different groups of feminists are focusing on different targeted audiences, and also analyzed the reason behind why there were different targeted audiences for the two groups. The result for African American feminists was that those women's mind sets were greatly affected by the racist environment that they were living in, not only in the past but in the present as well, and therefore they would generally consider more about the benefit of African American women (and African American people) as a whole. Those feminists do not want more harm for the entire ethnical group, therefore when they are advocating for feminism, they would have greater tendency towards advocating for group rights instead of solely focusing on individual rights. At the same time, the African American feminists themselves have gone through great oppression, as aforementioned with the Combahee River Collective, and that they would always be in fear of the safety of themselves, therefore provided with another reason for them to focus more on the rights of the group. Since their own safety was not ensured, it would be difficult for the African American feminists to focus on their own intellectual growth first. On the other hand with white feminists, they would not need to face as much oppression as African American feminists did, therefore they were more focused on individual intellectual growth. They believed more in the growth of a woman individually, namely through becoming more independent in life and becoming stronger for herself. As aforementioned in Friedan's book, the same perspective could be seen. At the same time, those women would usually have their living situations being more secured in comparison to African American feminists, which would result in them not being worried too much about daily life and have more time to consider about issues such as individualism. Hence, with those points combined together, white feminists became more focused upon individual rights, instead of group rights. Those differences in the targeted population that those feminists of the two different ethnicities are trying to achieve, along with the major issue of racism, eventually led to the divergence of the feminism branches. When a group of feminists (the African American feminists) are fighting for the rights of an entire group, while the other group of feminists (white feminists) are fighting for individual rights, the differences would eventually prevail, hence making the fight for feminism become less efficient. Hence, through studying further about the differences between different ethnical feminists, feminism would be further developed at the same time. In order to unified the two groups of feminism back, the aspect of human rights must be unified first in order for further developments in different civil rights movements, such as feminism in this case. However, a question that should be reflecting upon by all is that, how those said civil rights issue could be

resolved as time goes on, and if so, what would happen to human rights generally in the future?

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