**[Excerpt from:](https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism)**

**Four Waves of Feminism**

**By**

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But the times are changing, and a fourth wave is in the air. A few months ago, a high school student approached one of the staff of the [Center for Gender Equity](https://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/centers/center-gender-equity) at Pacific University and revealed in a somewhat confessional tone, “I think I’m a feminist!” It was like she was coming out of the closet. Well, perhaps that is the way to view the fourth wave of feminism.

The aims of the second feminist movement were never cemented to the extent that they could survive the complacency of third wavers.  The fourth wave of feminism is emerging because (mostly) young women and men realize that the third wave is either overly optimistic or hampered by blinders. Feminism is now moving from the academy and back into the realm of public discourse. Issues that were central to the earliest phases of the women’s movement are receiving national and international attention by mainstream press and politicians:  problems like sexual abuse, rape, violence against women, unequal pay, slut-shaming, the pressure on women to conform to a single and unrealistic body-type and the realization that gains in female representation in politics and business, for example, are very slight. It is no longer considered “extreme,” nor is it considered the purview of rarified intellectuals to talk about societal abuse of women, rape on college campus, Title IX, homo and transphobia, unfair pay and work conditions, and the fact that the US has one of the worst records for legally-mandated parental leave and maternity benefits in the world.

Some people who wish to ride this new fourth wave have trouble with the word “feminism,” not just because of its older connotations of radicalism, but because the word feels like it is underpinned by assumptions of a gender binary and an exclusionary subtext: “for women only.” Many fourth wavers who are completely on-board with the movement’s tenants find the term “feminism” sticking in their craws and worry that it is hard to get their message out with a label that raises hackles for a broader audience. Yet the word is winning the day.  The generation now coming of age sees that we face serious problems because of the way society genders and is gendered, and we need a strong “in-your-face” word to combat those problems. Feminism no longer just refers to the struggles of women; it is a clarion call for gender equity.

The emerging fourth wavers are not just reincarnations of their second wave grandmothers; they bring to the discussion important perspectives taught by third wave feminism.  They speak in terms of intersectionality whereby women’s suppression can only fully be understood in a context of the marginalization of other groups and genders—feminism is part of a larger consciousness of oppression along with racism, ageism, classism, abelism, and sexual orientation (no “ism” to go with that).  Among the third wave’s bequests is the importance of inclusion, an acceptance of the sexualized human body as non-threatening, and the role the internet can play in gender-bending and leveling hierarchies.  Part of the reason a fourth wave can emerge is because these millennials’ articulation of themselves as “feminists” is their own: not a hand-me-down from grandma. The beauty of the fourth wave is that there is a place in it for all –together. The academic and theoretical apparatus is extensive and well-honed in the academy, ready to support a new broad-based activism in the home, in the workplace, in the sphere of social media, and in the streets.

At this point we are still not sure how feminism will mutate.  Will the fourth wave fully materialize and in what direction?  There have always been many feminisms in the movement, not just one ideology, and there have always been tensions, points and counter-points. The political, social and intellectual feminist movements have always been chaotic, multivalenced, and disconcerting; and let's hope they continue to be so; it's a sign that they are thriving.