



# ANTIFEMINISM: CONCEPTS AND DIMENSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*Antifeminism can be defined as opposition to some or all forms of feminism. This opposition has taking various forms across time and cultures. For example, antifeminists in the late 19th century and early 20th century opposed women's suffrage. Antifeminists in the late 20th century in the United States opposed the Equal Rights Amendment. Sociologist Michael Flood gives his insights that an antifeminist ideology rejects at least one of the following general principles of feminism: Those social arrangements among men and women are neither natural nor divinely determined. Those social arrangements among men and women favor men. That there are collective actions that can and should be taken to transform these arrangements into more just and equitable arrangements, such as those in the timelines of woman's suffrage and other rights. (21-22) Canadian sociologists Melissa Blais and Francis Dupuis-Déri write that antifeminist thought has primarily taken the form of an extreme version of masculinity, in which "men are in crisis because of the feminization of society.*

**Key Words:** Antifeminism, Masculinism, Motherhood, Feminism

## INTRODUCTION

Antifeminism can be defined as opposition to some or all forms of feminism. This opposition has taking various forms across time and cultures. For example, antifeminists in the late 19th century and early 20th century opposed women's suffrage. Antifeminists in the late 20th century in the United States opposed the Equal Rights Amendment. Sociologist Michael Flood gives his insights that an antifeminist ideology rejects at least one of the following general principles of feminism:

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Men's studies scholar Michael Kimmel defines antifeminism as "the opposition to women's equality". He says that antifeminists oppose "women's entry into the public sphere, the re-organization of the private sphere, women's control of their bodies, and women's rights generally." Kimmel further writes that antifeminist argumentation relies on "religious and cultural norms" while proponents of antifeminism advance their cause as a means of "'saving' masculinity from pollution and invasion". He argues that antifeminists consider the "traditional gender division of labor as natural and inevitable, perhaps also divinely sanctioned."(35-37)

Some antifeminists view feminism as a denial of innate differences between the genders, and an attempt to reprogram people against their biological tendencies. Antifeminists also frequently argue that feminism, despite claiming to espouse equality, ignores rights issues unique to men. Some believe that the feminist movement has achieved its aims and now seeks higher status for women than for men via special rights and exemptions, such as female-only scholarships, affirmative action, and gender quotas.

Some antifeminists have argued that feminism has resulted in changes to society's previous norms relating to sexuality, which they see as detrimental to traditional values or conservative religious beliefs. For example, the ubiquity of casual sex and the decline of marriage are mentioned as negative consequences of feminism. Some of these traditionalists oppose women's entry into the workforce, political office, and the voting process, as well as the lessening of male authority in families. Antifeminists argue that a change of women's roles is a destructive force that endangers the family, or is contrary to religious morals. For example, Paul Gottfried maintains that the change of women's roles "has been a social disaster that continues to take its toll on the family" and contributed to a "descent by increasingly disconnected individuals into social chaos".



In the 19th century, one of the major focal points of antifeminism was opposition to women's suffrage, which began as a grassroots movement in 1848 and spanned for 72 years. Opponents of women's entry into institutions of higher learning argued that education was too great a physical burden on women. In *Sex in Education: or, a Fair Chance for the Girls* (1873), Harvard professor Edward Clarke predicted that if women went to college, their brains would grow bigger and heavier, and their wombs would atrophy. (29) Other antifeminists opposed women's entry into the labor force, their right to join unions, to sit on juries, or to obtain birth control and control of their sexuality. (55)

The pro-family movement appeared in the late 19th century, by about 1870. This movement was intended to halt the rising divorce rate and reinforce traditional family values. The National League for the Protection of the Family, formerly known as the Divorce Reform League, took over the movement in 1881. (501) Samuel Dike was one of the founders of the League, and was considered an early expert on divorce. Through his efforts, the League garnered attention from pro-family advocates. It underwent a shift from fighting against divorce to promoting marriage and traditional family. [27] Speaking on behalf of the League in an 1887 address to the Evangelical Alliance Conference, Samuel Dike described the ideal family as having "one man and one woman, united in wedlock, together with their children". (528) This movement built the foundation for many pro-family arguments in contemporary antifeminism.

Women's suffrage was achieved in 1920, and early 20th century antifeminism was primarily focused on fighting this. Suffragists scoffed at antisuffragists. Anna Howard Shaw, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) from 1904 to 1915, presumed, perhaps unfairly, that the antisuffragists were merely working under the influence of male forces. Later historians tended to dismiss antisuffragists as subscribing to the model of domestic idealism, that a woman's place is in the home. This undermines and belittles the true power and numbers behind the antisuffrage movement, which was primarily led by women themselves. Arguments employed by antisuffragists at the turn of the century had less to do with a woman's place in the home as much as it had to do with a woman's proper place in the public realm. In fact, leaders of the movement often encouraged other women to leave the home and participate in society. What they opposed was women participating in the political sphere.

Jerome Himmelstein identified two main theories about the appeal of antifeminism and its role in opposition to the ERA. One theory is that it was a clash between upper-class liberal voters and the older, more conservative lower-class rural voters who often serve as the center for right-wing movements; in other words, this theory identifies particular social classes as more inherently friendly to antifeminism. Another theory holds that women who feel



vulnerable and dependent on men are likely to oppose anything that threatens that tenuous stability; under this view, while educated, independent career women may support feminism, housewives who lack such resources are more drawn to antifeminism. Himmelstein, however, says both views are at least partially wrong, arguing that the primary dividing line between feminists and antifeminists is cultural rather than stemming from differences in economic and social status.(15) There are, in fact, similarities between income between activists on both sides of the ERA debate. As it turned out, the most indicative factors when predicting ERA position, especially among women, were race, marital status, age, and education.(50) ERA opposition was much higher among white, married, older, and less educated citizens.[36] Women who opposed the ERA tended to fit characteristics consistent with the Religious Right.

Abortion remains one of the most controversial topics in the United States. Roe v. Wade was passed in 1973, and abortion was utilized by many antifeminists to rally supporters. Antiabortion views helped further several right-wing movements, including explicit antifeminism, and helped right-wing politicians rise to power. Antiabortion writings, as well as conservative commentary in the late 20th century criticized the selfishness and self-centeredness of the feminist movement regarding abortions.

Founded in the U.S. by Phyllis Schlafly in 1972, Stop ERA, now known as "Eagle Forum", lobbied successfully to block the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in the U.S. It was also Schlafly who forged links between Stop ERA and other conservative organizations, as well as single-issue groups against abortion, pornography, gun control, and unions. By integrating Stop ERA with the thus-dubbed "new right", she was able to leverage a wider range of technological, organizational and political resources, successfully targeting pro-feminist candidates for defeat.

The Concerned Women of America (CWA) are also an antifeminist organization. Like other conservative women's groups, they oppose abortion and same-sex marriage and make appeals for maternalism and biological differences between women and men.

The Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is another antifeminist, conservative, women-oriented group. It's younger and less established than the CWA, though the two organizations are often discussed in relation to each other. It was founded to take on the old feminist establishment. Both of these organizations pride themselves on rallying women who do not identify with feminist rhetoric together. These organizations frame themselves as being by women, for women, in order to fight the idea that feminism is the only women-oriented ideology. These organizations chastise feminists for presuming to universally speak for all



women. The IWF claims to be "the voice of reasonable women with important ideas who embrace common sense over divisive ideology". (331)

According to Amherst College sociology professor Jerome L. Himmelstein, antifeminism is rooted in social stigmas against feminism and is thus a purely reactionary movement. Himmelstein identifies two prevailing theories that seek to explain the origins of antifeminism: the first theory, proposed by Himmelstein, is that conservative opposition in the abortion and Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) debates has created a climate of hostility toward the entire feminist movement. The second theory Himmelstein identifies states that the female antifeminists who lead the movement are largely married, low education, and low personal income women who embody the "insecure housewife scenario" and seek to perpetuate their own situation in which women depend on men for fiscal support. However, numerous studies have failed to correlate the aforementioned demographic factors with support for antifeminism, and only religiosity correlates positively with antifeminist alignment. Thus, Himmelstein concludes that antifeminism is a conservative religious reaction against the progress of modern feminism.

Authors Janet Saltzman Chafetz and Anthony Gary Dworkin, writing for Gender and Society, argue that the organizations most likely to formally organize against feminism are religious. This is because women's movements may demand access to male-dominated positions within the religious sector, like the clergy, and women's movements threaten male-oriented values of some religions. The more successful a feminist movement is in challenging the authority of male-dominated groups, the more these groups will organize a countermovement.

University of Illinois at Chicago sociology professor Danielle Giffort argues that the stigma against feminism created by antifeminists has resulted in organizations that practice "implicit feminism", which she defines as the "strategy practiced by feminist activists within organizations that are operating in an anti- and post-feminist environment in which they conceal feminist identities and ideas while emphasizing the more socially acceptable angles of their efforts".(569) Due to the stigma against feminism, some activists, such as those involved with Girls Rock, may take the principles of feminism as a foundation of thought and teach girls and women independence and self-reliance without explicitly labeling it with the stigmatized brand of feminism. Thus, most women continue to practice feminism in terms of seeking equality and independence for women, yet avoid the label.

Antifeminism might be motivated by the belief that feminist theories of patriarchy and disadvantages suffered by women in society are incorrect or exaggerated; that feminism as a movement encourages misandry and results in harm or oppression of men; or driven by general opposition towards women's rights.



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