

What the anti-woke backlash against liberal feminism misses about causes like the gender pay gap

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This week, thousands of women across [Iceland](#) went on strike to demand greater gender equality. That's right, Iceland: the country that has [ranked highest](#) in the world for gender equality for the past 14 years in a row.

So even in places such as Iceland that have focused on narrowing the [gender pay gap](#), [women](#) are still concerned about how housework and caregiving falls on their shoulders, is undervalued in society and impacts their careers.

Indeed, this is [Iceland's seventh](#) kvennavekfall ([women's strike](#)). The first, in 1975, saw [90% of the country's women](#) stop working, cleaning and minding the kids to [draw attention to gender inequality](#).

The country passed a law guaranteeing equal rights the following year, but the gender pay gap [still stands at about 10%](#).

My [research](#) explores how sex and parenthood can result in wage gaps, among other outcomes. This is not just a simple comparison of male and female earnings; it's symptomatic of wider societal structures in which women often end up poorer than men.

But the topic of gender pay gaps has increasingly been the subject of skepticism. I've recently heard it described as "[a radical leftist lie](#)," "[a crazy thing to argue](#)," and not to mention "[a myth](#)." I try not to take it personally.

Feminists and feminism have always been [the subject of ridicule](#), blamed for everything from the breakdown of the family to [a crisis of](#)

[masculinity](#).

Whether or not the word "feminist" makes you wrinkle your nose, the movement has achieved a great deal in the century or more since it began. Feminism should continue to evolve, to keep protecting and promoting the rights of women now and in the future.

The rise of liberal feminism

Because of my interest in wage gaps and labor market outcomes, you might put me in the "liberal" feminist camp. This strand of feminism has traditionally been concerned with equal opportunities, legal, political and economic equality and the promotion of more egalitarian gender roles within households.

These concerns have helped to usher in policy and legislative change since feminism's "[second wave](#)" in the 1960s and 1970s.

The type of feminism that developed tended to work within prevailing structures and systems, rather than trying to overthrow them, and so aligned itself with [dominant neoliberal value systems](#) that developed in the late 20th century.

By its early 2000s zenith, the liberal feminist message of freedom and empowerment, typified by [Cosmopolitan](#) magazine and [Sex and the City](#), chimed with a broader message of individuality in a free market.

The realities of motherhood, caring and family—key aspects of the second wave—were increasingly disregarded, the assumption being that care could be outsourced or that men would take up caring roles.

While still forming the basis of gender equality policy at national and EU/regional level, what are perceived as liberal feminist values have

been falling out of fashion with the wider public.

In line with a wider "anti-woke" backlash, criticism of liberal feminism as unworkable, elitist or irrelevant is coming from across the political and ideological spectrum.

Criticism of liberal feminism

The manosphere has been described as "[loosely unified by an anti-feminist worldview](#)." Growing numbers of social media personalities promote notions of masculinity centered around strict, often toxic, gender roles based on female inferiority.

There are even calls for the rollback of basic freedoms, such as [women's right to vote](#). Such an extreme withdrawal of rights is unlikely, but these voices and their millions of followers should not be ignored.

The popularity of "[trad](#)" ideas online (traditional sex roles within families) is not necessarily aligned with the exaggerated hyper-masculinity of the manosphere.

However, it reflects a reignited trend towards conservatism or at least a rejection of the perceived progressive attitudes to gender equality of the last two decades. The rejection of feminist values coming from more hardline or conservative forms of religiosity add further weight to [growing anti-progressive sentiment](#).

Meanwhile, a new wave of both radical and more conservative or "[reactionary](#)" feminists believe liberal feminism has lost its way. The freedom-first, choice-based narrative, some say, [undermines women's material interests](#) by championing an "elite" set of values that commodify the bodies of poor women, devalue [care work](#) and ignore important differences between the sexes.

They argue liberal feminism is [too mainstream](#), too in bed with the system and too sidetracked by relative trivialities such as microaggressions, boardroom representation and, yes, the gender pay gap.

The empowerment message of liberal feminism seen in "smash the patriarchy" tote bags and "girls just want to have FUNdamental rights" t-shirts rings almost embarrassingly corporate—out of touch with the more complex issues facing women and girls today.

Reclaiming feminism

I think it's time to step back and reclaim feminism's original purpose and ask how can it contribute to positive change in a tumultuous world.

In Europe at least, feminism has brought us [maternity provision](#), [equal pay](#) and drastically expanded opportunities outside of the home.

Women's [education levels have increased](#) globally and (despite a few Tik Toks promoting the virtues of "[bimbofication](#)") women will continue to want to be educated, have careers and contribute to public life.

Liberal feminists care about women's economic independence and, in lieu of some massive structural shift in how our societies are run, money still matters. Women across the social and economic spectrum still grapple with issues of work, care and family.

Feminism still has a role to play in analyzing these issues and developing policy solutions that make life easier for women and families.

The [gender](#) pay gap is not the most important issue facing women, but as a symbol of wider issues it's worth addressing. Yes, liberal [feminism](#) has some soul-searching to do. It ignores changes in the zeitgeist at its peril. But in the rush to embrace something more radical, let's not throw the

baby out with the bathwater.

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