

FEMINISM IN 2021: The Ideology vs The Aesthetic

RASHA JAMEEL

Every year, during International Women's Day (IWD), lifestyle brands around the globe centre their marketing around women and their necessities. Popular brands here in Bangladesh are no different. Last year, we saw a brand of soap host a much-televised women's day campaign on March 8th. Their campaign featured models, bloggers, and female entrepreneurs.

The campaign was well shot and well presented, and ironically lacked the feminist spirit.

The women featured in the campaign all looked the same: conventionally fair, dressed in glamorous, non-functional attire. They all sit still, look pretty, speak gracefully and never do any heavy lifting. They all come from a place of privilege and do not speak their mind. As the video progresses, you come to realise that they're only there because a brand has a business to promote.

So, is that what we're celebrating? The exploitation of the feminist movement?

Read on as I break down the feminist movement for you, so you can decide for yourself.

FIRST WAVE FEMINISM

Feminist ideals have been around since the 15th century. It can be deduced from the works of historians that Christine de Pizan, a poetess at the court of King Charles VI of France, was quite possibly the first person to reflect on feminism.

The ideology only grew from there onwards, with the advocacy of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary de Gournay, and many more.

The feminist movement itself kicked off in the 1850s, with the women's suffrage parades. Suffragettes took to the streets to demand women be granted the same voting rights as men. During this period of feminist activity, women demanded equality in mostly legal matters such as owning property, being able to cast votes and choose professional fields of work, having the rights to child custody in divorce proceedings, and so on. Notable activists headlining the rise of "First Wave" feminism were Dorothy Day, Sojourner Truth, Jane Addams, and Elizabeth Blackwell.

All white women, hailing from blue-collar households.

First Wave Feminism came with double standards, and rejected the idea of intersectionality. Only privileged, white women's accounts were heard and seemingly taken into consideration.

SECOND WAVE FEMINISM

The Feminine Mystique was published. The non-fiction by Betty Friedan challenged and argued against the conventional, patriarchal ideas of femininity.

Women of colour, namely bell hooks and Audre Lourde, finally found their voice and joined the feminist movement. The discriminatory air of the First Wave Feminism had finally begun to

dissipate.

The 1960s brought in new ideas and objectives from liberal and radical feminists. Women's demands moved past enfranchisement and focused on issues such as female sexuality, domestic violence, rape, and women's reproductive rights.

Post World War II, the feminist movement branched into two different sections: "Radical feminism" and "Liberal feminism". Liberal feminists fought to reform federal legislation to cater to the diversification of women's roles in the job sector. The liberal feminist movement was led primarily by activists Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan. Radical feminists drew from their experiences in radical protests (mostly during the civil rights movement) and directly attacked the ingrained patriarchy in workplaces, bringing issues such as sexual harassment to public attention. The radical feminist movement was led primarily by activists Casey Hayden and Mary King.

THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

By the 90s, the feminist movement had gained massive traction around the globe. Global feminism began to take hold due to efforts made by the UN. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) within the UN, had formed a Commission on the Status of Women in 1946. In the 90s, the council worked towards the development of female empowerment all over the world, encouraging the inclusivity of women from all socio-economic classes, ethnicities, and nationalities.

"Third wave" feminists sought to restructure the ideologies preached by "Second wave" feminists in an effort to eradicate the flaws in their predecessors' perspectives. Rebecca Walker is considered to be a pioneer for the third wave of the feminist movement. Walker introduced "intersectionality", the dismissal of bias against metrics such as religion, race, sexuality, and ability. This resulted in the definition of feminism broadening to include "transfeminism" and "postmodern feminism".

The Third wave dealt primarily in matters involving sexual liberation, violence against women, and reproductive rights involving access to contraception and the choice to abort.

Punk subculture came into effect with the introduction of "riot grrrl". Ideas surrounding "self-sufficiency" and "self-reliance" were popularised by punk rock musicians.

FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM

In the 2010s, social media platforms collectively became the defining factor in our lives. If a subject has found validation on social media, it has then unofficially been declared as an issue worthy of global attention.

The feminist movement came to discover new meaning amongst the netizens of the 21st century. The "Fourth wave" in the feminist movement began

developing from beliefs rooted in intersectionality and with a focus resting solely on women's empowerment in different sectors. Social media aided marginalised groups in finding their voices, by providing them with the means to be heard faster and throughout the world.

Key events in Fourth wave feminism include actress and activist Emma Watson's "HeForShe" UN campaign, the #MeToo movement carried out on social networking site Twitter, and the "Time's Up" campaign hosted by women's rights activists and popularised by celebrities.

HOW IWD CAME TO BE

International Women's Day was first declared by the Socialist Party of America, during First Wave Feminism, and went on to gain momentum internationally, beginning with the efforts of the leader of the Women's Office in German Social Democratic Party, Clara Zetkin.

In the 70s, IWD was first recognised and celebrated by the UN, and then integrated with the rest of the world's global and historic events.

From what history tells us, IWD has always been around to celebrate the achievements of women in various fields of work and education. The day is celebrated in accordance with the demands made and the rights claimed by women who struggled with the absence of equality in the society.

HOW IWD HAS BEEN TREATED IN RECENT TIMES

Thanks to social media, daily lives for everyone begin with a quick scroll through their notifications. Every year on March 8, a quick scroll-through like this one usually reveals various lifestyle brands using the aforementioned event to their own advantages. We come across marketing schemes centred on the spirit of International Women's Day, feminism, which effectively reduces a centuries-old movement to a mere seasonal trend.

According to history, the feminist movement has strived long and hard to attain diversity in its essence. The marketing campaigns that we come across on social media might lead you to believe otherwise.

Here's where Bangladesh stands

on feminism and the celebration of International Women's Day:

As a country consisting primarily of conservative and patriarchal communities, Bangladesh has just begun to grasp the concept of feminism. We have just about managed to adhere to ground-work laid down by First Wave Feminism, while remaining ignorant of inclusivity.

Intersectionality holds no meaning in the IWD campaign mentioned in the beginning of this article. The campaign limits its acknowledgement of women's achievements to only privileged women. Their narrative is one-sided and blurs out the plights of the marginalised groups. How often have you seen trans-women, queer individuals, the women who make up our domestic help, the women employed in the garments sector or the sex industry of Bangladesh, being given a platform to bring their struggles to light?

Is the feminism we're seeing in accordance with the ideologies laid down by its pioneers?

Perhaps it is sometimes. A handful of IWD campaigns make an attempt to include narratives of women from different walks of life. The women featured in those small-scale campaigns have a lot to say and don't shy away from doing so. That being said, even those campaigns have far to go in terms of intersectionality.

International Women's Day came to fruition because of the feminist movement, because of collective efforts put in by working-class women. It's imperative to honour the spirit of the working class. It's important to acknowledge the contributions of every single woman in the working class, not just a selected few.

Rasha Jameel is an overzealous Ravenclaw who often draws inspiration from mundane things such as memes. Send her your mespiritational thoughts at rasha.jameel@outlook.com



A Call for Career Counselling

ANUSHA MOURSHED

Choosing a field of study or career is one of those nerve-wrecking, major decisions that mould the rest of your life. So, rest assured, almost everyone feels some sense of fear and confusion. What if all students received some expert help that gave them clarity and a more distinct objective?

Some people grow up innately knowing exactly what they want to do with their lives while others require a lot more time to discover their options and explore the opportunities before they decide. For the latter group of people, it tends to become exceedingly difficult to choose an area of study in high school that they will later pursue as a career in the future.

Many fear that they might be deciding too soon without having sufficient experience while others find themselves trapped under the weight of peer pressure. There is a tendency to associate respect and dignity so vigorously with certain occupations that the other options of the spectrum seem to fall short of prominence. This often results in a lack of confidence within students interested in the more unconventional paths. Additionally, it is seen that plenty of them are also not completely aware of all the possibilities or the options best suited to them due to the lack of understanding of what each profession requires and whether or not they have what it takes.

These issues are all intensified by the lack of academic guidance in schools and can further propagate into a more precarious situation for the students in the long run due to the absence of appropriate counselling at the most relevant time.

It is seen that even some of the most reputed schools in Dhaka do not have career counsellors. In the handful of schools where they do provide this facility, more often than not, the counsellors are not specifically trained for the particular job. This results in students receiving unsatisfactory services which might even end up causing more harm than benefit.

I spoke to some students to gather their opinions and to understand their perspectives better.

"The fact that even the most elite schools in our country don't seem to offer proper career counselling to students, let alone how they continue to disregard the fact that careers are not simply units but a spectrum of options, speaks volumes. For students to truly comprehend their potentials and find the most befitting option would require exploration first or at least being aware of one's options. Bangladesh's education system continues to push students towards only goals of sets of career options which they deem to be respectable, cornering the future generation" said Sharita Fairooz, a grade 12 student at a reputed English medium school in Dhaka.

This certain angle to the matter of concern raises a crucial point which claims that academic guidance is not only required to find the most befitting option for every individual but also to make them aware of all the other possibilities and to give them the liberty to explore.

"I remember being a ninth grader and feeling like my whole world was turning upside down when I was told to choose between Science and Commerce subjects that would shape the entire rest of my life. How was a 15-year-old with no real world experience even expected to know what she wanted to do for the rest of her life all by herself? All throughout ninth grade, I went through so many breakdowns second guessing my choices all the time," said



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Anila Paromita, who is currently completing her undergraduate from a prestigious university in the USA.

She continued eagerly, "In short, with all the stress of the overwhelming present and lack of objectivity, I wish I had someone experienced in this field to guide me through a solid educational plan fit for my potential. If I had been fortunate enough to receive the guidance then maybe, I wouldn't have suffered from the indecision or have to go through all the uncertainty and difficulties associated with changing majors. I wish I had a guide to help me see the big picture, so I wouldn't look back on those days of my life as the most helpless phase."

In essence, as someone who has suffered greatly due to the lack of proper guidance, she believes that her experience could have been a lot more favourable had she been lucky enough to receive a helping hand.

Although the primary goal of career counselling is to help students select a field best suited to them according to their specific attributes, it not only just lays out all the possibilities but also provides expert resources that make people aware of their interests, strengths and weaknesses. It allows students to make well-informed decisions about their education and career, thus helping them to reduce the overall career-related frustration of what can otherwise become an exhausting process.

Characteristically, most Bangladeshi parents tend to have the majority of control over their children's education, if not all. This includes making decisions such as what activities they partake in, what subjects they choose and which job field they enter, regardless of their children's own ambitions. This later results in a lack of job satisfaction or a general gratification from

all things in life. For such cases, academic guidance is exceptionally important for students to be able to navigate through the process and make healthy decisions for their own ultimate benefit. The professional help can give them a clearer understanding, a better chance to embark on a journey they would actually enjoy and instill more confidence in them to choose what they truly wish to do.

Contrary to popular belief, academic guidance is not meant solely for people who are unsure of their goals but also very helpful for those who already have a fixed objective. The counselling can make them aware of their shortcomings and help them understand what they must do to acquire the necessary skills that are expected from them. It can help students change unwanted habits and behaviour patterns such as unproductivity, procrastination and not keeping themselves updated with the changes and advancements of their chosen field of study or career.

There are plenty of students who know exactly what they want to do with their life but lack enough confidence. Career counselling can help them connect better to their choices and build self-belief thus redirecting their focus to the right places again.

Besides, the counsellors can also prepare students in advance, by helping them create their curriculum vitae, and training them for university or job interviews. Although it's importance is not recognised nearly enough, having had some prior practice and receiving guidance directly from professionals in this area of expertise can give candidates a lot more clarity and a head start for the unpredictable journey ahead.

"As I was preparing for my very first

internship, the career coaches at the University of Toronto were phenomenal in their guidance to help me secure a position. I remember participating in a mock interview, being quizzed about the Ontario Environmental regulations and finally the mental and emotional support from my career coaches. I was able to receive employment as a junior environmental professional at the Ontario Ministry of Environment and Climate Change," said Mehnaz Farhad, an educator in a well-reputed institution in Toronto, Canada.

She added, "After graduation, as I worked as an educator at the Centennial College, I collaborated with the learning strategists there to hold the most interactive career coaching workshops. My colleague and I helped members of the youth at risk with interview performance, resume preparation and salary negotiation. Career coaching helped them find their way into the world."

Therefore, the education system must recognise the significance of academic guidance in schools and question why students are being deprived of such a life-shaping opportunity. Under the current circumstances, there are already plenty of factors to consider before making the smallest decisions.

The decision-making process becomes even more complex for 15 to 19-year-olds trying to make choices that will mould the rest of their lives. The appropriate assistance at the proper time can nudge them in the right direction and set the track to the course of the rest of their lives.

Anusha often has a lot on her plate. Send her memes and motivation at anusha.mourshed11@gmail.com