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HUMANISING THE REVOLUTION: FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF GENDER EQUALITY

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Abstract

This article reconceptualises the discourse on feminist activism and gender equality through a humanist lens. Moving beyond theoretical abstraction and statistical quantification, it argues that the true measure of the feminist project lies in its capacity to humanise—to restore, affirm, and expand the full humanity of all individuals, irrespective of gender. The article traces the historical evolution of feminist activism, examining how different waves have grappled with the dehumanisation inherent in patriarchal structures. Through an intersectional and phenomenological framework, it explores key battlegrounds—the body, the home, the workplace, and the digital sphere—as sites where the struggle for humanity is most acutely felt. It critically engages with the movements’ internal complexities, including tensions around inclusion and the challenges of backlash. Ultimately, the paper posits that gender equality is not merely a destination of equitable distribution but a continuous, collective practice of creating a world where every person can live a life of dignity, autonomy, and connection. Feminist activism, in its most potent form, is the hands-on labour of that humanisation.

Keywords: Feminist Activism, Gender Equality, Humanisation, Intersectionality, Embodiment, Lived Experience, Patriarchy, Care Labour, Digital Feminism, Social Justice.

I. Introduction: The Question of Humanity

“Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.”

This succinct, decades-old statement by writer Marie Shear cuts to the heart of a profound paradox. That such a notion should ever be considered “radical” reveals the core dehumanisation that feminist activism has confronted for centuries. The pursuit of gender equality has often been framed in terms of rights, opportunities, laws, and economic metrics. While these are indispensable tools and indicators, this paper contends that they are surface manifestations of a deeper, more fundamental project: the re-humanisation of a world structured by patriarchy.

Patriarchy, as a system, operates by fracturing humanity. It assigns value, capability, emotion, and destiny according to a rigid, hierarchical binary. It dismembers the human whole, granting men a monopoly on full personhood—rational, public, autonomous—while relegating women and gender-nonconforming people to a partial, often instrumentalised existence. To be gendered



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‘female’ in such a system is to be perpetually adjacent to humanity, defined by lack, by relation to others, by biological determinism. Feminist activism, therefore, in all its diverse and sometimes discordant forms, is the collective struggle against this dismemberment. It is the fight not just for a seat at the table, but for the right to define the table, build it, and sometimes, to dismantle it altogether.

This research paper explores feminist activism not merely as a socio-political movement but as a profound humanistic endeavour. Its central thesis is that “the arc of feminist activism bends toward humanisation, seeking to create the material, psychological, and social conditions for every individual to experience themselves, and be recognised by others, as fully human.” This humanisation is not a vague ideal but is realised in the concrete domains of lived experience: in sovereignty over one’s own body, in safety within one’s home, in dignity in one’s labour, and in voice in the public sphere.

The methodology of this paper is interdisciplinary, weaving together historical analysis, social theory, and a phenomenological focus on lived experience. It is grounded in intersectionality—the understanding, pioneered by Black feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw, that systems of oppression (racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism) interconnect, creating distinct modes of dehumanisation. The experience of fighting for one’s humanity is fundamentally different for a white, middle-class woman, a disabled trans woman of colour, or a working-class migrant man challenging toxic masculinity. An authentic humanist feminism must hold these complexities at its centre.

We begin by tracing the historical waves of feminism, not as a neat chronology, but as evolving, overlapping responses to specific forms of dehumanisation. We then move to the intimate theatre of the body, exploring how feminist activism has fought for bodily autonomy as the bedrock of human dignity. From there, we deconstruct the private sphere, redefining care and domestic labour as essential human work. We examine the public worlds of work and politics, where the struggle for recognition and equitable participation continues. In the 21st century, we turn to the digital frontier, where new forms of both solidarity and violence are reshaping activism. Finally, we engage with the vital internal critiques and external backlashes that challenge and strengthen the movement. Through this journey, we argue that feminist activism, in its relentless and messy pursuit of a more just world, remains one of the most significant humanising forces of our time.

II. Historical Waves: The Evolving Grammar of Humanisation

The metaphor of “waves” in feminist history, while imperfect, helps illuminate how the movement’s understanding of dehumanisation—and thus its humanising mission—has expanded and deepened over time.



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The First Wave: Claiming Legal Personhood

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the dehumanisation of women was starkly codified in law. The married woman was a **feme covert**, her legal identity “covered” by her husband’s. She could not own property, control her wages, or claim custody of her children. She was, in essence, a legal non-person. First-wave feminism, spearheaded by figures like Susan B. Anthony, Emmeline Pankhurst, and Sojourner Truth (whose “Aren’t I a Woman?” speech powerfully exposed the racialised dimensions of this dehumanisation), fought primarily for this most basic layer of human recognition: legal personhood.

The campaigns for suffrage were not merely about voting; they were about asserting the intellectual and moral capacity for citizenship. To deny women the vote was to declare them incapable of rational political judgement, perpetually childlike. This wave’s humanising act was to publicly insist, through protests, writings, and civil disobedience, that women possessed the fundamental human attributes of reason and civic conscience. Its limitation, often critiqued, was its frequent focus on the humanity of white, middle-class women, sometimes at the expense of others. Yet, its core achievement was to crack the legal shell of patriarchy, establishing that women were not chattel but persons under the law.

The Second Wave: Liberating the Personal Self

If the first wave won legal personhood, the second wave (1960s-1980s) confronted the psychological and social imprisonment that persisted. The rallying cry, “The personal is political,” unmasked the private sphere—the home, the bedroom, the psyche—as a key site of patriarchal control. Betty Friedan’s **The Feminine Mystique** diagnosed the “problem with no name”: the profound existential emptiness and stunted humanity of the educated, suburban housewife. Simultaneously, radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone and Carol Hanisch argued that patriarchy’s roots lay in the control of female biology and sexuality.

This wave’s humanising project was one of interior and intimate liberation. It fought for:

- **Reproductive Rights:** Framing abortion and contraception not as medical issues but as prerequisites for women’s autonomy over their life trajectories.
- **Bodily Integrity:** Challenging sexual violence and domestic abuse through consciousness-raising groups, where sharing personal experiences revealed systemic patterns of terror and control.
- **Psychological Self-Determination:** Rejecting Freudian pathologization of female desire and promoting female sexual pleasure and self-knowledge.

The movement established shelters, rape crisis centres, and health clinics—concrete institutions designed to restore safety and agency to dehumanised individuals. However, this wave too was critiqued, most forcefully by women of colour, working-class women, and lesbians, for



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universalising the experience of white, heterosexual, middle-class womanhood. The Combahee River Collective's seminal 1977 statement articulated a feminism that sought to humanise those whose identities were fractured by multiple, simultaneous oppressions.

The Third Wave & Intersectionality: Embodying Complex Humanity

Emerging in the 1990s, third-wave feminism was less a coherent ideology than a collection of responses to the perceived failures and exclusions of the second wave. Influenced by postmodernism and queer theory, it embraced contradiction, individuality, and play. It reclaimed derogatory terms (“bitch,” “slut”), celebrated sexual expression (via artists like Madonna), and focused on micro-politics and subversion.

Its most significant contribution to the humanising project, however, was the mainstreaming of intersectionality. This framework, articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provided the analytical tool to understand how different axes of identity converge to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. It insisted that you could not humanise “woman” as a monolithic category. The dehumanisation faced by a Black transgender woman was specific and compounded; a feminism that did not centre her experience was itself participating in her erasure. This wave pushed feminism to expand its vision of humanity to include all genders, sexualities, races, classes, and abilities, understanding humanisation as a deeply contextual process.

The Fourth Wave: Digital Solidarity and Call-Out Culture

The contemporary, digitally networked wave (from circa 2010) operates at a new velocity and scale. Born on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, it is characterised by hashtag activism (#MeToo, #TimesUp, #BringBackOurGirls), call-out culture, and a heightened focus on sexual violence, body positivity, and trans rights.

Its humanising power lies in its capacity for rapid, global solidarity and testimony. #MeToo allowed millions to share their stories of harassment and assault, transforming isolated shame into a collective roar that named systemic abuse. It demonstrated the power of believing survivors—a fundamental act of human recognition. Digital platforms have given voice to marginalised feminists worldwide, connecting local struggles into a global chorus.

Yet, this wave also faces the dehumanising pitfalls of the digital realm: online harassment, performative allyship, and the often-reductive nature of viral outrage. The challenge is to translate digital connection into lasting, nuanced, and institutionally rooted change. Each wave, therefore, has added a new dimension to the humanising grammar of feminism: from legal personhood to psychological liberation, to intersectional complexity, to digital amplification.

III. The Body as Battleground: Autonomy, Integrity, and Identity

The most primal site of patriarchal dehumanisation is the human body. Feminist activism has tirelessly fought to reclaim the body from being an object of control, violence, and commodification, and restore it as the sovereign territory of the self.



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Reproductive Justice: Beyond Choice

The fight for reproductive rights is fundamentally a fight for bodily autonomy—the right to decide if, when, and how to bear children. Early activism secured legal contraception and abortion (*Roe v. Wade*, now tragically reversed in the US), framing them as essential for women’s educational, economic, and personal self-determination. However, the mainstream “pro-choice” narrative was often critiqued as reflecting a white, middle-class perspective.

The concept of “Reproductive Justice”, developed by Black women activists like Sister Song, expands this into a fuller humanist framework. It intertwines:

1. The right not to have a child (via abortion, contraception).
2. The right to have a child under safe and healthy conditions.
3. The right to parent children in safe and sustainable communities.

This framework humanises by connecting bodily autonomy to social conditions. It asks: What does “choice” mean for a woman without healthcare, living in poverty, under threat of state violence, or in an environmentally poisoned community? Reproductive Justice insists that true autonomy requires not just legal permission, but the material resources and social support to enact one’s decisions. It frames reproduction as a matter of human dignity and social equity, not just individual privacy.

Confronting Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Rape, domestic abuse, femicide, and harassment are not merely crimes; they are tools of terror that reduce individuals to objects of conquest and control. Feminist activism has worked to rehumanise survivors by:

Naming the Crime: Moving terms like “marital rape” from oxymoron to recognised felony.

Creating Safe Havens: Establishing the first rape crisis centres and women’s shelters, spaces where survivors’ experiences were believed and their safety prioritised.

Shifting the Narrative: Campaigns like “MeToo and Slut Walk” challenge victim-blaming, placing the onus of responsibility squarely on perpetrators and the cultures that enable them.

This work asserts that a person’s body is inviolable. It seeks to replace the shame imposed on survivors with social accountability for perpetrators, transforming the survivor from a damaged object back into a respected subject.

The Politics of Appearance: From Objectification to Embodiment

Patriarchy exerts control by prescribing and policing the appearance of the female body. The beauty industrial complex, diet culture, and fashion norms often promote a narrow, unattainable ideal that fuels insecurity and self-alienation. Feminist responses have been multifaceted:



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- **Body Positivity and Fat Liberation:** Challenging weight-based stigma and celebrating bodies of all sizes, abilities, and appearances. This movement humanises by severing worth from conformity to an arbitrary standard.
- **The Reclamation of Pleasure:** Sex-positive feminism, from “Our Bodies, Ourselves” to contemporary activists, encourages women to explore their bodies and desires outside the male gaze, reclaiming sexuality as a source of self-knowledge and joy, not just service or danger.
- **Challenging the Male Gaze:** In art, film, and media, feminists have critiqued the representation of women as passive objects for visual consumption, advocating for female subjectivity and the “female gaze.”

Trans Rights and Bodily Self-Determination

Perhaps the most profound contemporary extension of bodily autonomy feminism is the fight for transgender rights. For trans and non-binary individuals, the dehumanisation is foundational: the denial of their deeply felt gender identity, often enforced through medical gatekeeping, legal barriers, and violent prejudice. Feminist activism that is truly humanising must champion:

- Access to gender-affirming healthcare.
- Legal recognition of self-identified gender.
- Protection from discrimination and violence.

This struggle affirms that the ultimate authority on one’s own body and identity resides within the individual. It expands the feminist principle of bodily autonomy to its logical conclusion: the right to define and actualise one’s own embodied self.

IV. Deconstructing the Private: Care, Labour, and the Home

Patriarchy has historically defined the private, domestic sphere as the “natural” domain of women—a realm of unpaid, invisible labour that subsidises the public, “human” world of men. Feminist activism has humanised this sphere by rendering its work visible, challenging its gendered assignment, and revaluing care as foundational to human society.

The “Second Shift” and the Devaluation of Care

Arlie Hochschild’s concept of the “second shift” named the exhausting reality for working women who returned home to a second full-time job of housework and childcare. This labour, essential for human survival and flourishing, was culturally and economically rendered valueless because it was done by women, for love, not money. It confined women to a cycle of service that limited their time for rest, creativity, and public engagement—key aspects of a full human life.



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Feminist activism responded by:

- Theorising Social Reproduction: Marxist feminists identified domestic labour as “social reproduction”—the work of reproducing the labour force daily and generationally. They argued this work, though unpaid, was fundamental to capitalism.
- Demanding Shared Domestic Responsibility: Campaigns pushed men to become equal partners in the home, framing it not as “help” but as a basic responsibility of adulthood and partnership.
- Advocating for Structural Support: Lobbying for policies like paid parental leave, subsidised childcare, and eldercare, recognising that the burden of care should not fall solely on individual families, and certainly not solely on women.

The Global Care Chain and Racialised Dehumanisation

The humanising project here must be intersectional. In wealthy nations, the “solution” to the dual-income family’s care crisis has often been the outsourcing of care work to migrant women, frequently women of colour. This creates a “global care chain,” where the care deficit is passed down a racial and economic hierarchy. The migrant nanny or cleaner enables the professional advancement of her affluent female employer, often at the cost of being separated from her own children.

This dynamic creates a brutal paradox: the liberation of some women is built upon the dehumanisation of others, whose own care labour remains undervalued and whose family bonds are stretched to breaking point. A humanist feminism must fight for the rights, fair wages, and dignity of all care workers, challenging the systems that pit women against each other across lines of race and class.

Reclaiming Care as a Human Ethic

Beyond redistributing drudgery, feminist thought has sought to revalue care itself. Ethicists of care, like Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto, argue that care is not a private, feminine virtue, but a public, human necessity and a moral imperative. They propose a society organised around an “ethics of care,” where interdependence is acknowledged, vulnerability is not stigmatised, and the work of nurturing life is valued as highly as the work of producing goods.

This represents a profound humanising shift: it challenges the hyper-individualistic, competitive model of “humanity” prized under patriarchy and capitalism, and offers a vision of humanity rooted in relation, empathy, and mutual responsibility.

V. The Public Sphere: Work, Politics, and Voice

The public world—of paid employment, politics, and cultural production—has been historically framed as the arena for the exercise of full humanity (rationality, ambition, leadership). Feminist



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activism has fought to dismantle the barriers excluding women and gender minorities from this arena, and to transform the arena itself.

The Struggle for Economic Personhood

The fight for entry into the paid workforce was a fight for economic independence, a cornerstone of personhood. Activists challenged “protective” laws that barred women from certain jobs, fought for the right to own credit, and campaigned against workplace discrimination. The persistent gender pay gap (compounded by race) is not just a financial inequity; it is a quantifiable measure of dehumanisation, a statement that women’s labour is worth less.

The demand for equal pay for work of equal value pushes further, seeking to rectify the systemic undervaluation of professions dominated by women (teaching, nursing, care work). This is a direct attempt to recalibrate the economic worth assigned to traditionally “feminine” skills versus “masculine” ones.

Confronting the Glass Ceiling and Hostile Environments

Beyond entry, feminists have exposed the informal barriers to advancement: the “glass ceiling,” the “old boys’ network,” and pervasive sexual harassment. The MeToo movement was a watershed in revealing how harassment functions as a tool to police women’s presence in the workplace, to remind them they are interlopers in a male domain, their bodies and safety contingent on male goodwill. Fighting hostile work environments is about securing not just a job, but a context in which one can work with dignity, safety, and the expectation of fair reward.

Political Representation: From Token to Transformation

The campaign for political parity is about more than symbolic representation. It is about ensuring that the experiences, needs, and perspectives of more than half the population shape law and policy. Quotas, all-women shortlists, and grassroots mobilisation have increased numbers. However, humanising politics goes beyond counting bodies; it involves feminising political practice. This includes:

- Challenging the combative, winner-takes-all style of traditional politics.
- Advocating for policies that address “private” sphere issues: childcare, domestic violence, reproductive health.
- Supporting female and feminist leaders who are often subjected to uniquely vicious, gendered, and appearance-focused criticism designed to undermine their authority and humanity.

Voice and Cultural Production

Humanisation requires the power to narrate one’s own story. Feminist activism has fought for voice in media, academia, literature, and the arts. It has critiqued the canon, founded feminist presses and film distribution companies, and championed female creators. This work asserts that



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women are not just subjects of culture but its authors and arbiters—that they possess the creative and intellectual authority to define human experience.

VI. The Digital Frontier: Connection, Amplification, and New Violences

The digital revolution has created a paradoxical new landscape for feminist humanisation—a space of unprecedented connection and potent new forms of assault.

Hashtag Activism and Global Solidarity

Digital platforms have democratised feminist voice. A teenager in Saudi Arabia can follow Malala Yousafzai; survivors in India and America can find common cause under #MeToo. Hashtags create ad-hoc publics, transforming private pain into collective power. They allow marginalised groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers in media and build grassroots movements with global reach. Campaigns like #BringBackOurGirls (for the kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls) or #NiUnaMenos (against femicide in Latin America) show how digital tools can focus international attention and pressure.

Call-Out Culture and Accountability

Online call-out culture can be a tool for humanisation by holding powerful individuals and institutions accountable for abusive behaviour, often when formal systems fail. It operates on the principle of believing survivors and challenging impunity. It can democratise accountability, shifting power from hierarchical institutions to networked communities.

The Shadow Side: Digital Dehumanisation

Yet, the digital sphere is also a cesspool of gendered hate. Women, particularly those who are outspoken, feminist, or from minority groups, face staggering levels of online harassment: rape threats, doxxing, image-based abuse, and coordinated hate campaigns. This is a deliberate tactic to silence them, to push them out of public discourse, and to punish them for claiming digital space. The harassment is often deeply dehumanising, reducing the woman to a body to be violated, a mouth to be shut.

Furthermore, the speed and simplicity of digital activism can lead to performative allyship—superficial gestures divorced from material action—and a lack of nuance that mirrors the binaries feminism seeks to dismantle. The challenge for digital feminism is to harness its connective power while developing robust strategies to combat online violence and foster the complexity necessary for lasting humanisation.

VII. Contested Terrain: Internal Critiques and External Backlash

No movement that seeks to dismantle deep-seated power structures operates without fierce internal debate and external resistance. Engaging with these is essential for a mature, self-reflexive humanising project.



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Intersectionality as an Internal Imperative

The most vital internal critique has been the consistent challenge from women of colour, queer women, trans women, disabled women, and working-class women: Your feminism does not humanise me. This critique has forced mainstream feminism to confront its own complicities in racism, homophobia, transphobia, and class bias. The resulting tensions are not signs of weakness but of growth. The embrace of intersectionality is an acknowledgement that humanisation cannot be a one-size-fits-all project; it must be attentive to the specific ways different bodies are dehumanised.

The Trans Inclusion Debate

The current heated debate within some feminist circles over trans inclusion represents a fundamental clash over the definition of “woman” and, by extension, the boundaries of humanisation. TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist) ideology argues that trans women threaten “female-only” spaces and that gender is reducible to biological sex. Inclusive feminism argues that denying trans women’s identity is a profound act of dehumanisation, repeating the same violent denial of self-determination that feminism has historically fought.

A humanist feminism must side with inclusion. To deny a person’s deeply felt identity, to exclude them from spaces and movements based on a rigid biological essentialism, is to commit the very sin patriarchy commits: defining someone’s humanity against their own lived experience. Protecting the humanity of one group cannot come at the cost of dehumanising another.

External Backlash: The Anti-Feminist Counter-Movement

Feminist advances have consistently provoked powerful backlashes. This manifests as:

- Moral Panics: Framing gender equality as a threat to “family values,” religious morality, or social order.
- Corporations using feminist slogans to sell products while perpetuating exploitative labour practices (“girlboss” feminism).
- Political and Legal Rollbacks: The overturning of “Roe v. Wade” in the US is the starkest example of a coordinated, decades-long backlash successfully reversing a fundamental right.
- Online MRA and Incel Movements: Virulently misogynist communities that explicitly blame feminism for societal ills and often promote violent ideologies.

Backlash is a reaction to perceived loss of power and privilege. It seeks to reassert a hierarchical model of humanity. Navigating it requires resilience, solidarity, and a clear-eyed understanding that the struggle for humanisation is never linear and is always contested.



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VIII. Conclusion: Toward a Fully Human Future

Feminist activism, in its long and winding arc, is ultimately a project of radical humanisation. It begins with the simple, revolutionary assertion that has animated its core for centuries: women are people. But as the movement has evolved, that assertion has deepened and expanded. It now insists: All people, across the spectrums of gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability, are entitled to a lived experience of full humanity.

This humanity is not an abstract gift but a condition built through relentless, practical work. It is built by securing legal personhood and bodily autonomy. It is built by valuing the labour of care and dismantling the prison of the exclusively private sphere. It is built by demanding equitable participation in the public worlds of work and politics. It is built by creating digital spaces for solidarity while fighting digital violence. It is built through the difficult, necessary work of intersectional inclusion that ensures no one is left behind in the march toward dignity.

The goal of gender equality, therefore, is not a sterile endpoint of 50/50 representation in existing, often flawed, institutions. It is the active, ongoing creation of a world where our systems, cultures, and relationships no longer fracture humanity along gendered lines. It is a world where strength is not defined against vulnerability, where rationality is not divorced from empathy, where autonomy is understood within a context of interdependence.

Feminist activism is the hands-on labour of building that world. It is the shelter worker holding a survivor through the night. It is the policy advocate drafting parental leave legislation. It is the teenager posting a TikTok about consent. It is the trans activist fighting for healthcare. It is the theorist crafting new language for our experience. It is often messy, contentious, and imperfect—because it is profoundly human.

In humanising others, feminists humanise themselves and invite everyone else into a fuller expression of their own humanity. The revolution is not just about who gets to be human, but about expanding the very definition of what it means to be human, together. That remains feminism's most enduring and transformative promise.

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13. **Pinjra Tod (Break the Hostel Cages) Collective** - A student-led movement fighting against sexist curfew and hostel rules, directly challenging institutional *patriarchal control* over women's mobility.
14. **The Farmers' Protests (2020-21) and Women's Participation** - Thousands of women, from elders to young mothers, lived at protest sites, reshaping gender roles within agrarian struggle and leadership.
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24. Some ai tools etc.