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## Book Review: Feminisms: A Global History by Lucy Delap

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## ***Feminisms: A Global History by Lucy Delap.*<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Sara Corey<sup>2</sup>

What is a feminist? What does feminism stand for? What are the goals of feminist theory? These questions do not have simple answers. The modern view of feminism is far from static. It is diverse and dynamic, changing and evolving with its responses to current events. Feminism, however, is not just one movement. It is a living global anthology of collective experiences, ideas and meanings of female freedoms and empowerment. However, feminism reflects social bias, promoting the experiences of some and neglecting or even marginalizing the influence of others

*Feminisms: A Global History* by Lucy Delap recognizes the feminists who were lost in the relaying of the history of the women's movement or who were prevented from joining it in the first place. As she notes, in some cases it was simply the origins of some feminists that excluded them. As a result, their ideas were rejected from the mainstream feminism that spurred protests, movements, and the adoption of symbols, including more recent activism, such as the Women's Marches and the donning of the 'pussy hat.' In her discussion, Delap is quick to assert that there has never been one theory of feminism. Instead, feminism has always been a mixture of ideas without a clear, universal mission.

Various backgrounds and experiences have shaped women's views of what feminism means. The feminist theory has, for this reason, manifested itself in different ways. Delap reminds us, however, that dominant voices of the movement have been traditionally those of educated, western, white women. That is not to say that the movement has not included women from other demographics and from around the world, but many female and male activists and their ideas have fallen through the cracks- whether that be because of imperialist legacies, cultural norms, or relations to other movements. For example, when British activist, Eleanor Rathbone, invented the idea of the 'Turk Complex,' she used orientalist vocabulary to describe how women perpetually suffered from subordination and male domination. She cited the harem, Hindu child brides, and clitoridectomies, and in so doing, she created a divide between the 'East' and 'West.' Moreover, she created an image of cultures outside of Europe and North America that made western feminists skeptical to the notion that women from the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere could ever be feminists. Feminist thinkers, like Rathbone, essentially excluded people from joining the movement, limiting the perception of feminism to a western construction. Arguably, this has contributed to the stereotype of what defines as feminist. As a result, Delap contends the feminist movement, as understood in mainstream culture, is not fully representative of people around the world who consider themselves to be feminists.

Feminists have often argued about the presence of men within in the feminist movement. Some feminists, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman believed that women should be fully autonomous from men yet supported the notion that men should serve as agents of change to promote the rights of women. Alexandra Kollontai averred that men were an integral part to

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women finding spiritual fulfillment through love. Others, such as Kate Millett, believed that men perpetuated patriarchy because of societal expectations of traditional masculinity and that the only way to ensure equality for women was for society to undergo a 'sexual revolution.'

Delap analyzes features of society that have impacted the development of feminism, such as public and private spaces and specific objects. She notes that some spaces were adopted to empower women, whereas some reinforced women's traditionally subordinate roles compared to those of men. Specifically, Delap discusses Rita Mae Brown's assertion that "women and men are taught to use space quite differently," in assessing why women have been reluctant to use spaces. In the United States in the 1970s, women began to utilize bookshops, legal practices, and women's health centers to spread the feminist message. Additionally, women began to create their own spaces by founding their own small businesses and feminist presses. Despite this progress, men continued to dominate office spaces and positions within higher education. With respect to objects, Delap discusses how some twentieth century feminists used objects to promote their messages, such as the use of specific colors on sashes, pins, and shirts, while others took more extreme measures by attempting to rebrand speculums as objects of empowerment. The latter is tied to the use and perception of the object as a means of shaming and dehumanizing women for their sexual behavior. To feminist philosopher, Donna Haraway, for example, the speculum represented an opportunity to destigmatize female reproductive health and grant basic healthcare to all women around the globe. *Feminisms* relays these phenomena through a historical lens and contextualizes how the modern movements developed to be how they are today.

The women's movement spurred advocacy work among other issues, such as the labor and temperance movements. At the same time, however, since the feminist movement was led by mostly, western, white women, the movement itself forced women from minority communities to choose between supporting feminism and supporting the promotion of rights within their own ethnic or racial communities. For example, many African American women could not justify supporting the feminist movement when members of their own race were being discriminated against on all fronts. Black women in particular have not been able to rely on white women to support their needs. Delap notes that white women were deemed the economic enemies of Black women. According to Black feminist, Frances Beal, "If your mother worked in a white woman's kitchen, she knows what I mean."

*Feminisms* provides insight into the concept itself and provides the opportunity to address the complexity of the feminist movement, the fragmentation within feminism attributable to its visibly western-centric perspective, and the experiences of forgotten and ignored feminists. The book adds to the discourse on social construction and highlights the significance of inclusion and the corresponding bias that results with the adoption of a single perspective. Outside of the discussion of feminism, Delap's thematic approach is a reminder that there are more voices than the ones being heard; this is a lesson in itself.