

## **THE WOMAN AND THE MAY'68**

### **A MULHER E O MAIO'68**

**Patrícia Neves<sup>1</sup>**

Master in Intercultural Studies for Business, ISCAP-P. PORTO, Portugal

patricia98neves@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** The manifestations of May '68 completely changed the course of France forever, not only had an impact on the whole society, but especially on women. Due to the negative meaning of feminism throughout the years, feminists are put in the same categorization, independently of the century, which is an incorrect assumption. The purpose of this paper is to approach the events occurred in that era, with an open understanding of the concepts of feminism and what lead to the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF) in France.

**KEY WORDS:** France, Feminism, Manifestations, May'68, Women

**RESUMO:** As manifestações de Maio'68 mudaram completamente a França para sempre, não só tiveram um impacto em toda a sociedade, mas especialmente nas mulheres. Devido ao significado negativo do feminismo ao longo dos anos, o conceito é caracterizado da mesma forma, independentemente do século, sendo uma suposição incorreta. O propósito deste artigo é abordar as situações que aconteceram naquela época,

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<sup>1</sup> Patrícia Neves received an BA in Secretarial Direction and Administration from Coimbra Accounting and Business School. Currently is attending the MA in Intercultural Studies for Business from Porto Accounting and Business School. Patricia Neves developed this article in the course of French Culture for Business due to her interest in the impacts that feminism had and has on society.

com uma melhor compreensão dos conceitos do feminismo e as situações que levaram ao Movimento de Libertação das Mulheres na França.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** França, Feminismo, Manifestações, Maio'68, Mulheres

## INTRODUCTION

The manifestations and movements of 1960's and 1970's in France were marked by a complete shift in everyone's ideas and beliefs, it marked France and its people (Allwood & Wadia, 2002, p.211). The May '68, just by itself, had tremendous consequences and meaningful impacts in society. According to the historian and professor Studer (2011, p.38), the events that occurred were greater than protests, it criticized the power relations and the bourgeois-capitalists of daily society. At its core, it could be viewed as an expression of a new social movement, which lead to other manifestations (Gilcher-Holtey, 2013, p. 254).

The creation of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF) emerged after May'68. This was not the start of feminists, since prior to the second wave of feminism<sup>2</sup>, existed the first wave<sup>3</sup>, and yet the MLF was one of the most influential feminist movements in history of France (Lalaki, 2018, p.1).

Before analyzing the events of May'68 and the MLF, is fundamental to address what being a feminist might be and how it can be such a wide concept. Which evolved throughout time, and even surpassed the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The following paper is structured in three topics, beginning with the diverse concepts of feminism and the various types of feminists that emerged, depending on the time in society, succeeding the events of May '68 in France, since it is crucial to comprehend how those events lead to the creation of MLF. Lastly, the final subtopic, approaches the women's movement in France, the types of women that represented it and their beliefs.

## DEFINITIONS OF FEMINISM

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French and socialist philosopher Charles Fourier coined the term "*féminisme*," recognizing that women desired legal, economic, and personal independence from men (Offen, 1988, p. 2). This definition was given by the idea that

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<sup>2</sup> The second wave of feminist was created during the 1960's, the year focused of the current paper, until 1990's. For more information on the second wave, the reader should see the following source: Rampton, M. (2015). *Four Waves of Feminism z Feminism*, Pacific University Oregon.

<sup>3</sup> The first wave of feminism occurred during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, corresponding with the era of liberal and socialist's feminist. For more information of the first wave, the reader should see the following source: Rampton, M. (2015). *Four Waves of Feminism*, Pacific University Oregon.

women had the same desires, which can be perceived as incorrect, since there is not a particular meaning or specific definition behind it (Haradhan, 2022, p. 5).

One may agree with the concept given by the American researcher and sociocultural linguist Bucholtz, that wrote: “Feminism: a diverse and sometimes conflicting set of theoretical, methodological, and political perspectives that have in common a commitment to understanding and challenging social inequalities related to gender and sexuality” (2014, p. 23).

In reality, feminism has changed due to social, political and cultural context. It has become an assumption, where people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century affirm that it is obvious and self-evident (Delmar, 2001, p.8). Despite being used to represent a concept, feminism is not a single entity; rather, it has assumed numerous definitions that differ according to the individual, including those who are delighted to identify as feminists and others who are not. (*idem*, p.10).

Since the beginning, feminism assumed a sense of cohesion, derived from the simple idea that all women had the same structure of feelings, meaning that all share the same experiences and feelings, therefore view the world in a rather similar way (*ibidem*). At this day and age, it is understandable that feminism and unity do not always go hand in hand, making it challenging to have a true meaning behind it (*ibidem*). Nevertheless, the writer and political activist of women's rights since the 1960s, Rosalind Delmar, stated:

many would agree that at least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order. (Delmar, 2001, p.8)

That being said, according to Allwood and Wadia (2000), feminism can be a theory and practice that wants to commute the relation of power among men and women, as well as making possible that both have equality among each other, in order to end women’s oppression.

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF FEMINISM

Given the controversial nature of the concept, feminism can be viewed in different lists of groups that have emerged throughout the years (Tong & Botts, 2009, p.1). One can start by thinking of liberal feminism whose goal was always to combat laws that denied women the same rights as men, such as the ability to vote or own property.

Liberal feminists always promoted the idea that man and women should have equal rights in the professional world and have the same academic opportunities (Haradhan, 2022, p.8 & Jaggar, 1988, p.42). In fact, they draw attention to every aspect of society that fostered and maintained disparities among both genders, believing that making laws equal to everyone would be a method to eliminate women's discrimination (Giddens, 2001, p.496-497).

In regard to Marxist and Socialist feminism, although it is possible to distinguish both, it is quite difficult to do so. Marxist feminists contend that capitalism must disappear for women to be free and achieve equality. Social feminism is founded on the same principles as Marxist feminism: a socialist revolution is needed to eliminate women's inequality (*idem*, p .470). They claim that since women are exclusively considered to be caregivers and caretakers in society, they experience sexual harassment and discrimination in every sector when they enter the work market (Haradhan, 2022, p.14).

Radical feminism, the MLF feminists, views patriarchy as the issue for women oppression (Giddens, 2011, p. 471). They believe that gender disparities in society, such as how men and women act, dress differently, and have different social interactions, form the entire society and way of life. As a result, it adds to gender inequity, which can only be eliminated by abolishing patriarchy. (Giddens, 2011, p. 471-471 & Jaggar, 1988, p.91).

In regard to postmodern feminism - the third wave<sup>4</sup> of feminism - is very different from the types mentioned before. According to Gibbens (2011, p.475), it “encourages the acceptances of many different stand-points as equally valid”. In other words, postmodern feminist believe that all people are unique and have different experiences, stressing the significance of recognizing all genders (*ibidem*).

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<sup>4</sup> The third wave of feminism began in the mid-90's and was informed by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. For more information of the third wave, the reader should see the following source: Rampton, M. (2015). *Four Waves of Feminism, Feminism*, Pacific University Oregon, 1-10.

## MAY 68

When thinking of May 68, one's mind wanders back to the largest protest movements after the World War II, not only in France, but in the United States of America (USA) and the Federal Republic of Germany<sup>5</sup> (Gilcher-Holtey, 2013, p. 253). Everyone, especially young adults, could see the contradictions in society and how their expectations towards it were so different from reality.

After a period of restrictions and repression, Europe was finally free, however, the gaps in prosperity, inequalities, racial discrimination remained, if not increased (Studer, 2011 p.44). The May 68 in France began later in comparison with the other nations, which did not make it less colossal. In fact, it began with a small student movement<sup>6</sup> that eventually overshadowed the protests of the USA and Germany. It erupted into a general strike that immobilized the entire nation of France (Gilcher-Holtey, 2013, p. 259).

The student movements in France were viewed as “*groupes minuscules*”<sup>7</sup>, yet interestingly enough they transformed into a mass movement in only 10 days. With the student movements, soon after came the workers' strikes (about 7.5 to 9 million workers refused to work in a matter of days) who were totally against the environment and discrimination within the industry (*idem*, p. 263).

When the workers realized that the government was accepting the student activists stipulations, they thought: “If the government submitted to the students why shouldn't it submit to us?” (Gavi, 1968, as cited in Gilcher-Holtey, 2013, p. 264). The government tried to negotiate new wage agreements with the strike unions, however the manifestations and strikes were far from being over (Gilcher-Holtey, 2013, p. 264).

The President Charles de Gaulle<sup>8</sup> left France abruptly, making the population believe that he would resign, but on May 30 there was a turning point for the revolution. The

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<sup>5</sup> These protests were movements of dissidents from traditional leftist parties. They were movements of “*Nouvelle gauche*” in France, “New left” in the USA and “*Die Neue Linke*” in Germany. For more information on May '68, the reader should see: Gilcher-Holtey, I. (1998). May 1968 in France: *The Rise and Fall of a New Social Movement*.

<sup>6</sup> The student movement arose out of a general crisis in the university system that affected the learning environment, career prospects, and students' life plans. For more information on May '68, the reader should refer to: Boudon, R. (1971). Sources of Student Protest in France. *American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 395, 139–149.

<sup>7</sup> Up to that point, French newspapers, including the Communist Party organ *L'Humanite* characterised the student movement as “tiny groups” and “adventurous extremists.”

<sup>8</sup> Charles de Gaulle was a French general and politician who led the Free French Army during World War II. From 1944 to 1946, he presided over the Provisional Government of the French Republic and restored French democracy. After that, he became the President of France.

president returned, dissolved the National Assembly and postponed the referendum. With that, the strikes started to alleviate, many workers returned to work, and even though students were the last to surrender, the protests eventually ended and life across France resumed to its normal, even if never completely the same (Silvera, 1972, p.344-346).

## **WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN FRANCE**

The 1968 protagonists try to remake everything, deciding how to change the old order and bring in the new (Studer, 2011, p. 38-39). With the euphoria and aspirations of the movements in 68, came along the feminists<sup>9</sup>. The women that participated in the radical left movements of May'68, came to the realization that despite the protesters desire to reform society, they had no intention of addressing the prejudice against women (Kaufmann-McCall, 1983, p. 283).

With this, the women of the time decided that they, too, needed to form their own movement. After May'68, the French society still demanded from the population a sense of conform and obedience towards the government, something that the previous feminists were agreeing on. However, the feminist of 68 did not want to subject themselves to the same as the prior feminist did, they did not want to compromise and wanted their ideas to be heard (Greenwald, 1996, p.45).

The Women's liberation Movement became popular in 1970 after a group of feminists performed a demonstration at the *Arc de Triomphe tomb*<sup>10</sup> dedicated for the soldier-wife. Subsequently, the French press coined the term "*Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*" (MLF) making the comparison of the similarity with the women's liberation movement in the United States<sup>11</sup> (Kaufmann-McCall, 1983, p. 283).

The MLF feminists had extremely disparate ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and even familial circumstances, which at first seemed inexplicable. At that time, it

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, feminists had existed for a long time, but by the spring of 68, feminists who were considered very radical, began to find a language to express their grievances and saw feminism as a distinct political movement.

<sup>10</sup>It contains the remains of a soldier who died in World War I and is recognized in a symbolic memory of all soldiers who have died for France. For more information, the reader should go to the following source: Delaney, B. (2022) The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

<sup>11</sup> The women's liberation movement in the United States is known as WLM. For more information see: Burley, S., & Forster, L. C. (2016). Historicising the Women's Liberation Movement. *Women's History Review*, 25(5), 697-700, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1132872>

was a new beginning for them, choosing completely personal and professional choices, but one thing remained: their common discrimination for being a woman (Picq, 1994). Quoting the professor of contemporary history of Switzerland, Studer (2011), that says:

The life of each woman was undoubtedly unique; but discrimination was common to them all. Women did not always identify with other women, and sometimes did not even see themselves as a 'woman' at all. But, in the final analysis, they were all socially perceived as women, and this categorization of the individual – in the estimation of the new women's movement – always entailed a gender-specific form of discrimination. (Studer, 2011, p.54)

The MLF refused any organization or structure, in order to always express their beliefs and be protected by the ideology of men, making it the most intense movement of all France. It helped French society to adapt and adjust to all sexes, challenging the government and its laws (Picq, 1994 p. 6). And even though MLF is not the current contemporary movement, feminist itself is not over. Through the years, one may observe how it has persisted, repressed most of the time, but engraved in the culture memory of each person (Picq, 2002).

## **CONCLUSION**

The May '68 played a huge impact on the MLF in France, with new ideas, new mindsets and, in general, a new desire of living life. Its effects were tremendous across France and in women, not only at that time, but in the future generations of feminists to come. The women's movement sought the radical idea, already proclaimed in May '68, that everything that is personal is political. And by doing so, it tried to eliminate the barriers made by the bourgeoisie society of that time.

They were the new generation, the children of the May'68 events, that did not want to conform with the society and wanted to be heard, with the aspiration of not committing the same mistakes as the feminists of the past.

Feminism is a concept that provides a great challenge when being described, nonetheless, it is essential to study and comprehend this topic. Particularly for those who

want to understand and see what has been done in history by women in their search for equality. The feminist movement did not start, neither did it end, on that period of time. There is still a long path to be fulfilled before women finally feel accepted, equal and free in the current society.

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