

Secularism and Feminism in the UK: What are people's perceptions of feminism and secularism?


Introduction

Feminism and secularism are both contested terms in academic literature, as much discourse surrounds the need and misconceptions of their definitions, their current aims, how they need to be considered for future societal progression and how the movements affect one another. However, academic understandings of feminism and secularism are often accused of being disjointed with how the general public perceive them (Gillis et al 41 and 218). By considering survey data from 43 British participants, responses will be compared against literature to theorise what the prominent viewpoints are and what aspects of the movements are still misunderstood. With reference to the unique British case, the data will help suggest how society should consider these movements to increase understanding, equality, and safe spaces for its communities.

Much debate exists simply around defining feminism. Some feminists have argued that by giving a definition, it may be irrevocably fixed in that interpretation (Thompson 172). However, Thompson rightly defends the need for definition, as it initiates conversation, allowing for it to be understood, discussed, and reinterpreted if necessary (172). The refusal by feminists to give a definition may create a lack of understanding, potentially leading many to believe implicit definitions which often undermine, contradict, or confuse the purpose of the movement (Thompson 173). Thompson describes feminism as a movement fighting for women to have an equal human status (173). This is how feminism will be considered throughout the essay.

Secularism is highly debated. The consequences of the Enlightenment way of thinking that, in a secular society, religion needs to be exiled to the private sphere and considered only for the non-white, non-Western women, has meant religion and secularism are often considered dichotomous (Aune 33). Past studies focused on identifying individuals as either religious or secular (Gross 9). This has led to many feminists, especially those religious, opposed to secularism, with some feminist critics accusing secularism of not allowing for cultural authenticity (Aune 47, Gillis et al 225). Kettell, however, describes secularism as a commitment of the state to remain neutral toward religious affairs, neither favouring, disfavouring, promoting, or encouraging any particular beliefs or views (3). This definition is ideal as it frames secularism without pitting it against religion or culture.

Most of the survey will help examine whether the general public demonstrate similar interpretations of feminism and secularism to Thompson's and Kettell's or whether they show diverse opinions comparable to academic discourse. One question will consider the overlap of the movements. Many critics discuss secular feminism and religious feminism as though they are contradictory (Reilly 7). Sahgal rightly argues the opposite. Instead, secular values are crucial for women's rights since they



ensure freedom of **and** from religion, as a freedom from religious control is a significant feature of women and minority groups' struggles (Sahgal 53-54). Without a secular society, freedom of expression could be threatened due to criticisms of religious figures or religion itself viewed as blasphemy (Sahgal 56). This would threaten women's dissent against oppressive practices and how they wish to live religiously. Secularism also needs to be examined in relevance to the British case (Sahgal 53). Although many critics often view France as the Western secular standard, where religion and state are mutually exclusive, Britain differs as much of its response to a growing multi-faith society has been to pluralise the state-religion relations rather than destroy them (Modood 6). Therefore, it is likely that British participants will view secularism more positively than many of their Western counterparts. Sahgal's argument manipulates secularism to be advantageous for religious and non-religious feminists rather than creating divides. This is the main argument this survey hopes to prove; that secularism is advantageous and holds similar values to feminism.

Methodology

The data was collected through a survey containing ten questions. The survey was shared via an anonymous link on social media and the snowball effect was used to involve more participants. The sample size was kept small as a larger sample would result in difficult analysis of the qualitative answers and 43 participants were enough to discuss a select number of views and how perhaps their characteristics affect this.

Three of the questions focused on the participant personally, by asking their age range, whether they are a university student/graduate and whether they considered themselves religious. These questions were included to look for patterns and to see what this could mean for social progression. The question on religion was phrased as "Would you consider yourself religious?" with the possible responses "Yes/No/Unsure", participants were not asked to specify any religious belief, as it would be unnecessary since it is not the intention of the survey is to distinguish. Gender was not asked, as this was also not necessary for the research's intent. There was concern that in needing to specify a gender, participants would feel pressured to answer a certain way. Imbalances in research has been reportedly caused by tendencies of gender studies to focus solely on women's responses, therefore this bias was avoided (Osselaer and Buerman 30).

Participants were asked to define feminism and secularism, whether they considered themselves feminists or secularists, how important they considered both movements for the progression of society on a rating scale of 5 (very important) to 1 (not important at all) and whether they considered both movements to overlap or not. Quantitative and qualitative questions were asked, as although many feminists prefer qualitative methods for the ability to uncover individual voices, quantitative questions provide clear valuable statistical evidence of inequalities (Aune 37). The questions were vague on purpose, so participants did not feel prompted to answer a certain way.

Findings

The data shows that religious participants were more likely to consider themselves feminists, 88.89% of religious participants answered yes to being a feminist whereas only 78.79% of non-religious participants considered themselves feminists. These statistics are surprising, as religious institutions are often accused of oppressing women, since misogynistic arguments are usually theological or scriptural (Howland et al 197, Gemzöe et al 326). However, critics acknowledge that much of religious feminism has been written out of women's history and it needs further examination (Gemzöe et al 299). Therefore, feminists in public and academic spaces need to reassess the place of religion in feminism.

However, religious participants were much less likely to consider themselves secularists, as only 22.22% said yes and 55.56% answered no compared to 63.64% of non-religious participants who said yes and only 6.06% said no. This could be due to the common perception of secularism as antithetical to religion (Reilly 27). One religious participant defined secularism as "A belief that all human interactions should be conducted outside the control and influence of any religion", this implies they view religion and secularism as dichotomous. There is a necessary distinction to make between radical and moderate secularism as all forms of secularism are often grouped with the former (Modood 4). Radical secularism is where religion and politics are believed to have no and need no connection whereas moderate secularism is where both may be individual but there are points of intersection (Modood 4). Britain is most likely moderately secular as the state often welcomes religious diversity rather than excludes it (Modood 7). Kettell's definition fits this idea of moderate secularism, as the state can remain neutral when considering state-religion overlaps.

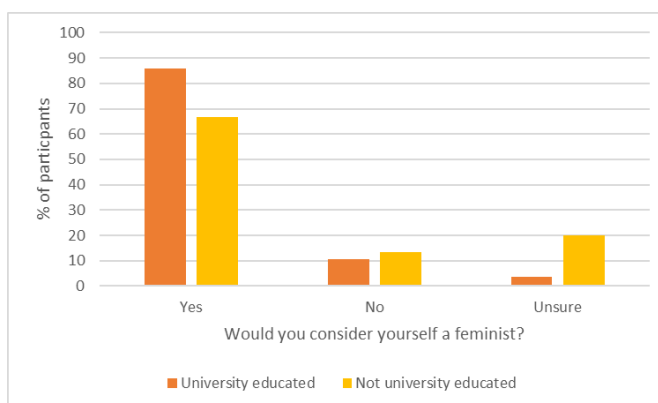


Figure 1

The data for whether participants considered themselves feminists distributed by who were or once were in higher education compared to those who are not is shown in *Figure 1*. The chart shows that those who have been university educated were more likely to consider themselves feminists, by around 19%, while there was not much of a difference between those who did not consider

themselves feminists. However, those not university educated were more likely to be unsure by around 16%.

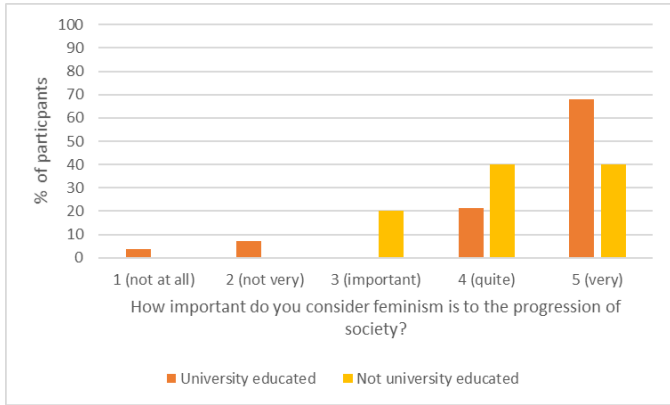


Figure 2

Interestingly, although more of those university educated considered feminism very important to the progression of society (as shown in Figure 2), 100% of those not university educated considered it is at least important whereas only 89% of those who are university educated considered it as important.

The data suggests that higher education does not have a substantial impact on participants views on feminism or its importance. Only 2.33% were unsure on how to define feminism, perhaps due to the media attention around feminism that, regardless of education, people have consumed. For example, Beyonce sampled Chimamanda Ngozi’s definition of feminist in her song “Flawless” which has over 92 million views online, meaning that feminism has become popular in mainstream pop culture (Knowles-Carter, YouTube). Therefore, the general public’s perceptions of feminism are often well-developed and similar to ones in literature.

The data suggests that higher education

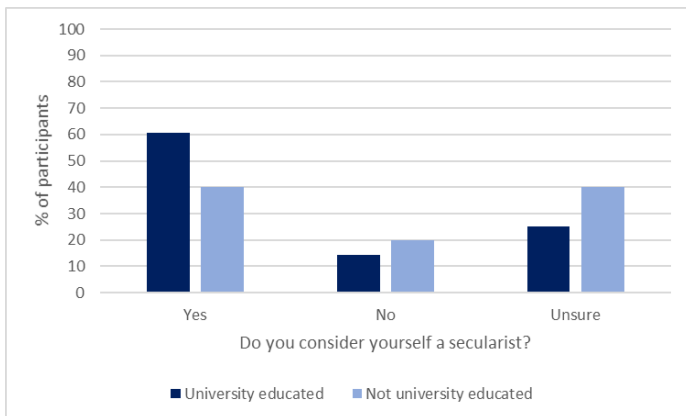


Figure 3

The data for whether participants who have been university educated or not consider themselves secularists is very different. As shown in Figure 3, there is a similar pattern to Figure 1 that those in higher education are more likely to consider themselves secularists. However, there was a lot more uncertainty compared to the feminism data.

Figure 4 shows how dispersed the responses for whether participants considered secularism to be important for progression. Although the data is skewed more towards its importance, there is little correlation between education and how participants responded.

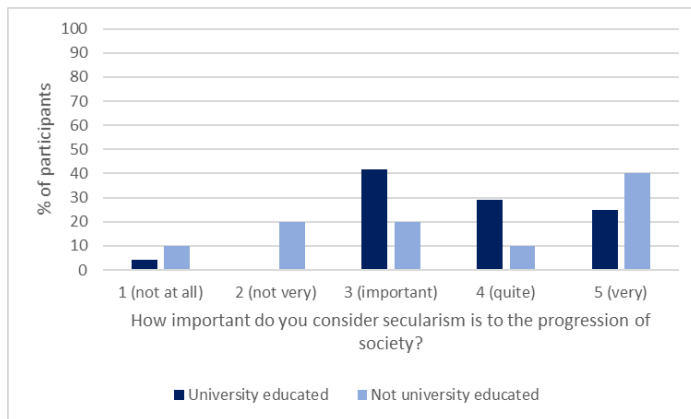


Figure 4

23.26% of participants were unsure how to define secularism, with another participant admitting after their definition that they “did have to google that”. This suggests that, unlike feminism, secularism is not as understood or discussed in general circles like it is in literature. This could be due to a lack of mainstream media attention. Perhaps it is also due to the

stigma surrounding secularism, as secularists are often accused of being Western (Sahgal 53). The misconception of secularism as antithetical to religion and Western leaves people uncomfortable to consider themselves secular, with Westerners fearing being labelled imperialistic and non-Westerners being labelled as traitorous to their non-secular communities (Howland et al 186).

The data by age groups was unexpected. The older ages, 40-50 and 51-61 showed the highest percentages of participants being feminists, with 85.71%, and 51-61 age group were the most likely to consider themselves secularist with 71.43%. It was first assumed the younger generations would be more secular and feminist due to being less religious and therefore, more likely to reject traditional practices that are perhaps considered oppressive (Aune 48). Walton, however, comments that when lecturing feminist theology, the age of women enrolling was increasing (Gemzöe et al 291). Many of the older students were new to feminist theory, having found it spoke to their life experiences. This suggests that even though the UK is decreasing religiously generationally, perhaps older people are using their experiences to grow and expand into feminist and secularist theory (Aune 48). Perhaps the younger generations are not more progressive as first thought. People often make assumptions of those outside their age group and this needs to be avoided hereafter for better, unbiased research (Gillis et al 32).


Some responses were not supportive of the movements. One participant described feminism as “In its first and second waves: A movement to promote the empowerment of and protect the rights of women. In its third wave: it’s essentially an anti-men movement which belittles real issues affecting women”. Studies show that young women are likely to assume women are already liberated and when they would view gender discrimination, it was often viewed on other women’s bodies, usually non-Western women (Gemzöe et al 132). The misconception of Western women as liberated and non-Western women as helpless diminishes both groups agencies and pits them against one another. It is imperialistic to view women’s struggles relative to Western ideas of freedom and liberation, as it can deny women’s rights as they often develop different concepts of liberation in their alternative social contexts (Gross et al 174-175, Mufti 17). At the same time, viewing third-

wave feminism in the UK as a “movement which belittles real issues affecting women” suggests current struggles in Western patriarchal societies are motiveless. UK third-wave feminism is fairly new, having only received academic and media attention in recent years (Aune 36). Third-wave feminists show a higher level of support for more radical feminist critiques (Aune 36). Perhaps a recent surge in radical theory appears “anti-men”. Tensions in recent decades inside the movement, between radical and socialist feminists and between different, classes, races, and sexualities has meant the aims of feminism politically have become harder to identify and support (Gillis et al 41). However, an important feature of third-wave feminism includes attention to intersectionality (Aune 35-36). Therefore, perhaps with a focus on intersectionality, the goals of the movement can be reassessed and refined.

The responses to whether participants thought feminism and secularism overlap were diverse. 25.58% of participants view feminism and secularism as two separate movements, 32.56% were unsure and 41.86% saw some sort of overlap. Participants who viewed them as separate movements explained as “religion could still be an important part of a feminist life.” This shows the view of religion as antithetical to secularism is a prevalent viewpoint among the general British public. One participant who saw overlap reflected that “religion is a significant contributor of women’s modern injustices”. It is necessary to point out these contributing oppressive practices are often more cultural than religious, such as veiling, despite being pushed by fundamentalists as religious (Sahgal 54). This only helps lessen the impact of secularism, as people blur the line between freedom of belief and freedom of expression (Bennoune 370). Only 27.90% of participants’ responses expressed similar views to Sahgal’s. Therefore, society and literature need to assert how vital secularism is for the implementation of women’s human rights (Bennoune 368) and how non-Western Muslim feminists can use secularism alongside their religious beliefs to exercise their rights (Gross et al 372).

It is important to evaluate whether feminism and secularism benefit society or whether other movements need to be considered. Feminism has shown a large presence in both academic and public spaces, resulting in much conversation. Although some participants disfavoured the movement, there is overriding support for feminism and its importance to societal progression. To avoid contempt and misinformation, academics and activists alike should work on how feminism is perceived, particularly developing the conversation on third-wave feminism as previously mentioned.

Although 23.26% of participants were unsure on secularism, there is overall support for secularism and its benefits for society. This is perhaps due to British politics being moderately secular. Some academics argue for a post-secular movement, as it challenges Western feminism which is historically considered to be secular and against non-Western practices. (Gemzöe et al 11). Although in academia, post-secularism has brought about useful deconstruction of tradition/religion and modernity/secularity binary’s, the concept is often confusing and lacks a necessary transition point



from the secularism movement (Gemzöe et al 11, Mufti 9). Post-secularism would also normalise certain religious and practices and forms of authority to represent 'the people' (Mufti 18). The post-secular movement is therefore worrying, as considering the veiling of Muslim women, this would give religious leaders powers to enforce women to cover. The campaign to cover helps gender segregation and discrimination even though it is often glossed over as a compulsory religious right (Sahgal 54). Secularism, on the other hand, helps many religious women practice their faith freely while allowing them to criticise cultural practices and their male Muslim peers (Gross et al 178). Therefore, it is unnecessary to look to confusing movements when developing current movements would provide women with more freedoms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the data showed that members of the general British public were predominantly supportive of feminism and secularism movements, possibly due to mainstream interest in feminism and increasing state-religion support in moderately secular Britain. Participants were more uncertain on the potential overlap of the movements and the view of religion and secularism as antithetical was evident. Religion, age, and education played a role somewhat in forming opinions, mostly of uncertainty surrounding the movements. The concepts of other movements such as post-secularism and why current movements are criticised were explored but overall, it was found that feminism and secularism need to be more prevalently discussed and utilised to provide safe spaces for women, particularly religious and non-Western women.

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