



London SlutWalk: women asserting their right to dress as they wish.

GETTING STARTED

- 1 In pairs, write down as many feminist ideas as you can recall from topics you have already studied. Include concepts, studies, names of sociologists and issues.
- 2 Pool your results as a class.
- 3 As a class, discuss your pooled results to identify any common themes linking the issues.

Learning objectives

After studying this Topic, you should:

- Know the main types of feminist theories.
- Understand the similarities and differences between feminist theories.
- Be able to evaluate the strengths and limitations of feminist theories.

FEMINIST THEORIES

Feminism sees society as male dominated and it seeks to describe, explain and change the position of women in society. It is therefore both a theory of women's subordination and a political movement.

The roots of feminism, like those of other modernist theories, can be traced back to the 18th century Enlightenment. This proclaimed universal principles of liberty and equality, along with the idea that human reason can liberate us from ignorance and create a better society.

Feminists argued that, since both sexes have the same power of reason, these principles should apply to women as much as to men and that women's emancipation must be included as part of the Enlightenment project.

A 'first wave' of feminism appeared in the late 19th century, with the suffragettes' campaign for the right to vote. The 1960s saw a 'second wave' emerge on a global scale.

Since then, feminism has had a major influence on sociology. Feminists criticise mainstream sociology for being 'malestream' – seeing society only from a male perspective. By contrast, feminists examine society from the viewpoint of women. Feminist sociologists see their work as part of the struggle against women's subordination.

However, although all feminists oppose women's subordination, there are disagreements among feminists about its causes and how to overcome it. In this Topic, we concentrate on those feminist theories that have had most impact on sociology.

Liberal or reformist feminism

Liberals are concerned with the human and civil rights and freedoms of the individual. In keeping with the Enlightenment tradition, they believe that all human beings should have equal rights. Since both men and women are human beings, so both should have the same inalienable rights and freedoms. Reformism is the idea that progress towards equal rights can be achieved by gradual reforms or piecemeal changes in society, without the need for revolution.

Laws and policies Liberal feminists (sometimes called reformist or 'equal rights' feminists) believe women can achieve gender equality in this way. For example, they argue that laws and policies against sex discrimination in employment and education can secure equal opportunities for women.

Cultural change Liberal feminists also call for cultural change. In their view, traditional prejudices and stereotypes about gender differences are a barrier to equality. For example, beliefs that women are less rational and more dominated by emotion and instinct are used to legitimate their exclusion from decision-making roles and their confinement to childrearing and housework. Liberal feminists reject the idea that biological differences make women less competent or rational than men, or that men are biologically less emotional or nurturing.

Sex and gender

Like Ann Oakley (1972), liberal feminists distinguish between sex and gender:

- **Sex** refers to biological differences between males and females, such as their reproductive role, hormonal and physical differences.

- **Gender** refers to culturally constructed differences between the 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles and identities assigned to males and females. It includes the ideas that cultures hold about the abilities of males and females, such as whether they are capable of rationality. These ideas are transmitted through socialisation.

While sex differences are seen as fixed, gender differences vary between cultures and over time. Thus, what is considered a proper role for women in one society or at one time may be disapproved of or forbidden in another. For example, until fairly recently it was rare to see women bus drivers in Britain, but this is now quite common, while in Saudi Arabia women are forbidden to drive any vehicle.

For liberal feminists, then, sexist attitudes and stereotypical beliefs about gender are culturally constructed and transmitted through socialisation. Therefore, to achieve gender equality, we must change society's socialisation patterns. Hence, liberal feminists seek to promote appropriate role models in education and the family – for example, female teachers in traditional male subjects, or fathers taking responsibility for domestic tasks. Similarly, they challenge gender stereotyping in the media. Over time, they believe, such actions will produce cultural change and gender equality will become the norm.

Liberal feminism is an optimistic theory, very much in keeping with the Enlightenment project and its faith in progress. Liberal feminists believe that:

- **Changes in socialisation and culture** are gradually leading to more rational attitudes to gender and overcoming ignorance and prejudice.
- **Political action to introduce anti-discriminatory laws and policies** is steadily bringing about progress

to a fairer society in which a person's gender is no longer important.

Activity Webquest

'SlutWalks' and feminism

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Liberal feminism can be seen as a critique of the functionalist view of gender roles. Functionalists such as Parsons distinguish between instrumental and expressive roles:

- **Instrumental roles** are performed in the *public sphere* of paid work, politics, and decision-making. This sphere involves rationality, detachment and objectivity.
- **Expressive roles** are performed in the *private sphere* of unpaid domestic labour, childrearing and caring for family members. This sphere involves emotion, attachment and subjectivity.

In Parsons' view, instrumental roles are the domain of men, while expressive roles are the domain of women.

Liberal feminism challenges this division. It argues that men and women are equally capable of performing roles in both spheres, and that traditional gender roles prevent both men and women from leading fulfilling lives. Liberal feminism aims to break down the barrier between the two spheres.

However, despite its critique of the functionalist view of gender divisions, liberal feminism is the feminist theory closest to a consensus view of society. Although it

Radical feminism

Radical feminism emerged in the early 1970s. Its key concept is patriarchy. Literally, this means 'rule by fathers', but it has come to mean a society in which men dominate women. Radical feminists make the following claims:

- Patriarchy is universal: male domination of women exists in all known societies. According to Shulamith Firestone (1974), the origins of patriarchy lie in women's biological capacity to bear and care for infants, since performing this role means they become dependent on males.
- Patriarchy is the primary and most fundamental form of inequality and conflict. The key division is between men and women. Men are women's main enemy.
- All men oppress all women. All men benefit from patriarchy – especially from women's unpaid domestic labour and from their sexual services.

recognises conflicts between men and women, these are not seen as inevitable but merely a product of outdated attitudes. Moreover, women's emancipation is a 'win-win' situation from which men too will gain. For example, ending the gender division of labour would allow men to express their 'feminine' nurturing side, which current gender stereotypes force them to suppress.

Evaluation of liberal feminism

In sociology, studies conducted by liberal feminists have produced evidence documenting the extent of gender inequality and discrimination, and legitimising the demand for reform in areas such as equal pay and employment practices, media representations of gender, and so on. Their work has also helped to demonstrate that gender differences are not inborn but the result of different treatment and socialisation patterns.

However, liberal feminists are criticised for over-optimism. They see the obstacles to emancipation as simply the prejudices of individuals or irrational laws that can be gradually reformed away by the onward 'march of progress'. They ignore the possibility that there are deep-seated structures causing women's oppression, such as capitalism or patriarchy. As Sylvia Walby (1997) argues, they offer no explanation for the overall structure of gender inequality.

Marxist feminists and radical feminists argue that liberal feminism fails to recognise the underlying causes of women's subordination and that it is naïve to believe that changes in the law or attitudes will be enough to bring equality. Instead, they believe that far-reaching, revolutionary changes are needed.

The personal is political

For radical feminists, patriarchal oppression is direct and personal. It occurs not only in the public sphere of work and politics, but also in the private sphere of the family, domestic labour and sexual relationships. Radical feminists see the personal as political. All relationships involve power and they are political when one person dominates another. Personal relationships are therefore political because men dominate women through them. Radical feminists refer to these power relationships as *sexual politics*.

Radical feminists therefore focus on the ways in which patriarchal power is exercised through personal relationships, often through sexual or physical violence or the threat of it. This has the effect of controlling all women,

not just those against whom it is exercised. For example, as Susan Brownmiller (1976) notes, fear of rape is a powerful deterrent against women going out alone at night.

Application

Suggest three ways in which patriarchal power may be exercised within the family.

Sexuality Radical feminism also sheds new light on the nature of sexuality. In general, mainstream sociology regards sexuality as a natural biological urge – and therefore outside the scope of sociology.

By contrast, radical feminists argue that patriarchy constructs sexuality so as to satisfy men's desires. For example, women are portrayed in pornography as passive sex objects and penetration as the main source of sexual pleasure. Similarly, Adrienne Rich (1981) argues that men continue to force women into a narrow and unsatisfying 'compulsory heterosexuality'.

Change

Given that patriarchy and women's oppression are reproduced through personal and sexual relationships, these must be transformed if women are to be free. Radical feminists have proposed a number of solutions or strategies to achieve this. These include:

Separatism Given that men's oppression of women is exercised through intimate domestic and sexual relationships, some radical feminists advocate separatism – that is, living apart from men and thereby creating a new culture of female independence, free from patriarchy.

For example, Germaine Greer (2000) argues for the creation of all-female or 'matrilocal' households as an alternative to the heterosexual family.

Consciousness-raising Through sharing their experiences in women-only consciousness-raising groups, women come to see that other women face the same problems. This may lead to collective action, such as 'SlutWalk' marches.

Marxist feminism

Marxist feminists dismiss the liberal feminist view that women's subordination is merely the product of stereotyping or outdated attitudes. They also reject the radical feminist view that it is the result of patriarchal oppression by men. Instead, as Marxists, they see women's

Political lesbianism Many radical feminists argue that heterosexual relationships are inevitably oppressive because they involve 'sleeping with the enemy' and that lesbianism is the only non-oppressive form of sexuality.

Evaluation of radical feminism

Radical feminists' idea that the personal is political reveals how intimate relationships can involve domination. They draw attention to the political dimension of areas such as marriage, domestic labour, domestic violence, rape and pornography. However, radical feminism is criticised on several grounds.

Marxists assert that class, not patriarchy, is the primary form of inequality. They also argue that capitalism is the main cause and beneficiary of women's oppression, and not men, as radical feminism claims.

Radical feminism offers no explanation of why female subordination takes different forms in different societies. Similarly, it assumes all women are in the same position and ignores class, ethnic etc differences between women. A middle-class woman may have more in common with a middle-class man than with a working-class woman.

Anna Pollert (1996) argues that the concept of patriarchy is of little value because it involves a circular argument. For example, male violence is explained as patriarchy, while patriarchy is seen as being maintained by male violence – so patriarchy is maintaining itself!

Radical feminism has an inadequate theory of how patriarchy will be abolished. Critics argue that vague utopian notions of separatism are unlikely to be achievable. Jenny Somerville (2000) argues that heterosexual attraction makes it unlikely that the nuclear family will be replaced by single-sex households.

Patriarchy may already be in decline. Liberal feminists argue that women's position has improved greatly in recent years as a result of social reforms and changing attitudes. Better education, job opportunities etc mean that gender equality is beginning to become a reality.

While drawing attention to male violence against women, radical feminism neglects women's violence against men and violence within lesbian relationships.

subordination as rooted in capitalism. Although individual men may benefit from women's subordination, the main beneficiary is capitalism.

For Marxist feminists, women's subordination in capitalist society results from their primary role as unpaid homemaker,

which places them in a dependent economic position in the family. Their subordination performs a number of important functions for capitalism:

- **Women are a source of cheap, exploitable labour** for employers. They can be paid less because it is assumed they will be partially dependent on their husbands' earnings.
- **Women are a reserve army of labour** that can be moved into the labour force during economic booms and out again at times of recession. They can be treated as marginal workers in this way because it is assumed their primary role is in the home.
- **Women reproduce the labour force** through their unpaid domestic labour, both by nurturing and socialising children to become the next generation of workers and by maintaining and servicing the current generation of workers – their husbands. They do this at no cost to capitalism.
- **Women absorb anger** that would otherwise be directed at capitalism. Fran Ansley (1972) describes wives as 'takers of shit' who soak up the frustration their husbands feel because of the alienation and exploitation they suffer at work. For Marxist feminists, this explains male domestic violence against women.

Because of these links between women's subordination and capitalism, Marxist feminists argue that women's interests lie in the overthrow of capitalism.

Application

- 1 What do (a) nurturing and socialising the next generation of workers and (b) maintaining and servicing the current generation actually involve?
- 2 How might women's domestic role enable capitalists to pay male workers less?

Barrett: the ideology of familism

All Marxist feminists agree that women's subordination within the family performs important *economic* functions for capitalism. However, some argue that non-economic factors must also be taken into account if we are to understand and change women's position. For example, Michèle Barrett (1980) argues that we must give more emphasis to women's consciousness and motivations, and to the role of *ideology* in maintaining their oppression.

For example, why do women marry and live in the conventional nuclear family when this is precisely what oppresses them? According to Barrett, the answer lies in the ideology of 'familism'. This ideology presents the nuclear family and its sexual division of labour (where women perform unpaid domestic work) as natural and normal. The family is portrayed as the only place where women can

attain fulfilment, through motherhood, intimacy and sexual satisfaction. This ideology helps to keep women subordinated.

Therefore, while Barrett believes that the overthrow of capitalism is necessary to secure women's liberation, she argues that it is not sufficient. We must also overthrow the ideology of familism that underpins the conventional family and its unequal division of labour. This would free the sexes from restrictive stereotypes and ensure domestic labour was shared equally.

Some feminists take the analysis of ideology further to explain why women seem to freely accept oppressive family and marital relationships. These writers often draw on non-Marxist and even non-sociological ideas. For example, Juliet Mitchell (1975) uses Freud's psychoanalytic theory to argue that ideas about femininity are so deeply implanted in women's unconscious minds that they are very difficult to dislodge. The implication is that even after the overthrow of capitalism, it would still be hard to overcome patriarchal ideology because it is so deeply rooted.

Evaluation of Marxist feminism

Given the importance of economic production to most other areas of social life, Marxist feminists are correct to give weight to the relationship between capitalism and women's subordination. They show a greater understanding of the importance of structural factors than liberal feminism. However, Marxist feminism is criticised on several grounds.

It fails to explain women's subordination in non-capitalist societies. As women's subordination is also found in non-capitalist societies, it cannot be explained solely in terms of the needs of capitalism. However, in their defence, Marxist feminists are only seeking to explain the position of women in contemporary capitalist society.

Unpaid domestic labour may benefit capitalism, as Marxist feminists claim, but this doesn't explain why it is women and not men who perform it. Heidi Hartmann (1981) argues that this is because Marxism is 'sex-blind'.

Marxist feminism places insufficient emphasis on the ways in which men (including working-class men) – and not just capitalism – oppress women and benefit from their unpaid labour.

It is not proven that unpaid domestic labour is in fact the cheapest way of reproducing labour power. For example, it might be done more cheaply through the market or through state provision such as publicly funded nurseries.

Dual systems feminism

Dual systems feminists have sought to combine the key features of Marxist and radical feminism in a single theory. The two systems referred to are:

- **An economic system: capitalism**
- **A sex-gender system: patriarchy**

Patriarchal capitalism As we have seen, radical feminism regards patriarchy as the cause of women's oppression, while Marxist feminism sees capitalism as responsible. Dual systems theorists such as Heidi Hartmann (1979) see capitalism and patriarchy as two intertwined systems that form a single entity, 'patriarchal capitalism'. Like radical feminism, these theorists accept that patriarchy is universal, but they argue that patriarchy takes a specific form in capitalist societies.

From this viewpoint, to understand women's subordination, we must look at the relationship between their position both in the domestic division of labour (patriarchy) and in paid work (capitalism).

For example, domestic work limits women's availability for paid work – but the lack of work opportunities drives many women into marriage and economic dependence on a man. Thus, the two systems reinforce each other.

Similarly, Sylvia Walby (1988) argues that capitalism and patriarchy are inter-related. However, she argues that the

interests of the two are not always the same. In particular, they collide over the exploitation of female labour. While capitalism demands cheap female labour for its workforce, patriarchy resists this, wanting to keep women subordinated to men within the private, domestic sphere.

However, in the long run, capitalism is usually more powerful and so patriarchy adopts a strategy of segregation instead: women are allowed into the capitalist sphere of paid work, but only in low status 'women's' jobs, subordinated to men.

Walby's approach is useful because it shows how the two systems interact and structure one another, without assuming that their interests always coincide.

However, Anna Pollert (1996) argues that patriarchy is not actually a system in the same sense as capitalism, which is driven by its own internal dynamic of profit making. By contrast, 'patriarchy' is merely a descriptive term for a range of practices such as male violence and control of women's labour.

Difference feminism and poststructuralism

All the feminist perspectives we have examined so far assume that all women share a similar situation and similar experience of oppression. By contrast, 'difference feminists' do not see women as a single homogeneous group. They argue that middle-class and working-class women, white and black women, lesbian and heterosexual women have very different experiences of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, homophobia and so on.

Difference feminism argues that feminist theory has claimed a 'false universality' for itself – it claimed to be about all women, but in reality was only about the experiences of white, Western, heterosexual, middle-class women.

For example, by seeing the family only as a source of oppression, white feminists have neglected black women's experience of racial oppression. By contrast, many black feminists view the black family positively as a source of resistance against racism.

This criticism raises two important issues – the problem of essentialism, and the relationship of feminism to the Enlightenment project.

The problem of essentialism

As applied to gender, essentialism is the idea that all women share the same fundamental 'essence' – all women are essentially the same and all share the same experiences of oppression.

Difference feminists argue that liberal, Marxist and radical feminists are essentialist – they see all women as the same. As a result, they fail to reflect the diversity of women's experiences and they exclude other women and their problems.

For example, some difference feminists argue that the preoccupation of Western feminism with sexuality is irrelevant to women in poorer countries, where access to clean water and primary healthcare are far more pressing problems.

Poststructuralist feminism

Poststructuralist feminists such as Judith Butler (Butler and Scott, 1992) offer an alternative approach. Poststructuralism is concerned with *discourses* and *power/knowledge*.

Discourses are ways of seeing, thinking or speaking about something. The world is made up of many, often competing, discourses – for example, religious, scientific, medical and artistic.

By enabling its users to define others in certain ways, a discourse gives power over those it defines. For example, by defining childbirth as a medical condition and healthy women as patients, medical discourse empowers doctors and disempowers women. Knowledge is power – the power to define or 'constitute' the identities of others. (For more on poststructuralism, see [Topic 9](#).)

The Enlightenment project

Poststructuralists argue that the Enlightenment project, with its talk of reason, humanity and progress, is one such discourse – a form of power/knowledge. Butler uses this idea in her critique of existing feminist theories.

Butler argues that the Enlightenment ideals were simply a form of power/knowledge that legitimated domination by Western, white, middle-class males. These supposedly universal ideals that claimed to apply to all humanity in reality excluded women and other oppressed groups.

Similarly, Butler argues that the white, Western, middle-class women who dominate the feminist movement have falsely claimed to represent 'universal womanhood'. She concludes that feminists are wrong to believe they can adapt the Enlightenment project so that it somehow includes all women – because women are not a single entity who all share the same 'essence'.

For poststructuralism, there is no fixed essence of what it is to be a woman. Because our identities are constituted through discourses, and because there are many different discourses in different times and cultures, there can be no fixed entity called 'womanhood' that is the same everywhere.

For example, womanhood in Saudi Arabia is constituted partly by Islamic discourse. By contrast, womanhood in the West is constituted to a greater extent by the discourses of advertising and the media.

Butler argues that poststructuralism offers advantages for feminism. It enables feminists to 'de-construct' (analyse) different discourses to reveal how they subordinate women – as in the medicalisation of childbirth, for example. Thus, we can examine the discourses of medicine, sexuality, advertising, art, religion, science, pornography etc to uncover the power/knowledge by which they define and oppress women.

Different discourses give rise to different forms of oppression, and thus to different identities and experiences for women. Likewise, each discourse provokes its own distinct form of resistance and struggle, with its own aims and demands.

In Butler's view, therefore, by rejecting essentialism and by stressing the diversity of discourses, poststructuralism recognises and legitimates the diversity of women's lives and struggles, rather than prioritising some and excluding others.

Activity Discussion

Which feminism?

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Evaluation of poststructuralist feminism

While poststructuralist feminism seems to offer a theoretical basis for recognising the diversity of women's experiences and struggles, critics argue that it has weaknesses.

For example, Sylvia Walby (1992) agrees that there are differences among women, but she argues that there are also important similarities – they are all faced with patriarchy. For example, compared with men, women face a greater risk of low pay, domestic violence and sexual assault.

Similarly, celebrating difference may have the effect of dividing women into an infinite number of sub-groups, thereby weakening feminism as a movement for change.

Lynne Segal (1999) criticises poststructuralist feminism for abandoning any notion of real, objective social structures. Oppression is not just the result of discourses – it is about real inequality. Feminists should therefore continue to focus on the struggle for equality of wealth and income.

Topic Summary

Feminists study society from the viewpoint of women. They see women as subordinated by men, and seek to liberate women from oppression.

Liberal feminists seek legal reforms and changes in attitudes and socialisation to bring equality.

Radical feminists see patriarchy as the fundamental conflict in society – men are women's oppressors and separatism is the only solution.

Marxist feminists see capitalism rather than men as the main beneficiary of women's oppression.

Dual systems feminists regard patriarchy and capitalism as intertwined. **Difference and poststructuralist feminists** argue that other feminist theories are essentialist and disregard differences between women.

EXAMINING FEMINIST THEORIES

QuickCheck Questions

Check your answers at www.sociology.uk.net



- 1 What is meant by 'malestream' sociology?
- 2 Which type of feminist is most likely to believe equality can be gained through reforming legislation and changing attitudes?
- 3 Explain the difference between sex and gender.
- 4 Which feminist perspective argues that all men oppress all women?
- 5 True or false? Marxist feminists believe gender inequalities only benefit capitalism.
- 6 Suggest three ways women's subordination benefits capitalism.
- 7 How might capitalism and patriarchy reinforce each other?
- 8 Why do difference feminists criticise white Western feminists?
- 9 What is meant by 'essentialism'?
- 10 Suggest two criticisms of poststructuralist feminism.

Questions to try

Item A

All feminists argue that women occupy a subordinate position in society and all feminists wish to end this state of affairs. However, they differ about both the causes of the problem and its solution. For example, liberal feminists argue that traditional attitudes and cultural stereotypes about women's abilities have kept them subordinated, but that changes in laws, policies and socialisation patterns will gradually bring about gender equality.

However, both radical and Marxist feminists argue that women's oppression has deeper roots and requires more fundamental, revolutionary changes in order to end it.

- 1 Outline and explain two feminist views of the position of women in society. (10 marks)
- 2 Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate the contribution of feminists to our understanding of society. (20 marks)

The Examiner's Advice

Q1 Spend about 15 minutes on this question. Divide your time fairly equally between the two views. You don't need a separate introduction; just start on the first view. Possible feminist views include liberal, radical, Marxist, difference and poststructuralist feminism. Choose two of these views and describe each in some detail, showing how each one explains the position of women in society.

Do this by creating a 'chain of reasoning' (see **Box 4.1** in chapter 4). For example, radical feminists argue that patriarchy is the fundamental form of inequality: gender is the key social division and all men oppress all women. Patriarchy thus explains why women are subordinated economically, physically, sexually and socially, and why their subordination is so universal and persistent.

Apply examples from one or two topics such as domestic violence to illustrate your explanation. Use concepts and issues such as patriarchy, socialisation, the reserve army of labour, the ideology of familism, class and ethnic differences among women etc, as appropriate to the two views you have chosen.

Q2 Spend about 30 minutes on this question. The question asks about feminists plural, so you need to consider more than one – for example, liberal, radical, Marxist and difference feminism. Start by identifying what feminists have in common and then examine the different branches, using the relevant key concepts and issues for each branch.

These concepts include sex versus gender, patriarchy, socialisation, anti-discrimination policies, public and private spheres, sexual politics, separatism, the reserve army of labour, reproduction of the labour force, familism, dual systems, essentialism, the Enlightenment project and the diversity of female experience. Use examples from other topic areas such as the family or education, but make sure you apply them to feminist theory. You could also refer briefly to feminist views about methodology.

Rather than leaving evaluation to a separate 'block' at the end, evaluate as you go along. Use debates between different branches of feminism about the causes of and solutions to women's oppression, as well as using alternative theories such as functionalism, Marxism etc to challenge feminist views.