
UNIT 1 FORMATIVE FEMINISMS

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this first unit of the block on “Feminist Theories” we will begin by trying to achieve conceptual clarity regarding the theoretical perspectives on feminism. Through your study, you will realize that the term ‘Feminism’ is directed at changing the existing inequalities in the power relations between men and women. Feminist theories combine description, explanation, and prescription. Each theory attempts to describe women’s oppression, explains the causes and consequences, and prescribes strategies for women’s liberation. You will also see that feminist theories contradict the erroneous, unclear and irrational way of thinking and writing on the subject of women.

By formative feminisms we mean those early theories and political influences which came to shape the feminist movements from their inception in the early part of the 19th and through the 20th centuries. You have already been introduced to the history of women’s movements in Blocks 1 and 2 of this course, and some of the terms you will come across in this unit would be already familiar to you. Here, we will look at the theoretical frameworks of the formative feminisms so that you can view these in relation to the historical movements that you have read about earlier. The formative feminisms are Liberal, Marxist, Radical, and Socialist feminisms. Each theory presented in this unit has three broad sections - the informing political philosophy, its theoretical debates, and critiques of the theory.

The information presented here will strengthen your understanding of the historical shifts that have taken place in Western political thought and their long reaching impact on feminists from the 17th to the 20th century. You will also notice how the feminist thinkers of each period have employed similar or related concepts but contextualized them to their time, deftly challenging the patriarchal views about women. Moreover, you can also observe how each feminist theory pushes the frontiers of feminism further and provides space, scope and energy for new ideas to emerge. Finally, you will find that ‘Feminism’

is not a single, unidirectional theory. Rather, it branches out to encompass various focal aspects and areas of life as perceived and lived by both men and women at a particular point of time in history.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Recognize and describe the general characteristics of a feminist theory;
- Describe the different political philosophies that inform formative feminisms (i.e. Liberal, Marxist, Radical, and Socialist) in defining human nature and analyzing women's oppression;
- Examine the theoretical debates and thoughts of leading feminist thinkers and the liberating strategies suggested by each formative feminism; and
- Critique each formative feminist theory so as to understand the historical rise of successive feminisms.

1.3 LIBERALISM

In Block 1 of this course, you read about the evolution of various women's movements in the west as well as in India, and their linkages with a feminist consciousness or awareness about women's rights. These movements were energized by various theoretical perspectives of the time, and the theories in turn, evolved along with the movements. Therefore, feminist theories gain meaning when we locate them within broader philosophical and political perspectives of their times. Let us begin by looking at one such formative branch of feminism: Liberal Feminism.

Liberal feminism is a logical extension of traditional liberalism that emerged in the west, out of the rapid social, political and economic transformations of the late 1600s to 1700s. The period is called 'The Age of Reason' or 'The Age of Enlightenment'. For liberalists, the uniqueness of human nature is in the capacity of rationality. Human progress is in the onward march of human reason and knowledge. Individual dignity, equality, autonomy and self-fulfillment are esteemed as liberal values. Rationality is the property of individuals rather than of groups, and this mental capacity is possessed at least by all men in equal measures.

1.3.1 Conservative Liberals

The consensus among the conservative liberals was that the principles of rational individualism are not applicable to women. They inherited Aristotle's reductionism that "We should look on the female as being as it were a deformity,

though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature” (Aristotle, 1953). Thinkers like Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu and above all Rousseau wrote that women are biologically suited to play the roles of wives and mothers. They are by nature, emotional and passionate, and hence unsuited for work in the public sphere. The ‘Normative Dualism’ of Des Cartes divided mind from body. Rationality and associated mental capacities were ascribed to men while women, passionate and emotional, were identified with the body. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was committed to sexual dimorphism, in constructing a systematic difference between ‘rational man’ and ‘emotional woman’ and setting up complementary roles for men and women.

1.3.2 Liberal Feminist Voices

The 18th century liberal feminists argued that women as well as men had natural rights. The 19th century feminists extended the arguments in favour of equal rights for women under the law to own property and to vote. The contemporary liberal feminists adopt the theory of welfare state and demand that the State should actively pursue social reforms and ensure equal opportunities for women. They oppose laws that establish different rights for women and for men.

It was left to the early liberal feminists to argue that women were indeed capable of reasoning. Attempts were made to demonstrate that the liberal ideas of the Enlightenment could be applied to women as well as to men. Women’s voices were heard from both sides of the Atlantic demanding equal treatment with men. Let us discuss the views of some important liberal feminists as follows.

i) **Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)**

Liberal tradition emerged with the growth of capitalism. Mary Wollstonecraft was writing at a time when the economic and social position of European women was very low. The bourgeois women of the capitalist society were confined within the unproductive, idle condition of domestic life. Rose Marie Tong describes the situation in her *Feminist Thought*: “These women were the first to find themselves left at home with little productive, or income-generating, work to do. Married to wealthy professional and entrepreneurial men, these women had no incentive to work ...” (Tong, 1989, p. 13-14).

Wollstonecraft compared these women to the “feathered race”- the birds in cages who do nothing but plume themselves and “stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch” (Wollstonecraft, 1792). She surmised that if men were also caged in as women are, they too would be pleasure seeking and pleasure loving and be overtly emotional and passionate.

ii) **Harriet Taylor (1807-1850) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)**

Fifty years later, Harriet Taylor Mill (1807-1858) and her close friend John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) whom she married later, defended women's rights in a series of essays they published jointly and separately. Both Taylor and Mill differed from Wollstonecraft in demanding for women not only the same education as men to achieve sexual liberty, but also the civil liberties and economic activities that men enjoy. Harriet Taylor was the primary author of *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) and Mill was the author of *Subjection of Women* (1869). These works provided the first systematic defense of women's rights.

Mill and Harriet provided an Agenda for the next 200 years of liberal feminism by synthesizing both utilitarianism and libertarianism (Nye, 1988, p. 12-13). Utilitarians envisaged a society in which there is the greatest good for the greatest number of people while Libertarians claimed that freedom is the natural right of every human being. Mill and Harriet argued that women should be granted all political privileges, including the vote and the right to run for public office.

iii) **Betty Friedan (1929-2006)**

The leading figure in the 20th century liberal feminism is Betty Friedan (1929-2006), an American activist and writer. Her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1974), is credited with sparking of the 'second wave' of feminism. The second wave of feminists believed that women's liberation meant sexual equality and gender justice, and that social change can be achieved by constructing legislation and regulating employment practices. The 'feminine mystique' is the idea that women can find satisfaction exclusively in the traditional role of wife and Friedan attempts to explode this myth. Friedan analyzes the emptiness that middle class, suburban, white, heterosexual housewives experience in their domestic life. Frustrated, beleaguered, and bored, these women turn to adorning themselves. They hope in vain that sex will free them. Friedan calls this frustration 'a problem that has no name'. Friedan emphasizes that women should be freed from oppressive gender roles everywhere, in the academy, the forum, and the market place.

The *National Organization for Women*, co-founded by Friedan in 1966, aimed to bring women into the mainstream of American society in full partnership with men. Friedan joined other leading feminists (including Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, Fannie Lou Hamer, Bella Abzug, and Myrlie Evers-Williams) in founding the '*National Women's Political Caucus*' in 1971.

Liberal feminists are of two categories: i). *Classical feminists* who fought for the removal of discriminatory laws and ii). *Welfare feminists* who argued that government should take appropriate action to eliminate socio-economic, as well as legal impediments to women's progress. In general, both are known to depend heavily on legal remedies.

1.3.3 Liberating Strategies: Education and Employment

Liberal feminists believed that given equal education, women will be equally rational as men. This premise is explained by traditional and modern liberal feminists. Wollstonecraft forcefully argued against Rousseau's view that women are defective in reasoning. In his book, *Emile, ou de l'éducation (Emile, or On Education)* published in 1762, Rousseau emphasized the inegalitarian view that "... the entire education of women must be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to be loved and honored by them, to rear them when they are young, to care for them when they are grown up, to counsel and console, to make their lives pleasant and charming, these are the duties of women at all times" (Cited in Okin, 1983, p. 71). Rousseau also assumed that little girls always liked to sew rather than to read and write. Wollstonecraft repeatedly argued that women ought to be given the same education as men so that they would be capable of making free choices and assume responsibility for their own development.

Valerie Bryson points out that Wollstonecraft's quarrel with Rousseau is fourfold (Bryson, 1992, p.22-23):

- First, Wollstonecraft was convinced that the women of upper classes in her time were frivolous and vain not by nature but because of their socialization.
- Second, she affirms that women are equally capable of and entitled to a rational education.
- Third, the virtue of being a good wife or mother cannot be imposed on women; it must be freely chosen by women themselves and women should be given knowledge and education so as to make rational choices to be good wives and mothers.
- Fourth, if men and women are of equal worth, they must also have equal rights. Wollstonecraft advocates political liberalism that campaigns for women's suffrage and legal rights and equal participation in politics and paid employment with men.

According to Betty Friedan, many educated middle-class women of her time suffered from depression because of the ambiguous life imposed on them. As education developed their potentialities, domestic life demanded their fulfillment in childbearing and childrearing. Friedan advised the suburban housewives to get college education and then enter into full time, public work-force. **As education is intimately connected to employment and financial independence, liberal feminists like Betty Friedan emphasized its importance for women.**

Employment and career will enable women to earn and become economically independent of their husbands. J.S. Mill opined that by keeping women in an unnatural state, the nature of women has become an artificial thing. He wrote in *The Subjection of Women* that the power of earning is essential for the dignity of a woman. Friedan argued that equality and human dignity are not possible for women if they are not able to earn and 'only economic independence can free a woman to marry for love'. According to Taylor, women could be fully liberated if they were to work outside the home. So the right to vote is not enough but participation in the free market of capitalist society is necessary. A woman who is employed contributes to the family and also wins respect. But Mill was of the view that a fully liberated woman enters and leaves the labour market at will.

1.3.4 Marriage, Motherhood and Career

J.S. Mill believed that even if a woman receives the same education, economic opportunities and civil liberties, she will prefer marriage and motherhood over other competing occupations. But Taylor claimed that given a free choice, a woman will choose a career in arts, business or politics instead of marriage and motherhood.

Friedan insisted on women entering a career. She argued that if a woman spends her whole time in the role of a wife or mother and has no time for a career, she will not develop into a full person. But Friedan failed to explain how to combine marriage and motherhood with a career without bringing in major structural changes within, as well as, outside the family. Later, Friedan admitted that it is not easy to combine marriage and career. Instead of calling women back into the private sphere, she exhorted women *to propel the women's movement and work with men for the desired changes in the 'mainstream'*. Liberal feminists also demanded equal rights for voting, reproduction, abortion and child healthcare, and reacted against sexual harassment.

1.3.5 Critiques of Liberal Feminism

The central aim of liberal feminists was to achieve for women those traits associated with males. It did not occur to them to question the value of traditional male attributes. This erroneously assumes that women can become like men if they set their minds to it; that most women want to become like men and that all women should aspire to masculine values. *Liberal feminists worked for women's equality without aiming at changing the structures of existing institutions.* Their emphasis on individualism prevents people from coming together as a community. It separates an autonomous individual from others, thus creating a 'political solipsism'. Though liberal feminists argued that women should be economically independent of men, they failed to provide women with adequate strategies to achieve an independent status. Even after gaining all sorts of legal rights, women will be still left in a condition of economic dependency damaging to liberation.

Elevating the activities of the mind over those of the body and identifying women with the body, as well as with 'woman-specific' work like child care, child rearing, care of the sick and the aged, lead to the devaluation of such activities since they are perceived as forms of unskilled, unpaid labour, associated with servicing the despised body and requiring less mental work.

On the whole, we could say that Wollstonecraft, Taylor, Mill and Friedan sent women out into public realm, though without summoning men into the private domain. Despite these limitations, liberal feminists have contributed immensely in improving the quality of life for women.

Check Your Progress: *Can you find any striking similarities between our contemporary Indian social activists and the Liberal feminists mentioned above, especially in regards to their emphasis on education, equality, career and strategies? Think about this paradox: Even highly educated women in India are sometimes placed in situations where they must confine themselves to certain expected and traditional roles. Despite wanting to use their education to contribute in meaningful ways to society, they may not be able to do so. Is education, then, a negative capability? Are you satisfied with the current status of social equality (irrespective of caste, creed, region, language and sex) as enshrined in our Constitution? (Think about equality not only between men and women but also among different categories of people at different strata of society.) Can we say that there is only formal equality and no substantial equity? Feminism searches for 'equity' step by step in human history.*

1.4 MARXIST FEMINISM

Marxism provides a perspective completely different from liberalism. Marxism denies rationality as the essence of human nature. Rather, it offers a theory called historical materialism. The unfortunate effect of economic dependence of women was recognized by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). Following Marx and Engels, Marxist feminists believe that women are oppressed by capitalism, and that gender inequality will disappear when capitalism is replaced by socialism and a classless society.

1.4.1 Historical Materialism

Marx talked about the ‘materialist conception of history’, which was later referred to as ‘historical materialism’ by Engels. Human beings are viewed as a biological species. Thus, human nature itself changes as modes of production and economic relationships change. It is the mode of production that determines the social consciousness of a given society.

Human praxis is a cooperative social activity involving some division of labour. It is historically determined. The worker’s conception of what needs to be done, how it should be done, and when it has to be done successfully are determined by previous social experience and the social context within which the individual is situated. Marx expresses that the sum total of relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, and on this economic structure is built the legal and political superstructure. On the whole, the mode of production conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general (Marx, 1973). Marx criticized capitalism as he felt that in this contemporary social structure, the necessity of survival and class domination deter human freedom and development. Freedom to Marxists is a social achievement. The capitalist organization of production alienates the workers from the product of their work, from the production process, from their self-realization and alienates them from each other.

1.4.2 Marx on Women

Although Marx does pay some attention to women’s subordination under capitalism, *it was the overthrow of capitalism and not sexual oppression which was the main agenda of Marx*. It was left to Engels to undertake a systematic analysis of women’s oppression after Marx’s death. Engels’ work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, published in 1884, has been accepted as a classic statement by generations of Marxists.

Whenever the women's situation is discussed by Marxists, it refers to women's subordination under capitalism. Since capitalist society is composed of different classes, therefore, all women are not identical. Working class women are different from bourgeois women in a capitalist class society as class divisions cut across sex lines.

Marxist feminists believe that when forms of feminisms do not account for social consciousness, they lead to forms of false consciousness of bourgeois women. According to Marxist feminists, women, as a class, should not focus their struggle against men but against the bourgeois system under capitalism. This is a collective work of both men and women of the working class. **While Marxist theory provides Marxist feminists with useful systematically organized tools to carry out an important critique of patriarchal capitalism, it stops short of providing a comprehensive framework from within which many other issues related to women's place in society could be addressed.**

1.4.3 Production and Reproduction

Engels records that a social organization of a given society in a particular period in history is determined by 'the production and reproduction of immediate life'. This implies that along with production of the means for existence, reproduction of human beings is equally considered. In a capitalist society, oppression impacts both the development of labour and that of the family. With the focus on reproduction, women's role in family and work under capitalism also enters into the Marxian debate.

Household work, the traditional work area of women, is defined as reproduction. In a capitalist society, the economic relations are such that the social tasks involved with reproduction, such as childbearing, childrearing, caring the sick and the aged, cooking, cleaning and other forms of household work, are considered economically cheap and unprofitable. Correspondingly, women as the performers of unprofitable tasks are also undermined in their value and contribution. You will read more on the issue of women and work, and women and household labour in related units of other courses.

1.4.4 Family and Mother Right

Engels traces the evolution of family from the earlier savage society to the present day in his major work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. He uses the anthropological work of Lewis Morgan in formulating his theory of family. Morgan distinguishes two historical periods prior to civilizations - savagery and barbarism (hunting state). In these earliest societies, sexual relationships had been totally promiscuous and unregulated. The original

family consisted of a state of group marriage. In all forms of group marriage, only the mother of the child was known and not the father. This made the '*the mother right*' as the dominant principle in the family organization.

The society moved from hunting state to the herding of cattle and cultivation of plants. In these primitive societies, the relations between sexes were based on equality. Women were responsible for domestic work and men for agriculture and husbandry. Women reigned supreme in the home and the descent was calculated through the female line. Then came the domestication of animals and the breeding of herds, metal-working, weaving and agriculture. There was surplus and slaves were engaged for labour power. Some men gained more property and more power. The acquisition of new wealth led to men's position becoming higher than women's. Men wanted to pass their property on to their children. 'Mother right' was overthrown. Engels' strongly comments in *The Origin* (1972, p. 120) that "the overthrow of mother right was the world historical defeat of the female sex". The traditional inheritance from father to his children was ensured through strict monogamy.

1.4.5 Monogamy

Monogamous marriage is an offshoot of the rise of class society. The first class opposition and oppression coincides with the sexual opposition of man and woman in marriage. The oppositions and contradictions are found in this marriage. Engels argues that prostitution, adultery and gender subordination are the outcome of monogamy. *Marriage itself becomes a crass form of prostitution for women.* According to Engels, the only difference between a married woman and a prostitute is that the former does not sell her body piecemeal like a courtesan, but sells it once and for all into slavery. Thus, the woman historically became a mere commodity, a possession of her husband, and an instrument for the production of children. In the middle class capitalist family, the woman was forced to sell herself sexually and brought down to a position of powerlessness. Engels holds that within the family, the man represents the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat.

1.4.6 Sexual Division of Labour

Despite Marxist ideals promoting equality of women as a class, there are contradictions within Marxist theory based on stereotypical assumption about women's bodies and their roles. The sexual division of labour, from the Marxist perspective, is natural because it is biologically determined. Marx and Engels state that the social division of labour originates in 'the division of labour in the sexual act'. It means that differences of age and sex naturally determine the division of labour. Marx suggests that women may be excluded from those

branches of industry which may be unhealthy or objectionable morally to the female body. In brief, it means that women's capacity to enter public industry is limited both by biological and by moral factors. **The final conclusion may be thus: despite Marxian advocacy for women to enter public industry, there is a suggestion that there could never be a complete abolition of the sexual division of labour, either in the family, in the work place, or in bed. Though gender differences would be muted under socialism, a psychological equality between men and women would be impossible.**

1.4.7 Application of Marxian Liberating Strategies

Marxists believe that the abolition of private property will end sexual oppression, and that economic supremacy will disappear of itself. The first condition for the liberation of woman, according to Engels, is "to bring the whole female sex back into public industry" and collectivize housework and childcare. The second condition for liberation is the social revolution which Engels hoped would occur soon.

Marx's analytical tools are used by feminists in debates relating to women's labour force. According to Marxist theory, classes develop based on work relations. In the case of women, it is not surprising that socialist feminists focused on domestic labour since "this work was done almost exclusively by women and was fundamentally different from the work done by either sex in formal economy" (Armstrong, 1990, p.68). Charnie Guettel, in her work *Marxism and Feminism* (1974, p.52), argued that what women do as housework is outside the formal economy. Jobs performed outside the home are valued as productive as they earn profit in a capitalist society, while the unpaid consumption work at home that women do is regarded as unproductive. Guettel maintained that class differences among women seem to reflect their husbands' relations to production, thus sustaining their **double subordination**. Hence, to overcome their subordination as women, women must work for the socialization of domestic work and enter the labour force. Such a labour force, with more equitable distribution of roles between the genders, can subsequently transform the productive system.

Margaret Benston, in her pioneering article "The Political Economy of women's Liberation" (1969), explored women's domestic labour further. Citing the Marxist distinction between use value and exchange value, she maintained that women as a group are responsible for the production of simple use values associated with homes and families. Unlike the paid work of men, which produces exchange value as well as use value, the unpaid work of women is perceived as superfluous from the standpoint of capital because it produces

only use value. It acquires a secondary status as it does not directly produce for the market or command wages. Contrary to the above, Benston argued that women's labour is useful in two ways:

- First, it fulfills the need for closeness, community and warm secure relationships and stabilizes the entire economy; and
- Second, it serves to make women what Marx would call as 'a reserve army' of labour, contributing to the transient economy in capitalism.

Benston was the first to use the reserve army concept in case of women. She explained how women are called upon to fill vacancies in the job market whenever needed and sent home to do their domestic work when their services are no longer required. Women are the last to be hired and the first to be fired and are hired to do low-paid work when the demand for workers arises in the market.

As you have seen above, Marxist/ socialist feminists strive to develop a theoretical account of different types of oppression resulting from the interface of gender, race/ethnicity, and regionality/ nationality with class. While making use of Marxist concepts to understand the position of women, Marxist feminists have also transformed these concepts. Most recent works demonstrate that work done in the home, including bearing and rearing of children, must be included in any notion of class; moreover, any conceptualization of class is inadequate if it does not take into account sex, domestic work, race, and region.

In the above section, you have obtained a broad overview of some of the ways in which feminists have applied Marxist theories and ideas in trying to achieve a more gender-just society. In the next section, let us look at some critiques of these theoretical perspectives so that we can understand the limitations of Marxist feminism.

1.4.8 Critiques of Marxist Feminism

It has been argued by critics of Marxism that Marxist categories are sex-blind. This accusation is based on the view that although traditional Marxists were able to explain how capitalism separated the homestead from the workplace, they failed to explain why capitalism assigned homestead to women and workplace to men.

Engels' assumption that the family pattern has been universal in all societies is questionable. The claim that there was sexual equality in primitive societies is also dubious. Engel's views on early man's desire to leave his property to his

heirs have been challenged for it is likely that women were the first cultivators and provided the surplus value.

They also said that in a socialist society, housework and childcare should be collectivized. But they have not mentioned who should be doing these household tasks - men or women. The implication is that these tasks will be done by women which reinforce the sexual division of labour that the Marxists want to abolish.

The dual work that women do in combining paid work with domestic responsibility and its implications on women has not been analyzed by Engels though collectivization of domestic work is recommended. He also failed to explain the sexual oppression of women workers and male dominance in the work place.

Check Your Progress: What, according to you, are the advantages of using Marxist theories for achieving feminist goals? On what basis has Marxist feminism been criticized?

1.5 RADICAL FEMINISM

Radical feminism is the most intriguing of all formal feminist theories we have studied in this unit. Issues about women's lives that had been taboo for discussion till the second half of the 20th century, i.e., the female body, sex, violence, reproduction, are brought into focus for frank and in depth analysis. Radical feminism covers a wide spectrum of variant views on the sexual oppression of women. The new concepts and terminologies that Radical feminism has helped to generate are now used liberally by global institutions, governments, and policymakers. Words such as 'gender', 'patriarchy', and 'objectification' might have been familiar to you even though you may not have been familiar with their nuances and significance. Radical feminism can easily be misconstrued if one does not understand its basic concepts and the significance of these concepts.

Radical feminism was started in the late 1960s by some college-educated middle class women and some *New Leftists* who became dissatisfied with what they considered to be conservative demands and male dominance, which were contrary to the principles of egalitarianism and altruism in their organizations.

The term 'radical' refers to 'roots' and therefore implies going to the roots. **Radical feminists claim that the root of all forms of oppressions is in the oppression of women.** It includes the following meanings: "that historically women were the first oppressed group; that women's oppression is international; that women's oppression is the hardest form of oppression to eradicate; that enormous suffering result for women; and that women's oppression provides a conceptual model for understanding all forms of oppression" (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984). According to radical feminists, the social structure that most oppresses women is called '*patriarchy*'.

1.5.1 Patriarchy

Through patriarchy men appropriate all super social roles and keep women in subordinate and exploited position. Literally, patriarchy means 'rule by fathers'. Prior to the emergence of Radical feminism, the term was used mostly by anthropologists in a narrower sense of an old man with absolute power over wives, children, herds, and dependents. Radical feminists use the term 'patriarchy' to address an autonomous, social, historical, and political force, a "sexual system of power in which the male possesses the superior power and economic privilege" (Eisenstein, 1979, p.17). Patriarchy refers to all systems of male dominance and appears to be everywhere. For a more detailed discussion of patriarchy, it would help you to refer to the unit on "Women & Patriarchy" (Unit 1 of Block 1) in the course on "Gender and Power".

1.5.2 Sex and Class

Radical feminists argue that women everywhere share a common oppression, and they constitute a class by themselves as opposed to men. "Sex class is so deep as to be invisible" are the opening words of Shulamith Firestone's work *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). Unlike liberals and Marxists, radical feminists pay attention to the ways in which men control reproduction, in other words, women's bodies. The control of men over women may be in varied forms: restrictive contraception, sterilization, abortion laws, pornography and other kinds of violence against women. When a person is deprived of power over her own body, it is deprivation of her humanity. Moreover, men construct women's sexuality, not for women's needs, but for their own interests.

1.5.3 Reproduction

Firestone was influenced by Marxism but believed that Marx's and Engel's interpretation is too narrow to explain women's subordination. Unlike the Marxists, she argues that it is the relations of reproduction, and not those of production, that form the basis of society. Hence she redefines historical materialism of Engels, by replacing 'materialism' by 'sex', 'economic classes'

by 'biological classes' and 'production' by 'reproduction' (Firestone, 1970, p.4):

Historical materialism, is that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all historic events in the dialectic of sex: the division of society into two distinct biological classes for procreative reproduction, and the struggles of these classes with one another; in the changes in the modes of marriage, reproduction and child care created by these struggles; in the connected development of other physically-differentiated classes [castes]; and in the first division of labor based on sex which developed into the [economic-cultural] class system.

Thus, Firestone sees that the first division of labour is in the differing reproductive roles of men and women. **The radical feminists conclude that the root of women's oppression is biological and therefore women's liberation requires a biological revolution.** A section of radical feminists are convinced that modern reproductive technologies promote such a revolution.

1.5.4 Reproductive Technologies for Liberation

Modern reproductive technologies of contraception, sterilization, and abortion for the first time in history provide the possibility for biological revolution.

... the artificial insemination by donor , in vitro fertilization, and embryo transfer are also quiet widely used. Due to these technologies and due to contracted motherhood, a woman who begets a child need not bear it, and a woman who bears a child need not rear it. Furthermore, as soon as it is possible to beget a child in vitro and bring it to term ex utero, women's role in the reproductive process will be no larger than men's. ... (Tong, 1989, p.74).

Radical feminists claim that sex roles will be eliminated when both men and women stop playing substantially different roles and finally, distinctions between the roles of woman-the-reproducer and man-the-producer will disappear.

1.5.5 Reproductive Technologies for Enslavement

Another group of radical feminists including Mary O'Brien and Adrienne Rich contend that modern reproductive technologies are a trap for women though they may promise untapped freedom. Men who are alienated from reproductive process, try to have power over women's reproductive process as compensation.

Male doctors and psychologists write down the rules, tell women how to feel and when to feel and how to act during pregnancy and delivery. Thus

'pregnancy' and 'birthing' are not lived experiences for women. In this regard, Mary O'Brien comments that modern reproductive technologies are men's strategies to get 'a child-for-nothing' (O'Brien, 1981, p.58-60).

1.5.6 Forced Motherhood

Radical feminists assert that women are forced to be mothers. Patriarchy declares that motherhood is the only way for a woman's self-fulfillment. A childless woman is pitied and described as 'unfeminine'. Women are expected to perform the same kinds of nurturing to adults as they do to their children. Patriarchy determines the conditions of their motherhood which imposes the responsibility of nurturance on women without giving them the power of nurturance. Feminist mothers may thus experience a sense of ambivalence in bringing up their sons amidst patriarchal ideology which promotes the ideas of sons as future masters.

1.5.7 Women as Sexual Slaves

For radical feminists, women under patriarchy are not only mothers but also sexual slaves. Women's sexuality is controlled forcefully by men and her 'honour' violated. Even rape laws are often framed to protect the interests of men rather than of women. An obvious example of this would be that nowhere is a man convicted for raping his wife, although this may be a common occurrence. It is because of the assumption that the woman belongs to her husband. Prostitution is another form of sexual coercion. In all of these instances, what comes to the fore is the idea that women lack control over their own bodies. Radical feminists suggest that women should be liberated from forced motherhood, sexual slavery, and regain control over their bodies.

1.5.8 Liberating Strategies

Promoting female culture and revalorization of females will liberate women from their sexual and attendant enslavement. Radical feminism maintains that every society has two cultures: the visible male culture and the invisible female culture. Religion, government, economy, and all social institutions represent the male view and interests. In this male culture, men envy women's reproductive processes and female creative energy. Radical feminists state that this results in sexual politics and leads to the notion of the 'personal is political'. The emergence of femininity in girls and masculinity in boys is not due to the psychological differences in their parents but due to the difference in power between their mothers and fathers. As such, this is the de-biologising of the Freudian theory of penis envy.

Radical feminists Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich advocate celebration of 'woman culture' which will change the basic structure of society, substituting new values. These values are qualities that characterize femaleness - empathy,

intuitiveness, adaptability, and awareness of growth as process, and a capacity to respond emotionally as well as rationally. The 'revalorisation' of women's qualities is carried out through women's art and language. It includes the creation of a new world view, seen from women's perspectives, and expressed through journalism, radio, music, film, dance, poetry, painting, photography, sculpture and literature. The first task of radical feminists is to reconstruct patriarchal language. This process is called 'naming'. Mary Daly defines feminist naming as a deliberate confrontation with language structures. Daly believes that the activity of being able to name things (oneself, or anything in the world around us) through language is indicative of power, and that women have had that power of naming stolen from them. Feminist naming thus begins with women invoking and exerting this power, and confronting traditional language structures.

Radical feminists believe that women are oppressed primarily in the realm of so-called intimate relations and suggest shaking off heterosexual marriage and recommend lesbianism as the full commitment of women to their own sex.

1.5.9 Critiques of Radical Feminism

Radical feminists contend that patriarchy is a trans-cultural universal phenomenon. However, we may note that oppression of women and enslaving practices have different meanings in different societies and are contextualized. Female separatism as envisaged by the radical feminists excludes men who form half of the world's population. Exclusion of men cannot bring about a revolution, as any such revolution must take into account that women and men co-exist within the patriarchal structure which needs to be transformed. Radical feminists are not concerned with the material reasons for men's subjugation of women. They demonstrate vividly how men enslave women but do not attempt to explain why men do so. *The important contribution of Radical feminism is the conviction that while the sexuality of women might have been a source of danger in the past, it can become a locus of power for women in the future.* You would find it interesting to note the manner in which radical feminists use intellectual and analytical tools to subvert given misconceptions about sexuality and about biology of women.

1.6 SOCIALIST FEMINISM

One step removed from Radical feminism is Socialist feminism. In order to examine the situation of women, both of these formative feminisms use sex and society as their lenses, although with the help of different feminist perspectives. Socialist Feminism is an offshoot of women's movement in the 1970s. It is a synthesis of the best insights of both Marxist and radical feminists.

It blends capitalism and patriarchy; production and reproduction. Productive activity for socialist feminists is not only provision for basic material needs of food, clothing, and shelter, but also the reproductive and sexual work that is done by women at home.

Socialist feminism adopts two kinds of approach: *dual-systems theory* and *unified-systems theory*. The dual systems theorists like Juliet Mitchell treat patriarchy and capitalism as separate forms of social relations but dialectically related to each other while the unified -systems theorists like Hartman and Sheila Rowbotham insist that patriarchy and capitalism are not separate but together form one unified concept.

1.6.1 Historical Conception of Biology

Social Feminists believe that biology is gendered as well as sexed. This implies that while we may be born with specific sexual anatomies (female/ male/ trans-gendered), our bodies are also submitted to a social gendering process from the time of our birth. So we could say that we are born into an already gender codified society. In terms of the notion of gender, we can thus infer that infants are bisexual (androgynous) at birth. But they are transformed into boys and girls with rigid masculine and feminine character structures, through a systematic gender-structuring which continues throughout life. The physical differences between men and women are partially determined by the work they do. Iris Young remarks that women in sexist society are physically handicapped because they have less mobility and strictures on physical development. Marian Lowe has investigated that social conditions bring variations in menstruation and menopause. Juliet Mitchell, Jane Flex, Gayle Rubin, Nancy Chodorow, and Dorothy Dinnerstein have all worked to prove that the masculine and feminine character types are structured and established by specific social forms of work practices. On the whole, socialist feminists believe that our 'inner lives', our bodies and behavior are structured by socially imposed gender-structuring. You will read much more about the relationships between 'sex' and 'gender' in various other courses of this programme. You would find it especially helpful to read the unit on "Sex and Gender" (Unit 2, Block 1) in the course on "Gender & Power", where these concepts, and the debates around them, are discussed in greater detail.

The activities in women's private life such as sexuality, childbearing and childrearing cannot be understood apart from society. Zillah Eisenstein argues that giving birth to a child is termed 'motherhood' only if it conforms to the social norm defining the relations of marriage and the family. Otherwise, the child is 'illegitimate' and the act 'adultery'.

1.6.2 Historical Analysis of the Gender Division of Labour

Socialist feminism claims that human beings are constantly recreating themselves through sexual division of labour. Iris Young (1981) provides a historical analysis of the gender division of labour. In pre-capitalist times, there existed an economic partnership between wives and husbands. With the rise of capitalism came the public-private split. Capitalism identified men as the 'primary work force' and women as the 'secondary work force'. As women were needed at home, they were confined to domestic work. Women became a large reserve army of labour, unemployed, low paid and less skilled secondary workforce, needed to keep wages low and meet unexpected demands in the workforce. In the third world economies, women gradually move from the primary work force to secondary work force.

Even today, the categories of work where women congregate are the lowest paid. Women work mostly as clerical workers, saleswomen, social workers, nurses and teachers. This confirms the ideological perception of women as subservient, nurturing, and sexy. It forces women to depend on men. Women wage earners face problems common to all workers and in addition suffer sexual harassment.

In the 1970s, socialist feminists began to demand due wages for household work that women do. Margaret Benston's "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" exposed domestic labour as a crucial form of women's work and many more domestic labour studies followed to gain public recognition and legitimacy for women's work at home (Benston, 1969).

1.6.3 Women as Sexual Objects

A woman is confronted by words, gestures, comments and threats of violence which express male dominance. Alison Jaggar (1983) sums up the socialist feminists' views on how women are treated as sexual objects:

Women are viewed relentlessly as sexual objects, whether or not they welcome sexual interest, and they are subject continually to sexual assaults and harassment. In addition, economic survival requires most women to present themselves in a way that is sexually pleasing to men: male superiors penalize women who seem to be "punishing" or defying men through their appearance: much of women's work is sexualized: and, in the end, the best chance of economic security for most women remains the sale of their sexuality in marriage. ... (p. 108).

It is an ideological mystification to consider women primarily as sex objects. Women have always worked outside procreation. They have provided food and services to the family and the larger society outside. It is men who control the expression of women's sexuality.

1.6.4 Alienation

Women, like wage workers, are alienated in sexual situations. Alison Jaggar proposes alienation as the theoretical framework which accommodates the insights of Marxist, radical, psychoanalytical and liberal feminisms (Jaggar, 1983, p.353).

A wage worker is alienated from the product upon which he works. In the same way, a woman is alienated from her body, the product upon which she works. A woman has little say on her body. She adorns herself, diets and dresses but all these activities are done for men. A woman is alienated from the product of her reproductive labour, that is, her child. A woman does not have the power to decide how many children she should have and when. Motherhood can also be an alienating experience for a woman as women may be alienated from the process of their reproductive labour. It is obstetricians who take total control of the birthing process. Childbearing like childrearing is an alienating experience. "The social relations of contemporary motherhood make it impossible for her to see the child as a whole person, part of a larger community to which both mother and child belong" (Jaggar, 1983, p.315). Finally, women are alienated from their intellectual capacities. To the extent men take control of producing and distributing knowledge and the process, women are not at ease in the academy. Ann Foreman (1977) declares that *femininity itself is alienation*.

1.6.5 Liberation of Women

Mitchell argues that defeat of capitalism alone cannot liberate women unless it goes with the defeat of patriarchy. Biological or economic revolution will not liberate women. It is only an outer expression. Mitchell considers the psychoanalytical view that sex oppression is deeper at the unconscious level. Hence she advocates primarily a psychological revolution, and states that attitudes toward women will never really change so long as the female and male psychology are dominated by dominant phallic symbols which extol male culture, male authority and male control over women.

1.6.6 Critiques of Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminism is criticized for being neither revolutionary nor radical enough. It underplays the significance of capitalist forms of exploitation. It has failed to create lasting solutions to the problem of female economic and social exploitation. One distinguishing feature of socialist feminism is its emphasis on democratic control of procreation. But it fails to explain what democratization of procreation would mean in practice. However, in its favour, one could say that socialist feminism has an inspiring vision of an androgynous society in which the distinction between 'masculinity' and 'femininity' no longer exists.

Your reading of various formative feminisms, Liberal, Marxist, Radical and Socialist, would have given you an understanding of the wonderful chemistry that exists between the progressive theories on which each of these was based. In the light of this, we could say that Socialist feminism is the most evident indicator in terms of showing how paradigms shift when feminist equations (specifically, Radical and Marxist) work on each other in understanding women's tangible and intangible oppressions.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed and analyzed four formative feminist theories. You would have realized that feminist theories address fundamental issues in feminist thought - the origins of women's universal oppression, gendered and problematized social and institutional relations, and the political actions to be taken to ameliorate these injustices. The four types of formative feminisms that you have read about included - Liberal, Marxist, Radical and Socialist. You have also seen that each feminist theory remains partial, imperfect, and incomplete. However, all of these different feminisms have contributed in valuable ways in enhancing our understanding of women's oppression and each offers us a rich perspective on how to struggle against this oppression. We need to draw on the strengths of all these theories in our ongoing efforts to deepen our critical understanding of these important issues.

Finally, the formative feminisms are predominantly of white, middle-class origins. From the viewpoint and historical perception of Indian women, we can find both commonalities and differences when we compare the situations discussed here with those in India. In other units of this course, you have already read specifically about women's movements in India (Blocks 1 & 2). Hence, to an Indian student, it will be an interesting exercise to read through this unit with a critical enquiry and apply the tools to your own life and those around you.

1.8 GLOSSARY

- Alienation** : It refers to the estrangement of individuals from other and a particular process. Humanbeings, according to Marx, are alienated from their work, their product, humanity and other people in the capitalist mode of living. Labour as well as our existence becomes an object in this process.
- Capitalism** : It refers to an economic system in which means of production, distribution, and exchange of wealth are in the hands of private individuals or corporations who invest, own, and maintain it. Capitalists are people who have capital - money, assets, land, investment, and so on.
- Feminism** : A social, economic, and political commitment directed at changing the existing power relations between women and men in society in order to fight against gender injustice and to promote equal rights and opportunities for all.
- Liberal feminism** : Assumes that the inequality of women stems from the denial to them of equal rights and from their learned reluctance to exercise such rights.
- Liberalism** : Constitutes a philosophy based on the principle that every person is to be given equal opportunities and civil rights.
- Marxist feminism** : Sees women's oppression as rooted not in sexism but in capitalism, with the introduction of private property. Class divisions cut across sex lines.
- Mother-Right** : A term associated with matrilineal descent. It was popularized by Bachofen, who said that matrilineal kinship combined with matriarchy was the universal first stage of human development. Lewis Henry Morgan, Engels and Marx used mother-right for the stage of human history which preceded patrilineal descent and patriarchies.

- Patriarchy** : A sexual system of power in which men as a category appropriate all superior social roles and keep women as a category in subordinate and exploited positions.
- Radical feminism** : Believes that women's oppression is the first form of oppression in human history and the most widespread. It is deep rooted and sexual under the form of life called patriarchy.
- Reproduction** : Childbearing and childrearing responsibilities and associated domestic tasks done by women.
- Sexual division of labour:** A universal practice in which necessary work and tasks are divided up according to gender. Men get some of the jobs and women get some of the jobs, based on traditional roles and expectations.
- Socialist feminism** : Sets as its goal transforming basic structural arrangements of society so that categories of class, gender, sexuality, and race no longer act as barriers to equal sharing of resources. Class and gender intersect in shaping women's lives.

1.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the relevance of any one formative feminist theory in the context of your own life experiences. Do you think your analysis from your chosen perspective can make your life more meaningful? Has it made clear to you any issue you have been confused about earlier? Would you like to make any improvement(s) on the theory? Analyse and discuss.
- 2) Based on your reading of this unit, comment on the following using a feminist perspective:

“The University Education Commission of 1948-1949 headed by Dr. Radhakrishnan recommended that education of women should be such as to suit those pretty accomplishments such as drawing, painting or the like skills”.
- 3) How do 'caste' and 'class' feed into each other in oppressing 'women' of lower socio-economic categories in your society? Explain with specific instances using an apt feminist theory for your analysis.

- 4) What is your view about surrogate motherhood which is based on technology? Does it liberate or enslave women? Explain.
- 5) What values could you add to the household work of women revolving around consumption and reproduction ?
- 6) Discuss how the concept of 'Alienation' is used by Marxist and radical feminists. Use examples from Indian society to see the extent of the relevance of this concept in the lives of Indian women.
- 7) Explain 'household labour' in the context of the gender division of labour.

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