

# Implication of Feminism and Feminist Theories in Addressing Gender Issues

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## Abstract

This paper, based on a thorough review of related literature, aims to clarify how feminism and feminist theories deal with 'gender issues'. Feminism is an ideology or theory that opposes the political, economic, and cultural relegation of women to positions of inferiority. Feminist movement, originated in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, fostered in its second half, motivated to propound feminist theories in which gender is in the central focus and gender relations are considered problematic and changeable. There are a variety of feminist theories such as liberal feminism, cultural feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, Black feminism and postmodern feminism. The feminist theories seek description of the situation of women, explanation of the reason for that situation, calls for activism or transformation, and causes of difference among women. Feminism threatens the patriarchal socio-economic structure of societies across the world. It also contributes to the development of a new feminist epistemology or paradigm of academic discourse and motivates activism for socio-economic and political transformation. Moreover, feminist discourses have influenced in the formulation of the development models such as WID, WAD, GAD, and GED which contributes to pave a way of gender equality across the world

***Keywords:*** Gender, Feminism, Feminist theory, Development discourse

## 1. Introduction

The term 'gender' refers to the social differences between women and men. Gender implies to male and female behavioral norms which are learnt differently in different societies and change over the course of time differing from 'sex' meaning to universal biological differences between women and men, and (Derbyshire, 2002). The World Health Organization (WHO) also defines gender as the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women (WHO, 2013). Beauvoir (1974) had earlier claimed that 'woman' is a historical idea and not a natural fact. She clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facility, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facility.

Gender issue is the main concern of feminist theory (Ritzer, 2011). Feminists argue that without gender as a central analytic category, social life - work, family, the economy, politics, education, religion—cannot be adequately studied or understood. Feminist Theory, a set of ideas and scholarship in a variety of disciplines as a result of the feminist movement, focuses on women's issues and the liberation of women from positions of disadvantage within various social, political, and economic systems. A majority of feminist theory concerns and describes women's situation, women's freedom, empowerment and gender equality. However, different theories deal with gender issues from different perspectives which puzzles feminism as well gender and the aspects they deal with. This paper based on secondary information aims to clarify the concept of feminism, feminist theory and how they deal with gender issues.

## **2. Feminism and Feminist movements**

Feminism can be termed as a theory and/or movement concerned with advancing the position of women through such means as achievement of political, legal, or economic rights equal to those granted men (Offten, 1988). If the women's movement was the political vehicle for women's quest for social injustice, feminism was its ideology (Seidman, 2004). Ritzer (2011) views feminism as a generalized, wide ranging system of ideas about social life and human experience developed from a women-centered perspective.

The first wave of feminism began during the late nineteenth Century from Europe and the USA. The first wave is seen as focused on women's struggle for political rights, especially for vote, and is marked by two key dates – 1848 when the first women's right convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York, and 1920 when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave women the right vote in the US (Subedi, 2013). Second wave feminism is the period which began in the 1960s and by some accounts continues to the present (Ritzer, 2011). The second wave of feminism connected with the continued gaps in the rights and opportunities of women suffered in the public sphere to the realm of the private sphere. The new areas included sexuality, reproduction, domestic labor and domestic violence (Subedi, 2013). Third wave feminism increasingly adopted the 1990s by the younger generation. The unifying theme of the third wave is more radical engagement with politics of difference, with emphasis on differences between women e.g. black feminism. Third wave feminism is influenced by post structuralism itself related to postmodernism rejecting the idea of fixed female identity (Subedi, 2013).

### **3. Feminist Theory and Gender Issues**

Feminist theory refers to a multitude of types of works, produced by a movement of activists and scholars in a variety of disciplines (Chafetz, 1997). Feminist theory differs from general theories of inequality. A theory is feminist if it contains three elements: Gender is the central focus of the theory, Gender relations are problematic, and such relations in society are considered changeable (Chafetz 1988). Of central importance to feminist theory is the focus not just on women's issues but how the theory deals with these issues in a way to challenge, counteract, or change a societal gender system that disadvantages or devalues women (Ransdell, 1991). Feminist theory focuses on women's issues and the liberation of women from positions of disadvantage within various social, political, and economic systems. Feminist theoretical approaches vary greatly in their focus, starting points, political grounding, and many other aspects (Riley, 1999). However, there are some interesting and common issues that consist of the majority of feminist theories.

Ritzer (2011) claims that the impetus for contemporary feminist theory begins in deceptively simple questions such as: *And what about women?* The question calls for a description of the social world and situation of women. The second basic question is: *Why then is all this about?* This question requires an explanation of the social world and women's relative position. The third question is: *How can we change and improve the social world so as to make it a more just place for women and for all people?* This question calls for social transformation and activism for gender equality and social justice. There is no equal position between women themselves. Therefore, another question can be raised as: *And what about the differences among women?* The basic theoretical questions produce a revolutionary switch in our understanding of the world. They lead to the discovery that what we have taken as universal and absolute knowledge of the world is, in fact, knowledge derived from experiences of a powerful section of society, men as masters.

Most of the feminist theories revolve around the questions raised above but topology differs by the aspect they focus on. A thorough review of literature by the author explores varieties of feminist theory and their different feminist perspectives.

<b>Table 1: Variety of feminist theory with reference to the gender issues they deal with</b>		
<b>Basic varieties of feminist theory- answer to the descriptive question, “What about women?”</b>		<b>Distinctions within theories- answer to the explanatory question, “why is women’s situation as it is?”</b>
<b>Gender Differences</b>		
Women's location in, and experience of most situations is different from that of men in the situation		Cultural feminism Biological Institutional and socialization Socio-psychological
<b>Gender inequality</b>		
Women's location in most situation is not only different from but also less privileged than or unequal to that of men		Liberal feminism
<b>Gender oppression</b>		
Women are oppressed, not just different from or unequal to, but actively restrained, subordinated, modeled and used and abused by men and male institutions		Psycho-analytic feminism Radical feminism
<b>Structural oppression</b>		
Women's experience of difference, inequality, and oppression varies by their social location within capitalism, patriarchy and racism		Socialist feminism Intersectionality theory
<b>Differences among women</b>		
Mainstreaming feminist theory calls for universal 'sisterhood' but there are division in women (class, caste, ethnic and racial) and one woman is different from another		Marxist feminism Black feminism
<b>Postmodern feminism</b>		
<i>Source: Ritzer, 2011</i>		

**Liberal Feminism:** Liberal feminism, a major expression of gender inequality theory, argues that women may claim equality with men on the basis of an essential human capacity for reasoned moral agency, that gender inequality is the result of a patriarchal and sexist patterning of the division of labor, and that gender equality can be produced by transforming the division of labor through the re-patterning of key institutions like law, work, family, education, and media. Liberal feminists, with strong roots in the classical liberal and pluralist traditions, argued for equal rights and a level playing field, and critiqued but did not reject institutions that tended to discriminate against women, their own efforts. The philosophical basis of this stream lies in principle individualism i.e. all individuals have equal moral worth. They should be judged on rational grounds- content of character, talents, and personal worth hence all individuals entitled to participate in/gain access to public/political life. Liberal feminism is essentially reformist, aimed at open public life to equal competition. They do not seek to abolish distinction between public and private sphere, seeing the latter as a matter of individual choice. Demand for equal rights, the core of liberal feminism, attracted those whose education and social backgrounds were better able to take advantage of wider career and educational opportunities. It therefore reflects interests of white middle class in developed nations.

**Cultural Feminism:** The theory accepts that there are fundamental personality differences between men and women, and that women's differences are special and should be celebrated. This theory of feminism supports the notion that there are biological differences between men and women. For example, "women are kinder and gentler than men," leading to the mentality that if women ruled the world there would be no wars. Cultural feminism is the theory that wants to overcome sexism by celebrating women's special qualities, women's ways, and women's experiences, often believing that the "woman's way" is the better way. Cultural feminism opposed the argument of immutable gender difference was, of course, first used against women in male patriarchal discourse to claim that women were inferior and subservient to men. This school of thought extols the positive aspects of 'female character' or 'feminine personality'. Early theorists like Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued that in the governing of the state society needed such women's virtue as cooperation, caring, pacifism, and nonviolence in the settlement of conflicts. The following generation of cultural feminism focus on the distinctive nature of women like "caring attention", different motivation pattern, communication style, capacity for openness to emotional experience, sexuality and intimacy, lower level of aggressiveness, capacity of creating peaceful coexistence are the positive aspects that should be acknowledged (Ritzer, 2011).

**Marxist Feminism:** Marxist feminism's foundation is laid by Friedrich Engels in his analysis of gender oppression in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). He argues that a woman's subordination is not a result of her biological disposition but of social relations, and that men's efforts to achieve their demands for control of women's labor and sexual faculties have gradually solidified and become institutionalized in the nuclear family. Engels analyzes the widespread social phenomena associated with female sexual morality, such as fixation on virginity and sexual purity, incrimination and violent punishment of women who commit adultery, and demands that women be submissive to their husbands. Marxist feminists tried to identify the operation of gender relations as and where they may be distinct from or connected with the process of production and reproduction, understood by historical materialism. Ellen Woods, a Marxist feminist argued that capitalism is uniquely indifferent to the social identities of people it exploits, undermining differences and diluting identities such as race and gender. Function of domestic labor and its role in the reproduction of capitalism and the argument raised the issue that men benefit from women's oppression (KhosraviShakib, 2010).

**Radical Feminism:** Radical feminism is a perspective within feminism, now primarily associated with second-wave feminism of the 1960s that focuses on the theory of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships based on the assertion that male supremacy oppresses women. Radical feminism aims to challenge and overthrow patriarchy by opposing standard gender roles and oppression of women and calls for a radical reordering of society (Willis, 1984). Radical feminists, more than socialist or liberal feminists, were more likely to create organizations that excluded men. In response to patriarchy's appropriation and exploitation of the female body, radical feminist sociologists focused their attentions on it, in particular rape, incest, health care, and sexuality (Winkler, nd). This type of feminism views the oppression of women as the most fundamental form of oppression, one that cuts across boundaries of race, culture, and economic class. Radical feminism questions why women must adopt certain roles based on their biology, just as it questions why men adopt certain other roles based on gender.

**Socialist Feminism:** Socialist feminism is considered as a synthesis of Marxist feminism and Radical feminism. It emerged in the second half of the 1970s and was contributed by feminists Sylvia Walby, Anne Witz and others. Socialist feminism did not fully agree with the traditional Marxism approach which saw women's subordination as secondary to class subordination. It also did not support the new radical feminism that ignored class and saw patriarchy as the primary form of

subordination. But it argued that class and women's subordination were of equal importance and had to be challenged simultaneously. Socialist feminists believe that there are four interlocking structures to be considered in women's subordination: production, reproduction, sexuality and child-rearing. Socialist feminists are concerned with promoting policies to eliminate gender segregation in domestic and wage labor, eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace, achieve equal pay for work of equal value, increase women's control over their conditions of work, transform the conditions in which women can make reproductive choices and increase public responsibility for childcare. They believe that community-based political activities are a necessary part of the socialist-feminist transformation of society. Socialist feminist activities have a vision of a society that excludes gender, class and race structure.

**Black Feminism:** Black feminism argues that sexism, class oppression, and racism are inextricably bound together (Collins, 2013). The way these relate to each other is called intersectionality. Forms of feminism that strive to overcome sexism and class oppression but ignore race can discriminate against many people, including women, through racial bias. In 1918, Maria Stewart, the first US Black feminist asked, *“How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?”* *“Shall it any longer be said of daughters of Africa, they have no ambition, they have no force?”* (Collins, 2000). Since then, several scholars have contributed to establish Black feminist perspective. One of the theories that evolved out of the Black feminist movement was Alice Walker's “Womanism” which focuses on the idea that black women experienced a different and more intense kind of oppression from that of white women. They point to the emergence black feminism after earlier movements led by white middle-class women which they regard as having largely ignored oppression based on race and class. Black feminist theory has argued that black women are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways than white women. Walker’s volume challenge challenges dominant ideas of the time by asserting the value of marginalized (African American women in particular) voices (Walker, 1983; McMillan, 2004).

**Postmodern Feminism:** Postmodern feminism's major departure from other branches of feminism is perhaps the argument that sex, or at least gender is itself constructed through language as described in Judith Butler's 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*. According to postmodernism, dominant meanings are often created through comparison with an “other” which then defines both itself and the dominant reality (Parpart, 1993). Western philosophy rests on binary opposites, such as truth/false, unity/diversity, man/women,

superior/inferior, whereby the nature and primacy of the first term depend on the definition of its opposite i.e. other (Derrida, 1976). It encompasses that women are treated as “Other” and men as primary sex. The false power of hegemonic knowledge can be challenged by alternative discourses which offer other explanations of reality. Discourse – a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs – is the site where meanings are constructed and power relations determined (Foucault, 1972, 1976; Scott, 1988). And the knowledge and power both are constructed by men. One of the most appealing aspects of postmodernism to many feminists has been its focus on difference. The notion that women have been created and defined as “other” by men has long been argued and explored by feminists (Parpart, 1993). Postmodern feminist thoughts challenge and avoid the essentialist definitions of femininity that was propagated during the period of modern feminism. Postmodern feminists assert that gender identity is not fixed, either by nature or society. There is no core gender identity. Gender always bears multiple, conflicting, and shifting meanings; it is a site of ongoing social conflict (Deidman, 2004). "Woman" is a debatable category, complicated by class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other facets of identity. There is no single cause for women's subordination and no single approach towards dealing with the issue (RMO, 2013).

#### **4. Implications of Feminist Theory**

**Feminism as a Threat to Patriarchal Social Structure:** Most forms of feminism characterize patriarchy as an unjust social system that is oppressive to women. The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection (Pateman, 1988). In feminist theory the concept of patriarchy often includes all the social mechanisms that reproduce and exert male dominance over women. Feminist theory typically characterizes patriarchy as a social construction, which can be overcome by revealing and critically analyzing its manifestations (Tickner, 2001). Feminism or feminist theory questioned on the subordination of women. Why are males in a superior position? Why can women not be the head of a Church? Why are most of the families are male headed? Why do only males have access to economic resources? Why are there few women among top scholars? What are the causes of women’s low position in society? Such questions threatened patriarchal socio-economic and political authority. And it is the contribution of feminist theory or feminist movements in different epochs of history.

**Feminism as a New Feminist Epistemology and Research Paradigm:** Feminism, feminist theory and feminist discourse have provided feminist epistemology [Epistemology is an area of philosophical study that deals with the study of the nature, origins, and extent of knowledge]. It has provided a new paradigm for research and academic discourse. [Paradigm refers to a conceptual framework or specific points of view within the social sciences.] A paradigm consists of the orienting assumptions and conceptual frameworks which are basic to a discipline (Stacey & Thorne, 1985).

Feminist thought served as a catalyst for the formation of a new sociological paradigm (Wallace, 1985). A new feminist paradigm would place women and their lives, and gender, in a central place in understanding social relations as a whole. A feminist paradigm would also contain a methodology that produces knowledge for rather than that of women in their many varieties and situations (Mac Kinnon, 1983; Acker, 1989).

**Feminism as an Institutionalized Political and Social Activism:** Feminism is an activism also. Feminist would not mind politicizing their issue at local, national as well as international level. The activism is explicitly observed with the rise in second wave feminism. One of the best known and most important political slogans of the early Women's Liberation Movement in the middle 1960s claimed that "the personal are political." It captured the insight that many of what were thought to be personal problems possessed social and political causes, were widely shared among women, and could only be resolved by social and political change. In the 1960s social movements - the Civil Rights Movement, the movement against the War in Vietnam, and the student movement which called for more student rights and decision-making power on college campuses - women were central actors. By the middle 1960s many of these women began to react to and organize around the strong contradiction within social movements which fought for self-determination and equality and yet which denied these same basic rights within their own ranks (Mandle, 2013). Like other progressive social movements, feminism has been deeply affected by the growth of identity politics. Black feminism is one example. Feminists from past to present have not only raised the voice of gender equality but also established camps and institutions for organized movement for social, economic and political rights of women which contributed for social change and achieving gender equality.

**Feminism as a Pillar of Feminist Development Discourses:** Feminist movement or feminist theory, after its germination, has played an important role in establishing different feminist development models. Since the 1970s, the development model 'Women in Development (WID)' was practiced. This model was solely influenced by modernization theory and liberal feminism. The term 'women in development' was" coined in the early 1970s by a Washington-based network of female development professionals (Tinker, 1990). They challenged trickle down theories of development, arguing that modernization was impacting differently on men and women. Instead of improving women's rights and status, the development process appeared to be contributing to a deterioration of their position (Miller & Razavi, 1995). Responding to the concern that women had been left out of the processes of economic development, the aim of WID was to integrate women into economic

development (Derbyshire, 2002). And it would be possible through avoiding bias in development projects, education, employment etc.

During the 1980s, the concept Women and Development (WAD) emerged. The model was heavily influenced by Marxist feminism and dependency theory that linked gender development to class and global capitalism. The main aim of the WAD model was to improve women's condition through elimination of asymmetrical relations between capitalists and women laborers. Similarly, the concept of Gender and Development (GAD) emerged in the 1990s. GAD approach focuses on the socially constructed basis of differences between men and women and emphasizes the need to challenge existing gender roles and relations (Reeves & Baden, 2000). This model is heavily influenced by socialist feminist that view both patriarchy and class that influence women's position in society. GAD model aims to change women's subordination position through their empowerment. This model assumes that women have to bear the triple work burden of production, reproduction and community roles (Subedi, 2013). They have, for the most part, attempted to demonstrate the concrete materiality of gender subordination as it is constructed by the rules and practices of different institutions: household, market, state and community (Miller & Razavi, 1995). In addition, Northern feminists proposed an approach termed as Women, Environment and Development (WED) during the 1970s. This approach was in opposition to men's control over nature and women and known as Eco-feminism. This stream points out that environmental decline is due to patriarchal authority in development planning. It claims that patriarchal leadership is destroying the relationship between community, women and nature. Eco-feminists cohere around an interest in the relationship between the feminization of nature and the naturalization of women's lives (Moore, 2004).

## **5. Conclusion**

Feminism is an ideology that opposes the political, economic, and cultural relegation of women to positions of inferiority that is solely concerned with gender issues. Feminist movement originated in the first half of the 19th century, fostered in its second half, and continues up to the present. The feminist movement and academic discourse in different epochs of history motivated to propound feminist theories in which gender is in the central focus and gender relations are considered to be problematic and considered changeable. There are a variety of feminist theories such as liberal feminism, cultural feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, postmodern feminism and Black feminism. Although different feminist theories differently perceive and treat gender issues, almost all theories revolve on some theoretical questions [And what about women?

Why then is all this about? How can we change and improve the social world to make it a more just place for women and for all people? And what about the differences among women?] seeking description of the situation of women, explanation of the reason of the situation, calls for activism or transformation difference among women. In feminist theory, among ‘gender difference’, ‘gender inequality’, ‘gender oppression’, ‘structural oppression’, ‘differences among women’, one or more than one may be the major cause of women subordination. Feminism not only threatens patriarchal socio-economic structure but also develops a new feminist epistemology or paradigm of academic discourse and motivates activism for socio-economic and political transformation. Moreover, feminist discourses have influenced the formulation of the development models such as WID, WAD, GAD, and GED which contributes to pave a way of gender equality across the world.

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