

Feminist Theories 1

Liberal or Reformist feminism:

- Liberals are concerned with the human and civil rights and freedom of the individual.
- In keeping with the Enlightenment tradition, they believe that all human beings should have equal rights.
- Reformism is the idea that progress towards equal rights can be achieved by gradual reforms in society without the need for a revolution.
- Liberal/Reformist feminists believe women can achieve gender equality by arguing that laws and policies against sex discrimination in employment and education can secure equal opportunities for women.
- They also campaign for cultural change. Traditional prejudices and stereotypes about gender differences are a barrier to equality.
- They reject the idea that biological differences make women less competent or rational than men, or men are biologically less emotional or nurturing than women.

Sex and gender:

- Oakley (1972) distinguishes 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
- While sex differences are fixed, gender differences vary between cultures and over time.
- Sexist attitudes are stereotypical beliefs about gender and culturally constructed and transmitted through socialization.
- To achieve gender equality we must change society's socialisation patterns. They seek to promote appropriate role models in education and the family for example female teachers in traditional male subjects. They challenge stereotyping in the media. Over time they believe such actions will produce cultural change and gender equality will become the norm. They can be seen as a critique of the functionalist view of the gender role.
- **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 Parson's view, instrumental roles are the domain of the men and expressive roles are the domain of women.
- Liberal feminists challenge this division. It argues men and women are equally capable of performing roles in both spheres and that traditional gender roles prevent men and women from leading fulfilling lives.
- Despite its critique of the functionalist view of gender divisions, it is the feminist theory closest to a consensus view of society. Although it recognizes conflicts between men and women, these are merely a product of outdated attitudes.

Evaluation of liberal feminism:

- Studies conducted by liberal feminists have produced evidence documenting the extent of gender inequality and discrimination and legitimizing the demand for reform in areas such as equal pay and employment practices etc. This has helped to demonstrate that gender differences are not inborn but the result of different treatment and socialisation patterns.
- However, they are criticised for their over-optimism. They ignore the possibility that there are deep-seated structures causing women's oppression, such as capitalism and patriarchy.
- Walby (1997) argues they offer no explanation for the overall structure of gender inequality.
- Marxist and radical feminists argue that liberal feminism fails to recognize the underlying causes of women's subordination and that it is naïve to believe that changes in law or attitudes will be enough to bring equality. Instead, they believe that far-reaching revolutionary changes are needed.

Evaluation of radical feminism:

- Marxists argue that class, not patriarchy is the primary form of inequality. Capitalism is the main cause of beneficiary of women's oppression and not men.
- Radical feminism offers no explanation of why female subordination takes different forms in different societies. It also assumes all women are in the same position and ignores class and ethnic differences between women, e.g. a MC woman may have more in common with WC woman.
- Pollert (1996) argues the concept of patriarchy is of little value in explaining women's position because it involves a circular argument – male violence is explained as patriarchy while patriarchy is seen as being maintained by male violence.
- Radical feminism has an inadequate theory of how patriarchy will be abolished. Notions such as separatism are unlikely to be achievable.
- 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

Radical feminism:

- Radical feminism emerged in the early 1970s. Its key concept is patriarchy.
- They believe patriarchy is universal and exists in all societies.
- Firestone (1974) believes 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.
- They believe patriarchy is the primary and most fundamental form of social inequality and conflict. The key division in society is between men and women as 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.
- Patriarchy is direct and personal, not only in the public sphere of work and politics but in the private sphere of the family, domestic labour and sexual relationships.
- All relationships involve power and they are political when one individual tries to dominate another. Personal relationships between the sexes are therefore political because men dominate women through them. Radical feminists refer to these power relationships as sexual politics.
- They focus on the ways in which patriarchal power is exercised through personal relationships, often through sexual or physical violence or the threat of it.
- In general, male stream sociology regards sexuality as a natural biological urge. However, radical feminists argue that patriarchy constructs sexuality so as to satisfy men's desires e.g. women are portrayed in pornography as passive sex objects.
- Given that patriarchy and women's oppression of women is exercised through intimate domestic and sexual relationships these must be transformed if women are to be free. They have proposed a number of strategies to achieve this :
 1. Separatism – living apart from men and creating a new culture of female independence. Greer (2000) argues for the creation of all-female households as an alternative to the heterosexual family.
 2. 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 'reclaim the night' marches.
 3. 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.

Feminist Theories 2



Marxist feminism:

- They reject the liberal feminist view that women's subordination is merely the product of stereotyping and outdated attitudes and also the radical feminist view that it is the result of patriarchal oppression by men.
- They see women's subordination as rooted in capitalism.
- This results from their primary role as an unpaid homemaker which places them in a dependent economic position in the family. Their subordination performs a number of important functions for capitalism.
 1. **Women are a source of cheap, exploitable labour for employers** – they can be paid less as they are partially dependent on their husbands.
 2. **Women are a reserve army of labour** – that can be moved into the labour force during economic booms and out against at times of recession.
 3. **Women reproduce the labour force** – both by nurturing and socializing children to become the next generation of workers.
 4. **Women absorb anger** - that would otherwise be directed at capitalism. 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.
- Because of these links between women's subordination and capitalism, Marxist feminists argue that women's interests lie in the overthrow of capitalism.
- Barrett (1980) argues that we must give more emphasis to women's consciousness and motivation and to the role of ideology in maintaining their oppression. The ideology of 'familism' presents the nuclear family and its sexual division of labour as natural and normal. The family is portrayed as the only place where women can attain fulfillment – helps to keep women subordinated. We must overthrow the ideology of 'familism' along with that of capitalism in order to secure women's liberation.

Difference feminism:

- Difference feminists do not see women as a single 'homogeneous group'. All women have different experiences of capitalism, patriarchy, racism e.t.c
- Difference feminism argues that feminist theory has claimed a 'false universality' for itself- it claimed to be about all women but really was only about white, Western, MC, homosexual women.
- 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.
- They 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.

Evaluation of Marxist feminism:

- Marxist feminists are correct to give weight to the relationship between capitalism and women's subordination as they show greater understanding of the importance of structural factors than liberal feminism.
- However, it fails to explain women's subordination in non-capitalist societies as it is also found in non-capitalist societies.
- Unpaid domestic labour may benefit capitalism, but this doesn't explain why it is women and not men who perform it.
- Marxist feminism places insufficient emphasis on the ways in which 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. It could be done 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.
- Namely an economic system – capitalism, and a sex-gender system – patriarchy.
- Radical feminism regards patriarchy as the cause of women's oppression, whereas Marxist feminism sees capitalism as responsible.
- Hartmann (1979) sees capitalism and patriarchy as two intertwined systems that form a single entity 'patriarchal capitalism'.
- They argue patriarchy is universal but it takes a specific form in capitalist societies.
- We must therefore 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.
- Walby (1988) argues that capitalism and patriarchy are inter-related. However, she argues that the interests of the two are not always the same. They collide over the exploitation of female labour. Capitalism demands cheap labour for its workforce whereas patriarchy resists this, wanting to keep women subordinated to men within the private domestic sphere. However, in the long run capitalism is 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.

Poststructuralist feminism:

- They offer an alternative approach concerned with discourses (ways of seeing, thinking or speaking about something) and power/knowledge. The world is made up with lots of sometimes competing discourses e.g religious, scientific, medical and artistic.
- By enabling people 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.
- Poststructuralists argue that the Enlightenment project is a discourse.
- Butler uses this idea in her critique of existing feminist theories. She argues that the Enlightenment ideals were simply a form of power/knowledge that legitimated the domination of Western, white, MC males over other groups and excluded women, black people and other oppressed groups.
- She also argues that white, Western, MC women who dominate the feminist movement have falsely claimed to represent 'universal womanhood' because women are not a single entity who all share the same 'essence'.
- For poststructuralist, there is no fixed essence of what it is to be a woman because our identities are constituted through discourses and because discourses change in different times and different cultures.
- Poststructuralism offers advantages for feminism as it enables them to analyse different discourses to reveal how they subordinate women. Different discourses give rise to different forms of oppression.
- In Butler's view therefore, by rejecting essentialism and by stressing the diversity of discourses, poststructuralism recognizes and legitimizes the diversity of women's lives and struggles, rather than prioritizing some and excluding others.

Evaluation of poststructuralist feminists:

- Walby (1992) argues that there are differences among women, but she argues that there are important similarities – they are all faced with patriarchy.
- Celebrating difference may have the effect of dividing women into an infinite number of sub-groups which weakens feminism as a movement for change.
- Segal (1999) criticizes them for abandoning any notion of real, objective social structures. Oppression is not just the result of discourses but about real inequality. Feminists should therefore continue to focus on the struggle for equality of wealth and income.