

## **What are the basic elements of Feminism?**

### **What are the differences between liberal and radical feminism**

Feminism is a general term used to describe a very broad and complex ideology. There are lots of different feminist theories and approaches, as well as several different types of feminists. The most straightforward meaning however describes it as ‘a movement advocating the rights of women and of their social, political and economic equality with men’<sup>1</sup> (Roger Scruton). Feminism views the personal experiences of women and men through gender – gender identity (how people think of themselves), gender roles (how people act), and gender stratification (each sex’s social standing) are all rooted in the operation of society.

Although feminists are united by their common desire for sexual justice and their concern for women’s welfare, there is a wide spectrum of ‘feminisms’ (Ann Oakley). These can be divided into four broad groups, liberal, radical, Marxist/socialist and Black. This essay will only however look at the former two in more detail.

Those who consider themselves to be feminists disagree about many things (this mainly depends on which of variants they fall into); most feminists usually support some general principles however: ‘All the varieties of feminism contain at their heart a paradox – requiring gender consciousness for their basis, their political rallying cry is the elimination of gender roles.’<sup>2</sup> The importance of change is obviously paramount in feminist thinking as feminism is definitely political since it links ideas to action. Feminism is critical of status quo, and promotes social equality for women and men. Feminists use the word patriarchy to describe the power relationship between men and women as it stands now, whereby men rule and dominate over women in today’s society, in both public life, through politics and in the economy and in private life, in the roles played in the family.

Most feminists believe that sex differences between men and women are relatively minor and therefore these differences can neither explain nor justify gender division and therefore women and men should not be judged on their sex but on who they are as individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> The Dictionary of Political Thought, Roger Scruton, Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> What is Feminism?, Mitchell, Oakley, Basil Blackwell

Feminists want to develop human choices as they maintain that the cultural perception of gender, divides the full range of human qualities into two opposing and limited spheres: the female world of emotion and cooperation and the male world of rationality and competition. As an alternative, feminists want to pursue a 'reintegration of humanity'<sup>3</sup> (French, 1985) by which each person develops all human traits regardless of whether they are male or female.

The movement as a whole strongly opposes gender stratification and wants to see it eliminated from society as any laws and cultural norms that limit the education, income and job opportunities of women maintain and further promote inequality between women and men.

Feminists have therefore sought to break down the divides divide between men and women. However, not all feminists agree on the same means to remove this divide. While some feminists see equality for women as being able to enjoy the same access as men to the 'public sphere'<sup>4</sup>, others argue that freedom for women can only be achieved if some or all of the responsibilities of private life for women, like bringing up children should be transferred to public bodies, in such things as provision of nurseries and crèches etc. However, 'second wave' feminists go further in their demands and argue that female oppression operates in every part of daily life and wish to see such things as the socialisation of children into accepting masculine and feminine roles wiped out.

Feminism is an ideology as I mentioned before which has different variants, the most well known ones are Liberal feminists and Radical feminists, although all feminists' have their goal of overthrowing the patriarchal order of society, the different groups in feminism see different means of accomplishing this goal.

Liberal feminism is the dominant ideology of modern society and is grounded in classic liberal thinking that individuals should be free to develop their own talents and pursue their own interests and should be treated according to their individual merits rather than on others basis's such as in the feminists case, sexual characteristics. But because liberalism evolved in a context in which the private sphere of the family was excluded from political demands for equality, in which traditional social arguments remained strong, and in which the Church upheld women's subordinate role in the family, liberal feminism developed.

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<sup>3</sup> Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals, Marilyn French, Summit Books.

<sup>4</sup> Political Ideologies, Heywood, Palgrave

The first major feminist political statement was Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of women* in 1792. She argued that women should be entitled to the same rights and privileges as men on the grounds that they too were 'human beings'.<sup>5</sup> She believed the key to liberating women lay in education. Education has always been advocated by liberals as a way of replacing ignorance and prejudice and liberal feminists have looked to education to widen the 'narrow mental horizons imposed on women by domesticity.'<sup>6</sup> But later feminists saw this as only the beginning, they argued that freedom and equality for women could only really come about through legal reform, for example the right to influence political decisions through the vote. John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor developed this idea, saying that equal rights for women were necessary not only to correct the injustices they faced but also to promote the moral and intellectual progress of humanity.<sup>7</sup>

Liberal feminists accept the basic organisation of society and politics but seek to expand the rights and opportunities of women. Liberal feminists support equal rights and oppose prejudice and discrimination that get in the way of the ambitions of women. So liberal feminists campaign for the removal of the social, economic, political and legal obstacles that deny women the same freedom as men.

Liberal feminists also endorse reproductive freedom for all women. Some respect aspects of the family as a social institution, calling for such things as widely available maternity leave and childcare for women who wish to work. Others are critical of the way in which family reproduces gender and argue that freedom is not possible for women until families are dramatically changed.

With their strong belief in the rights of individuals, liberal feminists do not believe that all women need to march in step towards any political goal. Rather, both women and men, working individually, would be able to improve their lives if society simply ended legal and cultural barriers rooted in gender.

Radical feminists, meanwhile, find the reforms called for by liberal feminism to be inadequate and superficial. The main goal for radical feminists is not to introduce equal rights, (they do not want women to become like men) but to free women from patriarchal control, the main challenge to patriarchy being in the form of separatism. While liberal feminists wish to create equality in society and are quite

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<sup>5</sup> Political Ideologies, Heywood, Palgrave

<sup>6</sup> The Politics of Women's Rights, Carter, Longman

<sup>7</sup> Essays on Sex Equality by John Stuart Mill and Harriet Yaylor, Rossi, University of Chicago Press

happy to live with men so long as they are not treated as lesser citizens, some radical feminists wish to see a policy, which would see women, cut themselves off from men entirely both socially and sexually.

The feminist writings of the 1970's and 1980's (second-wave feminism) raised questions about the nature of the female condition and sought to uncover the influence of patriarchy, not just in politics and the economy but in all aspects of social, personal and sexual existence which 'ensures male superiority' (Coote and Campbell)<sup>8</sup>. Kate Millet developed this idea in *Sexual Politics* in which she defined the 'patriarchal government' as an institution 'whereby that half of the population which is female is controlled by the half which is male'. Radical feminism holds that gender equality can only be obtained only by ending the cultural notion of gender itself. Fundamentally, according to radical feminists, patriarchy rests on the subordination of women through sexuality and reproduction. Men exert power over and through women's bodies and the only way to end this according to radical feminists is to seek to revolutionarily overthrow the patriarchal order. Merely changing people's attitudes through liberalist recommendations of education is not enough according to radical feminists.

There are many disagreements within the radicals however. Some would support new reproductive technologies - where conception would be able to take place outside the body so that there would be no necessary link between women's bodies, men and child bearing. Shulamith Firestone, in her book *The Dialectic of Sex* believes that it is this burden of child bearing which has placed women at a considerable disadvantage in the past. With this end to motherhood, radical feminists like Firestone, believe that the entire family system, including the conventional definitions of motherhood, fatherhood and childhood, could be left behind, liberating women, men and children from the oppression that the family, gender and the sex itself (Dworkin, 1987)<sup>9</sup>. However, other feminists see the new reproductive technologies as based on patriarchy and male science – a way of robbing women's rights over their own wombs. Furthermore, they celebrate women's key role as mothers. Differences such as these in opinion within radical feminism are somewhat confusing.

Feminist theory is still a well – known and widely supported ideology, however, its high point was during the 1960's and 1970's in which many of the goals that were sought, particularly by the liberal feminists, for instance the vote, equal

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<sup>8</sup> Sweet Freedom, Coote Campbell, Pan

<sup>9</sup> Men Possessing Women, Dworkin, Pedigree

opportunities at work and so forth have been more or less achieved. Some radical feminist ideas too, such as the legalisation of abortion etc have also now been accomplished, although the other recommendations, concerning reproduction outside the female body have more or less been dismissed as too radical. The basic goal however for feminists from the beginning of the movement had been to emancipate women from society's patriarchal order and this on the surface seems to have been achieved. More and more women are being employed in influential posts at work, men are seen to do more domestic and child associated activities and women of course now have the same access to education as men. However, it can also be seen that the majority of women in today's society are still playing the stereotypical female role in society.



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