

## How have feminists contributed to understanding gender?

Before the rise of Feminism in the 1960's, the popular view in sociology was that the biological differences between men and women were the things that determined their role in life. Functionalists assumed that men were biologically suited to heavy work (instrumental roles) and as women bore children, they were therefore biologically suited to the role of mother and carer, the expressive role. In the late 1960's Liberal Feminist Ann Oakley argued the case and said that gender roles were not 'nature' but were in fact nurture. She felt that gender roles were down to socialisation and even if there were biological tendencies, they could be overridden by cultural factors. She did several cross cultural studies; each one seemed to strengthen her case. For example, she found 14 cultures where women did the lumbering and 38 cultures where men and women shared cooking duties.

Since the emergence of Feminism, there have been several different Feminist perspectives and although they do not all agree about the origins of gender issues, each one has added its own valuable contribution to the understanding of these issues and heightened women's, and men's awareness of the inequalities that exist. Feminists have challenged the relationship of men and women as one where women belong to one group and men belong to the other.

Whilst 1<sup>st</sup> wave Feminism (1850-1930) gained women the right to vote, 2<sup>nd</sup> wave Feminism has also resulted in great improvements of the lives of 20/21<sup>st</sup> century women. It has heightened awareness of gender issues in areas like the family, the workplace, education, and the media to mention a few. Some of the successful Feminist campaigns resulted in things such as the 1975 sex discrimination act, the 1970 equal pay act and women's refuges.

Feminists also introduced different methods in carrying out sociological research. Previously sociological research was very 'malestream' and all research was done by male sociologists, on men and applied to society as a whole. No research had been done on the family, childbirth, household labour or money decisions which are all major parts of society.

Feminists felt that the 'scientific' methods used by men could not help understand society.

In the 1970's, Liberal Feminist, Ann Oakley introduced the unstructured interview as the technique to gain in depth 'real' information about women and their experiences but this was criticised as it was said that Oakley got so personally involved with her participants that it could bias her results.

The following sections will analyse and evaluate Feminist explanations of gender inequalities:

Liberal Feminism is a form of Feminism that argues that equality for men and women can be achieved through legal and social reform. They feel that men as a group need not be confronted. No one in particular was to blame for gender inequalities, it was just a by product of tradition. They say that gender role socialisation is to blame for producing and reproducing a sexual division of labour in which men are dominant and women subordinate.

Liberal Feminists believed in 'self ownership', and felt that women should have control over their own bodies. Their campaigning resulted in improvements in fertility control. Betty Friedans N.O.W (national organisation of women) campaigners also got results for women. They had excellent media contacts and bombarded Washington with telegrams about sex discrimination, picketed the EEOC (equal opportunity employment commission) and filed complaints against the N.Y Times for its sex segregation job ads. This resulted in the US Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Pay Act though the Sex Discrimination Act fell in 1982. The Liberal Feminist perspective was useful for highlighting inequalities at work and domestic labour but it doesn't explain why socialisation leads men to be dominant and women to be oppressed. It also overestimated the role of education, legislation and male resistance to giving up their power. It came under fire from black Feminists too who felt that different cultures and classes were not being taken into account. They felt that white women's experiences were far different to their own. For example, a white woman might be refused an abortion; black women were likely to be pressured into them.

Radical Feminism is one of the most extreme perspectives of Feminism. They feel that the family is the 'cornerstone of patriarchy' and this is reinforced by government, tradition, media and religion. They see society as patriarchal (men dominate and rule) and say that it is within the intimate relationship between men and women that inequalities originate. They took an in depth look into family life and unpicked what actually happened in the home. They felt

women's minds had been colonised by patriarchal ideologies and that men used their 'power' to dominate women. When this failed, they resorted to domestic violence to maintain their power over women. Radical Feminists drew attention to uncomfortable subjects like rape, domestic violence, child abuse and pornography which resulted in rape crisis lines and women's refuges but they were criticised for undermining the family and ignoring happy marriages. It was also criticised by Sylvia Walby who said Radical Feminism had a 'false universalism which cannot understand historical change or take sufficient account of divisions between women based on ethnicity and class'. Black Feminists also felt that ethnicity was their major problem and that family and the home was their haven not their battle ground. Functionalists felt that it undermined family and would destroy the family unit.

Marxist Feminists focus particularly on class and labour and the roles that women play in them. They feel that women's subordination in the labour market benefits capitalism and that the free domestic labour they supply benefits the economy. Women provide a healthy, cared for male workforce for employers for free and this suits the needs of capitalism. Margaret Benson (1972) said that the male wage pays for two people, which makes it a family wage and this is why men and women are paid differently. They state that women form a 'reserve army of labour' that can be taken on in times of need and quickly disposed of when no longer needed but this theory does not explain horizontal job segregation, and also fails to explain how in the last recession women held on to their jobs, fails to explain how women now officially make up more than half of the current labour force, and if women are cheaper to employ, why aren't men staying at home while the women go out to work. Marxist Feminists say that if capitalism was abolished, gender inequality would disappear. Sylvia Walby says Marxist Feminism doesn't explain exploitation of women in non-capitalist societies, and they are criticised for overlooking patriarchy as being influential and for ignoring sexuality, violence and culture in the inequalities of women. Black Feminists also criticise it for ignoring race and ethnicity.

The most balanced view to date seems to be that of the Dual/Triple system Feminists who take a piece of all the other perspectives. They believe that capitalism, patriarchy and racism all influence women's lives. This is a useful attempt at producing a more sophisticated explanation of gender inequalities but Postmodernist Feminists like Michelle Barrat and Anne Phillips (1992) argue that inequalities in society have now broken down and Catherine Hakim (1996) denies that there is discrimination against women at work. She states that

women are less committed to employment than men and that a woman's inferior place at work is down to her own choice to put her family before employment.