

FEMINISM

Feminists repudiate patriarchy which is the ideology by which men function as the default and dominant social group that society is built around, in which masculinity is the dominating social currency. Feminists assert that inequities of gender are not inescapable or acceptable, that biology is not limiting, and that the ability to choose is, by itself, liberating. Feminism's three core tenets are the entrenched nature of gender, the reality of patriarchy, and the necessity for change. Feminism identifies gender as a principal social division which facilitates undue advantages to men and therefore should be upended.

The Fetishism of Choice

The model liberal subject is always seen as having self-mastery over career, consumption habits, family life, relationships, sexuality, appearance, and body. Western liberal capitalism indeed promotes this model where members are seen as having choices and equal ability to choose. Feminism recognises that to have equal choice is an ideal, but it claims that individuals are restrained by socially constructed gender norms. Feminists claim all women are affected by female social subjection and that all men derive advantages from privilege associated with being male.

The notion that liberal capitalist norms ensure our freedom to choose is so widely held that the feminist highlighting of social restrictions associated with gender inequities comes as a rude surprise to some. Feminism challenges the notion that men and women are in control. They state that their choices are moulded by socially constructed, gendered conduct, their careers by widespread sexism, their sexuality by a socio-legal structure that does not ensure them the sexual freedom it promises.

The Prison of Biology

Feminism repudiates the liberal notion of atomised individuals who only require a basic legal regime to ensure their freedoms. Gender inequity is more complex than liberalism would permit it to be, but feminists do not want the inequity to be seen as realities that are grounded in women's biological differences. As far as they are concerned, biology should not translate to social inequality.

Feminist Thesis

The Entrenchment of Gender

Gender is a principal social flashpoint which has had significant staying power and will continue to do so.

It is quite mainstream to note that there are biologically ordained differences between men and women. However, feminists point to a sex/gender distinction which they claim patriarchy conflates. Sex is natural whereas gender is the socially constructed classification of people into masculine and feminine. Feminists believe the sex/gender distinction broached by them helps to elucidate that what are stated as biological realities are in fact products of cultural conditioning.

The sex/gender distinction is a basic premise of feminism, but it is problematic. Disaggregating gender from sex, on the one hand, has great liberatory potential in that much of what is seen as attributable to biology can be seen as socially constituted. But on the other hand, there is no way to know that social conditioning is any more pliable than biological conditioning and to assume that biology and culture are disparate entities that do not interact and affect each other is a rather big leap.

The Existence of Patriarchy

The gender cleavage does not favour women; it is immensely uneven and advantages men over women.

For feminists, gender differences equate to gender inequity; while men reap rewards, women are adversely affected by it. Feminists may not claim that patriarchy is an unavoidable result of gender differences, but they do hold that it exists very much alongside differences wherever they exist. Patriarchy is empirical, feminists claim, and it is an assertion about how men and women are positioned in society. The most elementary formulation of a society that is patriarchal, that liberal feminists subscribe to, is one in which quantifiable imbalances exist. They are to be found in deficits in legal rights, wages, and certain job opportunities among others. When articulating the Existence of Patriarchy feminism is confronted often by the Fetishism of Choice. In liberal doctrine, choice has transformative capacity; choice, by its very existence, translates unjust circumstances into just ones. To counter this, some liberal feminists may claim that any woman who actively chooses an untenable position for herself is not downtrodden, while others argue the extent to which women really have the power to choose given the social pressures on them that compel them in various ways. The latter position has more currency than the former in feminism.

The Need for Change

The ingrained patriarchal division of gender is unethical; political action is necessary to ameliorate and defeat it.

Feminism is a political movement with a reform or revolutionary agenda. Because feminism calls for significant changes, the internal discourse over the nature, method, agent of that change is contentious. Many of the iniquities of patriarchy are to be situated in our relationships, families, at work or how we look. As such, how change should occur becomes deeply personal, and though all feminists acknowledge the need for change, the nature of that change is up for debate.

Adapted from Clare Chambers, 'Feminism' in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargeant and Marc Stears (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (OUP 2013)