

# Sociology Shortcuts

## M7. Approaches: Feminism

**Hammersley** (1992) notes feminist approaches are based around "the emancipation of women as the research goal" and feminist research aims to both understand and, more-controversially, *challenge* female inequality.

### 1. Beliefs

A fundamental belief of feminist research is the assumption gender is the most significant form of social division and female liberation from male oppression is a legitimate research objective.

In this respect both sociology and society generally suffers from **andocentricity** (a focus on male interests and needs) that must be:

1. Addressed by highlighting "**malestream bias**" in all areas of social life.
2. Redressed by conducting *female-friendly* forms of research.

In this respect **Millen** (1997) notes feminist approaches are based around the claim we can *objectively* understand female oppression by giving a voice to the oppressed.

### 2. Proof

One of the key areas of proof for feminist approaches is **experience**; where women are exploited on a daily basis it follows that to understand inequality it needs to be **documented**.

This is achieved by allowing women to **talk** freely and openly about their lives - what **Lugones and Spelman** (1990) term "*the variety of real life stories women provide about themselves*" - in a situation where they feel both comfortable and safe.



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Acceptable forms of evidence have two dimensions:

1. **Subjectivity**: the main focus is to understand, from the respondent's viewpoint, the nature, extent and personal experience of female inequality. The object of such research is **value-committed** in various ways:
  - The emancipation of women from male exploitation by revealing the extent of such exploitation and exploring ways it can be overcome.
  - What **Hammersley** (1992) calls a "commitment to feminism" reflected in the "whole process of research".
  - What **Gelsthorpe** (1992) argues is a need to be "critical, rigorous and accurate" in the documentation process.

2. Women **experience** life and knowledge in different ways to men. **Gilligan** (1982) argues this experience has been historically ignored or marginalised in male-dominated and **male-centred research**; it is, therefore, acceptable to focus on documenting female experiences as a way of "redressing the gender balance" in terms of social research.

**Feminism** Noun \ fem-i-nism  
A BELIEF IN THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

### 3. Methodology

The general focus here is on data **validity** since feminist research aims to document female lives and inequalities in as much depth and detail as possible.

This research emphasis has two significant qualities:

1. It rejects what **Hammersley** calls "**hierarchy in the research relationship**"; feminist approaches acknowledge the researcher is positioned, through considerations of status and sex, in ways that influence the outcome of the research process (for good or ill). Since the aim is to channel and document female experiences, the relationship between researcher and respondent must be one of **equality**. This is achieved by using female researchers because this creates an environment in which women can talk freely about their lives and (shared) experiences.

2. The emphasis is on collecting **qualitative** data.

**Millen** (1997)

A **subjective** approach and preference for research **validity** is justified because in **patriarchal** societies where male voices normally take precedence, the balance is redressed by focusing specifically on those who are rarely given a voice.

The argument here is that our understanding of female inequality is enhanced because feminist approaches provide "*access to a wider conception of truth via the insight into the oppressor*".

### 4. Methods

Data tends to be gathered through a range of **unobtrusive methods**. These include:

- **focused interviews**
- **unstructured interviews**
- **ethnographic methods** such as participant observation.

**Wadsworth** (2001) defines feminist research in terms of four criteria that give both an outline of its general focus and a broad indication of how it should be carried-out, based on the idea of female experience as a way of generating reliable and valid knowledge.

- **Who?** "It is research carried out by women who identify as feminists":
- **Why?** It has a particular purpose focused around feminist issues and interests
- **What?** There are "particular kinds of questions, topics and issues" pertinent to female lives.
- **How?** By drawing on "women's experience of living in a world in which they are subordinate to men".

We need to note this general view is not **unproblematic** - there are debates, for example, *within* feminism about whether, given the widespread political, economic and social changes over the past 50 years, there is still a need for a "feminist approach" to research.

**Post-feminists** such as **Paglia** (1993) and **Roiphe** (1993) argue "female inequality" is no longer a major issue for feminism - which suggests a methodological approach based on redressing female oppression has limited current application.

