

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Theory and Methods

Unit M4: Feminism

Introduction

The main purpose of these Notes is to provide a basic overview of different sociological perspectives. Each set of notes is organised around three basic themes:

1. **A brief overview of the perspective.**
2. **An outline of the “basic principles” on which each perspective is based.**
3. **A brief evaluation of the perspective.**

These Notes are, therefore, intended to serve as a general introduction to different perspectives, although they may also be used as revision notes.

Feminist Perspectives

The following is intended mainly as a sort of "**theoretical overview**" of various Feminist perspectives and we can justify this by way of noting two points:

1. Firstly, sociologists have been - and still are - criticised for what Feminists have called their "**malestream**" bias. That is, the general preoccupation with explaining **male experiences** in and of the social world to the almost total exclusion (until very recently at least) of female experiences.

From a Feminist viewpoint, **women** tend to be discussed within Sociology (as elsewhere) as "**appendages**" of men (as you may have already discovered if you've studied areas of the syllabus such as "Work and Leisure", "Social Stratification" and, especially, "Deviance"). Feminist perspectives not only serve to redress this "male bias", they also offer a valuable contribution to the development of sociological theory and knowledge.

The **Radical Feminist** Kate **Millett** ("Sexual Politics", 1971), for example, was particularly scathing when she argued:

"...sociology examines the status quo, calls it phenomena, and pretends to take no stand on it, thereby avoiding the necessity to comment on the invidious character of the relationship between the sex groups it studies. Yet by slow degrees of converting statistic to fact, function to prescription, bias to biology (or some other indeterminate) it comes to ratify and rationalise what has been socially enjoined or imposed into what is and ought to be. And through its pose of objectivity, it gains a special efficacy in reinforcing stereotypes...Functionalists, like other reactionaries, are out to save the family".

2. Secondly - and related closely to the above - Feminism has been particularly concerned with the analysis of **male / female relationships** in terms of the relative significance of the concepts of "**sex class**" and "**patriarchy**". A great deal of work has been done in relation to these concepts and explanations of male domination / female emancipation.

In the main, Feminist perspectives tend to **reject** "malestream" (and especially Functionalist) arguments about the nature of gender relationships for three basic reasons:

Firstly, any explanation of male / female relationships must include an analysis of **power inequalities** that stem from, and contribute to, **economic, political** and **ideological inequalities** in our society.

Secondly, Feminism tends to take it as axiomatic (that is, as "self evident") that men and women in our society (indeed, the majority of, if not all, known human societies) do **not** enjoy some form of "**symmetrical**" relationship that is - at worst - "different but equal" or - at best - truly equal. All varieties of Feminist thought (even the most politically conservative) tend to begin from the observation that women are not only socially different but also fundamentally **unequal** to men.

Thirdly, in relation to gender and work, women's involvement in paid work is seen as **not** simply an **extension** of their family role. In some instances reference is made to women's "dual role", whilst in others the focus is placed on the central role of females in the workplace (for example, as a main family "breadwinner"). While Feminists tend to disagree about the **relative importance** of the concepts of **class** and **patriarchy** as guiding concepts in the explanation of women's exploitation by men, the majority of Feminists tend to agree that each is significant...

The main Feminist perspectives that we can examine are as follows:

1. Liberal Feminism.

Unlike the other forms of Feminism noted above, Liberal Feminism has tended not to be overly concerned with the development of a general body of theoretical knowledge about women's lives (and their relationship to men). This branch of Feminism has, on the other hand, tended to be more concerned with day-to-day questions of **legal / political / economic and social equality** for women.

As we will see, this has been both one of its great **strengths** (insofar as raising women's awareness, agitating for social change and so forth) and one of its greatest **weaknesses** (since, as you should be aware, lasting social change involves something more than changing people's attitudes - an idea we will develop in more detail in a moment).

In this respect, Liberal Feminism has been concerned with such things as issues of **overt discrimination** against women in all areas of social life (work, education, the mass media and so forth), as well as arguing for various forms of **legal protection** and **social rights** for women (anti-discrimination legislation, equal pay, child-care facilities for working women, support for single mothers and the like).

As may be apparent, the main theoretical thrust of Liberal Feminism has been to argue that women - as human beings - are **not inferior** to men and, on this basis, they should by right enjoy the **same political, legal, economic and social rights** and **responsibilities** as men. Much of the political focus, in this respect, has been on the question of "**equality of opportunity**". That is, the argument that women should be allowed to compete equally with men in all spheres of social life (but especially the workplace and education).

Unlike their Marxist and Radical sisters, **Liberal Feminists** have **not** advocated **revolutionary changes** in either the **structure of society** and / or male / female relationships. This "**practical**" approach has achieved some notable **successes** (in terms of **anti-discrimination**, **equal pay** and **maternity rights**, for example), but it has also attracted a good deal of **criticism** (not the least from Feminist writers). Such criticism has tended to focus not on the sentiment of "equality" (although Radical Feminists would, as we will see, like to go further than this), but rather around the **means** to achieve it.

As I've suggested, Liberal Feminists have focused their attention on "**equality of opportunity**"; what such Feminists want is **parity** with men in terms of general rights and responsibilities. Since such Feminism **doesn't** advocate wide-ranging, structural, changes in the organisation of society, its main weapon in the fight for equality of opportunity has been the **legal system**. In short, if women are unfairly and unreasonably discriminated against (in employment, for example) then laws are needed to "redress" the power imbalance, as it were.

2. Marxist Feminism.

As the name suggests, Marxist Feminists have tended to explain gender inequalities from the viewpoint of Karl **Marx's** analysis of **Capitalism**. Various Feminist writers have analysed **institutions** such as the **family** in terms of its **structural relationship** to Capitalist forms of **economic production**. In this respect, the **emphasis** is placed upon the way in which **women** are generally **exploited** through such things as **domestic labour**, **child care** ("**services**" that leave men free to be either exploited economically in the workplace or, indeed, to do the exploiting - Marxists call this type of "free service" a "**use value**" - the value of unpaid female labour to Capitalism can be expressed in terms of how it helps capitalists to carry-out economic exploitation, rather than in direct monetary terms) and as a "**reserve army of labour**".

In Marxist Feminist terms, the importance of the **economic dimension** to people's relationships is **stressed**. Just as an employee became dependent upon an employer for a job, a wage and hence survival, so this kind of dependent relationship became mirrored by the family group. In this instance, the woman becomes **dependent** upon her partner for survival. In both instances, of course, this is a highly-dependent relationship and, therefore, one characterised by **relations of domination and subordination**.

In addition, these relationships become routinized over time. The Capitalist seeks to justify and maintain his domination (because it is advantageous to him) and the male seeks to justify and maintain his domination (because, in exchange for sharing part of his wage he receives domestic services in return).

Barrett argues, on the basis of the above, that it is hardly surprising that in a situation where:

- a. One individual has power over another and
- b. The powerful individual stands to benefit by exercising that power, then
- c. People become effectively "locked-into" these relationships. It becomes - eventually - a normal part of people's lives (as, over time, children are socialised into these expected male / female, employer / employee roles).

For **Barrett**, therefore, a "**patriarchal ideology**" develops effectively out of the initial relations of (male) **domination** and (female) **subordination** produced by the **Capitalist system of production** - not the other way around as many **Radical Feminists** have argued.

Thus, the **combination** of the **material fact** of economic dependency coupled with the **ideological rationalisations** of this **dependency** (things like concepts of "**femininity**", "**maternal instinct**" and so forth) becomes a powerful social brew in which women are the eventual "**losers**".

According to **Barrett**, the **cause** of "**women's oppression today**" (to coin a phrase) is **not simply** to be found in **economic dependency** (although it remains a significant factor). A **patriarchal ideology** that has been developed, practised and refined over two or three hundred years is a powerful ideology.

3. Radical Feminism.

For Radical Feminists, two concepts assume a central significance in terms of any analysis of male / female relationships:

1. "Patriarchy":

The domination of women by men.

2. "Sex class":

The idea here is that, because of their **biology** (specifically, the ability to bear children) and **patriarchal domination**, women become dependent upon men for their material survival and protection. In this respect, since **all women** have a common biology and are all subject to male oppression they constitute a distinct **class** - one that has its **own interests** and **political agenda**.

The **biological family unit** is seen, by **Firestone**, as the **source** of **patriarchal domination** and she characterises it as being based upon four "facts"

1. Women, because of their **reproductive** biology, have **always** been **dependent** upon men for their protection and survival.
2. Human **infants** are **dependent** upon adults for a relatively long period of time (during which they have to be looked after).
3. There is a basic and **universal mother - infant bond** based upon the fact that the mother actually gestates the child - it comes from her body. Firestone sees this as a special, interdependent, relationship unlike that which exists between a father and child.
4. The **biological (reproductive) division** between the sexes is the **origin** of all **other divisions** - **economic, political and ideological**.

On the basis of these "facts", Firestone argues that **social class**, for example, has a **biological origin** and **patriarchy** represents the **ideological** means whereby men **exploit** female biology in their own interests. For this reason, Firestone (in common with many Radical Feminists) **rejects** the idea that the condition of female **exploitation** is necessarily and exclusively related to **Capitalism** (although, of course, Capitalism is seen to be an exploitative economic system).

Capitalism, like any economic system, is seen to be **built** upon the **exploitation of female biology** by men and, for Radical Feminists (unlike their Marxist counterparts), the revolutionary overthrow of Capitalism is **not** seen as a solution to women's exploitation (since it cannot change the fact that men will still be able to exploit female biology).

The implications of this analysis are relatively clear. If:

- a. The "**sex class**" interest of women is emancipation from male domination (just as for Marxist Feminists the "class interest" of workers is emancipation from the Capitalist) and
- b. The origin of male domination is the exploitation of women's dependent biology (**men**, in this respect, are the "**sex class**" **enemy**, just as for Marxist Feminists Capitalists are the "class enemy"),

it follows logically that **women** can only be **emancipated** from **male domination** once they are able to **free themselves** from their **biological dependency** on men.

For Radical Feminists, this emancipation can be achieved through such means as:

- a. Removing their biological dependency - if conception and foetal development takes place outside the womb, for example, women can no-longer be exploited biologically.
- b. Renouncing heterosexual relationships in favour of homosexual (lesbian) relationships. Daly, for example, identifies "male aggressiveness" as a central element in the domination of women and has advocated lesbian relationships as the only form of sexual relationship that is free from the tyranny of patriarchy.

Whichever "solution" is actually pursued, it is clear that the "destruction of "the family" is required as the first step along the road to either true equality or - more probably - the establishment of a society based upon matriarchal domination...

4. Socialist Feminism.

Socialist Feminism, whilst having a number of things in common with other Feminist perspectives

- support for **practical action** to improve the position of women's lives on an everyday basis (**Liberal Feminism**),
- attacking the **causes** of women's economic oppression (**Marxist Feminism**),
- **challenging** the **patriarchal assumptions** that underpin male / female domestic relations (**Radical Feminism**),

is also a **distinct perspective** in its own right. Unlike, for example:

Liberal Feminism - **Socialist Feminists** do **not** see **legal and / or political changes** as **sufficient in themselves**. Women have to be emancipated as a class, rather than on a piecemeal, ad hoc, basis.

Marxist Feminism - since the revolutionary overthrow of Capitalism does **not** seem very likely to occur, this "solution" to female exploitation tends not to be seen as a particularly useful one to pursue.

Radical Feminism - whilst **patriarchy** is seen to be a **significant** factor in female oppression, Socialist Feminists do **not** see **women** as a "**sex class**", **nor** do they see all **men** as "**the class enemy**". Not all male / female relationships are characterised by oppression and exploitation, for example.

Technological "solutions" to female exploitation are also **viewed with suspicion** (since control over development and exploitation of technology has traditionally been a male preserve), as is the idea that a matriarchal society is somehow superior and preferable to a patriarchal society.

In essence, perhaps, **Socialist Feminism** seeks to **combine political analysis** with **economic and domestic reform** as a means of improving the social position of women.

In **theoretical** terms, the main idea that tends to set Socialist Feminists apart from other Feminist perspectives is probably the recognition that **neither patriarchy nor class** are, in their separate ways, **explanations** for female oppression. Various social factors are seen to shape women's lives (class, gender, ethnicity, age and so forth), with **no single factor** being seen as the key to unlocking women's oppression.

The relationship between "**economic class**" and "**sex class**" is considered to be important by Socialist Feminists in the sense that female biology is clearly significant insofar as it gives men the **opportunity** to dominate women by limiting their ability to compete economically. However, economic discrimination, segregation and so forth is evidently a factor that affects women's social choices and experiences. **Economic discrimination**, for example, clearly has a socialising influence in relation to women's desire to marry, raise children and the like (domestic labour, for example, may be seen as a preferable alternative to low wage, low skill, repetitive work...)

Sylvia Walby ("The Historical Periodization of Patriarchy", 1988) personifies the Socialist Feminist perspective when she argues that we need to understand male / female relationships in terms of "**dual modes of production**".

1. A "**patriarchal mode**" that is found in domestic labour, paid work and so forth (where women are exploited on the basis of gender).
2. An "**economic mode**" where women, like men, are exploited on the basis of their class.

For **Walby**, this "dual form" is considered significant for two reasons:

- a. The **patriarchal mode** is **never** found in **isolation** from the **economic mode** - female discrimination is always based upon some form of economic discrimination / exploitation (since men can only exploit a "biological advantage" in a wider social context involving the economic organisation of a society).
- b. Although **patriarchy pre-dates Capitalism** (in the sense that it has existed in all human societies in one form or another), **Capitalism** is seen to be a significant economic development because of the way in which it **systematised economic exploitation** - raising it to new and hitherto unseen heights, for example.

In particular, the **marginalization of domestic economies** and **subsistence farming** in favour of the ascendancy of **paid (factory-type) work** is seen as significant since it **expanded male power** bases and **opportunities** at the **expense of female power** bases.

For **Walby**, as for many Socialist Feminists, Capitalism and patriarchy **do not necessarily** work hand-in-glove, however. On some occasions there is a **dynamic tension** between them.

For example, Walby argues that such tension has developed between the interests of a Capitalist class (the desire to employ the cheapest possible form of labour, regardless of sex) and the interests of men (patriarchy) who may resist attempts by employers to replace male workers with (cheaper) female workers.

Basic Principles.

1. There are four **major** varieties of Feminism:

- a. Liberal.
- b. Marxist.
- c. Radical.
- d. Socialist (sometimes called "dual system" theory).

Other forms of Feminism include **Functionalist Feminism** and **Black Feminism**.

2. Liberal Feminism:

- a. Gender prejudice is based around individual ignorance. education is seen as a valuable tool in the battle against discrimination based around ignorance.
- b. It is possible to legislate (pass laws) against sexual discrimination as a way of changing individual attitudes and behaviour. For example, the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts in the 1970's in Britain.
- c. The general position of women in our society has significantly improved in the past 100 years. woman have legal equality with men, although they still do not have status equality with men (that is, males still tend to have generally higher social status than women).

3. Marxist Feminism.

- a. Capitalist class relationships are the root cause of female oppression, exploitation and discrimination. Men are socialised into exploitative relationships in relation to work and they carry this socialisation over into the home and their relationship to women.
- b. Patriarchy is an ideology (a set of related beliefs about the world - in this instance, male - female relationships) that stems from male attempts to justify the economic exploitation of women.
- c. The "family system" characteristic of modern societies benefits capitalism (and, by extension, the men who tend to dominate positions of power and influence) because women:
 - can be forced / socialised into unpaid domestic labour.
 - can be forced / socialised into responsibility for child-rearing.

This benefits the Capitalist because they do not have to pay women to perform this role (the "reproduction of labour power" in society).

This benefits men because women perform a "domestic servant" role for all men.

d. Neither Marxist nor socialist Feminists see men as the "enemy" of women. To create a Communist / socialist society men and women have to co-operate in to:

- Overthrow the Capitalist system of economic exploitation (Marxist Feminism).
- Create a more-equal and equitable form of society (Socialist Feminism).

e. For Marxist Feminists, the concept of social class is considered to be more important than the concept of patriarchy since the latter is seen as a form of ideology that stems from class exploitation. Women are not a "sex class" because the only thing they have in common is their sex - an upper class woman, for example, has little if nothing in common with a working class woman. In addition, there is general agreement amongst Marxist Feminists that the points in the following section are valid.

4. Socialist Feminism.

a. Women's work and their social status is highly marginalized by their potential / actual "dual role" in modern societies (child-rearer and worker). Employers are able to exploit this dual role to pay women lower wages. Men are able to exploit this dual role by receiving "unpaid services" within the home.

b. The main reason for women's lower status in relation to men is the fact that they are generally economically dependent upon their male partner.

c. Male power over women is consolidated by **ideological myths** about women (that they are naturally passive, that they have maternal instincts and so forth). These myths are part of a powerful socialising influence upon women that leads them to define their major role as that of "mother, housekeeper and child-rearer".

5. Radical Feminism.

a. The concepts of **patriarchy** and **sex class** are key ideas in relation to the understanding of women's position and experience in all societies.

b. Patriarchy has existed in all known human societies and, as such, pre-dates Capitalist forms of gender inequality.

c. Patriarchal relationships are considered to have paved the way for Capitalist forms of economic and gender exploitation.

d. Sexual inequality is institutionalised in society. It is not possible to achieve sexual equality through legal means or by "changing people's attitudes".

e. Men are the enemy of women. Women are a sex class in that they share a common interest in freeing themselves from male oppression.

f. The universal **causes of patriarchy** are considered to be:

The exploitation of female biology by men (men can exploit women's incapacity through pregnancy, for example).

Marriage-based family relationships in which men control women's behaviour.

Heterosexual relationships.

g. One solution to the problem of patriarchal exploitation is seen to be lesbian relationships and female support groups.

h. Some Radical Feminists (e.g. Firestone) argue that female emancipation can be achieved technologically (women being freed from childbirth and so forth).

i. In general, Radical Feminists see the exploitation of women as involving both the public sphere (work for example) and the private sphere (the home - marriage as, according to David **Bouchier**, an "institutionalised source of female oppression").

This a dual form of female exploitation not experienced by men.

Some General Points of Criticism...

Most criticisms of Feminist perspectives have stemmed from Feminists themselves (this is sometimes referred to as an "internal critique" (that is, one that comes from various writers working within the same broad perspective). The following points refer to this kind of internal critique...

1. Liberal Feminism.

a. Liberal Feminists have focused their attention upon "**equality of opportunity**" between males and females. They have largely **ignored** the study of **social structural factors** that other Feminists see as a basic cause of inequality in Capitalist societies (for example, **patriarchy** and the **inequalities** created by Capitalist forms of economic production).

b. Liberal Feminists have been criticised (and variously derided as "**bourgeois / middle-class**" Feminists) for their failure to understand that in any society that is fundamentally **unequal** in its economic and social structure "**equality of opportunity**" is a fairly **meaningless** concept. In a society divided along class lines and driven by economic exploitation, women - like working class men - are at a fundamental economic disadvantage...

2. Radical Feminism.

a. There is no real **evidence** that women constitute a "**sex class**", since it is clear that, apart from a common biology, women may have no real shared interests "as a class apart from men". It is difficult to see, for example, what "common interests" are shared by upper class and working class women - aside from the fact that they are women. The experiences and life chances of upper class females are significantly different to those of working class females (where the position of the former may be closer to that of men than to their working class counterparts)

b. The primary importance attached to patriarchy downgrades the importance of concepts like social class and ethnicity. For Marxist Feminists, patriarchy itself stems from the way in which women are generally exploited economically.

c. To view women as a "sex class" whose basic interest involves emancipation from men would leave unresolved the problem of economic exploitation.

d. Radical Feminism tends to overlook the fact that the general position of women in society has changed over time and this can only be explained in terms of wider economic and political changes in society.

e. Socialist Feminists do not see women as a "sex class", nor do they see all men as "the class enemy". Not all male / female relationships are characterised by oppression and exploitation, for example. Technological "solutions" to female exploitation are also viewed with suspicion (since control over development and exploitation of technology has traditionally been a male preserve), as is the idea that a matriarchal society is somehow superior and preferable to a patriarchal society.

f. Radical Feminists over-emphasise factors that separate women from men (their biology in particular - over-stating the significance of biological differences - and also unsubstantiated / uncritical assumptions about male and female psychology).

3. Marxist Feminism.

a. Marxist Feminists tend to be criticised for placing **too much emphasis** upon **class relations** in the economic sphere (women considered as part of the working class, for example) and not paying enough attention to female experiences **outside** the labour market (within the family / domestic sphere, for example).

b. Given that the revolutionary **overthrow of Capitalism** does **not seem very likely** to occur, this "solution" to female exploitation tends not to be seen as a particularly useful one to pursue.

c. Radical Feminists have been critical of the emphasis placed upon Capitalist forms of exploitation. The main argument here is that **patriarchal** forms of exploitation have existed in all known societies, not just Capitalist ones. In addition, they argue that patriarchy predates Capitalism which makes it a more significant explanation of female exploitation and oppression.

4. Socialist Feminism.

a. This form of Feminism **underplays** the significance of Capitalist forms of exploitation.

b. Socialist Feminism is criticised for being **neither revolutionary nor radical enough** to create lasting solutions to the problem of female economic and social exploitation.