

Patrician College of Arts and Science

Department of Social Work

Women Development- Issues and Concerns
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Even Semester

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Feminism

- Definition: Unlike any other “isms” Feminism does not have a theoretical conceptual base. The term “Feminism” is derived from the Latin word.
- However a broad definition of feminism is “an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family and conscious action by men and women in changing the situation.”

Evolution of the concept of feminism:

- Feminism meant one thing in the 17th century and meant something else in the 19 & 20th centuries. For the former feminist, the struggle was fought for the democratic rights of women, it included the Rights to education & employment, right to own property, the right to vote – the right to enter parliament. On the whole they fought for legal reforms; the struggles were essential outside home and family.

Today the feminist have gone beyond mere reforms to end discrimination. They work more towards their emancipation. Feminism therefore now includes the struggle against women's subordination to the male within the home, against their exploitation by the family, their continuing low status at work & in burden in production and reproduction.

In essence the present day feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity & freedom of choice to control their life and bodies within and outside home.

- Feminist consciousness arose in Asia during the early 20th century. These voices demanded widow remarriage, ban on polygamy, and ban of sati, purdah and demand for legal emancipation. In the earliest agitator for women's rights were men. Although women today are becoming economically independent and are educationally & occupationally mobile, we can still compare their emotional world to that of Sita.
- A siege has been laid on women they have been captured by the very institution which attempt to safeguard the life and interest namely family, marriage, educational institution, employment establishment, police outfits, legal machinery, etc.

- Whether it is child marriage, infanticide, feticide, wife-battering, sati, widowhood, bigamy, polygamy, sexual harassment (eve-teasing), physical torture, mental cruelty, rape (by strangers, police, army, paramilitary), dowry extortion, dowry murders. Premarital and post-marital suicide – all these forms of oppressions of Indian women manifest in the decadent, capitalist, consumerist, corrupt, casteist, communal, criminal and patriarchal society

Theories of Feminism

- Liberal feminism
- Radical Feminism
- Socialist Feminism

Moderate or Liberal Feminism or Individual Feminism

- The inferior position of women according to the supporters of this theory is due to cultural and psychological factors. J.S. Mill, one of the earliest thinkers of this school, championed the cause of feminism. He was a liberal and individualistic thinker. His book "Subjection of Women" (1861) has become a landmark in the history of women's movement. According to him, the inferiority of women in the domains of mental and intellectual production were not natural but artificial.

- The Historical origin of Liberal feminism goes back to the 18th century “The enlightenment period of western Europe” – it was the age of reason. The thinkers of this period touched upon the nature and the role of women. An important aspect of liberal feminism was individualism, by which it was meant that individual possess the freedom to do what one wishes without interference of others.
- Mary Wollstonecraft as a liberal thinker is well known for her ardent support for women’s cause. Her work was known as “A Vindication of the rights of women” (1791). Her basic idea is that “Women are first and foremost human beings and not sexual beings” women are rational creatures. They are capable of governing themselves by reason.

- Gandhi also took some of similar approach towards women's problems. He strongly criticized excessive subordination of the wife to the husband. He said that women should enjoy equal status with man. Sex discrimination keeps half the population unproductive therefore women should be brought out from the four walls of the house.
- Liberal feminism argued for equal rights for women but accepted the existing social order as valid and advocated for the improvement of social customs, institutions, and laws. Without altering the social structure particularly in family. They also subscribed to the hope and accumulation of reforms will transform society, but radical restructuring is not necessary

Radical Feminism

- Radical feminism is an offshoot of moderate feminism. The radical feminist believes that the women's subjection is due to sexual aggression by men. [?] Male supremacy is the oldest, the most basic form of domination, all other forms of exploitation and oppression. (Racism, Capitalism, Imperialism, etc) are extension of male supremacy.
- Radical feminist also argued that the History of the world was not the struggle of the classes but it was a struggle between men and women.

- For radical feminist – The roots of subordination lies in the biological family.
- Radical feminist main plea is not only the removal of sex distinctions but the removal of men in their life – sexual preferences, control over one's body, free sex experience and collective child care are some of the action programs outlined by the radical feminist.
- The radical feminist argue that women have always been economically exploited for them marriage turns to be a contract where by sex and service (house work) are provided by women to men in return for support.
- The same thing happened in the feudal society where the lord provided security to the slaves in return for their services. Women and slaves are equivalent due to sexual politics.

- In the west the radical feminism adopted novel protest methods to draw the attention of the male oppressors.
- In the 1970 an army of women marched through the New York streets and placed what they thought “freedom trash cans” at important points. In this they threw their cosmetics and false eyelashes.
- Through this they wanted to show that women cannot be considered as sex objects. They also shouted slogans “marriage if legalized rape”.
- Among the radical feminist the very aggressive group formed societies whose chief aim was not only liberation of women but also the annihilation of men.
- Man being the enemy of the radical feminist, they stood to put an end to the subordination and they seem to be no place for men in their life.

Socialist or Marxist Feminism

- Another approach to the status of women is Historical materialism or Socialist feminism. All to this approach the root cause of the lower status of women lies in the family.
- The family is the result of the private property in the means of production therefore complete equality of women is possible when private property in the means of production is abolished.
- The concept of private property brought a basic change in the family.

- According to socialist view power is derived from sex and class and this is manifested materially and ideologically in patriarchy and class relations. The major task is to discover the interdependence of class and patriarchy.
- It would be necessary to organize struggle simultaneously against capitalism and patriarchy. [?] Patriarchal system cannot vanish by nearly abolishing private property.
- A struggle against patriarchal is a struggle against the present structure of the family system dominated by men.
- The liberation of women would not be complete without a change in the patriarchal social system and all the social values that go with them.

- The socialist feminist have also raised the whole debate of domestic work. They argue that women's oppression is based on unpaid house work.
- Child bearing, child care and house work are material activities resulting in products.
- Like radical feminist the socialist feminist are not antiman. But they believe in collaborating with men if the latter support their cause.

“Feminism has never been about getting a job for one woman. It's about making life more fair for women everywhere. It's not about a piece of the existing pie; there are too many of us for that. It's about baking a new pie.” — Gloria Steinem

CONCLUSION

- These 3 main approaches have been used for understanding women's subordinate status and also for evolving strategies to establish women's equality.
- In India feminism and nationalism was closely interlinked. The women's movement in India had none of the man-women antagonism characteristic of women's movement of the west.
- In the Indian context the dominant approach has been liberal feminism, moreover Indian women could not come out of their homes to fight oppression because it is the family that is a sole supportive institution. Hence it is not possible for many women to leave the security of the family.