

FEMINISM

This essay explores feminism from a historic perspective through to its context within contemporary society. Feminism is recognised as a complex, diverse, multi-faceted series of theories, ideologies, beliefs, movements and action agendas which are intended to end sociological practices and conventions which have led to women being disadvantaged (Lewis, 2018).

Consideration is given to the dichotomous distinctions between biological sex differences of woman and man, and the socially defined differences of gender identity behaviours; feminine and masculine, and how these have influenced female oppression through, for example, stereotyping and gender assumptions. Major sociological theories on the societal forces that influence perceptions of gender roles, such as functionalism, social identity, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology are discussed. Furthermore, the role of institutions such as religion and marriage are examined.

There is a description of the contribution of some of the principle commentators on feminist discourse, particularly those of the twentieth century, so called second wave feminism, which arose from social pressures during the 1960's through, to third wave feminism which occurred from the 1990's (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013; Giddens and Sutton, 2017). The expression of female sexuality is examined, particularly during the two decades between 1960 and 1980, exploring what has become known as 'the female liberation movement' (Greer, 1970) and the transformative societal impact of developments such as the widespread availability of the contraceptive pill and liberalisation of laws on divorce and abortion. There is a description of some of the main theoretical perspectives on feminism and finally, consideration is given to the relevance of feminism in contemporary society.

The idea of equality between the sexes has been established, internationally since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948. bell hooks (1984) defines feminism as 'the movement to end oppression of women'. The use of lower case is deliberate by hooks, describes feminism as 'a movement intended to end sexism, sexist exploitation and the oppression of women'. Women have, arguably, experienced oppression since females had relations with men. In the Judeo-Christian creation account of the Bible, for example, God creates the first man, Adam, and only after the animals of His creation proved inadequate as companions, does He form the first Woman, Eve, from a rib of the man (Genesis, 2:18-23). Eve provides for the downfall of mankind from God's grace by succumbing to temptation and as a punishment God promises the future of women as full of sorrow, pain in childbirth and the dominion of their husbands over them (Genesis, 3:16). Though women as mothers are lauded, the Bible is overwhelmingly patriarchal, for example Corinthians 11:13 states that 'man is the head of a woman' reflecting sociological norms of the time. Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) utilised this creation myth, ironically, in the title of her landmark feminist treatise *The Second Sex* (1949). de Beauvoir was making several points; according to Judeo-Christian convention woman is of man, created as an afterthought from a 'supernumerary bone of Adam', but is also the other of man

(de Beauvoir, 1949, Bair, 1991). As the other of man, woman is sociologically defined in relation to man because of the hegemony of man through patriarchy (de Beauvoir, 1949). de Beauvoir, an atheist, makes a further point; adapting the Marxist view of religion as an institution that subjugates workers, she considered that the church, a predominantly male institution, perpetuates male dominion and the oppression of women through teachings, such as the mythography of the downfall of Adam and Eve, ceremonies and power relations (de Beauvoir, 1949).

During human social history, a system of patriarchal dominance developed which persists to contemporary society. Engels (1884) provides an early theory on historic societal development, whereby men came to be the owners and controllers of private property, such as animals and land, overthrowing women's position as head of the household in order to maintain these rights. Institutions such as monogamous marriage, the biological family, and male inheritance and succession developed in order to underpin male dominance.

Coontz and Henderson (1986) and van de Meer (2019) suggests that historically, oppression of women was not universal. Early societies were communal, and as Graves (1955) points out, there are examples of societies, such as pre-Hellenic Greece, which were predominantly matriarchal (Graves, 1955). According to van de Meer (2019), in most early societies, women were free to work, own property and choose sexual partners. However, van de Meer (2019) proposes that catastrophic climate change around 3000 BCE established the foundations for modern patriarchy, as environmental change forced a shift from settled to nomadic lifestyles and the struggle for to control what fertile lands were available' leading to wars and conflict. The status of women also changed, becoming chattel which could be traded or given as gifts, or taken by force to be wives (Cowman, 2019). The vulnerability of women living a nomadic, conflict ridden lifestyle led to a reliance on men for physical survival which laid the foundations of patriarchy and male hegemony which persists in contemporary society (van de Meer, 2019; Millett, 1970). Firestone (1970) endorses this view positing that the vulnerability of women during menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding and child raising led to their dependence on men resulting in unequal power relations and a sexual class system based around the biological family. The sexual class system establishing a blueprint for later economic and class stratification systems which further reinforced male power (Firestone, 1970). Walby (1990) however, believes that theoretical attempts at identifying single historic roots of male hegemony fail to reflect the complex nature of patriarchy, and its evolving nature from private to public.

For feminist sociologists such as Oakley (1971), societal changes which occurred during periods such as the industrial revolution are the key to modern gender inequality. Marxist feminists see the expansion of capitalism as the source of female oppression, with capitalists, invariably men, as the principal beneficiaries. Oakley, however, sees the emergence of the role of housewife during industrialization as the most important development in modern gender inequality. Oakley considers that during the early

days of industrialization, the family as the principal means of production was gradually replaced by the factory. In the early period of industrialization, women worked in the factories, often replicating work that they did in the home, such as making textiles (Oakley, 1971). However, when child labour was restricted during the early part of the nineteenth century, and children became more dependent on their parents, the role of carer fell to women. Consequently, over a relatively short period of time, many women became restricted to the home and the dependence of women on the institution of marriage (Oakley, 1971). There developed two separate spheres of influence, the private, or the home, which was seen as a woman's place, and the public, places of employment and the civil, such as politics which were dominated by men (Oakley, 1971). Work for women was severely restricted during the nineteenth century and until the first world war (1914-1918), principally because women were perceived as a potential rival workforce by the male employees of the factories, and due to the increasingly idealised view of women as fragile, innocent and dependent (Oakley, 1971). It was marriage that was considered a woman's profession (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). However, a few types of employment, particularly domestic service, were almost exclusively the preserve of women; the sharp reduction in the demand for domestic staff after the first world war left many women without means of employment (Cowman, 2018).

Walby (1990) also considers that patriarchy is central to a feminist perspective of society. Women were excluded from many areas of employment during the nineteenth century and when they did gain access to employment during the twentieth century, usually earned less than men, had less security of employment and fewer opportunities for advancement. Gender specific types of employment also emerged which reflected socially normative expectations of gender roles, nursing as a female occupation, for example. Functionalist such as Talcott Parsons (1955) sees a biological imperative in this; women give birth and nurses the infant and the nature of the nuclear family leads to strong child-mother bonds. Women are therefore naturally suited to caring. However, Oakley (1974) rejects the biological and functionalist approach, arguing that the explanation of familial gender roles is merely a myth for validating the oppression of women within the domestic sphere. Furthermore, Oakley (1974) argues that comparisons between cultures demonstrates a wide variety of behaviours between women and men, and concludes that gender roles are culturally, rather than biologically determined.

In order to understand the nature of gender inequality, it is necessary to examine what is meant by gender. Common sense views of sex and gender tend to consider that they are coextensive (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). Biological determinist approaches led to a belief in sexual dimorphism; that there are significant, consistent and distinct differences between men and women which can be explained by variations in hormones and brain structure. Mikkola (2017) provides the example of Geddes and Thompson (1889) who suggested that men and women have different metabolic states; women conserve energy by being 'anabolic' in nature and are consequently quiet, passive, conservative and stable, men on the other hand are 'katabolic', expending energy resulting in them being energetic, physical, variable

and sociable. Although the biological determinist approach is regarded with caution nowadays the idea that biology is the root of behavioural and psychological distinctions between women and men persists (Mikkola, 2017). For example, there are commonly held beliefs that women are passive, caring, hormonally unstable during menstruation, poorer at visuo-spatial tasks such as reading maps, which have been used to justify exclusion of women from social and political institutions and employment deemed 'men's work' and the sexual division of labour (Mikkola, 2017, Oakley, 1974). Examining the corpus callosum, the connecting fibres between the hemispheres of the brain, and animal experiments during the 1970's sought to justify the biological determinist approach, but sociologists such as Oakley (1981), Fausto-Sterling (2000) and Connell (2002) argue convincingly against the validity of such biologically based evidence (Haralambos and Holborn 2013).

Gender inevitably followed the designated sex at birth, boy or girl, which was dependent on the external genitalia. The sex designation, based on binary heteronormative values, is the template for the individual's societal role, being the conduit to the behaviour norms which would follow according to the sex category (Siedman, 1996). In 1968, however, the psychologist/psychoanalyst Robert Stoller, who was working with transvestite, transsexual and intersex clients, and was interested in the concept of individuals believing that they were the wrong sex, realising that the sex and gender of many of those he worked with did not match, and this led to the conceptual leap of distinguishing sex from gender (Mikkola, 2017). Feminist sociologists quickly adopted this distinction in order to support the argument that differences in women and men can be explained through social expectations and cultural acts. This allowed, for example, explanation of the wide cultural variations in understanding sexed bodies and the differing norms of human behaviour that surrounds them (Mikkola, 2017).

Interestingly, the idea that gender is a product of social construction was not entirely new. In 'The Second Sex', de Beauvoir (1951) states that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (P.47). de Beauvoir had the insight that females become women through the acquisition of feminine traits, values and behaviours by a process of socialisation. de Beauvoir's book arguably laid the foundations for the emergence of second wave feminism a decade later, undermining the view that gender is determined by the birth sex.

First wave feminism, which emerged during the eighteenth century and lasted until the second world war began with the 1792 publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' (Sanders, 2001). Although the most well-known of these early activists are the suffragettes, a movement of civil unrest for the to establish the rights of women to vote (Cowman, 2019), the political and social agenda of these feminists was the expansion of all women's rights, including the property and contract rights and the opposition to chattel status of women within the marriage contract (Cowman, 2019).

Second wave feminism emerged during the 1950's and early 1960's, developing into a significant social and political movement (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). If de Beauvoir established the foundations for second wave feminism, the cornerstone was laid by Betty Friedan (1921-2006) with the publication

of 'The Feminine Mystique' (1963). Friedan was interested in the way that female identity was so closely associated with housework, child bearing and raising, and caring for their dominant male husbands. Friedan was also interested in the phenomenon called 'housewife neurosis', the claim that the boredom, banality and dullness of domestic routine, which was exacerbated by technological developments such as washing machine, vacuum cleaner the dishwasher which meant that housework could be completed in a relatively short period, stultified women and caused mental illness (Haggett, 2009). Friedan concluded that many married women inhabit a state of 'false consciousness' (1963: p.347), a state of mind which prevents women from recognizing the injustice of their situation. Women as wives, Friedman argued, were complicit in their subordination, agreeing to such conventions as changing their surname to that of their husbands and giving up employment, finding fulfilment vicariously through their husbands and children (1963). De Beauvoir (1951), however, argues that women sometimes make a fully gendered choice, utilising their constructed femininity to avoid responsibility, for example by consciously adopting a subordinate role and relying on their husband's employment for income. Although Friedan's findings have been criticized for being focused on white, middle class women and not recognizing that poorer, mainly black women, did not have the option of remaining at home and had no opportunities other than employment, Friedman's research is credited with launching the modern feminist movement.

Dorothy Smith (b.1926) further expanded understanding of the female perspective. Smith proposed an influential critical theory known as 'Standpoint Theory' which challenged normative and phenomenological views (Wylie, 2003). Standpoint Theory posited that women socially construct their worlds from their everyday situations, and an understanding of female oppression can only be realised from the perspective of a women, which is different, and therefore, in society, has less value, than the men's perspectives (Wylie, 2003). Since men control many institutions, there is a male sub-text which excludes women from the apparatus of power and creates 'relations of ruling' which provides for the perpetuation of the controlling and bureaucratization of the social state to the disadvantage of women (Smith, 1990, p.216). Smith also argues that this also extends to sociology which defines women's experiences through a 'malestream' approach, whereby the subordination of women by men is seen as natural or ignored; (Abbott, *et al*, 2005). Smith argued for a sociology of women (Smith, 1990).

Like bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins (b. 1948) is influential in the understanding of the experiences of black women, although limited to the USA. Collins (2009) brought to the feminist movement debates about power, self-definition and justice for black women.

Germaine Greer (b.1939) became one of the major contributors to second wave feminism with, what many consider a watershed polemic 'The Female Eunuch' (1970). Greer suggested that women are neutered by traditional social structures, such as family and marriage and need to expand their horizons

(Lewis, 2014). Boycott (2014) points out, however, that *The Female Eunuch* represented a time when women could not get mortgages or credit without their husband's agreement.

Sociological, media and medical changes, in the latter half of the twentieth century had profound effects on the agency of women (McCarthy, 2018). For example, the development of a reliable forms of contraception; the female contraceptive pill, which became available to married women in 1963, and widely available from 1967, the legalisation of abortion in 1967 and the Divorce Reform Act of 1969 which allowed women to sue for divorce changed women's perspectives. Women could control their fertility and leave relationships which were damaging to them. From 1975 women had the right to return to work and receive maternity pay (Cowman, 2019). However, there were contradictory force; after the pill became available, women were shown in the media as sexually available and promiscuous (Cowman, 2019). Women, however, did grasp the nettle and this sexual freedom was expressed, for example, with the expansion of female pornography and the production of magazines such as 'Playgirl' (Cowman, 2019).

In the 1990's 'girl power' became the mantra of the successful female band Spice Girls. However, the expression of feminism takes many forms. These are outlined in Haralambos and Holborn, (2013). Radical feminism attributes the subjugation of women to men through patriarchy and male aggression. However, radical feminism has been criticized as being, essentially, anti-men, and the aim of radical feminism is to overturn male dominance without recognising the contribution men make to society. Marxist feminism seeks to explain female subjugation through the capitalist system, and there are specialist branches such as eco-feminism and black feminism. Liberal feminism is the paradigm that most people recognise which seeks to create equality of opportunity and to eradicate gender stereotyping in the media and books and in job titles. Haralambos and Holborn (2013) suggest that liberal feminism has had more impact on improving women's lives than other branches of the feminist movement. Some, such as Tong (1998) argue that traditional feminism orientated around gender differences is no longer relevant and that society is now postmodern and post feminism. However, Greer (2000) dismisses the claims that modern feminists have made any gains in equality, suggesting that patriarchy remains entrenched in contemporary culture.

Finally, there is debate as to whether feminism is relevant in the twenty-first century. Critics point to the advances made in women's rights such as equal pay, maternity leave and pay rights which have been consolidated into the Equality Act (2010). However, there is no doubt that inequality persists across the world (United Nations, 2019). Nunez (2015) provides examples of laws which demonstrate entrenched discrimination in countries across the globe, for example, being able to vote, required modes of dress, being able to drive, using public facilities such as swimming pools and continuing rights protecting men from prosecution for violence against women, including rape and honour crimes.

In conclusion therefore, feminism continues to be a relevant movement which evolves as society changes.

References:

- Abbott, P., Wallace, C. and Tyler, M. (2005)
- Bair, D. (1990) *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography*. London. Touchstone.
- Bible, The, New International Version (1978) *Genesis 3:16*. London. Hodder and Stoughton.
- Boycott, R (2014) 'What Germaine Greer and the Female Eunuch Means to Me', *The Observer*, 26th January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/26/germaine-greer-female-feminist-influence> (Accessed 23 March 2019).
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble*, Abingdon. Routledge.
- Connell, R (2002) *Gender*. London. Polity.
- Coontz S., and Henderson, P. (Eds) (1986) *Women's Work, Men's Property*. London. Verso.
- Cowman, K (2018) 'Women, Sex and Society.' BBC Four, 26th June.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1949) *The Second Sex*. London. Johnathan Cape.
- Engels, (1884) *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Available at: <https://www.readingsfromtheleft/pdf/engelsorigin/pdf> (Accessed 23rd March 2019).
- Equality Act, (2010) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/> (Accessed 23rd March 2019)
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000) *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the construction of Sexuality*. New York. Basic Books.
- Firestone, S (1972) *The Dialectics of Sex*. London. Paladin.
- Friedan, B (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*. London. Penguin.
- Giddens, A. and Sutton, P.W. (2018) *Essential Concepts in Sociology*. 2nd ed. Cambridge. Polity.
- Graves, R. (1955) *The Greek Myths*, London. Penguin
- Greer, G. (1970) *The Female Eunuch*. London Paladin.
- Greer, G. (2000) *The Whole Woman*. London. Paladin

Haggett, A. (2009) 'Desperate Housewives and the Domestic Environment in Post War Britain. Individual Perspectives.' *National Institute of Health (USA)*, Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articlesPMC4496447/> (Accessed 22nd March 2019).

Haralambos, M. and Holborn, M. (2013) *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. 8th ed. London. Collins.

hooks, b. (1984) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*. London. Routledge.

Lewis, R. (2018) 'Gender, Voice and Space', *Gender online*. Volume 4. Available at: <https://www.revistadigitos.com/index.php/digitos/article/view/119> (Accessed 18th March 2018)

McCarthy, H (2018) 'Women, Sex and Society'. BBC Four: 26th June.

Mikkola, M. (2017) 'Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Winter, Available at: <https://www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/feminism-gender/> (Accessed 20th March 2019)

Millet, K (1971) *Sexual Politics*. London. Granada.

Nunez, C (2015) 'Eleven Laws from around the world that stand in the way of gender equality.' *Global Citizen*. 8th March. Available at: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/11-laws-from-around-the-world-that-stand-in-the-way-of-gender-equality> (Accessed 15th March, 2019).

Oakley, A (1971) *Sex, Gender and Society*. London. Temple Smith.

Oakley, A (1974) *Housewife*. London. Allen Lane.

Ruben, G. (1975) *Gender*. London. Routledge.

Sanders, V (2001) 'First Wave Feminism', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. Available at DOI: 10.4324.97802030111010-10 (Accessed 22nd March 2019).

Siedman, S. (1996) *Queer Theory Sociology*, Oxford. Blackwell

Smith, D. (1990) 'The Conceptual Uses of Power: A feminist sociology of knowledge', *Contemporary Sociology*, 21, (1) pp.131. Available at: <https://www.academic.microsoft.com/paper/2129752508/conceptual-use-of-power.pdf> (Accessed 23rd March 2019)

Stoller, R. (1986) *Sex and Gender. On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity*. New York Science House.

van de Meer, (2018) 'Women, Sex and Society'. BBC Four: 26th June.

Walby, S. (1990) *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Wylie, A. (2003) 'Why Standpoint Matters', *Journal of Science and Other Cultures*, London. Routledge Available at: https://pages.uoregon.edu/koopman/siap/readings/wylie_standpoint.pdf (Accessed 23rd March 2019).