

Describe and explore ONE of the following theories: Feminism, Marxism or Social Constructionism.

This assignment will be focusing on the theory of Feminism, exploring its origins and its evolution through the first, second and third wave of feminism. This essay will also be identifying the variety of female activists that have encouraged and enforced gender equality, and what they are doing to promote it. This essay will also be exploring the many areas and issues in today's society that are still cause to consider that gender equality is yet to be achieved. Firstly, what is feminism? Feminism can mean something different to each individual, although it is generally considered to be the pursuit to achieve gender equality in all aspects of life (Sisterhood and After, 2013). 'The advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes.', this is a common definition used by those who are attempting to explain what feminism means, in terms that are blunt and straight to the point. (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2019). This definition, although very brief, does initially outline what the underlying goal of what feminism is trying to achieve and accomplish. However, it could be considered that this definition does not remotely come close to the extensive and broad area that this theory contains, which will be explored in more depth as the essay continues.

As it has already been established, the theory of feminism is such a vast area, which can somewhat be broken down into three waves. The first wave of feminism could be considered the most influential of them all, and has been generally applied to the women's rights movements which originated and evolved in the 19th century, in the West. In the 19th century in Great Britain, if an individual of that era happened to be a woman, unfortunately, they were considered to be the lesser of the two genders. This meant they had little to no rights when it came to things such as having the right to vote, not having easy accessibility to obtaining a divorce (whereas a man could quite easily). Unless they were married, a woman was unable to own a property, unable to go to university to have an education, and a woman was only able to have specific professions deemed appropriate to their gender, and ofcourse, when they did have a profession, their pay was not equal to that of a man, which is astonishingly still an issue in today's society (Dyer, 2016, p.13).

There were in fact many campaigns held in the first wave, however the most significant wave that contributed to the movement of feminism and possibly the most famous, was what the suffragettes worked so hard for, the right for women to have the vote in the early 1900's. As a result of their extraordinary and persistent efforts which consisted of exploding letterboxes, smashing windows and their chaotic protests, some of their methods may have been seen as extreme, however, they did succeed in achieving the vote for women (Dyer, 2016, p.15). It was the founder of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the most well known suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst, who enforced her power and strength into having the vote for women. Pankhurst played a key role in the campaign and it was her who had the ability to see that quiet protests would not help them to achieve their goal, and with that created the WSPU in 1903 with a different approach. Their actions and tactics continued to become more extreme calling the government to notice, by going on hunger strikes when some women were taken to prison, and even turned to vandalism and property damage (Dyer, 2016, p.16). These tactics were clearly frowned upon by many, and they did not achieve their desired goal for years, it took time. After World War One ended in 1918, women over the age of 30 were finally given the opportunity to vote (Dyer, 2016, p.17). After the women's right to vote was achieved, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 was brought in, broadening a variety of professions which finally enabled women to work in those areas. Also giving women the opportunity to be part of juries, to become solicitors, to be in the civil service, and regardless of their marital status, the chance to go to university (Dyer, 2016, p.19).

The second wave of feminism appeared in the 1960's America, making itself well known as it was the beginning of the sexual revolution, and individuals being more open minded, having a more liberating attitude towards things that would have once been frowned upon. Rock music, long hair and recreational drugs, simple things that are globally accepted among today's societies and are now considered the 'norm', were very new and somewhat alien in the 1960's, causing an outbreak of rebellion amongst teenagers, breaking away from their confinement. Another thing that was very much not discussed in public, or in some cases not at all, was sex. It was an area that almost seemed forbidden to discuss or acknowledge, regardless of that fact people were quite clearly partaking in it. However, as the 1960's was indeed the beginning of the sexual revolution, individuals began to discuss sex more and more, especially women (Dyer, 2016, p.29). Prior to this, women had been oppressed by their

gender in regards to sexual activity. Women were seen as an object, a tool for providing children. However, here began the change where women were not just discussing sex, they were discussing how it could be improved. One massively problematic issue that was recognised was the fact that women could not simply have sex for pleasure like a man, with no consequences to their actions (Dyer, 2016, p.30).

A method that was developed to improve this issue was the contraceptive pill, which was developed in 1961 and offered to married women in the UK and the United States, and was a massive part of the Women's Liberation Movement. The contraceptive pill became available on a broader scale in 1967, being offered to a wider range of women (British Library, n.d). The impact that this had on women at that time was extremely positive and extensive, by giving women control over their bodies and having the opportunity to explore their sexual freedom without running the risk of becoming pregnant. This also successfully contributed to the formation of the Abortion Act 1967, which made abortion legal in the United Kingdom, furthering women to have control over their bodies and having the choice of becoming a parent or not, regardless of their circumstances (Dyer, 2016, p.32).

The era of the second wave also included inspirational and hard working activists of feminism, including Gloria Steinem. Steinem raised awareness and entirely devoted herself to outing the truth behind what life was like as a 'playboy bunny', having been employed as one herself, however she was undercover. Steinem's article 'A Bunny's Tale' grabbed the attention of many on a global scale, revealing and exposing what it was like to work in conditions as a playboy bunny. Steinem's findings revealed how the bunnies were often cheated financially, and disrespected. Steinem, who also founded Ms magazine, ensured that it contained information on diverse areas such as sex trafficking, date rape and domestic violence, ensuring that these hard to reach areas would be acknowledged (Dyer, 2016, p.40).

Following on from the second wave, the third wave of feminism began in the 1990's, which developed from the negative reactions and effects of the second wave. By this time, individuals had somewhat outgrown the ideologies of the second wave, and had broadened their understanding and knowledge of women's rights even further, acknowledging that in the 1960's the main focus seemed to only benefit white women who were middle-class, where did that leave every other women who did not conform to that group? Third wave feminists

were able to identify that this needed to change, to reach a variety of women of different race, class, religion, gender and ethnicity (Ohio Humanities, 2018). During this time, equality between both genders was considered to be fairly even, feminists decided to aim their focus at more social issues, aiming to diminish stereotypes. There was a large debate that went on in the 1990's surrounding the area of porn, someone's sexuality and their gender. The debate was known as 'feminist sex wars', which argued that women of that time would not necessarily be able to make the independent decisions for themselves to willingly partake in porn, as they have somewhat been manipulated their entire lives to believe what it is that men want sexually, therefore are not thinking for themselves, again it is the male in control, dominating that area (Dyer, 2016, p.49).

Teresa de Lauretis, an academic and critical theorist developed what is now known today as Queer Theory. In the 1990's, after editing an issue titled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay sexualities", de Lauretis goes on to give an explanation of this term, she identifies and explores that heterosexuality is not the only sexuality that is apparent and accepted, that other sexualities need to be acknowledged (Queer Theory - Origins of Queer Theory, 2019). Queer theory suggests that men and women are typically stereotyped, that when they are born they are told they are a girl or boy, and this means they must behave and conform to their identified gender roles. Queer theory explores that if individuals genders were not preordained and expected to conform, then more individuals would be non-binary, and would not have to behave how their stigmatised gender's are expected to, it would be down to the individual to make that decision for themselves (Dyer, 2016, p.51). The benefit from Queer theory is that it broadened minds globally, giving individuals who were perhaps not happy with their gender the chance to speak out, especially giving them the opportunity for transgender women to be widely accepted into the feminism movement. This particular theory can be considered as broadening and evolving what feminism is, making it more widely available to not just biologically born females, but also those who chose to be (Dyer, 2016, p.52).

Moving on from the three waves, to the present, some may question if gender equality has been fully achieved? A lot has changed since the first wave, which massively contributed to the ongoing efforts of feminist activists throughout the decades. A lot has been achieved to

gain equality between the genders, although there are still a few factors that need addressing. In today's age, there is currently what some may consider to be the fourth wave which is happening now, this concerns modern day issues such as technology. Since its continuous development, as fascinating as the internet can be, it has brought with it many issues. Cyber bullying is an issue that affects many on a global scale, women are receiving more threats and abuse online, which can lead to 'trolling', which means targeting specific individuals online for no particular reason, giving individuals easy access to abuse the internet's resources. It is often the case that women now receive more sexual threats online through dating apps, and unfortunately can be threatened with 'revenge porn' (Dyer, 2016, p.60). An example of an individual who is in the public eye and has also been the victim of being threatened with revenge porn is actress Emma Watson. In 2014, Watson made a public speech on women's rights, not long after Watson was threatened by an online website named 4chan, stating 'Emma, you're next' alongside a countdown, threatening to release nude photos of Watson. This website had already previously released nude photos of other celebrities (The Washington Post, 2017). Watson is now a UN Women Goodwill Ambassador who has devoted herself to raising awareness and empowering younger women through her HeForShe campaign, in attempts to further promote gender equality. Emma Watson is a perfect example of a modern day feminist activist, continuing to raise awareness of the movement of feminism through her work (UN Women, n.d).

Although a lot has been done to encourage and enforce gender equality within Britain since the first wave when the suffragettes began fighting for the cause, there are clearly a few remaining issues within today's society. As already stated, the increase of technology has brought with it many burdens from the ever expanding power that is the internet. There is also the relevant issue that is the current gender pay gap in the United Kingdom, where women are still earning less than men, even though they are carrying out the same job or both in the same field of career. The gender pay gap has been identified to limit their earnings over their lives, and has a dramatic effect on their pensions for the future (Striking Women, n.d). To prevent men earning more than women, the Equal Pay Act 1970 was put in place, which aimed to enforce equal treatment among both men and women within the same employment (British Library, 2018). However, according to Office for National Statistics, within the UK, the gender pay gap fell in 2018 to 8.6% among full-time employees. Although this is a small

percentage and the gap has been closing over time, it is still present, and men are still earning more than women (Office for National Statistics, 2018).

An individual who has been fighting the issue of the gender pay gap is Carrie Gracie, the BBC's former China editor, who has herself been affected directly by this issue. Gracie resigned from her role after accusing the BBC of a "secretive and illegal" pay culture. Her colleague, north American editor Jon Sopel, received a salary in the range of £200,000 - £250,000, whereas Gracie only received £135,000. Before accepting her job, Gracie had been told by the BBC that she would be paid within the same range as Spoel (The Guardian, 2018). Since Gracie's resignation, she won her 6 month dispute with the BBC over gender pay inequality and was awarded £280,000 (The Telegraph, 2018), which Gracie donated to the Fawcett society, a charity that specifically campaigns for gender equality, where the donation has been directly used to fund women who are in need of legal advice on matters such as equal pay claims (The Guardian, 2018). Carrie Gracie is another individual who is clearly enforcing the feminism movement in today's society, advocating on behalf of working women to ensure they are receiving an equal salary to their male colleagues, attempting to close the gender pay gap. Through Gracies continuous efforts, there is hope that the gender pay gap will eventually entirely decline.

Quite clearly, there are still several issues in today's society preventing achieving total gender equality, one very distinctive and concerning issue is, what is commonly known as, 'rape culture'. Rape culture is when sexual assault towards women is normalized, and publically dismissed throughout the media. It is also the objectification of a woman's body, glamorizing sexual violence and using misogynistic language, which results in a society and developing culture where women's safety and their rights are almost unacknowledged (Marshall University, 2018). There are several examples of what rape culture is, however, there is one very relevant example of an ongoing issue that desperately needs to be addressed and altered, which is blaming the victim (Marshall University, 2018).

In relation to this issue, in 2011, a protest movement took place in the United States and Canada named the Slutwalk, where thousands marched the streets (wearing either jeans or wearing more 'provocative' attire) in protest of an incident which took place in Toronto, where a policeman told a group of young female college students to stop dressing like 'sluts',

in order to avoid and prevent sexual assault (Dyer, 2016, p.68). This resulted in the Slutwalk, where according to its organisers, aimed to highlight a growing culture where it is the victim who is blamed rather the abuser/perpetrator (BBC News, 2011). The Slutwalk continued to spread worldwide, ensuring that the main issue to raise awareness for was opposing the idea that a woman's clothes can attract sexual assault. It is believed by feminist's that any women can be the victim of sexual assault, whether they are wearing little clothing to wearing full clothing, it simply makes no difference (Dyer, 2016, p.69). With marches and protests like the Slutwalk, who continue to raise awareness and highlight issues such as rape culture, there is only good which can come from it. By not avoiding rape culture, instead facing it head on, can hopefully mean that public perceptions will change on the reasons behind why sexual assault happens.

Clearly, there have been many female feminist activists promoting and enforcing gender equality, many different campaigns and protests to support the cause, however, to achieve the desired results on a long term basis requires legal action, in the form of legislation. A very effective law that was put in place is the Equality Act 2010 which was initially created to legally protect individuals within the workplace from discrimination (GOV.UK, 2015). This includes individuals of a different race, age, individuals who have undergone gender reassignment, being pregnant or on maternity leave, an individual's sexual orientation and their gender (GOV.UK, 2015). This particular Act is most definitely enforcing gender equality, by ensuring that by being a woman in today's society, they will not be discriminated against for this reason. With this Act, women are now protected in the workplace from harassment and victimisation, and if a woman were to feel that they were being treated unjust, they have the backing from the Equality Act 2010 to support them with whatever action they may chose to take.

In identifying that feminism is an expansive subject and has been viewed differently through the ages, the questions remains, is gender equality yet to be achieved, or has it been already? Clearly, since the first wave of feminism, a lot has changed. Women are now able to vote, go to the university regardless of their marital status, go into almost any career path they chose etc. Yet there are still many troublesome issues that continue to pester and taunt women in today's society. Although many things have changed since the first, second and third wave of

feminism, one may still be under the impression that unfortunately, gender equality has still got quite a way to go before being fully achieved. With the issues of the gender pay gap still being present, that is a clear indication that women and men are still not seen as each others equals. However, although the gender pay gap is still evident, it is in fact closing in, which suggests that equality within the workplace may be a large possibility in the near future. Even more concerning is the ever expanding tool that is the internet, and along with it its many burdens. Due to the internet being such an expansive tool, which is somewhat used as a weapon in today's society, it is doubtful that women will be able to escape certain burden's that it brings, such as being harassed via dating sites, as it is such an easy way for men to do such things. The issue of revenge porn and rape culture is highly relevant, and more needs to be done to protect women from being so easily exploited. However, with feminist activists such as Emma Watson who is directly supporting and helping women in these areas, it is promising that more will be done to clamp down on these issues. With the ongoing efforts of feminist activists and persistent campaigns that continue to enforce gender equality, one may consider it hopeful and possible that equality will one day be achieved.

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