

# 6 Feminism

Feminism is a philosophy which advocates — at least — equality of rights between the sexes, otherwise known as **gender equality**. Originally an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movement of middle-class women seeking the vote, it has developed into a wider and more far-reaching women's movement with diverse sub-strands including liberal feminism, socialist feminism and radical feminism.

**Gender equality** — social and cultural equality of status between men and women, which most feminists seek.

## 'First wave' feminism

- When seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers such as John Locke and Thomas Paine asserted 'the rights of *man*', they meant exactly that; as did the American Declaration of Independence (1776) that 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all *men* are created equal...'
- Hence the emergence of so-called 'first wave' feminism, with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and J.S. Mill and Harriet Taylor's 'Subjection of Women' (1869) which sought to reduce sexual discrimination primarily through a campaign for equal suffrage.
- This was a liberal variety of feminism.
- Wollstonecraft (incidentally, wife of the anarchist William Godwin and mother of Mary Shelley, the creator of *Frankenstein*) argued that women were, like men, essentially rational beings and therefore as capable of self-determination and as deserving of liberty, rights and, above all, education.

### Achievements of 'first wave' liberal feminism

Revised

Mill's essay encouraged the government of the day to pass the Married Women's Property Act 1870 which, for the first time, gave married women the right to own property; previously, everything they possessed legally belonged to their husbands. By 1928, women had won the vote on equal terms with men in the UK.

#### Examiner's tip

When exam questions ask you to explain the link between liberalism and feminism, it is not enough simply to say that there is such a thing as 'liberal feminism'; you should outline and explain the core liberal doctrines which lend themselves to a belief in equal rights for women — namely, individualism, rationalism, foundational and formal equality.

### Now test yourself

Tested

- 1 Define feminism, in a sentence.
- 2 Describe the origins of liberal feminism.
- 3 Name two 'first wave' liberal feminists.
- 4 List two achievements of 'first wave' liberal feminism.

Answers on p. 78

# 'Second wave' feminism

## Liberal feminism

Revised 

- By the 1960s it was widely perceived that little had been done to reduce ongoing economic, political, legal and social inequalities between men and women: hence the emergence of 'second wave' feminism.
- Liberal feminists in the post-war era — such as Betty Friedan, whose book *The Feminist Mystique* (1963) marked the resurgence of feminist thinking in the 1960s — sought equal political and legal rights for women.
- Again, the core liberal values of individualism, rationalism and foundational and formal equality logically underpinned a reformist, progressive philosophy of liberal feminism.

## Achievements of 'second wave' liberal feminism

Revised 

It made considerable strides in the UK, with legislation such as the Abortion Act 1967, Equal Pay Act 1970, Sex Discrimination Act 1976, the liberalisation of divorce, taxation and property laws, and the state provision of free and legal contraception. Women's whole lifestyles changed and even their health improved significantly as they bore fewer children, more safely. At around the same time in the US, liberal feminism went further and resulted in the legalisation of positive discrimination — i.e. quotas — for women as well as for ethnic minorities in education and employment.

However, the liberal feminist movement was predominantly white, Western and middle class and broadly excluded working-class and black women who were much more socially disadvantaged. Moreover, manifest gender inequalities across all classes persisted, and so more radical and even revolutionary forms of feminism emerged.

### Now test yourself

- 5 Why did 'second wave' feminism emerge?
- 6 Name one 'second wave' liberal feminist.
- 7 List three achievements of 'second wave' liberal feminism.

### Answers on p. 78

Tested 

## Socialist feminism

Revised 

- Socialist feminism is largely based upon Marxist economic theory.
- The significance of economic factors in the sexual aspect of oppression was primarily asserted by Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels in his book *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).
- Socialist feminists have emphatically rejected the liberal feminist, reformist, approach, maintaining instead that sexual divisions in capitalism are due primarily to the operation of the economy, and therefore that a class revolution is the prerequisite of sexual equality.
- They argue that the orthodox nuclear family is an economic unit bound up with the male ownership and inheritance of private property. Women themselves have long been the property of men within the legal framework of marriage which, in turn, has been a contract between the male breadwinner and the housewife of

### Typical mistake

It is wrong to assert that socialist feminism is purely Marxist; some utopian socialists, such as Charles Fourier, also advanced theories of female equality.

economic maintenance in return for sexual services. This is why, until the 1990s, there was no legal concept of rape within marriage.

- The traditional nuclear family — male breadwinner, female housewife — provides capitalism with 'two for the price of one', also providing men with an incentive to remain in exploitative work to support their families.
- Socialist feminists also stress the role of women as a 'reserve army of labour' in the event of an expansion of production such as in war. Women still provide a predominantly temporary and disposable source of labour, socially conditioned to accept low pay and status, thereby depressing wage levels without threatening men's jobs.
- Women's domestic work is also essential to the health and efficiency of the economy in sustaining and servicing their male partners, nurturing and conditioning future male workers and releasing men for employment.
- Marxist feminists emphasise the role of ideology and socialisation in perpetuating gender inequalities and women's acceptance of them.
- Therefore, for Marxists, women's liberation will be a by-product of economic and social revolution, and women should devote their time and energy to the class struggle rather than to bourgeois women's organisations.

#### Typical mistake

Do not focus exclusively on the socialist feminist analysis of the role of women in capitalism. They also argue that the traditional nuclear family structure facilitates the economic exploitation of male workers.

### Radical feminism

Revised

- Radical feminists, who emerged only in the second half of the twentieth century, go further than liberals and socialists to argue the primacy of gender divisions over all other social cleavages, including class and race.
- Writers such as Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone argue that **patriarchy** — where the male is head of the household — in the personal and private sphere of home and family, has always been the first and most important power relationship in the human social system. They have effectively redefined 'politics' to apply it to this power relationship in the private sphere — hence their famous slogan, 'The personal is the political'.
- Patriarchy in the private sphere confines most women to the home and therefore largely excludes them from the public sphere of work, economics and politics, and is therefore the root of sexual inequality throughout society and, indeed, human history.
- Social conditioning in the private sphere of home and family inculcates gender roles into future generations. Hence radical feminists draw a basic distinction between '**sex**' — biological differences deriving from nature — and '**gender**' — socially constructed roles which both men and women internalise through conditioning from birth, but which can be changed: 'Biology is not destiny'.

**Patriarchy** — literally, rule by the father; more generally, male dominance and female subordination throughout society.

#### Typical mistake

Students sometimes confuse the terms 'patriarchy' and 'patriotism'!

#### Typical mistake

When students are asked to explain the radical feminist slogan 'The personal is the political', they often wrongly assert that radical feminists are trying to bring politics, in the conventional sense, into the private sphere — e.g. political campaigns to improve the role of women in the home. This indicates a misunderstanding of the radical feminist use of the word 'politics'.

#### Examiner's tip

When exam questions ask why radical feminists proclaim that 'the personal is the political', it is important to state explicitly that they have redefined 'politics' away from its conventional meaning of state and government in the public sphere.

**Sex** — innate biological differences between men and women.

**Gender** — socially constructed and conditioned roles which are changeable.

- Hence radical feminists reject the **'public-private split'** — the divide between 'public man' and 'private woman'. For them, the priority is consciousness-raising amongst women towards a sexual revolution which will transform gender roles and eliminate private patriarchy.

#### Typical mistake

Students occasionally get the concepts of sex and gender mixed up. Remember: sex = innate biology, gender = external culture.

#### Revision activity

Create three cue cards: one on liberal feminism, one on socialist feminism and one on radical feminism. These should contain key doctrines, definitions, names and quotes.

**Public-private split** — the divide between the public sphere of work and politics, dominated by men, and the private sphere of home and family, to which women are largely confined.

#### Examiner's tip

When exam questions ask why the distinction between sex and gender is important to feminist analysis, you should emphasise that gender roles, as social constructs, are changeable and therefore that gender inequality is neither natural nor inevitable.

## The concept of patriarchy

Revised

How and why have feminists used the concept of patriarchy?

Due to their belief that conventional political theory has failed to see female oppression as a significant political fact, feminists have been forced to develop theories which see female oppression as a crucial, often primary, feature of human society.

However, different feminists use the concept of patriarchy differently:

- Liberal feminists associate patriarchy with legal and political oppression and the unequal distribution of rights in the public sphere. They believe that women should gain equal access to the public realm and therefore campaign for more women in senior economic and political positions.
- Socialist feminists attribute patriarchy to the capitalist economy and seek an economic revolution towards common ownership.
- The value of the concept of patriarchy from a radical feminist perspective is that it highlights the systematic, institutionalised and pervasive nature of male domination, suggesting, in the process, that this stems from and reflects the dominance of the husband-father within the family. Challenging gender inequality therefore requires a sexual revolution or qualitative social change through the overthrow of patriarchy in the private realm as well as in the public realm.

#### Revision activity

Devise three tables, each listing at least five contrasts between (a) liberal and socialist feminism, (b) liberal and radical feminism, and (c) socialist and radical feminism.

## Feminist views on the 'public-private split'

Revised

- Liberal feminists: do not want to eradicate the public-private split because they believe in maintaining women's personal freedom of choice about their domestic role and they fear that encroaching on the private sphere could mean creeping totalitarianism.
- Socialist feminists: believe that patriarchy originates in the public sphere and thus spreads to the private sphere.
- Radical feminists: believe that patriarchy originates in the private sphere and thus spreads to the public sphere.

#### Examiner's tip

When short questions ask why feminists have been critical of the public-private divide, point out that this only applies to radical and socialist feminists, but not to liberal feminists.

## Now test yourself

Tested

- 8 List three sub-strands of feminism and give one name associated with each.
- 9 Give three ways in which, according to socialist feminism, the capitalist economy benefits from the traditional nuclear family structure.
- 10 What do radical feminists mean by 'patriarchy'?
- 11 Explain the radical feminist slogan, 'The personal is the political'.
- 12 Why do most feminists differentiate between sex and gender?

Answers on p. 79

## Difference feminism

Revised

- Most feminists subscribe to '**androgyny**' — the belief that biological sex is irrelevant to people's social and cultural roles — and pursue varying types and degrees of equality between men and women.
- A small sub-strand of radical feminism, however, argues that there are essential differences between men and women — that biology is destiny and it does and should shape social and cultural roles. This '**essentialist**' perspective argues that innate genetic and hormonal differences make men naturally more competitive and aggressive and women naturally more caring, nurturing and empathetic.
- Women therefore cannot and should not seek equality with men. They should not be 'male identified'. They should celebrate the distinctive traits of the female sex and seek liberation as fulfilled women.
- Some of these essentialists choose to practise lesbian separatism as a political strategy.
- The implication — often unstated — is that women's nature is not only different but superior to men's.
- Other feminists, including most radical feminists, therefore reject difference feminism as simply an inverted form of sexism.

**Androgyny** — the belief that humans are 'sexless' in the sense that biological factors are irrelevant to their social status.

**Essentialism** — the belief that biological factors are crucial in determining social, cultural and psychological traits.

## Typical mistake

It is too sweeping and simplistic to assert that all 'difference feminists' seek female supremacy and matriarchy.

## Examiner's tip

When exam questions ask about diverse schools of ecogism (see Chapter 7), point out that 'eco-feminism' is linked to essentialism and argues that women's natural traits of caring and nurturing make them better stewards of the environment and planet than are men.

## Contrasts and conflicts within feminist thought

## The public-private split

Revised

Radical feminists reject the 'public-private split' — the idea that there is, or should be, a division between the spheres of public, economic and political activity and the private arena of home and family — a split

which liberals accept and value. Whereas liberal feminists believe that encroaching upon the private sphere may amount to creeping totalitarianism, for radical feminists the priority is a sexual revolution in the private sphere which will eliminate private patriarchy.

Marxist feminists are closer to radicals than to liberals on this point: i.e. they reject the public-private split; but they argue that inequality is rooted in the public, rather than the private, sphere, and change must therefore begin in the wider economic system. For Marxists, gender explanations of women's inequality cut across class; socialist groups therefore face the particular, practical problem of whether women should maintain their own separate organisations distinct from the main (and mainly male) proletarian party. Modern Marxist feminists have increasingly recognised the complex interplay of economic, social and cultural factors in determining patterned, social inequalities, including those of both class and gender. This perception was the basis of Juliet Mitchell's revisionist work, *Women's Estate* (1971). She argued that social revolution was a necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisite of sexual equality and that the role of women as child-bearers, child-rearers and as sex objects would also have to be addressed.

#### Typical mistake

When students are asked about contrasts and conflicts across feminism, they often neglect to address potential conflicts *within* particular schools of feminism, such as tensions within socialist feminism.

### Reformist or revolutionary?

Revised

Whereas liberals are inherently reformist, Marxist and radical feminists are both revolutionary — but they disagree on whether class or sexual revolution is the priority. They all agree that biological, economic and cultural factors all play a role in gender inequality but they disagree on the relative importance of those factors, and upon the solutions. For example, even liberals have long recognised that socialisation is a key factor in constructing gender roles: as J.S. Mill put it well over a century ago, 'I deny that anyone knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes. ... What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing — the result of forced repression' (1859). Nevertheless, liberals do not seek to challenge private family and marriage roles and relationships, whereas radicals see these as the root cause of sexual inequality.

Radical feminists, however, differ amongst themselves over whether women should — in a clear play on Marxist terminology — 'seize control of the means of reproduction' (Firestone) e.g. test-tube babies; or should pursue political separatism, e.g. women-only consciousness-raising groups and activities; or — at the most radical — should pursue private as well as public separatism in the form of political lesbianism. As the graffiti has put it for over 30 years, 'A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle'. Radical feminism has also spawned anarcho-feminists and eco-feminists with their own particular concerns about the state and the environment. A few of the radicals insist upon the superiority of female traits and values — so-called 'supremacists' whose goal is matriarchy rather than equality. The most radical of the radicals have provided the focus or target for the crude political and tabloid stereotypes of hairy man-haters in dungarees, which have helped to ridicule and marginalise the very word 'feminism' since the 1980s.

**Cultural diversity**

Revised

Black and third-world feminists, meanwhile, stress the great diversity of women in and across cultures, and often criticise first-world feminists of all schools for racism. The experiences of a successful, white, Western, professional woman would be utterly alien to a black, working-class woman battling against racism and poverty as well as sexism.

**Now test yourself**

Tested

- 13 List three differences between liberal feminism and Marxist feminism.
- 14 List three differences between liberal feminism and radical feminism.
- 15 List three differences between Marxist feminism and radical feminism.

Answers on p. 79

**Examiner's tip**

When exam questions ask about differences between the diverse schools of feminism, you should make the differences explicit — 'X believes A whereas Y believes B' — and you should explain in what ways X criticises Y and vice versa.

## Anti-feminism and 'post-feminism'

**Anti-feminism**

Revised

There will, of course, always be anti-feminists, such as traditional conservatives and fascists who believe that gender hierarchy is natural, functional, inevitable and desirable. Conservatism can even produce inverted chauvinism, e.g. the glorification of the wife/mother stereotype. The irony is that some self-proclaimed contemporary 'feminists' come very close to this stance: Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan, for example, in their later writings have rejected the goal of androgyny where men's and women's roles would not be socially differentiated, and have celebrated the unique nature of womanhood and the superior roles of motherhood and domesticity — much to the disgust of many other feminists.

**'Post-feminism'**

Revised

Some commentators — usually conservative journalists, whether male or female — have argued that feminism has done its job so effectively that it is now obsolete. 'Feminism is no longer necessary because it has become a victim of its own success' (Anne Applebaum, *New Statesman*, January 1998). She argues that inequality before the law no longer exists (though she admits that reality does not always match the letter of the law); and she argues that further changes — in attitudes and prejudices, for example — cannot be achieved by legislation or activism but only by time. Katie Roiphe (*Sunday Times*, March 1998) similarly says that feminism has succeeded to the extent that women now have to search desperately for 'trivial definitions of victimhood' like being complimented on their appearance or having doors opened for them by men.

**Revision activity**

Write a list of the quotations and slogans contained in this chapter, say to which school of feminism each one belongs, and decide how you would use each one in exam answers.

**Now test yourself**

Tested

- 16 Why do traditional conservatives believe that gender hierarchy is natural?
- 17 What is meant by 'post-feminism'?
- 18 List three problems or criticisms of feminism.

Answers on p. 79

**Examiner's tip**

When exam questions ask whether there can be such a thing as conservative feminism, stress in your answer that it is the organic doctrine of traditional and neo-conservatism which is fundamentally incompatible with feminism. Remember, however, that neo-liberalism logically embraces liberal feminism.

**Revision activity**

Devise a plan — either a written bullet-point summary or a mind map — for the following 45-minute essay title: 'Feminism is defined by the belief that "the personal is the political".' Discuss.

**Typical mistake**

When students are explaining why traditional and neo-conservatives are anti-feminist, they often address only the belief in 'tradition', but this is too simplistic.

**Exam practice**

**A Short-answer questions**

- 1 Explain the link between feminism and liberalism.
- 2 Why is the distinction between sex and gender so important to feminist analysis?
- 3 Why have radical feminists proclaimed that 'the personal is the political'?

**B Essay questions**

- 4 Analyse similarities and differences between liberal feminism and radical feminism.
- 5 'There are liberal feminists, socialist feminists and radical feminists, but no conservative feminists.' Discuss.
- 6 To what extent is feminism a single doctrine?

Answers and quick quiz 6 online

Online

**Examiner's summary**

- ✓ Short questions often focus on one school of feminist thought; essay questions usually require comparisons and contrasts of the three main schools of feminism — liberal, socialist and radical.
- ✓ Liberal and socialist feminism can be explained by reference to the core doctrines of liberalism and socialism themselves, such as rationalism and collectivism respectively.
- ✓ Each school of feminism emerged out of perceived deficiencies with previous schools, so it is often helpful to place them chronologically in essays.
- ✓ Essays on the diverse schools of feminist thought should not merely describe the differences, but should explain why they often strongly oppose each other, by reference to their core doctrines on the causes and remedies of female inequality.
- ✓ All three schools of feminism recognise the concept of patriarchy, the role of socialisation and the difference between 'sex' and 'gender', but they may place different emphasis on their importance.