

## FEMINISM

### What is Feminism? Is it Feminism or Feminisms?

- It is difficult in fact impossible to bring together all the beliefs and propositions under one rubric and define feminism as a single theory.
- Because the theories that are together called feminism, are not only different, but sometimes forcefully divergent. Therefore, one should begin by understanding that one cannot define feminism because it is not a single idea, rather it is a plural and non-static concept
- There are therefore **different feminisms**. Our attempt will be to understand them.

### The historical origin and development of feminism

- The term feminism is a relatively modern one – there are debates over when and where it was first used. In fact, the word feminist was often and for long used as a pejorative. For instance, Alexander Dumas *fils*, a French writer, in a pamphlet published in 1872 on the subject of adultery, uses the term to describe women behaving in a supposedly masculine way.
- However, though feminist was not at first an adjective used by women to describe themselves of their actions, one can certainly say that there was what we today call “feminist” thought and activity long before the term was adopted.
- In the 1840s the women’s rights movement and primarily the demand for women’s suffrage (voting rights) had started to emerge in the United States. In Britain also, the 1840s onwards saw the emergence of women’s suffrage movements. But we must note that even before the writing about the emergence of organized suffrage movements, women had been writing about the inequalities and injustices in the social condition and campaigning to change it. So, the concern about women’s social and political condition has been there much before the theory of feminism was formed.
- Even after the word feminism was coined, it was still not adopted as a term of identification by many of those who campaigned for women’s rights. Even many of the women’s rights organisations in the 1960s and early 1970s did not call themselves feminist. The term feminism had a restricted use in relation to specific concerns and specific groups. When women began to organize in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement called itself Women’s Liberation. This was often shortened to “women’s lib.”
- The label feminist is often applied to all women’s rights groups indiscriminately. But we need to stop and think if all theories, actions and campaigns that improve women’s social position (whether intentionally or not) should be classified as feminist
- All movements concerned with women’s issues need not be called feminist. Everyone supportive of women’s demand or right to equal treatment, or speaking against the injustice meted out to them, need not necessarily have to be a feminist. Being a feminist is neither a natural outcome of working for women’s issues, nor a prerequisite for the same.
- Feminism has its own history, its own practices, its own ideas, which is called feminist theory or feminism. Feminism cannot claim an exclusive interest in or copyright over problems affecting women. Feminism thus be established only as field which concerns itself with women, but cannot solely claim women as its domain.

Mary Wollstonecraft, her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792); Olympe de Gouge and Théroigne de Méricourt fighting for the extension of the rights promised by the French Revolution to women; and Catherine Macaulay’s *Letters on Education* (1790) which argues (as Wollstonecraft would do later) that the apparent weakness of women is not natural, but simply the product of mis-education. She firmly rejected the notion that women were “the mere property of men.”

### Feminism: The Three Waves

- **The First-wave feminism** is used to refer to the late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century movements that were mostly concerned with gaining equal rights for women, economic rights and the rights of education, birth control, suffrage.
- The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an increasingly and articulate statement of women's claims – perhaps in reaction to the emergence of an image of true “femininity” that seemed to become more and more constricted. But though many women (and men) spoke out against and acted on beliefs, it was not until the second half of the century that any organized campaigns – particularly for better education for women, for the possibility of their working outside the home, for a reform in the laws affecting married women, and the right to vote – began to emerge.
- **Virginia Woolf** and her concept of **Androgyny** [material shall be separately provided] – text in focus *A Room of One's Own*

Two of the best-known 19<sup>th</sup> century arguments for women's rights were written by men:

- William Thompson's *Appeal of One Half Of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other half, Men, to restrain them in Political and thence in Civil and Domestic slavery* (1825).
- John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869)

### SEX/GENDER

The terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ mean different things to different feminist theorists and neither are easy or straightforward to characterize. Sketching out some feminist history of the terms provides a helpful starting point. Some Feminists have questioned the assumption of naturalness of the differences between men and women, the nature of the tasks they consequently perform and their resulting relationship. They have made a distinction between **sex (biological)** and **gender (socio-cultural)**. Sex is a biological term and Gender a psychological and cultural one. It is often thought that someone who belongs to the female sex will belong to the corresponding feminine gender, or be a woman. But that is not so. To be a man or woman, boy or girl, is as much a function of dress, gesture, occupation, social network, personality and many such factors as it is possessing a particular set of genitals. The concept of **gender** has been adopted to make this distinction. This difference between sex and gender is the central concern of many feminist thinkers. Late 1960s and early 70s was the period marked by the second wave of feminism which highlighted the sex-gender distinction. One of the key influences of this phase of feminism was Simone de Beauvoir.

#### Biology is Destiny

Certain commonsensical assumptions about gender and gender relations have been prevalent. For instance, the assumption that division of labour is natural, where women do housework and men work outside as bread earners. Implicit are also certain assumptions about the innate nature of man and women: that the difference between men and women are naturally ordained, as made by God. Men are considered to be naturally strong, and protectors of all, hence preordained to exercise authority. Women are perceived to be inherently physically weaker than men. They are also considered to be soft, gentle and in constant need of protection. Hence, each gender's nature and behaviour is seen as an automatic extension of his/her biology. Therefore, Biology is seen destiny.

- **Simone de Beauvoir** [Detailed discussion shall be separately provided] She laid the foundation for the distinction between biological sex and socio-cultural gender. Text in focus: *The Second Sex* (1949) – here she made the famous assertion “one is not born a woman, rather one becomes a woman.” To Beauvoir bodily differences between man and women were inevitable but were meaningless in themselves. They acquired meaning only in the context of the lives that they lived. According to sex is not a natural fact, and there is no psychological or

biological destiny. [Go through the interview of Beauvoir “Why I’m a Feminist” (1975) shared in Google Classroom] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6eDMaDWquI>

Ann Oakley also made a distinction between sex and gender in the book *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) as she argued:

“Sex” is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible differences in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. “Gender”, however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into “masculine” and “feminine.”

The concept of gender seemed to open whole new avenues of thought and analysis for feminists, bringing with it hope of huge theoretical advances in the analysis of women’s oppression. However, having said that, gender is still a problematic term and so is the difference between Sex and Gender, as we shall later see.

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