

Sociology Factsheet



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The contribution of feminist theorists to our understanding of society today

The Factsheet will look at different feminist views and how these can be used to explain different aspects of society.

In general, the starting point for most feminist analysis of society is to see society as being made up of unequal structures of power between men and women. They believe that society is patriarchal which literally means 'rule of the father', but in general this term is used to refer to the ways in which society is male-dominated.

Feminism examines society particularly from the point of view of women. They argue that a lot of mainstream sociology has been focused on the concerns of men – 'malestream' sociology; - and has failed to deal with the concerns of women and the unequal position they have traditionally occupied in society.

There are a number of strands within feminist approaches including:

Marxist Feminism : this takes a Marxist approach to the study of women and women's interests, and emphasises the way in which women are doubly exploited – both as workers and as women.

Radical Feminism : this tends to focus more on the problem of patriarchy. For Radical Feminists, the main focus is on the problem of male dominated society.

Liberal Feminism : this approach wants to ensure that women have equal opportunities with men within the present system, through steps such as changes to the law to stop sex discrimination, removing obstacles to women's full participation in society, and better childcare measures so that women can play their full part in paid employment.

Black Feminism : Black Feminism argue that to be black and female is a very different experience to that of being white and female. These very different experiences can be seen throughout society.

Post -Feminism : is a term developed in the 1980s by women who refused to define themselves as feminists. It was a reaction to feminism, which was seen by some to have gone too far in its criticism of men and femininity.

Postmodern Feminism : a contemporary feminist approach believes that the oppression women experience differs from woman to woman and therefore there cannot be an accurate theory about female disadvantage in society.

1. What do feminists think about the family?

Feminists point out that:

- The experience of family is different for men and for women
- Women do the majority of housework, even today
- Women do the majority of emotional work
- There are lots of instances of sexual and domestic abuse of women in the family



Marxist Feminists such as Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow and Bea Campbell see the family as a major obstacle to female emancipation and as an institution which helps to maintain and service capitalist system.

Their main arguments include:

- The family is patriarchal – men dominate family relationships. The idea of balanced and equal roles in marriage (symmetrical conjugal roles) is seen as a myth.
- Domestic labour serves the needs of the capitalist economy – the household tasks completed by women makes the man in the family a more productive worker. By producing and rearing children – the workers of the future – at no cost to employers, housewives play a vital part in the reproduction of labour power.
- The family has an ideological role. The family socialises children into accepting an authoritarian and exploitive society e.g. by learning to accept the authority which parents exercise over them, children learn to accept the authority of schools, employers and the capitalist state.
- The family is an obstacle to gender equality in employment.
- The inequalities women suffer in employment because of their domestic and childcare responsibilities are built into the capitalist system. Women not only perform a valuable unpaid role as domestic labourers but also provide a 'reserve army of labour.' They are a source of cheap workers who can be brought into the paid labour force when needed, e.g. women do part time and temporary jobs but disappear into the family again when they are no longer required.

Radical Feminists emphasise the ways in which the family is a patriarchal institution – an institution which enables men to dominate, exploit and oppress women. Radical Feminists concentrate not on replacing the family but on changing it for the better. They argue for more involvement by men in family life claiming it would take much of the strain off women. This would require changes in other areas such as employment e.g. shorter working weeks, longer paternity leave etc.

Exam Hint:- Make sure you show that you understand that there is a variety of feminist approaches.

Liberal Feminists such as Sue Sharp and Rosalind Delmar are concerned with the impact of gender divisions within society. They believe that men are also the victims of gender socialisation and they tend to seek legislative change to ensure equality for men and women.

Black Feminists including writers Amos and Parmar (1984), point out that ethnicity has a massive effect upon the nature of family life, and therefore women's experience of the family.

Note: A lot of the points raised in this section on Feminist explanations of the family can also be used in answers to questions in other areas of Sociology.

For example:

Work – reserve army of labour, women support men so they are productive at work, paternity leave, gender inequalities in employment because of domestic roles, housewives play a vital part in the reproduction of labour power.

Power – men powerful in the family and at work, domestic violence, changes in legislation.

Education – socialisation of boys and girls in the home and in the education system, children learn to accept the authority of schools, employers and the capitalist state.

Stratification – the family could be used as an example when explaining differences between males and females in society.

Exam Focus:

Outline and assess Feminist explanations of the family

You could start your answer to this question by outlining the general views of Feminism and then developing your answer to show how different feminist approaches explain the family. Use evidence throughout to support what you write.

You don't have to include all feminist approaches in your answer but it is important to show the examiner that you understand that there are different Feminist approaches.

2. What do feminists think about education?



According to feminists, it is gender that determines success.

Whilst feminists emphasise gender rather than class inequalities, their fundamental argument mirrors the Marxists. In particular, Feminists maintain that the ways in which boys and girls are treated sends messages about appropriate behaviour and aspirations. Feminists see education as a major source of gender socialisation. Spender (1983) claims that education is largely controlled by men, who use their power to further their own interests.

Abraham (1986) analysed textbooks used in a comprehensive school. He found maths textbooks to be especially male dominated. Women tended to be shown in stereotypical roles such as shopping, while men were typically running businesses – a way of enforcing gender expectations of society.

Marxist Feminists argue that women's role in society is shaped and determined by the needs of the economy. They blame the capitalist system for allowing women to be forced into a situation where they are socialised into supporting men both in the home and the work place. Education is seen as enforcing these expectations both on men and women.

Radical feminists argue that patriarchy can only end when women are freed from the negative influence that men inflict on women, both physically and emotionally. The school classroom and playground are seen as prime sources of such influence.

Liberal Feminists argue that patriarchy will be ended by changes in equal opportunities and educational policies e.g. they would argue that the introduction of the National Curriculum has played a significant role in bringing about equality of education by making sure that both genders study the same subjects in school.

Black Feminists argue that to be black and female is a very different experience to that of being white and female. These very different experiences can be seen in schools and colleges and the way teachers and books treat both groups of students differently.

3. What do Feminists think about health?



Whilst feminists, like Oakley, are interested with many issues concerning women and health, there are key areas that concern them.

(a) The medicalisation of childbirth

Male doctors see pregnancy and childbirth in terms of a medical procedure to be controlled and regulated and stress the importance of hospital rather than home birth.

(b) Status of nurses

Most nurses are female and they receive lower pay than doctors who are mainly males.+

(c) Contraception

This is mainly aimed at women.

(d) Women's health and capitalism

Women's health is big business and big profits can be made from things like anti-aging products/procedures and plastic surgery.

Doyal (1995) argues that capitalism defines female health in terms of the ability to reproduce the next generation of workers and being able to undertake domestic tasks and act as a reserve army of labour. Doyal sees women's health as undermined by the dual burden of doing paid work as well as most of the housework. Women do more caring than men and suffer more from physical and emotional damage from sexual abuse than men.

Marxist feminists focus more closely on the particular impact of social inequality in general on the health of the lives of women in the working class and minority ethnic groups.

Radical Feminists point out how the medical profession and drug and technology industry are male dominated. Even in areas where there are more women than men e.g. midwifery, they are supervised by male obstetricians and gynaecologists. Nurses, around 90 per cent of whom are women, have lower status than doctors – around 65 per cent of whom are men – and there is a large body of research evidence which suggests that men have greater career success in the nursing profession than women. Women dominate in the lower levels of every aspect of the National Health Service.

Liberal Feminists argue that patriarchy will be ended by changes in equal opportunities policies e.g. they would argue that there are now far more women working as doctors today than there were because systems are being introduced to allow them opportunities to work in these positions of responsibility.

4. What do Feminists think about wealth, poverty and welfare?



Feminists argue that in a patriarchal society men use their position of dominance to keep women in an inferior position. This is often linked to the financial dependence of women on men, especially after having children.

Feminists emphasise the way the welfare state supports patriarchy, and the inadequacy of the welfare state in meeting the needs of women. They point to the way the benefit system is frequently based on contribution records built up by full time workers, who are less likely to be women, and the way the founding principles of the welfare state were based on an assumption of women being financially supported by men, with important levels of care of the elderly, children, the sick and disabled being provided free by women.

Feminists argue that the notion of female dependency was built into the welfare state from its outset. Land (1978) points out that the 1911 National Insurance Act was largely concerned with insuring male workers against sickness, injury and unemployment, rather than their wives and children. The assumption of female dependency was reflected in the Beveridge Report of 1942, which allowed married women to opt out of full national insurance cover and to rely on the husbands' instead. Land argued that the current social security system perpetuates such assumptions. Williams (1993) pointed out how welfare legislation was built on sexist assumptions about a 'woman's place.' The Beveridge report reflected the dominant views of its time, assuming that women would return to their chief role of mothers and housewives after the war.

Feminists such as Glendinning and Millar (1992) have argued that there has been a feminisation of poverty, and research by Oppenheimer and Harker (1996) demonstrates that more women than men were living in poverty in 1992. Feminists argue that these patterns are a result of women's secondary position in the labour market.

Although more women are now working, many women work part time, and they earn less than men. This finding, combined with the patriarchal assumptions built into the benefit system, support Glendinning and Millar's notion that poverty has been feminised (become something associated mainly with women.)

Marxist Feminist in particular draw attention to the powerless position of women in capitalist society where the work that they do in the home is unvalued and unpaid. This situation, they claim, is of benefit to the ruling class, as it reduces the bargaining power of the male breadwinner because his whole family is dependent on his wage.

Marxist Feminist argue that in supporting the ideal of a nuclear family in which the father is the breadwinner and the mother and the children are economically dependent, the state not only reinforces male dominance in the family but helps to serve the interests of the capitalist class. The assumption that unpaid domestic labour is a natural part of women's role justifies both the state and the employer absolving themselves of much of the responsibility for the care of children, the sick, the disabled and the elderly.

Activity What would Radical Feminists and Liberal Feminists say about wealth, poverty and welfare?

5. What do feminists think about religion?

Feminism argues that religion can be an instrument of domination and oppression. They see religion as a product of patriarchy.

Feminist Sociology has two major concerns when focusing on religion:

- What roles do women occupy within religious institutions?
- What role does patriarchy play within religion?



Women have played a decisive, yet historically understated, role within the development of religious movements. State-endorsed religious institutions (e.g. Church of England) tend to emphasise the traditional role of women within the family. Many religions have also excluded women from key positions within their organisations, e.g. the catholic priesthood.

Watson (1994) researched the veiling of Islamic women which is seen by many as a form of socially controlling women.

Armstrong (1993) points out that women occupy a marginal position in most major religions.

Exam Focus:

Evaluate feminist views on the role and functions of religion in society today.

The question asks you to evaluate..... This is asking you to judge, criticise in terms of impact/significance, and investigate the implications.

You need to explain feminist views on the role of religion in oppressing women and use appropriate research e.g. Watson, Armstrong.

You could evaluate by:

- Using theories to criticise other theories
- Make methodological criticisms
- Use historical examples to support or criticise a theory
- Use evidence and say how it supports/criticises a theory
- Say what is good/bad about an idea
- Assess the contribution made to sociology/topic by a theory.

Make sure evaluation runs all the way through the essay answer. Do not leave it until the end.

6. What do Feminists think about Mass Media?

There is a great deal of research showing that media representations of men dominate the media and are more positive than those of women. Representations of women tend to reflect negative stereotypes.

Ferguson (1983) argue that media representations promote and reinforce powerful norms of femininity. Women in the media tend to be portrayed in roles submissive to men e.g. housewives, mothers.

Tuchman (1978) concluded that women are marginalised in media representations. Men have tended to be represented in the opposite way to that of women, usually being portrayed as strong, independent, resourceful and authoritative.

The media world is also dominated by men who control what society sees and reads, therefore reinforcing patriarchal society.



Activity What would the different feminist approaches say about the media?

7. What do Feminists think about crime and deviance?

Radical feminism focuses on the plight of women under capitalism. Male domination has been the norm, and women have been subject to it in the home and workplace, as well as on the street. Radical feminist criminologists have looked at the unjust treatment of female teens, who are much more frequently subject to institutionalisation for status offense violations (offenses that would not be criminal if an adult) such as running away from home, and particularly singled out for sexual deviance. While away from home or working alone, women must always be on their guard for potential attacks or advances from men.



Heidensohn (1985) argues that the justice system is influenced by attitudes to gender in society as a whole. Women are treated more harshly when they deviate from norms of female sexuality.

Carlen (1997) argues that women are more likely to be sentenced according to the court's assessment of them as wives, mothers and daughters rather than the seriousness of their crimes.

The justice system in the UK is dominated by men reinforcing patriarchal society.

Activity

Women account for 11 per cent of all judges in England and Wales.
What would Marxist Feminists and Liberal Feminist views be on this?

Test yourself

Choose 2 topics you have studied and bullet point key feminist issues for each topic.

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