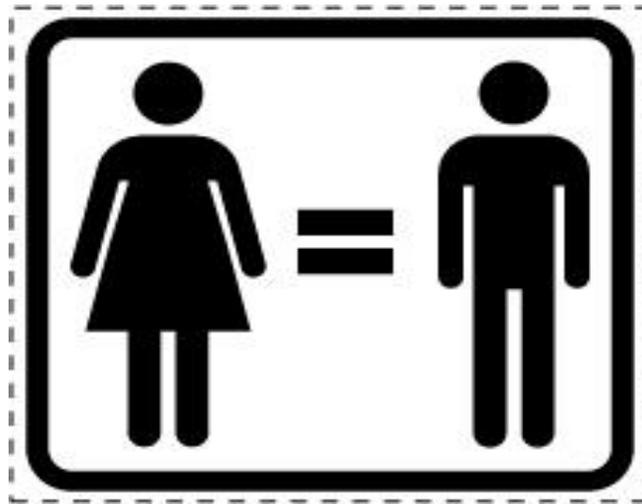


Module-15

FEMINISM



Developed by:

Dr. Subrata Chatterjee
Associate Professor of Sociology
Khejuri College
P.O- Baratala, Purba Medinipur
West Bengal, India

FEMINISM

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a word that is heard on a daily basis in our lives. The word describes a popular movement that has gained many followers in recent years. It is also commonly used with the wrong definition attached to it via popular media sources. The definition of feminism is not to support equality for one specific gender. The true definition of feminism is to have equal standards for all people regardless of gender, and this definition is misconstrued through popular icons in the field of feminism today; therefore, feminists should rename their movement to the more appropriate term of egalitarianism.

First, our society should properly define feminism instead of allowing multiple definitions to float around and fend for themselves with followings of belligerent citizens that use the word with hatred. Hatred has never been a definition of feminism and never will be. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word feminism has two definitions. The fact that a respectable organization such as Merriam-Webster cannot define this word properly once without upsetting people is a sign that we have a problem. The first definition of “feminism” is “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes.” The second definition is “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests.” Normally, I would approve of two definitions if they are being used in two different circumstances. That is not the case with this word. We have one situation where the same exact word is used with two vastly different meanings. One meaning is supporting equality for all genders while the other meaning sides with one specific side of the overall picture of this movement, women’s rights, and justifies it as the only problem. There is an abundance of confusion on the definition of “feminism,” so feminists should clarify the definition of this word as it applies to the current movement in order to help feminism achieve its goal.

The goal of the feminist movement, gender equality, could be more accurately defined as a movement of egalitarianism. Egalitarianism is defined as “a belief in human equality especially with respect to social, political and economic affairs” or “a social philosophy advocating the removal of inequalities among people” according to Merriam-Webster. This definition literally has the same meaning as the first definition given to describe the feminist movement. Instead of forcing supporters of feminism to choose which of the two definitions they support, feminists should relabel themselves as egalitarianists.

VARIOUS WAVES OF FEMINISM

Feminism in the West began with 19th century activism in favor of women's voting rights. Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, it expanded in scope, adapting to new social and political realities. In general, feminism's trajectory led to broader inclusiveness with regard to race and social class. Feminist thought and activism roughly aligns with three distinctive historical periods, known simply as first, second and third wave feminism.

FIRST WAVE

The first wave of U.S. feminism debuted with Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1848 Seneca Falls Convention address, which promoted voting rights for women. Stanton claimed that women were men's equals and deserved equal political rights. This touched off the American women's suffrage movement, which lasted until the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote in 1919.

Though some black women such as journalist Ida B. Wells participated in the suffrage movement, first wave feminism was dominated by white, middle class women and their interests. White women's dominance was reinforced by the population control rhetoric promoted by first wave feminists such as Margaret Sanger. Toward the end of the first wave, as Marxism spread in parts of Europe, feminist Marxists such as Germany's Rosa Luxembourge called for more dramatic social transformation.

SECOND WAVE

After the suffrage movement, first wave feminism began to slow. It would not take up Luxembourge's call for radical transformation until the 1950s and 1960s. Inspired by earlier feminist writers including English novelist Virginia Woolf and French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, second wave feminists aimed to shake up the status quo. Many second wave feminists were influenced by the rise of a Marxist intellectual movement called the New Left. While Marxism cast the working class as an oppressed social class, second wave feminism saw women as an oppressed class.

Second wave feminism's radicalism alienated many women from the movement as some feminists formed separatist communes to eliminate men from their lives. Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde challenged the separatist vision of second wave theologian Mary Daly. Men, she pointed out, were an integral part of the movement for racial equality. She insisted that it was not feasible for black women to sequester themselves in communes and ignore the black men working for racial equality beside them.

Women like Daly and her graduate student Janice Raymond advocated to exclude transgender women from feminist struggle. Daly called for the murder of transgender women, and Janice Raymond's "Transsexual Empire" cast transgender women as members of an anti-feminist

conspiracy. Meanwhile, second wave feminists such as Julie Bindel and Andrea Dworkin focused heavily on critiquing sex workers and pornography.

THIRD WAVE

During the 1990s, third wave feminism emerged in an effort to address earlier critiques of feminism. Third wave feminism attempted to reach out to women of color, transgender women and sex workers. During this time, feminist writer Heather Corinna began publishing a website magazine called Scarleteen, offering sex education to young people. Corinna's emphasis on personal sexual autonomy, distaste for sexual shaming and commitment to enthusiastic sexual consent became emblematic of a movement within third wave feminism called "sex positive feminism."

During the third wave, women of color became increasingly active in feminism. Beginning in the late 1990s, groups like the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective spearheaded a reproductive rights movement that treated reproduction as more than just access to birth control and abortion rights. These were crucial, they argued, but they maintained that women of color needed more. They rejected earlier feminist eugenicist thinking -- and insisted that marginalized women should be supported when they chose to have children as well.

VARITIES OF FEMINISM

Liberal Feminism

This is the variety of feminism that works within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women into that structure. Its roots stretch back to the social contract theory of government instituted by the American Revolution. Abigail Adams and Mary Wollstonecraft were there from the start, proposing equality for women. As is often the case with liberals, they slog along inside the system, getting little done amongst the compromises until some radical movement shows up and pulls those compromises left of center. This is how it operated in the days of the suffragist movement and again with the emergence of the radical feminists.

Radical Feminism

Provides the bulwark of theoretical thought in feminism. Radical feminism provides an important foundation for the rest of "feminist flavors". Seen by many as the "undesirable" element of feminism, Radical feminism is actually the breeding ground for many of the ideas arising from feminism; ideas which get shaped and pounded out in various ways by other (but not all) branches of feminism. Radical feminism was the cutting edge of feminist theory from approximately 1967-1975. It is no longer as universally accepted as it was then, nor does it provide a foundation for, for example, cultural feminism.

This term refers to the feminist movement that sprung out of the civil rights and peace movements in 1967-1968. The reason this group gets the "radical" label is that they view the oppression of women as the most fundamental form of oppression, one that cuts across boundaries of race, culture, and economic class. This is a movement intent on social change, change of rather revolutionary proportions, in fact. The best history of this movement is a book called *Daring to be Bad*, by Alice Echols (1989). I consider that book a must! [JD] Another excellent book is simply titled *Radical Feminism* and is an anthology edited by Anne Koedt, a well-known radical feminist

Marxist and Socialist Feminism

Marxism recognizes that women are oppressed, and attributes the oppression to the capitalist/private property system. Thus they insist that the only way to end the oppression of women is to overthrow the capitalist system. Socialist feminism is the result of Marxism meeting radical feminism. Jaggar and Rothenberg [*Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations Between Women and Men* by Alison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenberg, 1993] point to significant differences between socialist feminism and Marxism, but for our purposes I'll present the two together. Echols offers a description of socialist feminism as a marriage between Marxism and radical feminism, with Marxism the dominant partner. Marxists and socialists often call themselves "radical," but they use the term to refer to a completely different "root" of society: the economic system.

Cultural Feminism

As radical feminism died out as a movement, cultural feminism got rolling. In fact, many of the same people moved from the former to the latter. They carried the name "radical feminism" with them, and some cultural feminists use that name still. (Jaggar and Rothenberg [*Feminist Frameworks*] don't even list cultural feminism as a framework separate from radical feminism, but Echols spells out the distinctions in great detail.) The difference between the two is quite striking: whereas radical feminism was a movement to transform society, cultural feminism retreated to vanguardism, working instead to build a women's culture. Some of this effort has had some social benefit: rape crisis centers, for example; and of course many cultural feminists have been active in social issues (but as individuals, not as part of a movement).

As various 1960s movements for social change fell apart or got co-opted, folks got pessimistic about the very possibility of social change. Many of them turned their attention to building alternatives, so that if they couldn't change the dominant society, they could avoid it as much as possible. That, in a nutshell, is what the shift from radical feminism to cultural feminism was about. These alternative-building efforts were accompanied with reasons explaining (perhaps

justifying) the abandonment of working for social change. Notions that women are "inherently kinder and gentler" are one of the foundations of cultural feminism, and remain a major part of it. A similar concept held by some cultural feminists is that while various sex differences might not be biologically determined, they are still so thoroughly ingrained as to be intractable.

Eco-Feminism

This branch of feminism is much more spiritual than political or theoretical in nature. It may or may not be wrapped up with Goddess worship and vegetarianism. Its basic tenet is that a patriarchal society will exploit its resources without regard to long term consequences as a direct result of the attitudes fostered in a patriarchal/hierarchical society. Parallels are often drawn between society's treatment of the environment, animals, or resources and its treatment of women. In resisting patriarchal culture, eco-feminists feel that they are also resisting plundering and destroying the Earth.