

Has feminism
achieved its goals?



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This essay will assess the question: has feminism achieved its goals? The essay will outline the three strands of feminism. The first section focuses on Liberal feminism which asserts the idea that in order for feminism to achieve its goals it must create equality among men and women. The second section turns to socialist feminism that believes that the only way feminist goals can be achieved is with the overthrow of the capitalist system and that of patriarchy. The Third and final section analyses radical feminism that advocates the goal of political lesbianism. This essay will conclude that feminism has not achieved its goals, however Liberal feminists believe their aim for equality is achievable in the near future.

Has Feminism achieved its goals?

Feminism as an issue first became prominent in the 17th and 18th century in France and America. It was not until the suffragette movement of the 19th century that feminism was seen as important in Britain. The scholar Estelle Freedman compares first and second-wave feminism saying that the first wave focused on rights such as suffrage, whereas the second wave was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination.[1]Feminism is a contested issue, therefore difficult to define, due to the fact that feminism has a directory of meanings, however the term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Within feminism there are many strands, the most important and commonly known strands are Liberal, Socialist, Radical and more recently Post-modernist. Within these strands there is an on-going argument of whether or not feminism has achieved its goals.

Early feminism was heavily influenced by liberalism. Liberal Feminists main goal comes from the liberal idea of equality of opportunity, freedom for the individual. The idea that everyone, both men and woman deserve to be considered to be of equal worth. However these liberal feminists take into consideration that this is not the case in society. Their goal thus being to create a society consisting of a culture of equal rights. They believe that woman's subordination is a product of stereotyping, for instance seeing a woman as a mother only. It is often implied that feminine behaviour is a weakness meaning that men are seen as the stronger part of society, creating this inequality. Friedan sees this as the 'feminine mystique' which she refers to as a cultural myth.[2] This is the idea that woman see certain things as more important; for instance the need for security and love is typically seen as feminine, whereas success and superiority is typically seen as masculine. This assumption thus disadvantages women and separates them from entering employment.

Liberal feminists therefore dismiss the notion that biological differences make women less competent than men, and believe that societies socialisation patterns need to change, so that gender socialisation does not occur, in other words males and females need to distance themselves from stereotypical roles. As both men and women our humans, they should have the same type of freedom and rights. Wollstonecraft asserts this view claiming that 'the distinction of sex would become unimportant in political and social life'[3]

Liberal Feminists believe that they can achieve this goal of equality through reform, for instance laws against sex discrimination in employment secures

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equal opportunities for woman. Added to this, they have the belief that society should not be organised by gender, but as Mill puts it: according to the ‘principle of equality’[4] and that accidents of birth like the sex of the child should be irrelevant, thus suggesting that women should be open to all the aspects of society, just like men, having all the rights and liberties that men enjoy such as the right to vote.

Liberal Feminism is an optimistic theory, and overall believes that the goals of feminism are progressing and that over time gender equality will become the norm. This progression can be seen through different rights such as the right to initiate divorce proceedings and the reproductive rights of women to make individual decisions on pregnancy. Thus they believe that the goals of feminism may not be achieved at this moment in time, but the changes in society mean that soon they will be.

Liberal feminists have been criticised for this over optimism, they see the obstacles to equality as simply the prejudices of individuals or irrational laws, ignoring the possibility that there are deep seeded structures causing women’s oppression, such as patriarchy. Socialist and radical feminists criticise liberal feminists stating that one needs to recognise the underlying causes of female subordination, and that it is naive to believe that changes in the law will be enough to bring equality. Instead, they believe that revolutionary changes are needed.

Socialist feminists connect the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression and labour. They think unequal standing in both the workplace and the domestic sphere holds women down. Socialist feminists

see prostitution, domestic work, childcare and marriage as ways in which women are exploited by a patriarchal system that devalues women and the substantial work they do. They focus their energies on broad change that affects society as a whole, rather than on an individual basis. They see the need to work alongside not just men, but all other groups, as they see the oppression of women as a part of a larger pattern that affects everyone involved in the capitalist system.

Socialist feminists dismiss the liberal feminist view that women's subordination is due to stereotypes. They see women's subordination as rooted in capitalism; although men may benefit from women, the main beneficiary is capitalism. For them the tension between men and women is due to the economic structure of society and only by overthrowing capitalism will women be equal to men. Thus their goal is: a revolution- that is they believe that the subordination of women can only be understood in terms of economic factors, for instance the idea that women are unpaid workers in the home. This subordination performs a number of functions for capitalism: women reproduce the labour force; women absorb the anger of men. Ansley for example describes wives as 'takers of shit'[5]. It is for these reasons that woman's interests and thus their goal should be the overthrow of capitalism. If this is their goal, then it is quite clear that feminism, according to the socialist feminist side has not achieved its goals.

However modern socialist feminists refuse to look at the status of women in terms of economic factors and instead focus on the cultural roots. Mitchell suggests women perform four functions in society: ' 1) members of the workforce, 2) reproduce the human species 3) responsible for socialising

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children 4) sex objects.’[6] Looking at this, the only way according to modern socialist feminists to achieve their goal is if they separate themselves from each of these areas, not just the idea of capitalism being replaced by socialism. This has yet to be achieved.

Many criticisms have been made of socialist feminists. For some, they fail to explain women’s subordination in non-capitalist societies. As women’s subordination is also found there. Unpaid domestic labour may benefit capitalism, but it does not explain why it is women and not men who perform it. They place insufficient emphasis on the ways in which men and not just capitalism oppress women and benefit from their unpaid labour.

Radical Feminism dismisses both liberal and socialist feminism, focusing on gender as the reason for all social divisions. They consider the male controlled capitalist hierarchy, which it describes as sexist, as the defining feature of women’s oppression. Radical feminists believe that women can free themselves only when they have done away with what they consider an inherently oppressive and dominating patriarchal system. For them the key concept is Patriarchy: which literally means rule by fathers and is seen process of gender oppression.

Patriarchy has come to mean a society where men dominate women, that there is a male-based authority and power structure and that it is responsible for oppression and inequality. As long as the system and its values are in place, society will not be able to be reformed in any significant way. Patriarchy is universal, existing in all societies. According to Firestone the origins of patriarchy are in biology; women bearing children makes them

more dependent on men. However this is criticised by De Beauvoir who believes that the position of women is based not on natural factors but social factors, showing a critique of patriarchal culture.

The basis of radical feminism is the idea that sexual oppression is the biggest feature of society and that other forms of inequality for instance class exploitation take a back seat. For radical feminists patriarchy is the biggest form of inequality, men are women's main enemy. Most radical feminists advocate the idea of separatism and Political lesbianism.

Separatism refers to the idea of living apart from men creating a culture of female independence. Political Lesbianism is the idea that women become involved in lesbian relationships for political reasons. Many radical feminists argue that lesbianism is the only non-oppressive form of sexuality; 'feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice'[7]

The relationship between men and women must be transformed if women are to be free. Radical feminists argue that women and men should be separate, women should raise their consciousness about women's oppression in women only groups and they stress that political lesbianism is the only non-oppressive form of sexuality.

Thus, this means that the goal of radical feminists is to live separate lives from men. However they recognise that this will not solve all the problems of the patriarchal society. Some radical feminists see no alternatives other than the total uprooting and reconstruction of society in order to achieve these goals. These goals have clearly not been achieved as heterosexual

relationships are still the norm, although having said this there has been a rise of homosexual relationships in the last thirty years.

Socialist feminists argue that class, not patriarchy, is the primary form of inequality. They also argue that capitalism is the main cause and beneficiary of women's oppression, and not men. Radical feminism offers no explanation of why female subordination takes different forms in different societies. It assumes that all women are in the same position and ignores class, ethnic differences. Liberal feminists argue that women's position has improved greatly and that women are now more equal to men.

These three strands represent the different views and ideas of different feminist theorists. Although they all have different opinions, having considered all the arguments it is clear that they all believe that feminist goals have not been achieved. Liberal feminists believe that they are well on their way to achieving equality, whereas both socialist and radical feminists disagree. Socialist feminists asserting the view that an overthrow of capitalism is needed, whereas radical feminists assert the view that in order to be free they need to live separate lives from men.