

# Fragmented feminism:

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Fragmented Feminism: The tension between equality and difference

The concept of feminism invites many points of contention. In modern usage, it is defined as the ideology that constitutes the belief that women require liberation from the disadvantages their sex imposes. Although there have been significant advances for women in the three waves of the feminist movement, tensions have developed within the ideology. In this essay I will explore the tension that feminism attempts to reconcile between equality and difference. Feminist beliefs can be dated back to the ancient civilisations of Greece and China. However, the concept only truly developed in the twentieth century. The first wave of feminism in the mid-1800s was solely concerned with the pursuit of sexual equality legally and politically, with particular emphasis on suffrage rights. It was believed that when these rights were gained, full emancipation of women would be inevitable. The women's movement regenerated in the 1960s when it was apparent that wider liberation was needed for sexual equality to exist. The second-wave of feminism was characterised by more radical concerns, seeking equality to extend to the private sphere. This allowed feminism to be established as a distinctive ideology, opposed to being attached to others, and gender perspectives were recognised as important in general public life. The third-wave of feminism, apparent today, shows a greater engagement with women being different from men through emphasising the differences between the sexes. Although there have been significant developments for feminism over time, the ideology has become increasingly easy to dismiss because it is often difficult to locate common ground and tension and disagreement are preeminent. There are two core themes of feminism that

establish some common ground. The first of which is the desire to redefine the political. Traditionally, politics has been confined to the public sphere. This includes governmental institutions, political parties, pressure groups and public debate. This is problematic through a feminist lens because of the socially constructed roles of the 'public man' and the 'private woman'. Essentially, this definition of politics excluded women that were restricted to the private sphere of the home and gave the issue of gender equality very little political importance. Feminism has sought to overturn these roles and broaden the definition of politics to include both public and private spheres. The second core theme of feminism is the opposition to a patriarchy. Literally defined as 'rule by the father', a patriarchy is often used to describe male dominance and female subordination in society at large. Feminists believe the family to be the 'chief institution' of a patriarchy, which aids the systematic process of reproducing male dominance in other elements of life. Feminists are united in wanting to remove the notions of women as the second sex and men as the dominant. The essence of the feminist argument, in which agreement can be found, is that women are made subordinate by men and there is a need for liberation. However, there is a strong tension between equality and difference feminisms that contemplate the means by which this liberation should come. The late 80s and 90s saw a regeneration of Social Darwinism that attempted to explain the differences between women and men as biological rather than social. This justification for the secondary role of women called into question these 'natural' differences. Most feminists sought to overcome them through denying the relevance of biological differences while others sought to celebrate the differences, giving

feminine and masculine qualities the same value. This fragmentation within the ideology has resulted in a core debate of how women should be liberated. Equality feminism aspires to the goal of sexual equality in a gender-blind society. Central to this argument is the distinction between sex and gender. Gender is defined as a socially and culturally constructed difference between men and women whereas sex distinguishes the biological and ineradicable differences. This is exemplified through Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement, 'women are made: they are not born'. This implies that women's inferior position is created by society rather than natural or biological fact. Women as the 'second sex' has been constructed from the 'eternal feminine' which women need to be liberated from to enjoy sexual equality. Equality feminists argue that biological facts should in no way disadvantage women or determine their social destiny. There is a strong focus on the desire for androgyny and personhood, acknowledging that differences are only a 'manifestation of oppression or subordination'. The different strands of feminism that identify with this argument include Liberal feminism, which emphasises equal sexual rights in the public sphere irrelevant of sexual differences; Socialist feminism, which links the oppression of women to the capitalist economic system; and Radical feminism, which believes gender to be the most significant of social and political divisions, rooted in the private sphere. Although there are obvious differences between these forms of feminism, they are united in the belief that gender differences are a negative prospect. There are several key arguments against Equality feminism. Most importantly, implicit in being equal to man is the idea that women become 'male identified'. Determining

objectives through constant comparisons to men creates a risk of undermining the feminist value of overthrowing the patriarchy as women model themselves on men. The level of expectation of what women can and should do that is brought by Equality feminism has resulted in the development of the 'superwoman syndrome'. This is where women are expected to balance the career, the family, and other responsibilities, which amounts to enormous pressure in the different spheres. If women are unable to do this, they are forced to make sacrifices in either the public or private sphere. It is interesting to consider, however, how these sacrifices are seen as anti-feminist. This argument reflects the unreachable standards that Equality feminism has cast upon women as a sex. Other arguments against Equality feminism include that it is not clear whether women should be liberated through equality of opportunity or outcome, and whether the sex divide is as clear-cut as the ideology interprets. Oppositionists argue that it is actually a biology-culture continuum that determines sex, which makes gender and sex more difficult to distinguish. Difference feminism accommodates for the criticisms of Equality feminism in seeking 'women identification'. This branch of feminism holds that there are ineradicable differences between men and women, rooted in anatomy and culture. The nature of men as competitive and women as empathetic reflects a deeper biological distinction rather than simply the social structures. Difference feminists aspire to the celebration of these core differences and to the equal value given to the qualities both sexes bring. They promote the sense of 'sisterhood' through experiences unique to women such as menstruation and childbirth. Freedman discusses how "the capacity to bear children and the

social roles and skills which it entails contain some valuable elements that constitute the core of women's difference from men. " The strands of feminism that identify with this argument include Cultural feminism, which emphasises an interaction with a women-centred culture; Pro-woman feminism, which advocates a positive image of women's qualities, stressing creativity, empathy and cooperation; and Essentialism, which holds that biological factors are imperative in determining psychological and behavioural traits. The core theme in these branches of the ideology is the recognition of differences between men and women in a positive light. The problem that lies within Difference feminism is that it is impossible to debate without the formation of a hierarchy. Eisenstein and Jardine state " Western culture has proven to be incapable of thinking not-the-same without assigning one of the terms a positive value and the other, a negative. " Therefore, this perspective will only ever allow for the domination of one sex over the other. Also, the recognition of differences as a positive concept demonstrates the power of the patriarchy through " its capacity to recruit women into their own oppression. " In placing value on the qualities that have made women redundant for such a time, only reinforces the ideas of sexual division that feminism originally aimed to overthrow. Although it is biologically true that women are unique in the experience of childbearing that does not bring with it the requirement of child-rearing. Mothering is not an innate instinct but rather a desire to be ' feminine' found at such a young age it could not be deemed a conscious decision. The concept of a ' symmetrical family' demonstrates the equal responsibility between mother and father and rejects the conditioned roles that Difference feminists

celebrate. It is argued that the biological differences are therefore irrelevant within the heavily debated private sphere, because men also have the opportunity to perform the empathetic and caring role, usually cast to the mother. This essay explores a large tension within the liberation that feminists aspire to bring to women. I believe that Equality feminism will be more successful for women because the differences that Difference feminists enshrine come from centuries of hegemonic masculinity that has conditioned the naturalisation of these values. This perspective only reinforces the inferior position of women in maintaining a hierarchy between feminine and masculine qualities. Equality feminism is more effective in its gender-blind stance because it rejects that hierarchy that subordinates one sex. Women do not have to be 'male-identified'. Both men and women should be able to identify with a gender-irrelevant universal standard, creating a personhood and inevitable sexual equality. In conclusion, feminism has become largely fragmented at the close of the twentieth century. Although there are common goals of overthrowing the patriarchy and redefining the political, the strong tension between Equality and Difference feminisms is preeminent today. Both perspectives provide a means for women to continue to be liberated; yet they each hold an element of contradiction to the original principles of feminism. Overall, Equality feminism will be more successful for the liberation of women because inherent in Difference feminism is a hierarchy that will always demand the domination of man or woman and will never allow true sexual equality.