

Political Ideas – Feminism (non-core ideas)

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

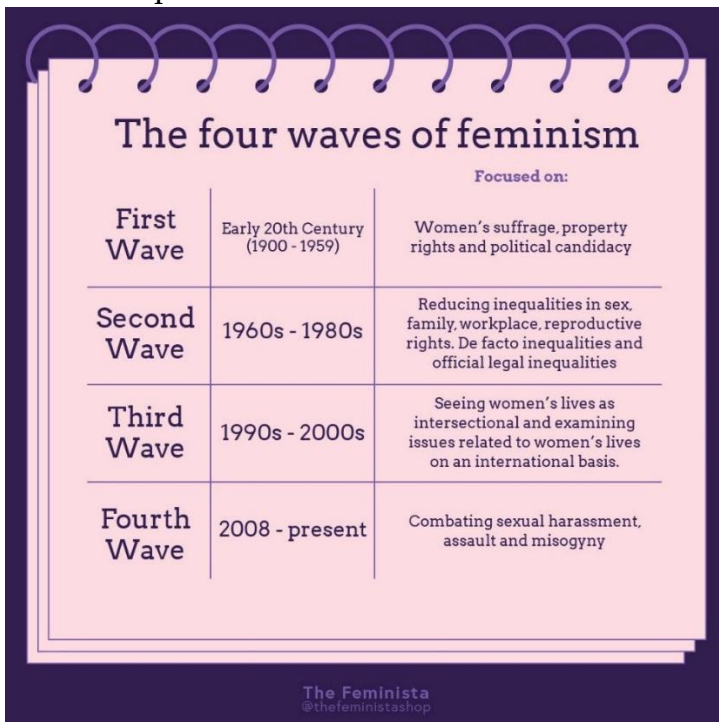
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- (1) The origins of feminism.
- (2) The different types of Feminism.
- (3) Core ideas and principles.
- (4) Differing views and tensions.

(1) The origins of feminism

Patriarchy = a term used by feminists to refer to a society that is dominated by men and for men, where women's status, rights and opportunities are inferior to men and women are exploited by patriarchy. It is possible that women are unaware of patriarchy = a form of false consciousness.

- While feminist role models and themes were apparent in ancient times, as a set of political beliefs it is traced back to 1790 and can be divided into four waves until the present time:



The four waves of feminism		
		Focused on:
First Wave	Early 20th Century (1900 - 1959)	Women's suffrage, property rights and political candidacy
Second Wave	1960s - 1980s	Reducing inequalities in sex, family, workplace, reproductive rights. De facto inequalities and official legal inequalities
Third Wave	1990s - 2000s	Seeing women's lives as intersectional and examining issues related to women's lives on an international basis.
Fourth Wave	2008 - present	Combating sexual harassment, assault and misogyny

The Feminista
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- **Liberal feminists** = aim to reform patriarchal society, **Simone de Beauvoir** and **Charlotte Perkins Gilman**.
- **Socialist and radical feminists** = argue that the system is rotten from the core and reforms are futile, thus the call for a revolution, **Sheila Rowbotham** and **Kate Millett**.
- The third and fourth waves feminists argue that **patriarchy keeps changing** its features and new complex and nuanced features of oppression are emerging in contemporary life, posing new challenges.
- **First wave** = Liberal (rights for women), suffragists, socialist and radical feminism.
- **Second wave** = liberal, socialist, radical, ecofeminism, difference feminism and postmodern.
- **Third wave** = post-feminism, liberal, postmodern.
- **Fourth wave** = postmodern feminism, transfeminism.

(2) The different types of feminism

2.1: Liberal feminism.

2.2: Socialist feminism.

2.3: Radical feminism.

2.4: Postmodern feminism.

2.1: Liberal feminism

- **Gender stereotypes** = men and women's gender roles are predetermined by society and therefore they are socialised into these roles. All agents of socialisation in the public and private spheres are partaking in the process.
- **Equality of opportunity** = every individual, regardless of their sex/gender, have the same life chances and opportunity to succeed = pathways for social mobility.
- Liberal feminists argue that gender stereotypes can be eradicated by utilising democratic pressure = focus on the public rather than private spheres.
- Heavily influenced by liberal ideology and individualism.
- Advocate equality of opportunity.
- First wave feminists, like **Mary Wollstonecraft** (see key thinker in liberalism), argued for political equality and the right to vote. The underlying assumption was that political emancipation is going to evolve into gender and legal equality.
- First wave feminists like **Perkins Gilman** were among the first ones to argue that biological differences are irrelevant but are being employed to justify discrimination or different gender roles.

- Later, **Simon de Beauvoir** argued that men are the ones that cultivated the idea that gender differences are natural, innate and based on biology, because it reinforced their exploitation of women.
- **Betty Friedan** (see key thinker liberalism) argued that society restricted women to domestic roles resulting in alienation and oppression of women, and she advocated equality of opportunity in the public sphere.
- Third wave feminists argued that the mutation of patriarchy results in new forms of oppression of women. **Naomi Wolf** argued that patriarchy and technology determine the perception of beauty, for example.
- **Liberal feminists in essence are reformist**, reject radical views as simply militant in ways that do not match complex reality and they believe that discrimination and oppression of women can be corrected and balanced by social, economic and political reforms.

Key thinkers

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

Key work: *The Second Sex* (1949)

Key concepts and ideas

- **Sex versus gender** = gender roles were assigned to women based on biological sex.
- **'Otherness'** = in a patriarchal society women are treated as an inferior minority to **male superiority**. Men are considered to be **'the norm'** and women are a deviation from this norm.
- Known as the first **existential feminist**, she argued that **individual freedom** stands above any societal conventions that are used to justify dominance and forms of oppression.
- Biological differences of sex were used as a justification by men to shape gender roles that exploit women and keeps male dominance unthreatened.
- All roles in society should be open to everyone; there is no such thing as a job that is in 'a woman's nature'.
- **Rejected the concept of 'motherhood'** as one that was used to indoctrinate women into domestic roles through all agents of socialisation.
- **Developed the idea of 'otherness'** to argue that men shaped their place as representing 'the norm' and women thus are outside this norm.
- Women need to liberate themselves and shape their own individual identity, gender roles in private and public spheres ought to be equal and unrelated to biological sex, advocated widespread contraception and the legalisation of abortion, and state funded childcare.

Key quotation

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)

Key work: *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892)

Key concepts and ideas

- **Sex and domestic economics go together** = women’s survival relies on their sexuality so they can please their husbands.
- **Social pressure** = young girls are socialised to conform to societal conventions such as motherhood, and different toys and clothes for girls and boys reinforce this learning.
- She reacted against social Darwinism that linked male domination with the idea of the survival of the fittest. She argued that biological differences are irrelevant in modern society and cannot be used to justify inequality.
- Only economic independence could emancipate women and make them equal and protect their freedom.
- Motherhood should not mean that women cannot work outside the house.

Key quotation

“A house does not need a wife any more than it needs a husband.”

2.2: Socialist feminism

All socialist feminists argue that the economy dictates all the other structures in society, thus it created inequality and **capitalism is the cause of patriarchy**.

- Patriarchy is considered as one more form of the sins created by capitalism.
- However, different branches offer different understanding and solutions, especially, making a distinction between revolutionary and reformists:

Socialist key thinker **Engles** was the first to argue that economics is the cause of gender inequality and capitalism is the cause of patriarchy. The infrastructure determines the superstructure.

Engles argued that capitalism transformed preexisting social structures resulting in women being required to be unpaid helpers to support the men in their employment. He argued that women cooperate with this inequality by socialising children to reinforce this inequality.

Sheila Rowbotham adopted a **Marxist view** that women have always been oppressed, in the same way that Marxism argue that the economy always determined other social structures, even before capitalism.

She called for 'a revolution within a revolution', to eradicate both capitalism and patriarchy.

Key thinker

Sheila Rowbotham (1943--)

Key work: *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (1973)

Key concepts and ideas

- **Capitalism** = women are forced to sell their labour so they can survive and support their family.
- **Family** = the family is not just an oppressive instrument to subordinate women to fit with capitalism but also a refuge for men from the capitalist alienation outside the house.
- Female oppression has economic roots but also linked with the nuclear family. Women have always been oppressed, and marriage is like feudalism with the woman akin to a serf.
- Capitalism accentuated and entrenched this inequality.
- Men do not understand the oppression they participate in.
- The family has a dual function, to oppress women and to offer a refuge for men.

Key quotation

"Clearly society has a tremendous stake in insisting on a woman's natural fitness for the career of mother; the alternatives are all too expensive."

2.3: Radical feminism

Radical feminists' origin is in the second wave of feminism, and they all argues that:

- Society is patriarchal and oppressive.

However, different branches of radical feminism offer different and sometimes conflicting explanations and solutions.

- While liberal feminists focus on the public sphere of society (visible, such as culture, workplace, education, etc) radical feminists argue that both public and private (domestic, home, less visible) spheres must be addressed to create a significant change: 'the personal is political'.
- Radicals argue that patriarchy is entrenched in the private sphere like family. Attack on both the personal sphere and the public lives of women is necessary for their emancipation.
- **Difference feminists** = argue that a world that is dominated by feminine essence is more balanced and harmonious. Difference feminists also influenced ecofeminists who argue that male domination is reflected in the oppression of

women and of nature to meet their needs. Difference feminists recognise some superiority of female characteristics (nurturing, cooperative) and they advocated that this should be celebrated. However, that doesn't mean they call for female supremacy and matriarchy.

- Difference feminists argue that the experience of women isn't equally shared by all women, because gender is linked with class, race, ethnicity etc and therefore different women experience 'being' a woman differently.

Key thinker

Kate Millett (1934-2017)

Key work: *Sexual Politics* (1970)

Key concepts and ideas

- Family = the sexual revolution is possible only by abolishing the traditional family.
- Women in art and literature = patriarchy produced and encouraged the degrading portrayal of women in various forms of art and writings.
- The state is an agent of patriarchy; it is part of the problem and therefore cannot be part of the solution.
- Therefore, the focus is shifting into dismantling the traditional family structure.
- Patriarchy in the traditional family means male ownership of the wife and children. The domestic service of women is exchanged for financial support.
- The family is the key agent of socialisation that perpetuates patriarchy.

Key quotation

"The complete destruction of traditional marriage and the nuclear family is the 'revolutionary or utopian' goal of feminism."

2.4: Postmodern feminism

Post-feminists were critical of both liberal and radical feminism

- During the late 1980s and early 1990s, post-feminists argued that most feminist objectives were obtained and women should just 'get on with it'. Some criticised feminism for encouraging the 'victim' label of women that is in fact undermining women and holding them back rather than emancipating them. Women should be accountable and take responsibility for themselves.
- Post-feminists also criticised feminism for being reliant on a white-middle-class prism that does not account for the complexity of women's experience in modern global society; leading to the emergence of postmodern feminism.

Intersectionality = challenging the belief that gender is the singular most potent factor shaping and explaining women's experience and identity. Instead, women's identity is a

composite of various interacting factors of identity, such as race, class, age and religion. Thus, difference feminism.

- Postmodern feminists emphasise intersectionality to reflect the complexity of women's experience, as it is reflected in postmodern contemporary life.
- **bell hooks** (who chose to use lower-case letters to emphasise her individual identity and writings) was among the first to argue that race was no less important than gender in explaining black women's oppression.
- Later, Kimberle Crenshaw coined that term 'intersectionality' to expand this idea beyond the interplay between race and gender to embrace other key factors that are overlapping.
- hooks argued that second wave feminists were themselves applying a narrow perspective that adds to the complexity and overlapping nature of oppression.
- The inequality of women is complex and multilayered and thus requires nuanced theories.
- Postmodern feminists diverted much attention into hyper-sexualisation in multilayered manifestations in contemporary culture and media.
- SlutWalk for example, is a global movement of postmodern feminists who dress like 'sluts' in marches to protest against the view that dictates how women should be dress to prevent men 'getting the wrong message'.
- **Social media** is also blamed for spreading misogyny and double standards. However, on the other hand, it is an effective tool raising awareness and mobilising public support for women's issues.
- **Transfeminism** is an example of intersectionality perspectives because it demonstrates the complexity rather than unidimensional links between sex and gender.
- We also ought to take into account the development of the concept of 'gender' that used to be binary (originally based on biological sex) and nowadays gender identity is not only diverse but also can change from one day to the next. See below.

(3) Core ideas and principles

1. Sex and gender

Feminism draws a distinction between sex and gender

Sex

- Refers to the biological difference between men and women. Innate.
- Biological differences have observable physical attributes: external and internal anatomy, chromosomes and hormones' levels.

- Most feminists are equality feminists, arguing that women's nature is socially constructed, thus their identity is socially constructed rather than being determined by their biology.
- The debate: difference versus equality feminism and transfeminism.

Gender

- Gender is a concept explaining the role that society attribute to men and women.
- Most feminists argue that gender roles are socially constructed and result in gender stereotypes.
- Simone de Beauvoir argued that biological differences were used as the excuse for male domination by shaping gender roles for women.
- The importance of socialisation both in the private and public spheres, with different agents playing their role.

2. Patriarchy

- For feminists, patriarchy is the social system that makes male domination possible, leading to oppression, exploitation, degradation and subordination of women. Various social structures and institutions are utilised to maintain this domination and resist any change.
- Liberal feminists believe patriarchy can be 'fixed' through reforms by the state: access to education, workplace equality, changes in marriage and divorce laws, etc.
- Millett argued that male superiority is entrenched.
- Radicals including socialists argue that female consciousness or 'false' consciousness is shaped by the ills of capitalism, it is entrenched and it is naïve to think that reforms can eradicate it. Women in fact are accomplice in their own subordination. A revolution instead of reform, in line with Marxism.

3. The personal is political

- Liberals focus on public sphere's measures, such as equal pay and workplace opportunities. They argue that the state should not interfere with the private sphere.
- Radicals argue that 'the personal is political'.
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued that domestic roles are inherently exploitative.
- Sheila Rowbotham argued that marriage is akin to feudalism.
- Simone de Beauvoir advocated contraception and state funded childcare.
- Kate Millett believed that the traditional family is socially constructed and must be transformed because it is the cause of women's marginalisation and oppression. The family is responsible for women not having their own identity.

4. Equality feminism and difference feminism

- Most feminists can be seen as equality feminists because they advocate that biological differences are irrelevant to gender differences and that the latter is socially constructed.
- Thus, arguing there are no unique feminine characteristics.
- Simone de Beauvoir rejected the idea that being a woman entails being in a possession of a unique quality.
- In contrast, difference feminism does argue for **essentialism** whereby biological differences indeed determine certain gender differences and these differences ought to be celebrated.

5. Intersectionality

- bell hooks criticised second wave feminists for applying a narrow perspective to feminism.
- Intersectionality suggests that the oppression of women is not unidimensional and instead it is multilayered with overlapping factors playing a role.
- Intersectionality is rooted in postmodernists ideas that identities are not mutually exclusive, and they interact in various ways, including for women who can develop and nurture multiple identities, and they can also change their identities (gender) at different points in time. Thus, **identity is a fluid concept**.

(4) Differing views and tensions

1. Human nature

- Sex refers to biological differences such as chromosomes, whereas gender is used by some to argue that sex generates gender differences such as women being nurturing and men being logical.
- Most feminists argue that the biological status should not affect any gender aspects.
- Difference feminists disagree and they advocate essentialism that attach gender differences to biological differences, and argue that men and women are different.
- Difference feminists argue that equality feminism encourages women to adopt male behaviours and this in itself had negative effects on women, but also on men.
- Cultural feminism = similar to difference feminism yet more extreme, women are born with different cultural characteristics as well as biological features. They are more caring and nurturing and men are more competitive and aggressive.

2. Society

- Patriarchy is pervasive in every aspect of society such as religion, culture, education, politics, workplace etc.

- The oppression of women by the forces of patriarchy are reinforced by socialisation and women partake in this process.
- Liberals argue that society forces women into the domestic role of wife, mother, housewife; however, this situation can be reformed.
- Revolutionary socialists are radical and see society to be one facet determined by economical forces of capitalism and a revolution of the economic system will revolutionises society and patriarchy.
- Post-feminists tend to embrace changes in women's status and conditions and therefore call for accounting for the multitude of identities that women are free to develop and juggle.

3. The state

- Feminists have developed a distinct set of ideas with respect to the state although they mostly agree that the state is a vehicle to leverage patriarchy in society.
- Socialists and radicals argue that the state is a reflection of the capitalist system and patriarchy is embedded in every dimension of life but it is rooted in the economy and the ills of capitalism.
- Liberals argue that reforms of the public sphere for women can be predicated on utilising the state to conduct and implement these reforms. Thus, the state has a positive role to play in the emancipation of women.
- Postmodern feminists argue that it is impossible to draw generalisations about the role of the state because it depends at which facet this role is examined with relation to, and at which point in time.

4. The economy

- Feminists agree that women are discriminated against, at various ways, in the economic life.
- Unpaid labour in the home, unequal pay and lack of opportunities in the workplace.
- Most agree that economic independence is essential in women's emancipation.
- Socialists argue that a revolution is the only solution.
- Postmodernists argues that race and class are no less important than gender and that some women, like black women with low socioeconomic status, face a discrimination that middle-class white women can never relate to. Thus, completely different experiences are apparent for different women.