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*The Variety of Feminisms  
and their Contribution to Gender Equality*

**Introduction**

My focus is the continuities and discontinuities in recent feminist ideas and perspectives. I am going to discuss the development of feminist theories as to the sources of gender inequality and its pervasiveness, and the different feminist political solutions and remedies based on these theories. I will be combining ideas from different feminist writers, and usually will not be talking about any specific writers. A list of readings can be found at the end.

Each perspective has made important contributions to improving women's status, but each also has limitations. Feminist ideas of the past 35 years changed as the limitations of one set of ideas were critiqued and addressed by what was felt to be a better set of ideas about why women and men were so unequal.

It has not been a clear progression by any means, because many of the debates went on at the same time. As a matter of fact, they are still going on. And because all of the feminist perspectives have insight into the problems of gender inequality, and all have come up with good strategies for remedying these problems, all the feminisms are still very much with us. Thus, there are continuities and convergences, as well as sharp debates, among the different feminisms.

Any one feminist may incorporate ideas from several perspectives, and many feminists have shifted their perspectives over the years. I myself was originally a liberal feminist, then a so-

cialist feminist, and now consider myself to be primarily a social construction feminist, with overtones of postmodernism and queer theory. Because I am not examining the ideas of particular feminists but speaking of perspectives that have emerged from many theorists, I will talk of feminisms. What I am looking at first, are feminist *theories* about why women and men are unequal, and second, feminist *gender politics*, the activities and strategies for remedying gender inequality.

The reason for much of the change in feminist theories is that with deeper probing into the pervasiveness of gender inequality, feminists have developed more complex views about gender, sex, and sexuality. *Gender* is now understood to be a social status, a personal identity, and a set of relationships between women and men, and among women and men. *Sex* is no longer seen as a one-way input or basic material for social arrangements, but a complex interplay of genes, hormones, physiology, environment, and behavior, with loop-back effects. *Sexuality* is understood to be socially constructed as well as physiologically based and emotionally expressed.

The main point feminists have stressed about gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, but is deeply ingrained in the structure of societies. Gender inequality is built into the organization of marriage and families, work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts and other cultural productions, and the very language we speak. Making women and men equal, therefore, necessitates social and not individual solutions. I have grouped the feminist perspectives of the last 35 years into three broad categories that reflect their theories and political strategies with regard to the *gendered social order*. These are *gender reform feminisms*, *gender resistant feminisms*, and *gender revolution feminisms*.

### **Gender Reform Feminisms**

The feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s were the beginning of the second wave of feminism. They are *liberal feminism*, *marxist* and *socialist feminisms*, and *development feminism*. Their roots were, respectively, 18th and 19th century liberal political philosophy that developed the idea of individual rights, Marx's 19th century critique of capitalism and his concept of class consciousness, and 20th century anti-colonial politics and ideas of national development. Gender reform feminisms put women into these perspectives.

#### *Liberal Feminism*

Theoretically, liberal feminism claims that gender differences are not based in biology, and therefore that women and men are not all that different -- their common humanity supersedes their procreative differentiation. If women and men are not different, then they should not be treated differently under the law. Women should have the same rights as men and the same educational and work opportunities. The goal of liberal feminism in the United States was embodied in the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was never ratified. (It said, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.") Politically, liberal feminists formed somewhat bureaucratic organizations, which invited men members. Their activist focus has been concerned with visible sources of gender discrimination, such as gendered job markets and inequitable wage scales, and with getting women into positions of authority in the professions, government, and cultural institutions. Liberal feminist politics took important weapons of the civil rights movement -- anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action -- and used them to fight gender inequality, especially in the job market.

Affirmative action calls for aggressively seeking out qualified people to redress the gender and ethnic imbalance in work-

places. That means encouraging men to train for such jobs as nursing, teaching, and secretary, and women for fields like engineering, construction, and police work. With a diverse pool of qualified applicants, employers can be legally mandated to hire enough different workers to achieve a reasonable balance in their workforce, and to pay them the same and also give an equal chance to advance in their careers.

The main contribution of liberal feminism is showing how much modern society discriminates against women. In the United States, it was successful in breaking down many barriers to women's entry into formerly male-dominated jobs and professions, helped to equalize wage scales, and got abortion and other reproductive rights legalized. But liberal feminism could not overcome the prevailing belief that women and men are intrinsically different. It was somewhat more successful in proving that even if women are different from men, they are not inferior.

#### *Marxist and Socialist Feminisms*

Marx's analysis of the social structure of capitalism was supposed to apply to people of any social characteristics. If you owned the means of production, you were a member of the capitalist class; if you sold your labor for a wage, you were a member of the proletariat. That would be true of women as well, except that until the end of the 19th century, married women in capitalist countries were not allowed to own property in their own name; their profits from any businesses they ran and their wages belonged to their husband. Although Marx recognized that workers and capitalists had wives who worked in the home and took care of the children, he had no place for housewives in his analysis of capitalism.

It was marxist feminism that put housewives into the structure of capitalism. Housewives are vital to capitalism, indeed to any industrial economy, because their unpaid work in the home

maintains bosses and workers and reproduces the next generation of bosses and workers (and their future wives). Furthermore, if a bourgeois husband falls on hard times, his wife can do genteel work in the home, such as dressmaking, to earn extra money, or take a temporary or part-time job, usually white-collar. And when a worker's wages fall below the level needed to feed his family, as it often does, his wife can go out to work for wages in factories or shops or other people's homes, or turn the home into a small factory and put everyone, sometimes including the children, to work. The housewife's labor, paid and unpaid, is for her family.

Marxist and socialist feminisms severely criticize the family as a source of women's oppression and exploitation. If a woman works for her family in the home, she has to be supported, and so she is economically dependent on the "man of the house," like her children. If she works outside the home, she is still expected to fulfill her domestic duties, and so she ends up working twice as hard as a man, and usually for a lot less pay.

This source of gender inequality has been somewhat redressed in countries that give all mothers paid leave before and after the birth of a child and that provide affordable child care. But that solution puts the burden of children totally on the mother, and encourages men to opt out of family responsibilities altogether. To counteract that trend, feminists in the government of Norway allocated a certain portion of paid child care leave to fathers specifically.

Women in the former communist countries had what liberal feminism in capitalist economies always wanted for women -- full-time jobs with state-supported maternity leave and child-care services. But marxist and socialist feminists claim that the welfare state can be paternalistic, substituting public patriarchy for private patriarchy. They argue that male-dominated government policies put the state's interests before those of women: When the economy needs workers, the state pays for

child-care leave; with a down-turn in the economy, the state reduces the benefits. Similarly, when the state needs women to have more children, it cuts back on abortions and contraceptive services. Women's status as a reserve army of labor and as a child producer is thus no different under socialism than under capitalism.

The solution of women's economic dependence on men thus cannot simply be waged work, especially if jobs continue to be gender-segregated and women's work is paid less than men's. Socialist feminism had a different solution to the gendered workforce than liberal feminism's program of affirmative action. It was comparable worth.

In examining the reasons why women and men workers' salaries are so discrepant, proponents of comparable worth found that wage scales are not set by the market for labor, by what a worker is worth to an employer, or by the worker's education or other credentials. Salaries are set by conventional "worth," which is rooted in gender and ethnic and other forms of discrimination. Comparable worth programs compare jobs in traditional women's occupations, such as secretary, with traditional men's jobs, such as automobile mechanic. They give a point values for qualifications needed, skills used, extent of responsibility and authority over other workers, and dangerousness. Salaries are then equalized for jobs with a similar number of points (which represent the "worth" of the job). Although comparable worth programs do not do away with gendered job segregation, feminist proponents argue that raising the salaries of women doing traditional women's jobs could give the majority of women economic resources that would make them less dependent on marriage or state benefits as a means of survival.

#### *Development Feminism*

Addressing the economic exploitation of women in post-colonial countries on the way to industrialization, *development*

*feminism* has done extensive gender analyses of the global economy. Women workers in developing countries in Central and Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa are paid less than men workers, whether they work in factories or do piece work at home. To survive in rural communities, women grow food, keep house, and earn money any way they can to supplement what their migrating husbands send them.

The gendered division of labor in developing countries is the outcome of a long history of colonialism. Under colonialism, women's traditional contributions to food production were undermined in favor of exportable crops, such as coffee, and the extraction of raw materials, such as minerals. Men workers were favored in this work, but they were paid barely enough for their own subsistence. Women family members had to provide food for themselves and their children, but with good land confiscated for plantations, they also lived at a bare survival level.

Development feminism made an important theoretical contribution in equating women's status with control of economic resources. In some societies, women control significant economic resources and so have a high status. In contrast, in societies with patriarchal family structures where anything women produce, including children, belongs to the husband, women and girls have a low value. Development feminism's theory is that in any society, if the food women produce is the main way the group is fed, and women also control the distribution of any surplus they produce, women have power and prestige. If men provide most of the food and distribute the surplus, women's status is low. Whether women or men produce most of the food depends on the kind of technology used. Thus, the mode of production and the kinship rules that control the distribution of any surplus are the significant determinants of the relative status of women and men in any society.

In addition to gendered economic analyses, development feminism addresses the political issue of women's rights versus national and cultural traditions. At the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women Forum held in Beijing in 1995, the popular slogan was "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights." The Platform for Action document that came out of the UN Conference condemned particular cultural practices that are oppressive to women - infanticide, dowry, child marriage, female genital mutilation. The 187 governments that signed onto the Platform agreed to abolish these practices. However, since they are integral parts of cultural and tribal traditions, to give them up could be seen as kowtowing to Western ideas. The development feminist perspective, so critical of colonialism and yet so supportive of women's rights, has found this issue difficult to resolve.

Western ideas of individualism and economic independence are double-faced. On the one hand, these ideas support the rights of girls and women to an education that will allow them to be economically independent. They are also the source of a concept of universal human rights that can be used to fight subordinating and sometimes physically hurtful tribal practices, such as genital mutilation. On the other hand, Western ideas undercut communal enterprises and traditional reciprocal food production and shared child care.

Indigenous women's own solution to this dilemma is community organizing around their productive and reproductive roles as mothers -- so that what benefits them economically and physically is in the service of their families, not themselves alone. However, this same community organizing and family service can support the continuance of cultural practices like female genital mutilation, which Western development feminists want to see eradicated. The decision to not interfere with traditional cultural practices that are physically harmful to girls and at the same time work for their education and better health



care is a particularly problematic dilemma for development feminism.

### *Summary*

Each of the gender reform feminisms face contradictions in their theories and their practical solutions.

Liberal feminism argues that women and men are essentially similar, and therefore women should be equally represented in public arenas dominated by men -- work, government, the professions, and the sciences. But if women and men are so interchangeable, what difference does it make if a woman or a man does a particular job?

Marxist and socialist feminisms argue that the source of women's oppression is their economic dependence on a husband. Their solution is full-time jobs for women, with the state providing paid maternity leave and child-care. But, what the state gives, the state can take away. State policies reflect state interests, not women's. Women are worker-mothers or just mothers, depending on the state's economic needs.

For development feminism, the theoretical emphasis on universal human rights is reflected in pressure for the education of girls, maternity and child health care, and economic resources for women who contribute heavily to the support of their families. However, when gender politics calls for marital rights and sexual autonomy, development feminism frequently has to confront traditional cultural values and practices that give men power over their daughters and wives.

### **Gender Resistant Feminisms**

As gender reform feminisms made inroads into the public consciousness in the 1970s and women entered formerly all-men workplaces and schools, they became more and more aware of constant and everyday put-downs -- from bosses and colleagues at work, professors and students in the classroom, fellow

organizers in political movements, and worst of all, from boyfriends and husbands at home. These "microinequities" of everyday life -- being ignored and interrupted, not getting credit for competence or good performance, being passed over for jobs that involve taking charge -- crystallize into a pattern that insidiously wears women down.

The younger women working in the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, and student new-left movements in the United States in the late 1960s had even earlier realized that they were nothing more than handmaidens, bed partners, and coffee-makers to their male co-workers. Despite the revolutionary rhetoric the young men were flinging in the face of Western civilization in many countries, when it came to women, they might as well have been living in the 18th century.

Out of this awareness that sisters had no place in any brotherhood came the *gender resistant feminisms* of the 1970's. They are *radical feminism, lesbian feminism, psychoanalytical feminism, and standpoint feminism*.

### *Radical Feminism*

Radical feminism had its start in small, leaderless, women-only consciousness-raising groups, where the topics of intense discussion came out of women's daily lives -- housework, serving men's emotional and sexual needs, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause. From these discussions came a theory of gender inequality that went beyond discrimination, to oppression, and a gender politics of resistance to the dominant gender order. Radical feminism's theoretical watchword is *patriarchy*, or men's pervasive oppression and exploitation of women, which can be found wherever women and men are in contact with each other, in private as well as in public. Radical feminism argues that patriarchy is very hard to eradicate because its root -- the belief that women are different and inferior -- is deeply embedded in most men's consciousness. It

can best be resisted, radical feminists argued, by forming non-hierarchical, supportive, woman-only spaces where women can think and act and create free of constant sexist put-downs, sexual harassment, and the threat of rape and violence. The heady possibilities of creating woman-oriented health care facilities, safe residences for battered women, counseling and legal services for survivors of rape, a woman's culture, and even a woman's religion and ethics forged the bonds of sisterhood and the rationale for separation from men.

Radical feminism turns male-dominated culture on its head. It takes all the characteristics that are valued in male-dominated societies -- objectivity, distance, control, coolness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness -- and blames them for wars, poverty, rape, battering, child abuse, and incest. It praises what women do -- feed and nurture, cooperate and reciprocate, and attend to bodies, minds, and psyches. The important values, radical feminism argues, are intimacy, persuasion, warmth, caring, and sharing -- the characteristics that women develop in their hands-on, everyday experiences with their own and their children's bodies and with the work of daily living. Men could develop these characteristics, too, if they "mothered," but since few do, they are much more prevalent in women.

Radical feminism claims that most men have the potential to use physical violence against women, including rape and murder. They point to the commonness of date rape and wife beating, of murders of ex-wives and former girl friends. The commercial side of this systemic misogyny, or women-hating, is the way women are depicted as sex objects in the mass media and as pieces of meat in pornography, and the global exploitation of girls and young women in prostitution. Even more insidious, they argue, sexual exploitation is the common downside of romantic heterosexual love, which itself is oppressive to women. The threat of violence and rape, radical feminism theorizes, is the way patriarchy controls all women.

Radical feminism's political battlefield has been protection of rape victims and battered women and condemnation of pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, and sexual coercion. Since all men derive power from their dominant social status, any sexual relationship between women and men is intrinsically unequal. Consent by women to heterosexual intercourse is, by this definition, always coerced unless it is explicitly agreed to by a fully aware, autonomous woman. This viewpoint led to an expansion of the parameters of rape, and to making date rape visible and legally actionable.

The radical feminist political remedies -- women-only consciousness-raising groups and alternative organizations -- were vital in allowing women the "breathing space" to formulate important theories of gender inequality, to develop women's studies programs in colleges and universities, to form communities, and to produce knowledge, culture, religion, ethics, and health care from a woman's point of view. But they alienated many working-class women, especially those of disadvantaged ethnic groups, who felt that their men were just as oppressed as they were by the dominant society.

Radical feminism's critique of heterosexuality and its valorization of mothering produced a schism among feminists, offending many of those who were in heterosexual relationships or who didn't want children. Its praise of women's emotionality and nurturing capabilities and condemnation of men's violent sexuality and aggressiveness has been seen as *essentialist* -- rooted in deep-seated and seemingly intractable differences between two global categories of people.

This concentration on universal gender oppression has led to accusations that radical feminism neglects ethnic and social class differences among men and among women, and that it downplays other sources of oppression. By pitting women against men, radical feminism alienates women of color and

working-class women, who feel torn between their feminist and their ethnic and class loyalties.

### *Lesbian Feminism*

Lesbian feminism takes the radical feminist pessimistic view of men to its logical conclusion. If heterosexual relationships are intrinsically exploitative because of men's social, physical, and sexual power over women, why bother with men at all? Women are more loving, nurturant, sharing, and understanding. Men like having women friends to talk about their problems with, but women can only unburden to other women. "Why not go all the way?" asked lesbian feminism. Stop sleeping with the "enemy," and turn to other women for sexual love as well as for intellectual companionship and emotional support.

One theoretical lesbian feminism concept is that of the *lesbian continuum*, where a lesbian can be any independent, woman-identified woman. This lesbian metaphor transforms love between women into an identity, a community, and a culture. Lesbian imagery is not a mirror opposite of men's sexuality and relationships, but a new language, a new voice. Lesbian feminism praises women's sexuality and bodies, mother-daughter love, and the cultural community of women, not just sexual and emotional relationships between women.

Women bisexuals who have sexual relations with both women and men, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes serially, disturb the gender and sexual dichotomies that are the basis for lesbian feminism. Their presence has been severely resisted in many lesbian communities, but they have become a contradiction not yet resolved in lesbian feminism.

### *Psychoanalytic Feminism*

Another important gender resistant feminism of the 1970s and 1980s came out of feminist re-readings of Freud and the French feminist engagement with Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault.

Freud's theory of personality development centers around the oedipus complex -- the detachment from the mother. Psychoanalytic feminism claims that the source of men's domination of women is men's unconscious two-sided need for women's emotionality and rejection of them as potential castrators. Women submit to men because of their unconscious desires for emotional connectedness. These gendered personalities are the outcome of the oedipus complex -- the separation from the mother.

Because women are the primary parents, infants bond with them. Boys, however, have to separate from their mothers and identify with their fathers in order to establish their masculinity. They develop strong ego boundaries and a capacity for the independent action, objectivity, and rational thinking so valued in Western culture. Women are a threat to their independence and masculine sexuality.

Girls continue to identify with their mothers, and so they grow up with fluid ego boundaries that make them sensitive, empathic, emotional. It is these qualities that make them potentially good mothers, and keep them open to men's emotional needs. But because the men in their lives have developed personalities that make them emotionally guarded, women want to have children to bond with. Thus, psychological gendering of children is continually reproduced. To develop nurturing capabilities in men, and to break the cycle of the reproduction of gendered personality structures, psychoanalytic feminisms recommend shared parenting -- after men are taught how to parent.

French psychoanalytic feminism focuses on the ways that cultural productions (novels, drama, art, opera, music, movies) reflect and represent the masculine unconscious, especially fear of castration. In French feminist psychoanalytic theory, patriarchal culture is the sublimation of men's suppressed infantile desire for the mother and fear of the loss of the *phallus*, the symbol of masculine difference. Since women don't have a

phallus to lose and are not different from their mothers, they can't participate in the creation of the culture. Women's wish for a phallus and repressed sexual desire for their fathers is sublimated into wanting to give birth to a son; men's repressed sexual desire for their mother and fear of the father's castration are sublimated into cultural creations. What women represent in phallic culture is the sexual desire and emotionality men must repress in order to become like their fathers -- men who are controlled and controlling. No matter what role women play in cultural productions, the *male gaze* sees them as desired or despised sexualized objects.

Phallic cultural productions, according to psychoanalytic feminism, are full of aggression, competition, and domination, with an underlying misogynist subtext of fear of castration -- of becoming women. To resist and to counter with woman-centeredness, French feminism called for women to write from their biographical experiences and their bodies -- about menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and sexuality. That way, women can resist their suppression by the dominant phallic culture. However, urging women to produce woman-centered art and literature locks them into a categorically female sensibility and emphasizes their difference from men and the dominant culture even more. Women's emotional and erotic power is unleashed and made visible in women's cultural productions, but they are separated from men's culture, which is still dominant.

#### *Standpoint Feminism*

Radical, lesbian, and psychoanalytic feminist theories of women's oppression converge in standpoint feminism, which turns from resistance to confrontation with the dominant sources of knowledge and values. The main idea among all the gender resistant feminisms is that women and women's perspectives should be central to knowledge, culture, and politics, not invisible or marginal. Whoever sets the agendas for scientific research, whoever shapes the content of education, whoever

chooses the symbols that permeate cultural productions has *hegemonic power*. *Hegemony* is the ideology that legitimates a society's unquestioned assumptions. In Western society, the justifications for many of our ideas about women and men come from science. We believe in scientific "facts" and rarely question their objectivity.

Standpoint feminism is a critique of mainstream science and social science, a methodology for feminist research, and an analysis of the power that lies in producing knowledge. Simply put, standpoint feminism says that women's "voices" are different from men's, and they must be heard if women are to challenge hegemonic values.

The impact of the everyday world in its experiential reality and the structures that limit, shape, organize, and penetrate it are different for people in different social locations -- but especially for women and men, because Western society is so gender-divided. Men do not recognize that the knowledge they produce and the concepts they use come out of their own experience. Rather, they claim that their scientific work is universal, general, neutral, and objective. But women know that it is partial, particular, masculine, and subjective because they see the world from a different angle, and they have been excluded from much of science.

The grounding for standpoint theory comes from marxist and socialist feminist theory, which applies Marx's concept of class-consciousness to women, and psychoanalytic feminist theory, which describes the gendering of the unconscious. Standpoint feminism argues that as physical and social reproducers of children -- out of bodies, emotions, thought, and sheer physical labor -- women are grounded in material reality in ways that men aren't.

Women are responsible for most of the everyday work, even if they are highly educated, while highly educated men concentrate on the abstract and the intellectual. Because they are closely



connected to their bodies and their emotions, women's unconscious as well as conscious view of the world is unitary and concrete. If women produced knowledge, it would be much more in touch with the everyday, material world, and with the connectedness among people.

Although men could certainly do research on and about women, and women on men, standpoint feminism argues that women researchers are more sensitive to how women see problems and set priorities, and therefore would be better able to design and conduct research from a woman's point of view. It is not enough, however, to just add more women to research teams or even have them head them -- these women have to have a feminist viewpoint. They have to be critical of mainstream concepts, which justify established lines of power, and recognize that "facts" reflect current values and past history. Most of all, they have to privilege *women's experience*.

But is all women's experience the same? And aren't the "facts" produced from a woman's perspective just as biased as those produced from a man's point of view? In "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (*Feminist Studies* 14:575-99, 1988), a paper that was a commentary on Sandra Harding's groundbreaking *The Science Question in Feminism*, Donna Haraway proposed a way out of the dilemma. She says that all knowledge is situated, just as standpoint feminists claim, but situations differ, and so do all perspectives. Truths, therefore, must be partial. This diversity is a strength, not a weakness, in feminism.

#### *Summary*

Gender resistant feminisms have produced much controversy within feminist circles. A strong critique of what has been called *cultural feminism* focuses on its claims of essential differences between men and women, its view of heterosexual sexuality as coercive and potentially violent, its valorization of

motherhood, and the promotion of a separate and distinctive woman's culture rooted in female bodies and life experiences. Many feminists feel that these views are a throwback to biological justifications of women's inferiority, and that a separatist politics isolates and ghettoizes women and forecloses affiliating with feminist men to change the wider society.

A woman-centered perspective was a needed corrective to a gender-blind neutralism that in the end seemed to advocate that women become just like men -- work-oriented, free of responsibility for child care, and sexually "liberated." Certainly, when women did try to emulate men, they ended up working a double shift (full-time job and continued responsibility for running a home), they felt guilty for neglecting their children (few men shared parenting equally), and they were vulnerable to date rape and sexually transmitted diseases.

But the focus of the gender resistant feminisms on "woman" is troublesome. Are women so monolithic that they can be expected to always have similar experiences and a unitary perspective? Do gender resistant feminisms create a universal Woman that is actually middle-class, Western, heterosexual, and white? Does this universal Woman suppress other women's voices? How can they be heard?

Ethnic and working-class feminists feel they can be "womanist" without male-bashing. Heterosexual and bisexual feminists say they can have relationships with men and keep their autonomy. Civil libertarian feminists dislike the calls for censorship of pornography.

Out of these critiques have come a group of feminisms that deal with the contradictions of gender resistant feminisms, especially the questions of the unity of women, the privileged perspective of women's standpoint, the source of identity in identity politics, and the complexities of sexuality.

### **Gender Revolution Feminisms**

The 1980s and 1990s have seen the emergence of feminist theories that attack the dominant social order through questioning the clearness of the categories that comprise its hierarchies. These feminisms deconstruct the interlocking structures of power and privilege that make one group of men dominant, and range everyone else in a complex ladder of increasing disadvantage. They also analyze how cultural productions, especially in the mass media, justify and normalize inequality and subordinating practices. These feminisms thus have the revolutionary potential of destabilizing the structure and values of the dominant social order.

They are *multi-ethnic feminism*, *men's feminism*, *social construction feminism*, *post-modern feminism* and *queer theory*.

#### *Multi-ethnic Feminism*

Throughout the 20th century, social critics have argued that no one aspect of inequality is more important than any other. Ethnicity, religion, social class, and gender comprise a complex hierarchical stratification system in which upper-class, heterosexual, white men *and* women oppress lower-class women *and* men of disadvantaged ethnicities and religions. In teasing out the multiple strands of oppression and exploitation, multi-ethnic feminism has shown that gender, ethnicity, religion, and social class are structurally intertwined relationships.

Multi-ethnic feminism takes the standpoint perspective a step further. It is not enough to dissect a social institution or area of social thought from a woman's point of view; the viewpoint has to include the experiences of women and men of different ethnic groups and religions and must also take into consideration social class and economic conditions. Values, identity, and consciousness of self are rooted in all the major social statuses. Ethnicity, religion, social class, and gender are the walls and windows of our lives -- they structure what we experience, do,

feel, see, and ultimately believe about ourselves and others. As Patricia Hill Collins points out in a recent comment on standpoint theory ("Comment on Hekman's 'Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited': Where's the Power?" *Signs* 22:375-81, 1997), these experiences are not individual, but belong to *groups*; thus they are a vital source of both a world view and a sense of identity.

The important point made by multi-ethnic feminism is that the subordinate group is not marked just by gender or by ethnicity or religion, but is in a social location in *multiple systems of domination*. Men are as oppressed as women, but men and women of disadvantaged groups are often oppressed in different ways -- in the United States, Black men are punished for their masculinity; Black women seen as sexual objects or mothers. Thus, group consciousness reflects all social statuses at once.

Multi-ethnic cultural feminism finds art in what women of every culture produce in everyday life: quilts, folk songs, celebratory dances, festive food, decorated dishes, weaving and embroidery are all part of a vibrant women's culture. These women's modes of art and literature are interactive and emotionally expressive. They are the equivalent of men's subversive cultural productions, such as jazz and rap, and equally distinctive from the dominant group's way of talking and thinking.

A woman of a disadvantaged ethnic group may not feel loyalty or identity with "all women." But she may also feel alienated from the men of her own group, if they are oppressive to women because of a traditional patriarchal culture or because they are themselves subordinated by men at the top of the pyramid. Consciousness of subordination and the forms of struggle may have to be different for women and men; the man who is Other may need to find the voice suppressed by dominant men; the woman who is Other may need to find the voice suppressed by both dominant *and* subordinate men.

*Men's Feminism*

Men's feminism is a burgeoning field of study that applies feminist theories to the study of men and masculinity. Men's feminism took on the task called for by feminists studying women in relationship to men -- to treat men as well as women as a gender and to scrutinize masculinity as carefully as femininity. A prime goal has been to develop a theory, not of masculinity, but of masculinities, because of the diversity among men. There are no universal masculine characteristics that are the same in every society. Nor, for that matter, in any one society, or in any one organizational setting, as earlier studies of working-class men and racial stratification made very clear.

The main theory developed in men's feminism, which has been used to dissect the differences between and within groups of middle-class and working class men of different ethnic groups and sexual orientations, is a concept of *hegemonic masculinity*. Hegemonic or dominant men are those who are economically successful, ethnically superior, and visibly heterosexual. Yet the characteristics of masculinity, hegemonic or otherwise, are not the source of men's gender status. Genders -- men's and women's -- are relational and embedded in the structure of the social order. The object of analysis is thus not masculinity or femininity but their oppositional relationship. Neither men nor woman can be studied separately; the whole question of gender inequality involves a relationship of haves and have-nots, of dominance and subordination, of advantage and disadvantage.

Men's feminism argues that gender inequality includes men's denigration of other men as well as their exploitation of women. Low-level men workers around the world are oppressed by the inequalities of the global economy, and young working class urban men's impoverished environment and "taste for risk" has made them an endangered species. Men's feminism blames sports, the military, fraternities, and other arenas of male bonding for encouraging physical and sexual violence and

misogyny. It deplors the pressure on men to identify with but not be emotionally close to their fathers and to be "cool" and unfeeling towards the women in their lives and distant from their own children. But many men feminists have been critical of the men's movements that foster a search for the primitive or "wild man" and of religiously oriented men's organizations that link responsibility to family with patriarchal concepts of manhood. They argue that these movements seek to change individual attitudes and do not address the structural conditions of gender inequality or the power differences among men.

The sources of gender inequality that men's feminism concentrates on are embedded in the stratification systems of Western societies as well as in the homophobia of heterosexual men, who construct their masculinity as clearly opposite to that of homosexual men. Thus, it is necessary for prominent men of all ethnic groups in politics, sports, and the mass media to appear heterosexual. Gender inequality is also embedded in men's jockeying for the leading positions in whatever arena they find themselves, and excluding women as much as possible from competition. It is not an accident that so much of the language of competition is the language of sports, because organized sports are not only an immediate site of masculinity displays, but also a source for vicarious competitiveness and for the creation of symbolic icons of masculine strength and beauty. Unfortunately, these are also icons of physical and sexual violence.

Men's feminism overlaps with gay studies in analyzing the social dimensions of male homosexuality. Examining homosexuality from a gender perspective shows that homosexual men are *men*, not a third gender, and partake of the privileges and disadvantages and life style of men of the same ethnic group and social class. Nonetheless, because homosexual men do not have sexual relationships with women -- an important marker of manhood in Western society -- they are considered not-quite-men. Thus, like other men who do not have the marks of hegemonic status (white, economically successful,

heterosexual), homosexual men are lower on the scale of privilege and power in Western society. Homosexual men, however, do not subvert the gender order because they retain some of the "patriarchal dividend" of male advantage. Men's feminism provides a needed corrective in bringing men into gender research as a specific subject of study, but it does not offer new theoretical perspectives. Rather, men's feminism is an amalgam of social construction, multi-ethnic, psychoanalytic, and development feminism and gay studies. It is likely that men's feminism will eventually be absorbed into more general feminist perspectives.

#### *Social Construction Feminism*

While multi-ethnic feminism focuses on the effects of location in a system of advantage and disadvantage, and men's feminism on the hierarchical relationships of men to other men and to women, social construction feminism looks at the structure of the gendered social order as a whole. It sees gender as a society-wide institution that is built into all the major social organizations of society. As a social institution, gender determines the distribution of power, privileges, and economic resources. Gendered norms and expectations get built into women's and men's sense of self as a certain kind of human being, and alternative ways of acting and arranging work and family life are literally unthinkable.

In social construction feminist theory, inequality is the core of gender itself: Women and men are socially differentiated in order to justify treating them unequally. Thus, although gender is intertwined with other unequal statuses, remedying the gendered part of these structures of inequality may be the most difficult, because gendering is so pervasive. Indeed, it is this pervasiveness that leads so many people to believe that gendering is biological, and therefore "natural."

Social construction feminism focuses on the processes that create gender differences and also render the construction of gender invisible. The common social processes that encourage us to see gender differences and to ignore continuums are the gendered division of labor in the home that allocates child care and housework to women; gender segregation and gender typing of occupations so that women and men don't do the same kind of work; regendering (as when an occupation goes from men's work to women's work and is justified both ways by "natural" masculine and feminine characteristics); selective comparisons that ignore similarities, as in men's and women's separate sports competitions; and containment, suppression, and erasure of gender-inappropriate behaviors and appearances, such as aggressiveness in women and nurturance in men.

Social construction feminism argues that the dichotomies of male and female biological sex and physiology are also produced and maintained by social processes. Genital and hormonal ambiguities are ignored or overridden in the sex categorization of infants, and the gendering of sports and physical labor ignores the overlaps in female and male stature and musculature. In the social construction feminist perspective, the processes of gender differentiation, approval of accepted gendered behavior and appearance, and disapproval of deviations from established norms are all manifestations of power and social control. Religion, the law, and medicine reinforce the boundary lines between women and men and suppress gender variation through moral censure and stigmatizing, such as labeling gender-inappropriate behavior sinful, illegal, and insane.

Social construction feminism also analyzes the historical and cultural context in which sexuality is learned and enacted, or "scripted." What sexual behaviors are approved, tolerated, and tabooed differ for women and men and vary for social groups over time and place. Sexuality, in this perspective, is a product of learning, social pressures, and cultural values. Legal penal-



ties, job loss, and violence uphold the heterosexual social order, defeating individual attempts at resistance and rebellion.

Most people, however, voluntarily go along with their society's prescriptions for those of their gender status, because the norms and expectations get built into their individual sense of worth and identity. Even transvestites (males who dress in women's clothes and females who dress in men's clothes) and transsexuals (people who have sex-change surgery) try to pass as "normal" men and women. So male cross-dressers tend to wear very feminine-looking clothing, and male transsexuals use hormones to grow breasts. Because contemporary Western men's clothing is acceptable for women to wear, female trans-genders and gender rebels have an easier time "passing."

The power of social construction is evident not only in the re-gendering of bodies and dress, but in what happens in work and family roles. Male-to-female transsexuals find that the jobs they are hired for as women pay less than those they had as men. And married men who dress in women's clothes in the home do not do housework while they are so dressed. More consequentially, all of a transsexual's identity papers, from birth certificates to passports, have to be reissued in their new gender and name. Married transsexuals have to get divorced, because, in our society, two women and two men cannot be legally married. (They can in other societies.) Changing gender is changing one's basic social status.

In the social construction feminist view, long-lasting change of this deeply gendered social order would have to mean a conscious reordering of the gendered division of labor in the family and at work, and at the same time, undermining the taken-for-granted assumptions about the capabilities of women and men that justify the status quo. Such change is unlikely to come about unless the pervasiveness of the social institution of gender and its social construction are openly challenged. Since the processes of gendering include making them invisible, where

are we to start? With individual awareness and attitude change, or with restructuring social institutions and behavioral change? Certainly, both individuals and institutions need to be altered to achieve gender equality, but it may be impossible to do both at once.

Social construction feminism is faced with a political dilemma. If political activities focus on getting individuals to understand the constrictions of gender norms and expectations and encourage resistance to them in every aspect of their lives, it would not necessarily change social structure. If the focus is on getting work organizations and governments to structure for gender equality, it would not necessarily change gendered norms for individuals. The dilemma is built into the theory of social construction -- individuals construct and maintain the norms and expectations and patterns of behavior that become institutionalized, but existing institutions constrain the extent of allowable variation and individual and group difference. Socially patterned individual actions and institutional structures construct and reinforce each other. For this reason, social construction feminism recognizes that there is always change, but it is usually slow -- and it may not be in the direction of gender equality -- as recent backlashes and fundamentalist governments have shown so dramatically.

#### *Postmodern Feminism and Queer Theory*

Post-modern feminism and queer theory go the furthest in challenging gender categories as dual, oppositional, and fixed, arguing instead that sexuality and gender are shifting, fluid, multiple categories. They critique a politics based on a universal category, Woman, presenting instead a more subversive view that undermines the solidity of a social order built on concepts of two sexes, two sexualities, and two genders. Equality will come, they say, when there are so many recognized sexes, sexualities, and genders that one can't be played against the other.

Postmodern feminism and queer theory examine the ways societies justify the beliefs about gender at any time (now and in the past) with ideological "discourses" embedded in cultural representations or "texts." Not just art, literature, and the mass media, but anything produced by a social group, including newspapers, political pronouncements, and religious liturgy, is a "text." A text's "discourse" is what it says, doesn't say, and hints at (sometimes called a "subtext"). The historical and social context and the material conditions under which a text is produced become part of the text's discourse. If a movie or newspaper is produced in a time of conservative values or under a repressive political regime, its "discourse" is going to be different from what is produced during times of openness or social change. Who provides the money, who does the creative work, and who oversees the managerial side all influence what a text conveys to its audience. The projected audience also shapes any text, although the actual audience may read quite different meanings from those intended by the producers. "Deconstruction" is the process of teasing out all of these aspects of a "text."

Queer theory is an offshoot of postmodern deconstructionist cultural studies. Neither are necessarily feminist, the analysis of cultural gender discourses has merged into postmodern feminism.

Much of postmodern feminist deconstruction has been of cultural representations, such as movies, videos, TV, popular music, advertising -- whether aimed at adults, teenagers, or children -- as well as paintings, operas, theater productions, and ballet. They all have discourses that overtly and subliminally tell us something about female and male bodies, sexual desire, and gender roles. A romantic song about the man who got away glorifies heterosexuality; a tragedy deploring the death of a salesman glorifies the traditional nuclear family. These discourses influence the way we think about our world, without questioning the underlying assumptions about gender and

sexuality. They encourage approved-of choices about work, marriage, and having children by showing them as normal and rewarding and by showing what is disapproved of as leading to a "bad end."

Queer theory goes beyond cultural productions to examine the discourses of gender and sexuality in everyday life as texts ripe for deconstruction. In queer theory, gender and sexuality are "performances" -- identities or selves we create as we act and interact with other. What we wear and how we talk are signs and displays of gender and sexual orientation. What we do socially creates us as women and men of a particular ethnic group, social class, occupation, religion, place of residence, even if we try to create ourselves as individuals.

Queer theorists have explored whether transvestism, dressing in the clothes of the "other" gender, creates a freer social space or reproduces conventional gendering. Women and men, homosexual and heterosexual and bisexual, those who cross-dress for "drag" performances, costume parties, mardi gras, and gay pride parades, as well as those who live in the other's gender status are all texts with a gendered and sexualized discourse. What queer theorists often find is that gender roles are recreated in the same old way -- a transvestite passing as a woman wears a demure dress, stockings, and high-heeled shoes; a butch lesbian swaggers in men's jeans and cowboy boots. The bearded lady in a skirt still belongs in a circus, and is stared at openly on the street. Genders and sexualities may be mixed up, but they are not erased.

If social construction feminism puts too much emphasis on institutions and structures, and not enough on individual actions, postmodern feminism and queer theory have just the opposite problem. In queer theory, all the emphasis is on agency, impression management, and presentation of the self in the guise and costume most likely to produce or parody conformity. (Madonna is a supreme proponent of queerness.) Postmodern

feminism is mainly concerned with deconstructing cultural productions, neglecting the more iron-bound and controlling discourses embedded in organizational, legal, religious, and political texts.

Social construction feminism's analyses of the institutional and organizational practices that maintain the gender order could be combined with postmodern feminist and queer theory's deconstruction of how individuals do and undo gender. Social construction feminism argues that the gendered social order is constantly restabilized by the individual action, but queer theory has shown how individuals can consciously and purposefully create disorder and gender instability, opening the way to social change. Social construction feminism can show where the structural contradictions and fault lines are, which would offer places for individuals, organizations, and social movements to pressure for long-lasting restructuring and a more equal social order for all kinds of people. Then queer theorists can destabilize it all over again!

### *Summary*

Gender revolution feminisms all question *binary oppositions*. They use more gender categories than "man" and "woman," since each gender category is cross-cut inextricably by ethnicity, religion, and social class. Sexuality, too, is not binary or fixed. There are at least six sexualities -- heterosexual woman, heterosexual man, lesbian, gay man, bisexual man, bisexual woman. These gendered sexual statuses encompass a variety of feelings and experiences. Biological sex is also not binary -- to male and female, you can add hermaphrodite and transsexual. Physiologically, there is overlap in muscular strength and physical endurance -- a continuum rather than a male-female split. A recognition of multiple categories disturbs the neat polarity of familiar opposites and undercuts the assumption that one category is dominant and one subordinate, one normal and one deviant, one valued and one "other."

Gender revolution feminisms claim that all the statuses that structure our lives are socially constructed. Thus, it is possible to have multiple variations and mixes of whatever humans can invent in behavior, emotional and sexual relationships, and identities. Identity politics becomes a lot more complex, but the possibilities for political coalitions also multiply.

### **Conclusion**

Gender reform feminisms laid the theoretical groundwork for second-wave feminism. Their politics are practical and perhaps the best way to redress gender inequality at the present time. The fight for equal legal status and political representation for women and men, and for autonomy for women in making procreative, sexual, and marital choices still has not been won in most countries of the world. Gender segregation in the workplace and lower pay for women's work is pervasive in capitalist and socialist economies. The global economy, with its exploitation of poor women and men as cheap labor, and economic restructuring in industrializing and post-industrial economies, with its reduction in social-service benefits to mothers and children, has worsened the material conditions of life for many people throughout the world. Thus, economic problems are another arena for feminist gender politics.

While the politics of gender reform feminisms spills over into a politics for every disadvantaged person, the battles of gender resistant feminisms are for women alone. Fighting to protect women's bodies against unwanted pregnancies and sterilizations, abortions of female fetuses, genital mutilation, rape, beatings, and murder has been an enormous and never-ending struggle. And the sexual integrity of women and girls needs protection from forced prostitution, exploitative sex work in pornographic productions and nightclubs, and loveless marriages. Both lesbians and gay men need to be able to live free of discrimination and violent attacks, but many lesbian women also

want their own physical space and their own cultural communities, where they where they live free of sexual harassment and men's domination, nourish their loves and friendships, and produce books, music, art, and drama that reflect their different ways of thinking and feeling.

Multi-ethnic feminism is part of a powerful political movement to redress past and present legal and social discrimination of disadvantaged groups in so many societies, and to preserve their cultures. Men's feminism follows in the footsteps of working-class social research and politics, but expands their political arena to include gay men. Their condemnation of the price paid for the rewards of professional sports and the physical and sexual violence they foster are their particular political agenda. In conjunction with the radical feminist fight against rape and pornography, men's feminism has gone directly to men in college workshops, seminars, and conferences to make them aware of how their behavior can be so harmful to women.

Social construction and postmodern feminisms have only begun to translate their theoretical and linguistic destabilization of the gender order into politics or praxis. Degendering needs to be translated into everyday interaction, which could be revolutionary enough. But to fulfill their political potential, the gender revolution feminisms need to spell out what precisely has to be done in all the institutions and organizations of a society -- family, workplace, government, the arts, religion, law, and so on -- to ensure equal participation and opportunity for every person in every group. Gender revolution feminists have said that there are multiple voices in this world; now, they have to figure out how to ensure that every voice can be heard in the production of knowledge and culture and in the power systems of their societies.

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