



# FEMINISM, AUTONOMY, AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Riya Saha, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Philosophy, NBU, Siliguri, India

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## Abstract

Achieving complete freedom from societal constraints is a complex challenge. While it may be difficult to break free from all societal norms entirely, individuals and societies can work towards greater personal and collective autonomy. Societal constraints can be seen as societal norms and expectations that guide our behaviour. In contrast, some constraints are necessary to maintain social order, equality and cooperation. However, it is crucial to recognise that not all social constraints are beneficial. The early feminist movement was crucial in advancing women's empowerment by advocating for equal rights and suffrage, and it challenged derogatory social norms. In this article, I will explain how biased, stereotypical, sexist and discriminatory behaviours create systematic barriers and hindrances to women's progress and autonomy. I will explore how the amalgamation of feminism as a social, political, and cultural movement and women's empowerment, a more goal-oriented process, works together to emancipate the vulnerable section of society.

## I. Introduction

Feminism and empowerment are intertwined concepts. Feminism is a socio-political movement aimed at challenging patriarchal systems and structures that perpetuate gender-based hierarchies. Feminism is the driving force behind women's empowerment. Feminism, as a social, political, and cultural movement, has advocated for legal and policy change that can challenge societal norms and attitudes about women's roles and their social status. By doing so, feminism has contributed significantly to the empowerment of women. Feminist theorists are agitating against the sexist and stereotypical ways of thinking about women's morality that are seen as limited to care, nurture, love, compassion and peace. Feminism has also addressed how traditional dominant, heteronormative standards of masculinity can be restrictive and harmful for men.

## II. The Historical Impact of Feminism in Transforming Women's Lives

Feminism encompasses a wide range of beliefs, strategies, goals and sometimes competing explanations for the pervasiveness of relationships of dominance and subordination between men and women that reflect the diversity of thought and ideas within feminism.

Liberal feminism has been criticised heavily as it only focused on extending women certain "rights" that were previously assumed to be granted to males or, to be more specific, white males.

According to Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea, "For liberal feminists, empowerment has meant extending women's options beyond the domestic to public sphere" (Rowland-Serdar & Schwartz-Shea, 1991, p. 605). However, as the movement progressed during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, simply gaining access to equal legal and

constitutional rights and gaining admission to previously male-dominated arenas was not considered the equivalent of women's empowerment.

Thus, juggling childcare, outside work, and domestic chores was considered a more onerous burden because individual women confront these difficulties with little to no support from their male partners or society at large. Liberal feminists accepted the male value as the universal value, i.e., they accepted the biological and androcentric view of society, and they also accepted the value difference between men and women. The activism was taking place in a hierarchical setting.

From the Marxist theory, feminists try to understand gender relations in society, drawing a link between the capitalist structure of society and gender inequality. According to Marxist feminists, patriarchy is not only restricted to the private sphere, but it spreads from the household to the public sphere to the economic sphere. Therefore, the patriarchal exploitation of economic resources by men must be questioned. Marxist feminists recognised the family within the context of capitalist society. They argue that women's exploitation within the family is due to the fact that women are encouraged to carry out unpaid work within their home. This helps capitalism to flourish. This authoritarian ideology teaches passivity, where women and children have to learn to submit to parental authority. Thereby learning to accept the hierarchy of power and control in capitalist society. However, Marxist feminism puts more emphasis on the nuclear family, ignoring family diversity. This approach also assumes a degree of passivity with women; some women might actively choose their social role as wives and mothers. We must not overlook that family gives tremendous power to many women; the Indian family is an excellent example.

Socialist and Marxist feminist theories are identical in the sense that socialist feminist theory is developed from the Marxist understanding of class inequality. For socialist feminist thinkers, capitalism and patriarchy are more or less similar in the sense that capitalism contributes to the alienation of the working class and in patriarchy, it is men who appropriate the labour of women. Economic growth and development do not necessarily mean a positive change in the gender relation between men and women. Socialist and Marxist feminist theories help us to understand how unpaid labour devalues women because it is necessary for a capitalist society. One important criticism against socialist feminist theory has been the fact that they have partially overlooked the cause of inequality and heterogeneity of women as a class, and the focus has been on the economic oppression of women.

Marxist theorisation suggests that to establish a more egalitarian society, we need to do away with the class struggle; similarly, for radical feminists to do away with gender inequality, a radical transformation of social structure is required. Both liberal and radical feminists agree that women's representation in politics brings a different voice, highlights different aspects, and brings different concerns and perspectives to light. The main objection against radical feminism is that it portrays women as a universally oppressed and passive group. As a result, radical feminists have been accused of spreading man-hating sentiments.

Post-modern feminism emerged as a reaction to the limitations of second-wave feminism, which focused on women's liberation and sought to establish a universal identity for women based on the shared experience of oppression. Postmodern feminists challenge the unified and essentialised form of identity, arguing that multiple and intersecting factors, such as race, class, sexuality and nationality, shape women's experiences and identities. Butler contends that the concept of sex as a linguistic construct is manufactured and disseminated by the compulsory heterosexual system to limit the formation of identities based on hetero-sexual desires (Butler, 2010, p. 36). Butler argues that sex, or gender, is constructed

through language. This means that gender norms and expectations are not universal but vary across cultures because gender does not inherently convey or manifest any essential qualities either externally or internally.

### III. Feminist Redefinition of Sex-Gender Binary

Feminist critique of women's position in contemporary society demonstrates that every aspect of our social life is governed by gender (Jagger, 1983, p. 21). In contemporary feminist ideology, the distinction between sex and gender is a highly prominent subject matter, and the result is a renewed series of attempts to conceptualise the nature of women and men. The terms sex and gender are frequently employed

interchangeably but are completely different concepts. Sex pertains to the biological characteristics of humans and animals, primarily linked to physical and physiological traits such as chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels, and reproductive or sexual anatomy. Gender pertains to the socially constructed roles, behaviour, expressions and identity of human beings. It shapes self-perception, interpersonal dynamics, and societal power and resource allocation. However, strict biological determinism is overly simplistic in the context of feminism. It is important to note that a complex interplay of genetic, environmental, and societal factors influences human behaviour. A French existentialist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, stated that one is not born a woman but becomes one (Beauvoir, 1973). In this context, Beauvoir explores the idea that gender identity is not predetermined by biology. Still, de Beauvoir emphasises the role of socialisation and cultural expectations in defining the roles and attributes associated with being a woman. A woman is not inherently predetermined. Instead, she is shaped and formed through life experiences and societal influences.

Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble* (2010), challenged the idea of a fixed gender identity and argued that gender is “performative” and is created through action. Actions, desires, and distinctive characteristics create an illusion of an internal and structured gender essence. This illusion is linguistically upheld to regulate sexuality within the compulsory context of reproductive heterosexuality (Butler, 2010, pp. 185-86). According to this theory, individuals “do” gender through their actions and behaviour, contributing to the construction and reinforcement of societal norms. This perspective challenges the traditional views that see gender as a fixed and biologically determined aspect of identity; rather, the actions of gender require a performance that is repeated.

Oppression of women through social norms has been pervasive and complex from medieval to modern times. Women in medieval times were often subject to a feudal system that limited their rights. The conventional hierarchy positioned men in authoritative positions, while women were anticipated to adhere to traditional gender roles. In this sexist, stereotypical way of thinking about women and their morality, these are reduced merely to the idea of care, nurture, compassion, and peace and the universal, abstract, rational, objective thinking and theorisation are therefore regarded as something only done by the male members of the society. So, this discrimination that is based on the division of roles between men and women is also very problematic in the feminist conception of justice.

The historical narrative in philosophical writings has long rejected the idea that women can function as fully rational agents. Thinkers of the Middle Ages believed that God made women to be a helper in procreation for men because “women’s power of reasoning is less than a man’s” (Marx, 1973, pp. 611-12). By nature, males are deemed superior and females inferior, with the former meant to rule the latter to be ruled (Marx, 1973, p. 611). In his book *On The Subjection of Women* (2006), Mill emphasises that if women’s intellectual attainments were inferior to men, the most likely explanation is that women were deprived of education and confined to the domestic sphere. (Mill, 2006, p. 134). Mill suggests that restrictions should be imposed when necessary for the common good. It advocates for impartiality in applying the law, treating everyone equally unless there is specific justification based on justice or policy

(Mill, 2006, p.134). So, the subjection of women based on perceived intellectual inferiority, or physical weakness finds no justification in feminist theorization.

#### **IV. Women’s Empowerment and Autonomy**

Gaining access to equal legal and constitutional rights and gaining admission to previously male-dominated areas is not equivalent to empowerment for women. Here, we are trying to offer a revised conception of empowerment, which explicitly includes self-development. Empowerment can be defined as the journey where women develop confidence in their capacity to shape and assume responsibility for their gender identity, political stance, and decision making (Alcoff, 1988, pp. 405-36).

In a liberal society, the power relation is structured where women feel subordinated in the public and private spheres, supported by cultural messages internalised to varying degrees by women. In this situation, women with a sense of secure self thrive as they can become empowered through choice and the utilisation of rights. Contrary to that, women with doubts about their power or perceived powerlessness suffers. Women have been

viewed as the subordinated inhabitants of the family or private sphere. Hence, women were politically irrelevant.

As highlighted by Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea, “In response to this truncated liberal view, feminists have articulated two deeply opposed positions on women and the family. Early liberal feminists, like many other feminists, at times exhorted women to reject motherhood, parenting, and work in the home in order to lead lives of liberation in the public sphere. The possibility that women did exercise power in their family and personal lives was disregarded; the idea that there was value in the lives of women engaged exclusively in work in the home was largely absent” (Rowland-Srdar & Schwartz-Shea, 1991, p. 607). In current feminist theorisation, the values of these activities were rigorously defended. But we cannot deny the fact that certain kinds of rules and power relations in the family, along with the cultural prescriptions and aggressive economic, social, and political structural hierarchies, hinder women’s development of self. “Over time, these cultural messages and family forms have changed. The “traditional” authoritarian family structure has declined while there has been a steady increase in “non-traditional” egalitarian families. Such family structures may attenuate the messages of powerlessness so that fewer women will face helpless dependency as a barrier to empowerment in the future. Overcoming helpless dependency and reclaiming the self remain, at present, a necessary first step toward empowerment” (Rowland-Srdar & Schwartz-Shea, 1991, p. 612).

The pre-existing milieu in which a woman is born that influences that individual's characteristics, behaviour, and destiny is something that the person cannot change. Still, selfhood for women involves coming to terms with the cultural stories that have shaped their lives. While the past cannot be undone, the chaotic and traumatic events of the past can be woven into a new and more meaningful story. As women’s roles in the public and private spheres change as more women reflect on their life experiences, a platform to challenge the oppressive structures of our society is created. Women can reconcile with the earlier realities of their lives to move on to self-acceptance. “With this self-acceptance, the confounding of fear of others and the need for their love and approval loses its base. No longer fearing others, she no longer feels that she must oppose them” (Westkott, 1986, p. 213).

The Kantian-inspired notion of autonomy as self-government according to the dictates of reason is an extremely limited concept of autonomy. Reason, in the accounts of prominent liberal thinkers from Kant to Rawls, is clearly separated from the emotional world. Therefore, autonomy is separated from them as well. As Alison Jagger points out, these narratives indicate a fundamental belief that the unique value of human beings lies in a specific “mental capacity” (Jagger, 1983, p. 28).

Autonomy is a process characterised by the growth of an ability to “respond to people and situations rather than to react” (Rowland-Srdar & Schwartz-Shea, 1991, p. 616). Critical reflection is an important aspect of responding to someone or something. Still, it also involves more than rational knowledge of one's self because self-knowledge is more than simple introspection. Thus, autonomy must be conceived of not as an “end state” but as a day-to-day struggle; to do otherwise is to romanticise the concept (Hooks, 1987, p. 69).

Autonomous choice has lasting social, cultural, and political effects. Initiating change in both private and public spheres. Changing the helplessly dependent personality empowers women to oppose ongoing social practices that disempower women.

## V. Empowerment Entails Responsibility

Empowerment comes with the responsibility to use capabilities wisely and ethically. Dependency and powerlessness in women are perpetuated by patriarchy, but this kind of dominating behaviour can happen from women’s ends as well. Carol Gilligan carefully describes two distinct “ways of speaking about moral problems” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 1). One of these is the “justice perspective” she finds more often in the comments of male subjects; reason and rights dominate in explanations of decision-making. The other is a “care perspective”, articulating a morality of care and responsibility. Here, we can draw a parallel between essentialist views and Gilligan's research, as essentialist feminists argue that women’s morality is not only different from men's but also superior to men's. They have also established that men are more rational and women are more sensible. These interpretations can appropriate several sexist practices that prevail in our society against which feminists are fighting.



This concept entails that women are responsible for the well-being of relationships. Detachment from such responsibilities occurs as part of the process of empowerment, where women realise their self-worth as individuals valuable in themselves. Here, women do their share of emotional work and nurturing but refuse to do more. Here, we can see the paternalism inherent in women's "caring" for men; this caring, when it takes the form of discerning men's needs and responding to them, not only denies men the integrity of identifying their needs and asking to have them met but additionally places men in "the position of the peripheral 'other' in the public domain" (Lerner, 1988, p. 242). Glorifying women's morality associated with care, nurture, compassion, and love reifies the historically produced traits. In this way, we can lose sight of the fact that this kind of culturally produced imposed norms and rules that restrict individuals in a particular domain that produces subjugation is the context that gave rise to care ethics. We must remember that the more women confine themselves within these preestablished domains in this context, the more women glorify themselves as nurturers, and the less likely it is that men will utilise their competence in this area (Lerner, 1988, p. 253). Breaking away from predefined gender roles can lead to a more balanced utilisation of skills and competencies across genders. Both men and women with a secure sense of self are equally capable of responding to justice and care perspectives. Empowered individuals form genuinely nurturing families, which challenges the social and cultural norms and messages that promote powerlessness in women and are harmful to society. Both genders need to liberate themselves from the predefined limitations that confine women to domestic roles, overlooking their intellectual capabilities and inhibiting men from openly expressing their emotions, limiting their potential to contribute to caregiving and emotional support, which hinders the development of an inclusive and balanced society.

## VI. Conclusion

Feminists are concerned with ending male dominance, and all feminist theorisations are designed to explain how this goal can be realised. Each feminist theory has identified in its distinctive way the root cause of male dominance promoting women's empowerment. "For liberalism, male dominance is rooted in irrational prejudice; it must be overcome by rational argument. For traditional Marxism, male dominance is an ideology by which capital divides and rules; it must be overcome by a "cultural" revolution" based on a socialist transformation of the "economy." For radical feminism, male dominance is grounded on men's universal control over women's bodies, meaning their sexual and procreative capacities; it must be overcome by women's achieving sexual and procreative self-determination" (Jagger, 1983, p. 147). Women's empowerment positively affects both men and women. Men can contribute significantly by challenging traditional norms, supporting gender-inclusive policies, and promoting gender-inclusive policies. Collaborative efforts that involve men and women working together are essential for creating a society that recognises and values the contributions of all individuals, irrespective of their gender.

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