# **FEMINISM**

**Exam Strategies**: Create a **dialogue between the different branches of feminism** – let them talk to each other. Do not write a literature review. Reflect about how feminism not only affects our understanding of politics, but also has implications for our *doing* of politics (anti-discrimination law). **Critically reflect** on the terms given by the prompt (e.g. doctrine of *equal* rights,

#### Questions to think about:

- Is feminism a united movement?
- Does the claim that gender is socially constructed help feminism?
- What weight should feminists give to the value of individual liberty?
- Do feminists fail to appreciate the value of the private sphere when they claim that it is a site of women's oppression?
- To what extent are the differences amongst women a problem of feminism?

My own position: Feminism is not a united movement - although to have political force, it should re-focus on a common goal. Prima facie, the liberal feminist view has a lot to offer. It is a good standpoint for feminists to embrace due to its focus on equality and irrelevance of sex for opportunities, and it can respond to most radical feminist charges. But liberal feminism is fundamentally limited: By being a gender realist theory, it might treat all women the same. We need to incorporate intersectional insight and be aware of potentially and actually disadvantaged social groups (and look at dimensions of race, sexuality, class etc.). I don't think that the eroding the term "women" is helpful for the feminist cause, because it makes it very difficult to speak about feminist's goal in any meaningful way. Hence, the social construction of gender is helping some feminists but not others.

## **DEFINITIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS**

- > How could feminism be defined?
  - > A good catch-all definition for feminism might be to "end oppression to women". But there are different branches of feminism which take different stances on this. There is a lively debate about what defines a woman. Perhaps "ending patriarchal oppression" would be a good alternative.
- What are the **three theses of feminism** (which all feminists share in one way or another)?
  - > There is a social cleavage of gender.
  - > Patriarchy exists.
  - > There is a need for change, gender needs to be overcome.
    - Feminists differ to the extent to which this change should be brought about, how extreme it should be.

All theories share the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged compared to men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified.

#### What is the **distinction between sex and gender**?

- > Sex denotes certain biological traits and is given by birth, Gender however denotes 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits and is argued to be socially constructed. It entails a social categorisation of people into masculine and feminine. "One becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949)
- > Biological vs. **Cultural mothering/fathering** men are encouraged to be active and women passive in their upbringing. But sex difference does not necessitate that parents shouldn't be equally involved in parenting.

#### What is **liberal feminism**?

> Embraces liberal thought – especially the idea of the **equal worth of human beings**, spheres of choice and freedom that the state should not interfere with – and uses it to advance feminist ideas: Liberal

feminists are primarily concerned with protecting and enhancing women's personal and political autonomy.

Makes use of the distinction of sex and gender and argues that inequalities between men and women cannot be justified by natural differences, thus we need to think about the importance of gender socialization.

#### What is **radical feminism**?

- > Goes further than liberal feminism and argues the oppression is intrinsic to the aggressive, contemporary political structure, which in turn is very hard to eradicate. It can be **conceived as form of perfectionism**, which thinks that it is necessary to change people's minds because they are "choosing the wrong life".
- > Where the liberal sees the potential for freedom, the radical feminist sees **structures of domination that** are bigger than any individual.

## What is standpoint theory?

> Arises from the worry that if a feminist is too close to western, analytical theory, she will be subject to its limitations ("The master's tools we never dismantle"). Feminism should however express the standpoint from which they speak: as subjects, not objects.

## FEMINISM IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- \rightarrow In most of its history, Western political philosophy has ignored women
- Historically, liberal feminism arose in 198th century as a demand for equal rights (Bryson 2003)
  - > But this later became problematized (see below)
- > Feminism after WW2:
  - > By 1945, women of most Western democracies had won degree of legal equality with men
    - But in the domestic sphere, they were still very unequal: Women received welfare for motherrelated tasks.
  - > In 1960s, view that happiness for women could only be achieved through domesticity pervaded (Betty Friedan)
  - > In 1980s, theorists began to construct critical accounts of feminism, e.g. Okin criticizing Rawls that his theory must be extended to the family a just future would be one without gender.

# LIBERAL THEORY AND FEMINISM

### PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE

- What is the liberal private-public distinction about?
  - > **Public**: sphere of individual rights, contractarian agreements
  - > **Private**: includes special bonds of attachment, tradition, social bonds, affection; seen as personal, intimate and crucially **gender-neutral** (which implicitly assumes there is symmetry of power) the state should stay out of this. Politics was sought to be protected from contamination from the private.
    - Liberalism faces the charge of endorsing and enforcing this dichotomy one which crucially contributes to the continuous oppression of women (MacKinnon) Why is this? A core element of liberal thought is that there are spheres of life in which the state should not intervene.
- Social contract which tells the story of how a new civil society and a new form of political right is created implies a **sexual contract** of women subordinated to men, i.e. a contract which establishes men's political right over women (Pateman 1988).
- This links into the public-private distinction: The social contract is treated as an account of the creation of the public sphere whilst the **private sphere is not seen as politically relevant**. "The dichotomy between the public and the private ... is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about. (Pateman)

- > Feminists argue that greater social, political and economic power of men has structured this "private" sphere to the disadvantage of women and children, rendering them vulnerable, and often leaving women economically dependent on men and subject to a highly inequitable division of labour in the family (Held 2006)
- > Pateman (1988) argues that the public realm cannot be fully understood without the private sphere: "Civil freedom depends on patriarchal right."
- > Radical feminists demand the erosion of any distinction between the personal and political (Elshtain 1981):

  The personal is political. Elshtain argues that women have been silenced from public speech "because politics is in part an elaborate defense against the tug of the private, against the lure of the familial, against evocations of female power." But those people who were silenced to say are not people with nothing to say but are people without a public voice and space in which to say it.
  - As alternatives for ordering the basic notions public and private, Elshtain demands that the private world be integrated fully within, or subsumed by, an overarching public arena and insists that the public realm by "privatized" with politics controlled by the standards, ideals and purposes emerging from a particular vision of the private sphere.

## What is a liberal feminist critique of Rawls?

- Okin 1989: Counter to Pateman, Okin believes that the original position can be used as a tool for feminist criticism. Rawls ignores gender biases he takes it for granted that the contractors in the OP are heads of families, whereby he assumes a continuity of interests within the family. This overlooks the political relevance of sex and gender.
- Solution: Reformulate the OP such that the relevant parties are individuals who behind the veil of ignorance do not know their sex in the future society people will abstract away from gender bias. So Rawls's Theory of Justice can still be used as a tool for feminist thought: If the veil of ignorance hides the parties from their sex, it becomes a powerful concept for challenging the gender structure. Why is this important? "Family is the school of justice": it is where girls learn to be girls and boys to be boys, where gender stereotypes are entrenched and where the conception of the good and a sense of justice are shaped. For Okin, justice demands that family structures are to be revised envisions a just future without gender, where sex becomes irrelevant in social practices.
- > Obj.:
  - Should feminism do away with gender hierarchy or with gender as a whole? After all, gender can be a useful social identity, not necessarily a mark of oppression. The transgender movement positively identities with the gender that is the opposite to the one ascribed by sex.
  - Theory remains an **ideal one** and doesn't involve real-world experiences of injustices

#### THE DIFFERENCE APPROACH

- The difference approach to sexual discrimination views as discriminatory unequal treatment that cannot be justified by reference to some sexual difference (Kymlicka 1990). It accepts that there are legitimate instances of differential treatment of the sexes (e.g. segregated washrooms), but these are not discriminatory as long as there is a genuine sexual difference that justifies the differential treatment
  - > Seems intuitively appealing to have a "sex-blind" society, and indeed, it is the standard interpretation of sex equality law in most Western countries. "moral thrust" is to "grant women access to what men have access to" (MacKinnon 1987)
  - > <u>Objection</u>: Social institutions are designed in a certain way, designed by men. So the difference approach sees sex equality in terms of the ability of women to compete under gender-neutral rules for the roles that men have defined (Kymlicka 1990)
    - <u>Example</u>: Jobs which require that the person, gender neutral, is not someone who is the primary
      caretaker of a preschool child. Even though this is not making reference to gender, i.e. is gender
      neutral, there is NO sexual equality

- Janet Radcliffe Richards (1980): "If a group is kept out of something for long enough, it is overwhelmingly likely that activities of that sort will develop in a way unsuited to the excluded group."
- One possible implication of this is that we need to reconceptualize sexual inequality as a problem: Not as arbitrary discrimination, but of **domination** (MacKinnon 1987). This yields the **dominance approach**.
  - > Gross (1986) argues that we need to abandon the interpretation of justice as equality, but rather redefine it as a politics of autonomy.
    - However, the dominance approach is also an interpretation of equality (so we don't need to abandon the concept completely), equality is understood as women being equally important in shaping social life.
      - "in this vision equality does not mean to be like men, ..., or to have equality with one's oppressors" (Eisenstein 1984)
- \rightarrow Is liberalism guilty of adopting the difference approach?
  - > True that **liberal theorists have adopted a "malestream" approach** (as Mary O'Brien calls it) and have accepted the difference approach to sex equality
  - > But liberals are arguably betraying their own values of autonomy, equal opportunity, if they adopt it. (see Nussbaum's argument)

### (IN)JUSTICE IN THE FAMILY

Young 2011: **Gender exploitation** has two aspects: transfer of the fruits of material labour to men and transfer of nurturing and sexual energies to men.

- \rightarrow How is marriage seen by feminists?
  - > As a class relation in which women's labour benefits men without comparable remuneration (Delphy 1984)
  - > As a **deeply inegalitarian institution** (Pateman 1988): The public man has ownership about a woman in private
    - Classical liberals have assumed that the male-headed family is a biologically determined unit, and that justice only refers to conventionally determined relations between families (Pateman 1980)
- > How are family and public life linked?
  - > State does not keep out of family life at all: marriage and divorce laws are imposed by the state and impact how people live their domestic lives (Okin 1989)
  - > Power is not exclusive to the public sphere but a central element in the family as well: Even though family members stand in special relations to one another and care for each other, they are still discrete persons with potentially conflicting interests (Okin 1989)
  - Key liberal feminist position: "until there is justice within the family, women will not be able to gain equality in politics, at work, or in any other sphere" the family must be just if we are to have a just society. But this has not happened yet, for the expectation and the experience of the division of labour by sex makes women vulnerable. (Okin 1989)
    - The fact that men have power over women means that gender issues are essentially political (Millet)

### OBJECTIONS AGAINST LIBERAL FEMINISM

- > Too individualistic (variant of the **communitarian critique**): Liberal feminists underestimate how much family and society matter for living the good life liberal individualism urges people to minimize their needs for one another and depend on themselves alone.
  - > <u>Resp.</u>: Flourishing of human beings taken one by one is both analytically and normatively prior to the flourishing of a state or nation. It is a good view for feminists to embrace, because they have too rarely

been treated as ends in themselves, and too often as means to an end (Nussbaum 1999). Also, one's own wellbeing very much depends on one's family and society.

- Radical feminist critique: Liberalism lacks a concrete engagement with the realities of power in different social situations. There are groups which are actually or potentially disadvantaged and making them legally equal would be to neglect that difference. Developing political principles must begin from the historical and social conditions in which we exist (Young 1989).
  - Resp.: Liberal philosophers have mostly been rejecting the purely formal notion of equality formulation as capabilities refocuses the aim to not simply distributing resources around, but also to see that they work in promoting the capacity of people to choose a life that they want. (Nussbaum 1999). If equality of opportunity means anything, it is that individuals have the right to demand different prerequisites depending on one's social standing or circumstances in society.
    - However, it has to be admitted that the reluctance of liberal reluctance to interfere with the family runs deep and is very concerning it fails to take into account competition for scarce resources (like time), divergent interests, differences in power etc. BUT this is not a failure intrinsic to the liberal theory itself, rather, it is a "failure of liberal thinkers to follow their own thought through to its socially radical conclusion".

## STANDPOINT THEORY

- What are different approaches within standpoint theory?
  - > **Difference feminism**: is critical of liberal equality feminists, because women must NOT be "like men" in order to be valued. Fear that the value of womanhood can be too easily erased. Justice instead requires that feminine values are properly rewarded.
    - Ethics of Care (Gilligan 1982, Held 2006): Posits that there are two ways of thinking about justice: One is abstract and involves universal duties this is gendered. Another way, involving care, is more concrete and involves personal duties and bonds it is relational and particular. Every person starts out as a child dependent on those providing us care and we remain interdependent throughout our lives (Held 2014). Justice should be re-theorized so that strict impartiality does not rule out the special forms of care, like compassion and emotionality.
      - Features include i) Central focus is on the moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility, e.g. caring for one's child. It "stresses the moral force of the responsibility to respond to the needs of the dependent." ii) values emotion rather than rejects it, iii) calls into question the universalistic and abstract rules of the dominant moral theories instead, respect the claims of particular others with whom we share actual relationships.
      - Criticizes the liberal individualist conception of the person, for we are not abstract, rational selves, or "mushrooms sprung from nowhere", but rather interdependent human beings, which all depend on care at one point in their lives (mostly in early childhood and youth or when they are older)
    - Kymlicka (1990) believes that the core of the care-justice debate is within moral concepts:
       Whilst justice is about rights and fairness, care is about attending to responsibilities and relationships.
    - <u>Critique</u>: Reason vs. emotion dichotomy is posited to starkly?
  - Radical feminism: Whilst liberal feminists say that the law be sex blind, radical feminists say that the status quo already embodies asymmetries of power. Liberals need to realize that the present has been constructed from a male perspective. Since males are the dominant social group, reality is constructed from that patriarchy is a system of male domination and female submission.
    - One form of radical feminism: Gender is created by the sexual objectification of women so the theory of gender is actually a **theory of sexuality** (MacKinnon 1987). The mechanism to

reinforce this in a society with equal legal treatment is violent, subordinating and dehumanising pornography which conditions male desire to focus on sexual submissiveness.

- > **Poststructuralist feminism**: More in the continental tradition. Gender is purely performative (Butler 1990) there are no natural roots to different behaviour. Resistance to social construction becomes possible when it is shown in acts that gender is not natural, see Transgender movement.
  - The reality which we 'know' is mediated through language and experience. As such, meaning is unstable and dependent on culture and power structures (Bryson 2003)
  - But this could make it very difficult to talk about women in any meaningful way (see below)
- > **Intersectional feminism**: This differs from other approaches mentioned above, because the others all share the metaphysical assumption of "**gender realism**" that women as a group are assumed to share some characteristics, some criterion that defines their gender and the possession of which makes them "women".
  - But this view is criticized by intersectional feminism: Sexual submissiveness (as MacKinnon says) cannot be the defining criterion since it varies depending on your race and class.
  - White, middle-class women have too narrow of a perspective and focus on class stereotypes. Domesticity cannot be the main driver of sexual oppression as black women have had jobs for a long time. Gender and racial subordination must be seen together (hooks 1981). Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women's rights because they did not see "womanhood" as an important aspect of their identity rather, they faced the brutal reality of racism. "Black women" was not a separate group in itself, but was often treated with one or the other (either white women or black men)
    - "although the women's movement motivated hundreds of women to write on the woman question, it failed to generate in depth critical analyses of the black female experience".
  - We need to see the struggle against racism and the struggle against sexism as natural intertwined.
    - White women's experience of discrimination does not match the black women's
      experience. "The assumption that feminism identifies and seeks to change the common
      position of women became increasingly untenable." (Young 2011)
      - E.g. black women during period of slavery were raped whereas white women were seen as pure and virtuous.
  - Does this mean the end of specifically feminist discourse?
    - Young (2011): Does not think it does because "I still experience, as do many other women, the affinity for other women which we have called sisterhood, even across differences" still, it has compelled her to move out of a focus specifically on women's oppression and trying to understand the social position of other oppressed groups.
- Basic idea of structural injustice from Young:
  - > "structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities."
    - This framework is deployed to characterise many instances of oppression and marginalisation, e.g. women, sweatshop workers, the homeless, temporary migrants...
    - It avoids the language of individual blame, which might lead to more acceptance of reconciliation

- Historically, feminists have endorsed the sex/gender distinction: sex depends on biological features; gender depends on social factors. The main feminist motivation for making this distinction was to counter biological determinism. (Mikkola 2017)
  - > E.g. transsexuals' sex and gender do not match
- How have feminists argued for the claim that gender is socially constructed?
  - > The mechanism of social construction of gender is **social learning**, which implies that a child learns how to be a girl or a boy in their social environments. For example, parents treat their sons and daughters differently, with intention or not (Millet 1971).
    - This is problematic, because gendered behaviour girls acting soft, delicate while boys should act strong fits with, and reinforces women's subordination. They learn, and get used to, being passive, docile and emotional helpmeets for men (Millet 1971).
  - Mackinnon (1987, 1989) argues that theory of gender is really a theory of sexuality: Masculinity is defined as sexual dominance and femininity as sexual submissiveness. To be oppressed as a woman is to be viewed and treated as sexually subordinated. Thus, the meaning of gender is created by sexual objectification of women, who are seen and treated as objects to satisfy men's desires.
    - MacKinnon does not see gender difference as having distinct behavioural patterns, but rather, it is a function of sexuality which is hierarchal in patriarchal societies
      - Objection: This is trying to make sexual objectification the focus and may be too narrow: in some contexts, sexist oppression seems to concern more division of labour and economic exploitation (esp. in developing countries)
- > **Problems** with the sex gender distinction:
  - Arguing that gender is socially constructed implicitly assumes gender realism that women are assumed to all share some characteristic features or experiences which define their gender (see intersectional feminism)
- Objections to the gender realism view:
  - > **Particularity Argument**: Gender realism does not take into account racial, cultural and class differences between women.
    - <u>Claim</u>: Gender realism is only correct if gender were independent from other factors like race and class but this is not the case. There cannot be one single defining criterion for womanhood like sexual submissiveness because this common condition will vary depending on those other background conditions.
      - Example: During slavery, black women were "hypersexualised", thought to be always sexually available, whereas white women were thought to be pure and virtuous. Rape of a black woman was thought to be impossible (Harris 1993)
  - > **Normativity Argument**: It posits a normative ideal of womanhood.
    - Butler (1999) argues against the political counterpart of gender realism, feminist identity politics, which aims at mobilizing women as a group, presupposing that their membership is fixed by some common condition or experience. Thus, she critiques the very idea that there is a definitive subject in need of liberation.
    - Claim: Gender realist accounts are normative in defining the term "woman" in a certain way, feminists implicitly say that there is some 'correct' way to be gendered a woman. The upshot of this gender realist account is that if a person does not exhibit that distinctively feminine characteristic (e.g. being subject to sexual subordination as per MacKinnon), then one is not 'really' a member of the woman category.
      - "identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary" (Butler 1991)
    - Gender is performative
    - What is appropriate response to feminist identity politics then?

- Feminists should understand woman as open-ended and a term in process "it is open to intervention and resignification" (Butler 1999)
- Feminists should not try to define a "woman" at all, and this should not constitute the foundation of feminist politics. Rather, they should focus on providing an account of how power functions and shapes our understandings of womanhood
- Finlayson (2018) says that perhaps it is best to stand down from the whole "what are women" question – women are those who occupy a particular position in society relative to men.
  - Obj.: But then it becomes very hard to construct a unified movement.

#### FEMINISM AND THE DIVERSITY OF WOMEN

- The goal of feminism may be characterized as **ending the oppression of women** (hooks 2000)
  - > But women are oppressed not only by sexism but in many other ways, e.g. by classism, homophobia, racism, ageism, ableism etc. so would the goal of feminism then be to end all oppression that affects women? This would be a very expansive definition of feminism.
  - > hooks 1989: "I believe women and men must share a common understanding a basic knowledge of what feminism is if it is ever to be a powerful mass-based political movement (...) I suggest that defining feminism broadly as "a movement to end sexism and oppression" would enable us to have a common political goal"
    - This approach implies that even though feminism's objective is to end sexism, because of its relation to other forms of oppression, this will require efforts to end other forms of oppression as well.
- What makes a particular form of oppression sexist?
  - Not just that it harms women, but that **someone is subject to this form of oppression specifically** *because* **she is, or appears to be, a woman**. E.g. racial oppression harms women but racial oppression by itself doesn't harm them because they are women, it harms them because they are members of particular race.
  - > The strategies put forward to explicate sexist oppression are problematic (see critique of gender realism)
    - One Explanation: Only consider as paradigms those who are oppressed "only" as women, motivation behind this is that more complex cases bringing in additional forms of oppression will obscure what is distinctive of sexist oppression
      - The ideal of impartiality suggests that all moral situations should be treated according to the same rules but by claiming to provide a standpoint which all subjects can adopt, it denies the difference between subjects (Young 2011). Particular experiences of privileged groups will then appear to be universal.
      - Hence, this would have us focus only on white, wealthy, young, able-bodied, heterosexual women to determine what oppression is! And this is of course implausible.

<sup>1</sup> We could define oppression as Young does: As a situation when one or more of the following conditions is met: i) Exploitation - benefits of their work or energy go to others without those others reciprocally benefiting them; ii) Marginalization - excluded from participation in major social activities, such as workplace; iii) Powerlessness - live and work under authority of others; iv) Cultural imperialism; v) Violence and harassment

Hence: Need to understand that **women differ on various dimensions** and that some are more potentially or actually disadvantaged than others – these dimensions include, but are not limited to: race, class, sexuality (Young 1989). "We cannot develop political principles by starting with the assumption of a completely just society, however, but must begin from within the general historical and social conditions in which we exist"

 Social justice needs to explicitly acknowledge and attend to these differences in order to undermine oppression.

"It is still compatible with pluralist methods to seek out patterns in women's social positions and structural explanations within and across social contexts, but in doing so we must be highly sensitive to historical and cultural variation" (McAfee 2018)

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