

Chapter 3: Feminist Theories

1. Feminist Social Work Theories

Feminist theory is an approach to understanding and conceptualizing gender roles and advocates for the inclusion of women's interests in social organization. Analyzing the varied experiences of people from a political perspective that holds a sex-based analysis as one of the key analytical lenses constitutes a feminist approach. Another way of saying this is that within feminist theoretical analyses, many distresses experienced by women-and some of those experienced by men-can best be understood in terms of sex-based and gender-based social and structural restrictions, constrictions, and resource deficits, as these limitations interact with various other structural and interpersonal constraints.

Feminist theories, first of all, explain and suggest directions for change in social and environmental factors that create or contribute to dilemmas and problems experienced by women. Second, they explain and propose interventions for women's intrapersonal and interpersonal concerns. Third, feminist theories provide a perspective for evaluating social and environmental experiences of groups and individuals, regardless of sex or gender. The emphasis placed on each of these three areas, along with the centrality of additional factors that influence marginalization, oppression, and unwarranted constraints, depends on which feminist theory is used.

Feminist social work is a practice that starts with the analysis of women's experience in the world and focuses on the links between a woman's position in society and her individual predicament. Feminist perspectives have drawn attention to gender roles and relationships, along with their connection to social policy and welfare services. It has questioned the quality of relationships among individuals and promoted dialogical and egalitarian relations in practice.

Feminist informed social work practice has given greater credence to the perspective of the recipient, be they male or female.

The profession of social work is more than 100 years old. The history of feminist social work practice is equally long. Although not all social workers have been open to feminist thought, many social work practitioners have worked within feminist frameworks. Feminist theory emerged out of women social workers' commitments. The commitment of women social workers to wider feminist movements in the West in the 1970s encouraged feminist theory's development, starting in a broad liberal tradition and in radical social work. Some of the major ideas included dealing with women's conditions of discrimination in life and work; women-centred practice; hearing women's different voice compared with men; and, the strength of women in working with diversity.

Feminism has two waves of development. Feminist activism in the 1800s was concerned primarily with legal and political rights. From the 1960s onward, the emphasis has shifted to unequal opportunities in work, political, and public spheres. This second wave focused on social inequalities. **Feminism since the 1960s has developed a number of unique perspectives. The approaches range from liberal to radical to postmodern.** All of the perspectives share a deep concern for personal and social growth, as well as a linking of the personal and the political. Some approaches recognize basic gender differences in conceptualizing and acting in the world, contesting a dominant male perspective. Most feminist theories suggest ways to help eliminate misperceptions, sexual inequalities, restrictions, and oppression faced by women-goals that many writers have pointed out are shared by social workers-but the goals of each branch of feminism vary according to the perspective on the forces that impede women.

1. Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism is a gradualist approach to improving the position of women in society by promoting equal opportunity through legislation while, at the same time, challenging the socialization process that accepts gender inequality. Gradualism that seeks equality and focuses on cultural assumptions and social relations; adherents address legislation, social conventions, and socialization. Rather than train women to dismantle structural supports of power imbalances, liberal feminists are more likely to examine interpersonal interactions and encourage women to behave more like those men who are successful in their careers. That is, liberal feminists work within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women into that structure, often using a model of individual rather than structural deficit.

2. Radical Feminism

Radical feminism is an approach that focuses on men's power and privilege within the social system and seeks to promote women's organizations as separate social organizations. Separatism that focuses on patriarchy; adherents promote separate women's structures in organization and social life. Radical feminists argue that individual women's experiences of injustice and the miseries that women think of as personal problems are actually political issues, grounded in power imbalances. Often using the slogan "The personal is political," they argue that separating public from private issues masks the reality of male power, a system of domination that operates similarly in interdependent public and private spheres. Radical feminists hold that public-private divisions isolate and depoliticize women's experience of oppression. This is criticized for focusing on common gender differences and not diversity of experiences.

Radical feminists characterize society as patriarchal. By this they mean that, historically, families have been organized according to male lines of inheritance and dependence, and also that society has been constructed in a way that accrues a disproportionate share of power to men. The patriarchal structure privileges men through the complex political manipulation of individual identity, social interactions, and structural systems of power. Formal structures such as legal systems create and reinforce the sexual hierarchy, and virtually all human interactions are permeated by male privilege

3. Socialist or Marxist Feminism

Socialist or Marxist feminism is a perspective that sees women's oppression as a result of class-based social systems. Activism focuses on structured inequality within a class-based social system, especially in reproduction of the workforce; adherents promote understanding oppression to best determine which response to use. Oppression of women is said to be based in the private property system that exists within capitalist social and economic structures. More pragmatically, socialist feminists focus attention on women's role in the wage labour force, often using the labour movement as a base from which to promote more equitable redistribution of resources. They focus on organizing women as women to eliminate gender-specific aspects of oppression, such as the problems of sexual abuse, insufficient child care, and constraints on reproductive rights. This is criticized for its limited view of power relations, since class and economic oppression provide limited explanations.

4. Black Feminism

Black feminism is a perspective that begins with a racial analysis and points to the diversity of women and the various kinds of oppression. Focuses on racism and understanding

women's diversity and various forms of oppression; adherents focus on the diversity of responses, including family experience in slavery and historic family and social patterns.

5. Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern feminism is an approach that focuses on how discourse in society creates social assumptions about how women should be treated. Acknowledges the complexity and sophistication of social relations and focuses on discourse in society that creates social assumptions. Postmodern feminism makes significant contributions to social work. Postmodern feminism suggests a wide range of social forms and behaviours and argues against a relatively uncomplicated account of oppression based on patriarchy. Postmodern feminist theory acknowledges and seeks to understand diversity and multiple discourses. Other important aspects of postmodern feminism include concepts of identity, deconstruction of discourses, and reassessing the cultural characteristics of the feminine body.

There are many perspectives on postmodern feminist practice. The broad involvement of feminist thinking in social work leads to various groups of suggested principles for postmodern feminist practice. These differing opinions illustrate one of the strengths associated with feminism: to acknowledge and understand the diversity of the world of women.

Principles of feminist practice attempt to counteract the weakness of social work. Principles include recognition of diversity and strength; women as active agents; eliminate privileging certain groups of women; redefine private problems as public issues; treat women's needs holistically; acknowledge that human relations are interdependent; address social and individual causes of women's problems; and, look for collective solutions to personal problems. In line with those principles, the principles for working with men suggest that gendered power

relations have implications for men; masculinity is power-based; social organization favours men; diversity among men reflects privilege; and, celebrates the redefinition of masculinity.

Feminism is a significant contributor to critical practice theory. Feminism has informed critical practice theory in a number of ways. For example, feminism is open to a wider range of explanations for oppression and looks at interactions between different forms of oppression. Feminist social work also emphasizes the way in which difference and power are linked and the complexities of the interaction among social differences, physical differences, and professional help.

2. Anti-Discriminatory/Anti-Oppressive Theories

Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive theories had a significant influence in the 1980s and 1990s, both in theory and in practice, as many agencies faced pressures from migration, globalization, and refugees and less accepting attitudes from clients. **These theories offer advantages as they develop radical approaches to account for the range of different types of oppression and a better account of issues.** A new focus on oppression emerged and strengthened the sociological basis of social work.

Anti-discrimination/anti-oppressive theory focuses on combating discrimination institutionalized in society and representing powerful groups. Some of the policy concerns stemmed from social conflicts like riots, crime levels, and refugees and responses were aimed at reducing inequalities by promoting social inclusion. Radicals suggested approaches regarding groups suffering from inequality and injustice. Radical practice questions the **social order** and thus focuses on **structural issues**. These problems are found in many countries due to migration, indigenous peoples, and social conflicts due to religion.

Feminist thinking has contributed to anti-discriminatory work. Oppression of black women resulted in black feminist perspectives that examine racism and sexism. Other examples include the role of psychoanalysis, ideas on disability, mental illness and learning disabilities, and the political economy of aging. Many of these factors interrelate.

Race, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality are important sources. Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppression seek to bring together these areas into an over-arching theory and practice regarding areas where people are oppressed or experience discrimination. Anti-discrimination and anti-oppression theory derives from a general critical social science analysis focused on rules elites and exclusion of groups.

An important aspect of anti-discriminatory theory is analysis of origins. A major aspect of anti-discriminatory theory is an analysis of the origins of discrimination, due to the need to identify the problems. The rise in problems of race and ethnicity in the world is due to changes in the last half of the twentieth century such as migration, wars, travel, communications, economic linkages, as well as, changes in religious beliefs of societies. As a result, significant minority groups developed in many countries, leading to a focus by anti-discriminatory theory on housing and employment, but moving on to examining institutional racism due to elite ethnic groups as seen in privilege in schools, etc.

In the 1990s, all forms of oppression were included in generic responses. During the 1990s, anti-discriminatory approaches included all forms of oppression in generic approaches. These approaches often involve 'concentric' examinations; concentric views may present problems since they assume that wider social ideas and structures are always mediated by a more immediate culture in their effect on the individual. Combating discrimination against all groups is generally incorporated. Anti-discrimination and anti-oppression seek to incorporate concern

for combating discrimination among all groups into social work practice. These views avoid separating different forms of discrimination into a hierarchy. This approach leads to sensitivity for the multiple pressures of being included in several oppressed groups such as elderly, black, and female.

Anti-discriminatory practice is connected to radical criticism of social work. Anti-discriminatory practice's stress on structural elements connects to the conventional radical criticism of the failing of traditional social work. Powerful groups preserve power using hegemony, so discrimination is created and maintained by personal beliefs and behaviour reinforced by ideologies. This is an increasingly important idea in critical theory.

Overall, anti-discriminatory/oppressive perspectives criticize social work. These perspectives criticize social work's practice and organization due to the perceived failure to incorporate major social change to achieve equality and social justice for minority and oppressed groups.

Dalrymple and Burke provide a model of anti-oppressive practice. Their model addresses use of power and authority in search of protection for both public and clients. They assert that a clear theoretical database that includes an understanding of power and oppression must inform practice. A clear connection is required between an individual's personal social environment and the wider social system; the worker must be aware of agency contexts. Their practice guidelines require an empowering approach, working in partnership with clients, and minimal intervention. This empowering approach focuses on clients gaining control, becoming aware of personal resources, overcoming obstacles, having their voices heard in decision-making and challenging inequality and oppression. Clients must understand how things have happened to them and try to find ways to take control over some aspect of their lives.