



FEMINISM, EDUCATION AND GENDER EQUALITY-A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Feminism is a manifestation of equality of rights between both the sexes. According to Oxford English dictionary, feminism is an advocacy of the rights of women based on the theory of equality of the sexes. It can also be defined as the struggle for equal rights, and as a political and social movement. It asks for equality at all levels right from household to workplace. Women being different than men have different requirements, not superior but different. In this condition, feminism asserts the rights of women. Feminism, one of the most recent ideologies to emerge, attempts to analyse the social position of women, explain their apparent subsidiary role in history and offer the basis for reform and the advancement of women in all areas of society. Feminists believe that there is a fundamental power struggle between men and women (Harrison and Boyd, 2018). It began as a movement to achieve equality for women in various aspects.

This paper seeks to highlight the role of education in bringing gender equality based on manifestation of various waves of feminism.

KEYWORDS: *Feminism, patriarchy, gender disparity, advocacy, equality, power struggle.*

INTRODUCTION

Modern feminism began with Mary Wollstonecraft who, inspired by the ideals of French Revolution and Liberalism, argued in her book “A Vindication for the Rights of Women (1798)” for the need to make women rationally educated (https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/38612/5/06_chapter2.pdf). Feminism is used for a dual purpose. One is to get the privileges which women don't have due to gender disparity and the next is to settle scores against ‘foot soldiers of patriarchy’. In the movement towards attaining the dual purposes, sometimes they promote one, holding the other back and vice versa (Ranjan, 2019). Some writers use the term “feminism” to refer to a historically specific political movement in the United States and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there are injustice against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-philosophy/>). In the mid-1800s, the term “feminism” was used to refer to “the qualities of females”, and it was not until after the First International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892 that the term, following the French term *féministe*, was used regularly in English for a belief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-philosophy/>).

Although the term “feminism” in English is rooted in the mobilization for woman suffrage in Europe and the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, of course efforts to obtain justice for women did not begin or end with this period of activism (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-philosophy/>).

Feminism seems to involve at least two groups of claims, one normative and the other descriptive. The normative claims concern how women ought (or ought not) to be viewed and treated and draw on a background conception of justice or broad moral position; the descriptive claims concern how women are, as a matter of fact, viewed and treated, alleging that they are not being treated in accordance with the standards of justice or morality invoked in the normative claims

(<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-philosophy/>).

Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified. Under the umbrella of this general characterization there are, however, many interpretations of women and their oppression, so that it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine, or as implying an agreed political program (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-philosophy/>).

Feminists are those who believe that women are entitled to equal



rights, or equal respect, and one is not required to believe that women are currently being treated unjustly. Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. It is an umbrella term for various ranges of views about injustice perpetrated against women. It is committed to bringing about social change to end injustice against women, in particular, injustice against women as women (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-philosophy/>).

Feminism must not be merged with women's movements that encompass a broader designation. Not all women's associations are necessarily feminist. Those who are active within feminism must not also be mistaken for all women (https://repositorio.ul.pt/bitstream/10451/23703/1/ICS_ACova_Feminism_EDI.pdf).

VARIOUS WAVES OF FEMINISM

Feminism is a concept often misunderstood as signifying a genealogy solely of women's rights and social, political, and economic advancement. Like all other ideologies and movement, the history of feminism is most often structured and analyzed as a linear progress narrative; in the white western context, twentieth-century white feminist history has been organized as a series of generations, defined as "waves" (Wright, 2018).

First wave feminism refers to a period of feminist activity during the 19th and early 20th century throughout the world particularly in the U.K, Canada and the U.S. It focused on *de jure* inequalities primarily on gaining women's suffrage (the right to vote). The first wave of feminism in the United States was characterized by diverse forms of intervention that have continued to inspire later feminist movements. One of the earliest manifestations of liberal first-wave feminism in Europe, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), was written in the wake of the French Revolution and is still read as a seminal text (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). Woolf introduced the notion of female bisexuality and a unique woman's voice and writing, Beauvoir the notion of women's radical otherness or, rather, the cognitive and social process of "othering" women as the second sex in patriarchal societies. In the early stages, the first wave of feminism in the United States was interwoven with other reform movements, such as abolition and temperance, and initially closely involved women of the working classes (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). However, it was also supported by Black women abolitionists, such as Maria Stewart (1803–1879), Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), and Frances E.W. Harper (1825–1911), who agitated for the rights of women of color. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and several others from the more radical parts of the women's rights movement appeared as delegates to the National Labor Union Convention as early as 1868, before any successful attempts to organize female labor (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). The first wave of feminism consisted largely of White, middle-class, well-educated women (Campbell, 1989). This tendency was only

reinforced by the counterstrikes of both the abolitionist movement and the working unions to also keep women involved in these movements (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). Suffragists confronted stereotypes of women and, in particular, claims of proper female behavior and talk. First, they engaged in public persuasion, which in those days was considered most unwomanly (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006).

Some first-wave feminists pursued the argument of women's innate moral superiority, thus embracing what might be called "difference first-wave feminism." This argument was part of a sophisticated rhetoric of equity, developed simultaneously in Europe and in the United States, which shared the modern, Western political framework of enlightenment and liberalism, anchored in universalism (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). The concept of equal opportunity framed a particular type of equity research, which arose outside the academy in the first half of the 20th century, and gradually provided the basis for a growing field of research in "the women issue".

Second wave feminism refers mostly to the radical feminism of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Inspired by the tactics of the more activist parts of liberal feminism, radical second-wave feminists also used performance to shed light on what was now termed "women's oppression" (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). These movements criticized "capitalism" and "imperialism" and focused on the notion and interests of "oppressed" groups: the working classes, Blacks, and in principle, also women and homosexuals. The second-wave feminism was theoretically based on a combination of neo-Marxism and psychoanalysis, outlined by feminist scholars such as Juliet Mitchell in *The Subjection of Women* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). They claimed that patriarchy is inherent to bourgeois society and that sexual difference is more fundamental than class and race differences (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). They even claimed that women—due to their primary social attachment to the family and reproduction—constitute a class and economy of their own, based on the unpaid work in the home, the productivity of motherhood, and their function as a workforce reserve (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). Radical second-wave feminism was characterized by a claim for sisterhood and solidarity, despite differences among women and a simultaneous investment in the slogans "Woman's struggle is class struggle" and "The personal is political," directing the feminist agenda to attempt to combine social, sexual, and personal struggles and to see them as inextricably linked (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). In addressing what they saw as "the woman question," they concluded that the emancipation of women would occur only with the destruction of capitalism and the rise of socialism, when women would be freed from dependency on men and the family and be involved in "productive" labor.



Second-wave feminism was marked by a growing criticism from Black, working-class, and lesbian feminists, outlined by, among others, bell hooks in *Ain't I A Woman? Black Woman and Feminism* (1981) and Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989). The distinction between sex and gender, emphasized by second-wave feminists, provides a sociological or cultural explanation, which at first seems to solve the dilemma between sameness and difference but does not entirely answer questions related to the sexed body, as well as differences among women (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). Starting in the 1970s, Second-wave feminism has generated an explosion of research and teaching on women's issues, which has now grown into a diverse disciplinary field of women's, gender, or feminist studies.

Third wave feminism is buoyed by the confidence of having more opportunities and less sexism. Young feminists now reclaim the term "girl" in a bid to attract another generation, while engaging in a new, more self-assertive even aggressive but also more playful and less pompous kind of feminism. Karen McNaughton is only one of many who have been empowered by the new grrl rhetoric, which originated among girls-only punk bands such as Bikini Kill and Brat Mobile in the United States in the early 1990s (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). The movement has simultaneously criticized sexist language, appropriated derogatory terms for girls and women, and invented new self-celebrating words and forms of communication. Third-wave feminists are motivated by the need to develop a feminist theory and politics that honor contradictory experiences and deconstruct categorical thinking (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). They embrace ambiguity rather than certainty, engage in multiple positions, and practice a strategy of inclusion and exploration. Third-wave feminism is also inspired by and bound to a generation of the new global world order characterized by the fall of communism, new threats of religious and ethnic fundamentalism, and the dual risks and promises of new info and biotechnologies (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006). A common American term for third-wave feminism is "grrl feminism," and in Europe it is known as "new feminism." While concerned with new threats to women's rights in the wake of the new global world order, it criticizes earlier feminist waves for presenting universal answers or definitions of womanhood and for developing their particular interests into somewhat static identity politics (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2006).

EDUCATION AND GENDER EQUALITY

Education is very much aligned with gender equality. Educationists have tried to engage with local contexts to bring girls into the education system. The view of education as a basic need and the implication that gender equality in education entailed an opportunity for all to have such basic needs emerged in the 1970s when some development economists critiqued the assumptions of modernisation that poverty would be eradicated by economic growth, the expansion of employment, higher incomes and the trickle-down effects of successful capitalism

(Fennell and Arnot, 2008). Gender equality in education associated with 'practical gender needs' might entail paying particular attention to provision of education, taking account of the social relations that prevent access to learning, participation and achievement (Fennell and Arnot, 2008). In less developed economies, without strong empirical educational research traditions and a strong public teacher voice, gender education reform is also expressed through an ideologically diverse group of NGO grassroots activists, projects and initiatives or through government policy statements developed in response to international pressure but with relatively little impact on educational provision (Fennell and Arnot, 2008). Western feminisms have developed their own agenda that has engaged with gender relations within advanced capitalist structures and liberal democratic states. This trajectory has focused particularly on the ways in which gender dualisms, the historic separations of the public and the private, and the formation of multiple gender identities, performances and relational worlds are created (Fennell and Arnot, 2008). The role of education as a possible catalyst to catapult women out of the domestic sphere and into the labour market therefore provides a very different trajectory from the relationship between gender and education that was introduced by human capital theory (Fennell and Arnot, 2008). The capabilities approach replaces this focus on the 'instrumental value' of education, i.e. the consequences of women's education solely in terms of their contribution to economic development, with a direct emphasis on the importance of the socially transformative and catalytic aspects of education (Fennell and Arnot, 2008). The role of education as a possible catalyst to catapult women out of the domestic sphere and into the labour market therefore provides a very different trajectory from the relationship between gender and education that was introduced by human capital theory (Fennell and Arnot, 2008). Contemporary education research is using the theory of capabilities and entitlements with its new emphasis on the power of education through the enhancement of the individual's negotiatory skills and set of choices within a contested site. The capabilities approach replaces this focus on the 'instrumental value' of education, i.e. the consequences of women's education solely in terms of their contribution to economic development, with a direct emphasis on the importance of the socially transformative and catalytic aspects of education, i.e. the 'intrinsic value' of the educational process, which are not so readily translatable into monetary values (Fennell and Arnot, 2008). The likelihood of education releasing women from the triple burden of work is dependent on their ability to make individual choices to access education, whether this is for themselves or on behalf of their daughters (Fennell and Arnot, 2008). Education gives a generalised commitment to the promotion of equality. Social and market imperfections that created women's exclusion needed to be addressed. Education enables girls and boys, women and men to participate in social, economic and political life and is a base for development of a democratic society. Education is one of the prioritised issues within the thematic area of gender equality. It is often argued



that quality education is crucial for gender equality. Education was referred to as essential and critical for advancing gender equality in any society. However, educating girls produces many additional socio-economic gains that benefit entire societies. These benefits include increased economic productivity, higher family incomes, delayed marriages, reduced fertility rates, and improved health and survival rates for infants and children. It also produces significant improvements in health, nutrition, and life expectancy, and countries with an educated citizenry are more likely to be democratic and politically stable (USAID, 2008). Equity strategies such as these are needed to eventually attain gender equality over the long term and must be reflected in policies and practices directed toward learners, teachers, and the community (USAID, 2008). To ensure fair chances for achievement, the length of school careers, academic qualifications and diplomas should not differ based on a person's sex. Mechanisms for evaluating individual achievement should also be free of any gender bias. Parity in enrollment and greater gender equality in schooling can, and often do, co-exist with inequalities outside of education. Gender equality is "equality between men and women and entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices. Gender equality means that the different behaviour, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued, and favoured equally (Sharma and Bala, 2015).

The gendered aspects of various school practices and routines have also been highlighted. They can also serve as role models and supports for marginalized students. This perception of gender equality began the challenge of breaking down traditional gendered binaries through legal reforms. These gave women access to male-dominated spheres of society and demonstrated that women are more than capable of performing tasks usually allotted to men. In this respect, equality exists among and within different groups so that difference creates a safe space for respect and affirmation of each other in all our differences. It requires the removal of deeply embedded obstacles and structures of power and exclusion, such as discriminatory laws, customs, practices and institutional processes, all of which undermine opportunities and outcomes (Simmonds, 2017). Gender equity becomes the interrelatedness of gender parity and gender equality as it seeks to characterize institutional and social processes that work towards parity and equality. Gender equality is achieved through the assimilation of subordinated groups (women, gay men) into the values, institutions and lifestyles of the dominant groups. Among women and men over age 25 and already in the workforce, the educational gender gap with regard to level of qualifications held is larger. Global gender gaps in primary, secondary and tertiary educational attainment stand at 11%, 17% and 14% respectively, in the age 25+ cohort. Education gains have not always translated into economic gains for women. Even though there is near gender parity in employment for professional and

technical workers, reflecting in part the equal education and skills levels among women and men with tertiary education, women hold less than a third of senior roles. Education is often considered to be one of the key institutions that should be addressed in order to promote equal opportunities and mainstream gender equality (Magi, et al, no date). On the one hand, education and schools as institutions do not operate in a vacuum and are informed by the general tendencies, values and attitudes that are prevalent in the society. At the same time, education is a powerful tool for changing the societal attitudes and empowering the next generation (Magi, et al, no date). Successful mainstreaming of gender equality, therefore, cannot be achieved without giving (future) teachers the necessary knowledge, tools and teaching methods to understand and tackle gender stereotypes and mainstream gender equality (Magi, et al, no date). At the same time, education is a powerful tool for changing the societal attitudes and empowering the next generation.

A woman's life is greatly improved when she has an education by increasing her status in society and at home and also by increasing the opportunity of financial self-sufficiency. She also suggests that to improve women's lives, it is essential to understand why this gender discrimination prevails and why it substantiates the urgent need for policy makers to take education and literacy initiatives, especially for women. It can also promote gender equality in the labor market if these two benefits of education accrue to women equally to men. Achieving gender equality in and through education requires system-wide institutional change in the way policies and plans are developed to ensure no one is left behind (Unterhalter, 2019). These processes require attention to the structures, norms and relationships that shape education disadvantage for the people in the system. Gender equality also refers to the outcome of equal rights and equal power between women and men in line with the human rights agenda, which requires transformational political commitment to bring about (Unterhalter, 2019). Gender equality means that the interests, needs and priorities of females and males are taken into consideration; as such, it has the potential to benefit everyone—women and men, girls and boys (Unterhalter, 2019). Gender inequalities in access, progression and attainment in education intersect with other inequalities that hold girls and boys back. Mainstreaming gender equality throughout an education system and tracking these changes will take significant investments of time, money, skill, research and reflection linked to evaluation. Many economic and sociological theories predict that education increases women's participation in the labor force. This prediction is premised on the notion that education favorably affects women's willingness and ability to enter the wage labor market (Benavot, 1995). Greater educational attainments among women will also lower the relative value of educational credentials attained by older men. Manufacturing firms and transnational corporations, in their constant search for cheaper, more 'stable' sources of labor, will have new justifications to replace men, especially older men,



with younger women (Benavot, 1995). Education has been given an important role in the struggle for equality between women and men as well as between different social groups. In the first nationwide Curriculum for the Comprehensive School (1962), it was assumed that boys and girls would show traditional differences with respect to behavior, interest and abilities (Benavot, 1995). Feminist researchers have pointed out the gender-blindness of traditional educational research. However, male-female relations in education are also neglected in more upto-date sociology of education (Jonsson, 1995).

In the field of education, socialist feminists have concentrated on the historical development of the provision of women's education and on its relations to women's dual situation in the family and on the labor market. The middle and working-class young women in the sample differed most visibly in their levels of post-secondary educational attainment. Good education has considerable power to increase equality between women and men. It can help tackle gender disparities in wages, poverty, reproductive autonomy and political power (Qasim and Singh, 2014). Education and training for women is one of the major goals of empowerment of women which need to be universally made applicable to all parts of the world. Education also brings a reduction in inequalities and functions as a means of improving their status within the family (Qasim and Singh, 2014). It is indispensable that education enables women not only to gain more knowledge about the world outside of her hearth and home but helps her to get status, positive self-esteem, and self-confidence, necessary courage and inner strength to face challenges in life (Qasim and Singh, 2014). Education, especially of women has a major impact on health and nutrition as an instrument of developing a sustainable strategy for population control. Education plays a catalytic role in a country's socio-economic development and is one of the principal means available for a deeper and harmonious form of human development reducing poverty, ignorance and exclusion (Qasim and Singh, 2014). Education is an end in itself as well as a means of realizing other desirable ends. In our world of unpredictable social and technological changes, education has taken on a particular significance as a means of understanding and coping with such complexities (Qasim and Singh, 2014). It plays a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women. Through education, women are developing self-confidence, self-esteem and a sense of financial security by way of skill cultivation to be entrepreneurs. Women's instinctive approach, which encompasses humane concerns, finds its reflection in their ability to combine justice with compassion, concern with rationality. Education of women plays a crucial role in releasing their energy and creativity and enabling them to meet the complex challenges of the present world. Women's instinctive approach, which encompasses humane concerns, finds its reflection in their ability to combine justice with compassion, concern with rationality (Qasim and Singh, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Feminism is a relatively new ideology, dating, for all practical purposes, from the late eighteenth century. Three 'waves' of feminism can be detected. The first, of about 1830–1930, was concerned chiefly with legal and political rights. The second, in the 1960s and 1970s, focused on much more fundamental, personal and relationship issues. The 'third wave' in the last decade or so has been essentially a reflection on and reappraisal of what has been achieved (Harrison and Boyd, 2018). The key target of feminism is 'patriarchy' – male domination in all its myriad forms (Harrison and Boyd, 2018). Feminism is referred to be equalizer of opportunities between men and women. It asks for equality in the workplace, school, hospital and many other places. Women different from men have different requirements for work and livelihood. They became so used to having just men around that they think one set of requirements, necessities and rules are how it's supposed to be. In India, inequality exists in almost every family, some discriminate between son and daughter while other show disparity towards their daughter-in-law (Pallavi, no date). Gender equality is regarded to be one of the core factors of any democratic society and the facilitator of economic growth and societal well-being (Magi et al, no date). Education is often considered to be one of the key institutions that should be addressed in order to promote equal opportunities and mainstream gender equality. On the one hand, education and schools as institutions do not operate in a vacuum and are informed by the general tendencies, values and attitudes that are prevalent in the society. At the same time, education is a powerful tool for changing the societal attitudes and empowering the next generation (Magi et al, no date). Women's lives cannot be seen just in terms of 'oppression', or inequalities addressed by politics. Women have new forms of power in work, politics and the media available to them to redress gender inequalities. Feminists boldly asserted that there was no such public–private distinction and that the most intimate dimensions of such relationships had profound political consequences (Harrison and Boyd, 2018). If women were to be truly equal with men then there would need to be female emancipation within both the private sphere and the public sphere (Harrison and Boyd, 2018). Women's movements therefore seek liberation from patriarchy by various means ranging from specific political campaigns, such as demand for liberal abortion laws, to 'consciousness-raising' by debate, discussion and publications, or simply 'living the future' – adopting a 'liberated' lifestyle and related values and sharing these with the 'sisterhood' (Harrison and Boyd, 2018).

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