FEMINISM

Feminism emerged as a twentieth century movement but has its roots in the nineteenth century in the work of Mary Woolstonecraft, J.S. Mill and others.

It asserts that society has established problematic power relationships between men and women and that, throughout history, women have been subordinated to men.

There is a difference between ‘sex’ (which is biological) and ‘gender’ (which is a social construct established in ‘learned’ behaviour thorough socialisation). Society, therefore, imposes different binary roles, behaviours and expectations on men and women which become reinforced and stereotypical.

Some feminists accept that there are biological sex differences, but that these differences have no social, political or economic significance (****androgyny****); others believe that these differences are crucial in determining psychological and behavioural traits (****essentialism****) - men and women are essentially different.

There are many different types of feminism. Some of the key approaches are identified below.

Liberal Feminism

This asserts that society denies equal rights to men and women and that historically, women have fewer rights than me. It follows therefore, that if Liberal feminism campaigns for equal rights and has a view that if such rights are won then the cause has been met. For example, the suffragettes fought for the right to vote and more recent campaigners have focussed on equal pay for the same work as men and equal access to employment. Women have the same intellectual capabilities as men and should be given the same access to jobs.

Women have often been portrayed as ‘limited’, intellectually or physically and Liberal Feminists seek to address this perspective. Some Victorians even believed that women’s brains were smaller than men’s!

This demand for equal rights is confined largely to the world of work and politics, or the ‘public sphere’. This can be achieved within the existing societal and economic framework. All that is required is anti-discrimination legislation.

Many Nordic feminists, arguing for equal roles in politics and better childcare, have been Liberal Feminists.

**Radical Feminism**

Radical Feminism emerged in the 1960s as a response to Liberal Feminism, claiming that it was not enough to address the rights of women in the public sphere, but that the structure of society itself worked against women. Changes in legislation have not produced a more equal society. There is still the so-called ‘glass ceiling’, with very few women in senior positions in public life. Society is patriarchal: it is still dominated by men. Women have to behave like men in order to succeed (a criticism levelled at Margaret Thatcher, for example).

This extends to the home as well as the public sphere. Marriage is a patriarchal device, with men regarded as the head of the household. Women are oppressed within these relationships and reduced to domestic chores and providing babies. Indeed, rape within marriage was not criminalised until 1991!

Radical Feminists therefore argue that are oppressed within society and that ‘The Personal is Political’. Patriarchy devalues feminine traits and values (such as caring, cooperation and compassion) which are of equal worth to male traits (competitiveness, strength, etc). They seek to overthrow the prevailing patriarchy.

Radical Feminists therefore accept that there are different gender traits with which we are born. They are ‘difference feminists’.

Some Radical Feminists suggest that women should replace patriarchy with matriarchy, while others suggest that women should live in single sex communities. These promote separatist radical feminism or even political lesbianism (a rejection of the heterosexual male dominance).

**Socialist Feminists**

Socialist Feminists argue that the issue lies with capitalist society and the resulting economic oppression. The social class structures which have emerged in capitalist society serve to subordinate women more than men, by separating the personal life (home and family) from the workplace. Women become trapped in the home so that men can engage in wage labour and the work done by women in the home is unpaid labour. This is essential to capitalism and helps prop up the system.

Moreover, men tend to control women’s labour in the home (childrearing, domestic chores, etc.). Effectively, capitalism is a patriarchal system into which we are socialised (eg through toys which reinforce gender stereotypes).

Gender inequality is therefore a product of the capitalist system. The solution is to share the domestic workload and redesign domestic space so that it engenders greater equality.

**Deconstructionist Feminists**

Deconstructionist Feminists are also known as Third Wave Feminists. They emerged in the 1990s. They believe that the binary labelling of our bodies as men or women lies at the heart of the problem. We tend to ask whether a baby will be a boy or a girl. But this binary classification is flawed and culturally embedded. Even babies born with ambiguous genitalia are usually surgically altered so that they can fit into this labelling system. Such a labelling system is arbitrary and leads to gender inequality.

Assuming different skills and qualities on the basis of different genitalia is highly problematic. Both ‘sex’; and ‘gender’ are produced through social constructs, produced through the use of language and flawed labelling. These reinforce what appear to be innate behaviours. Gender is effectively a ‘stylisation’ of the body. Remove the labelling, deconstructionists say, and you remove the problem.

So for deconstructionist feminists the categories we impose are not biologically real. Dismantling the language would lead us free to behave how we wish, rather than according to a linguistically imposed stereotype.

**Conclusion**

Most would agree that equality is a good thing. But there are many strands to feminism. Asking someone ‘are you a feminist?’ is a flawed question. The question should be: ‘What kind of feminist are you?’