

## Unit 10

# Feminist Approach

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### Learning Objectives

it is expected that after reading Unit 10 you will be able to

- ❖ Critically present a conceptual frame for analyses of the ways in which social institutions, practices and discourses define women and men and their statuses in society in general and in India in particular
- ❖ Unpack the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender that are common to sociological inquiry
- ❖ Show how central assumptions about gender relations continue to shape the organisation of the social world regardless of their empirical reality
- ❖ Discuss some of the contributions the feminist approach has made to the sociology of gender in particular and to sociology in general.

## 10.1 Introduction

After discussing in Unit 9 the significance of the comparative method in social research, we now turn in Unit 10 to the equally significant application of the feminist method in contemporary social research. You can say that feminist method helps us to look at the social world through the prism of gender. It intersects with other hierarchies and social forms. It is true that the classical sociologists generally excluded consideration of actions of women. Consequently, discipline of sociology had little to say about women. Marx, Durkheim and Weber made stray comments on women and family. This is the reason why the emergence of feminist sociology has brought much excitement and optimism among the new generation of sociologists.

After mapping its ideological location, Unit 10 covers the historical context of the feminist method. Next, the author identifies three stages in the growth of the feminist approach since the 1970s and then delineates key features that mark the feminist method. A reference has been made to Maria Mies' methodological guidelines for feminist research.

## 10.2 Relationship with Common Sense; Interrogating Ideological Location

It is critical to make explicit the domain assumptions that underlie all theories and methods. The sociology of knowledge presumes that knowledge, much like social institutions and beliefs, is socially constructed and therefore has a necessary symbiotic relationship with social classes, castes, groups and communities. However while it is easy to discern the domain assumptions that characterise those systems of knowledge, which are marginal and seen as overtly political, the same is not true of established dominant approaches. Hence it is only with the surge of post-colonial writings that it now may appear that Orientalism or a west centricity marked the classical comparative approaches. Unlike this apparent neutrality that shrouded the comparative method, the feminist method is seen as overtly political. Indeed a false but persistent dichotomy is created between the academic and political approaches. The same would be true of a Marxist or Dalit or Black perspective. In the case of the feminist method, however the hostility often is intense and responses range from a tendency to trivialise to a tendency to demonise. Such responses can be understood in the context of the far-reaching and fundamental challenges that the feminist method poses to conventional knowledge systems.

These challenges are contrary to the extant common sense of any existing society. And here I would like to stress that this is contrary not only to traditional and modern patriarchal common sense but also to modern but dominant theoretical approaches (see Box 10.1).

### Box 10.1 Examples of Traditional and Modern Patriarchal Common Sense

Illustrative of the traditional patriarchal common sense would be the belief that women are mean minded and petty. A fitting reply that Tagore (in "Ghare Baire") had for that was 'indeed they are, much as the Chinese women's bound feet were... bent and deformed'.

Illustrative of a modern patriarchal common sense would be that women ought to be educated but for the sake of being better home makers. You would know that matrimonial columns in India are replete with demands for modern but traditional brides. In other words selective virtues of modern and traditional women would be combined for customised services to run a system that is essentially patriarchal.

The question that you may legitimately ask at this point is how do the examples in Box 10.1 help us understand the feminist method. I would try to answer this at this level by asking a question I often ask in class. The discussion runs like this.

'The rate of divorces is rising because of the increase in the number of educated women.'

The responses to the above statement vary. Some students in the class

agree in an unqualified manner believing indeed that educated women are responsible for breaking homes. Others are uncomfortable with the covert suggestion that therefore women ought not to be educated. And some others make a methodological point suggesting a reformulation of the variables in the stated hypothesis. In other words could we not alternatively formulate the statement as follows?

'The rate of divorces is rising because of the unwillingness of educated men to treat their wives as equals.'

Or you could say that

'The rate of divorces is rising because more women are willing to break out of bad marriages rather than suffer a life in silence.'

The purpose of providing these illustrations was to make explicit the connection between everyday common sense and the ease with which it converges with sociological formulations. It is not surprising that Talcott Parsons' model of the family assumed women to perform expressive roles and men instrumental ones. The point in contention is not that it does not conform to the empirical reality but that it takes the extant as given, and not problematic. The traditional and modern patriarchal norms are thus embedded in the dominant theoretical formulations (see Johnson 1991). The dominance of the established methods was such that it appeared to be naturalised (see Harding 1987: 2-14). For what can be more obvious and natural than the fact that men and women are different? It made sense to claim that 'anatomy is destiny' and to argue that the division of labour was and is biological in origin (see Box 10.2).

#### **Box 10.2 Examples of Anatomy is Destiny**

As recently as the early 1980s the British Secretary for State for Social Service, Patrick Jenkin in a television interview on working mothers stated: 'Quite frankly I don't think mothers have the same right to work as fathers. If the Lord had intended us to have equal rights, he wouldn't have created men and women. These are biological facts; young children do depend on their mothers' (cited in Rose 1994: 19).

In classical as well as neoclassical economic thought, we find that there is quite early in history the discussion of women's wages and conditions of their employment. For example, Smith (1776) noted that women work for wages but at the same time he thought that a man should have enough wages to bring up his family. He considered women's reproductive roles as essential for society. Adam Smith held that women did not have the capacity to take rational decisions in economic matters.

Here is another common example to show the how the feminist approach interrogates and challenges very sensitive and deep-rooted structures, leading to considerable hostility and at the least discomfort. Often people say that women are making a fuss over a minor thing when they do not wish to change their surname after marriage. However if the question is posed that if it is so minor then why the fuss when she wishes not to

change. Or it could be asked that if it is so trivial then why do not men change their surname on marriage. The issue of course is not of scoring debating points. The issue is that ordinary customs do often rest on a deep-rooted patriarchal structure. Change of surname implies change of lineage, family, belonging, and identity and is seen as demonstrative of effectual loyalty. You will clearly note how the comparative approach would not evoke sharp criticism or passionate reaction unlike the feminist.

Let us complete Reflection and Action 10.1 in order to explore our own responses to the issue raised above.

#### **Reflection and Action 10.1**

Organise a debate at your Study Center on 'No harm if a woman does not change her surname after marriage'. Listen carefully to all the points of view in favor or against the topic and then write a note of about one thousand words, incorporating all the social reasons given by the speakers for and against the theme. At the end of the note, you may also give your own viewpoint. Fifteen days after the debate and writing of the note, reflect once again on your views. Do you still hold the same views as you did earlier?

### **10.3 The Historical Context**

We noted the nineteenth century academic context within which the comparative method arose. More recent anthropologists would point to the fact that colonialism and the access to the study of 'other' cultures was a political context that cannot be wished away. This political context was, in a manner, camouflaged, owing to the unquestioned dominance of western power and western scholarship. The natives have just begun talking back. The political context also went unnoticed because the method explicitly advocated value neutrality and indeed took pains to delineate guidelines to avoid obvious pitfalls of bias. In sharp contrast the feminist approach has an overt political context. And also overtly states its value preferences. A commitment to gender equity is embedded within the approach.

While the first phase of the women's movement dates back to the suffragette movement of the west (see Box10.3) and the national movement in the colonised countries like ours, it is only with the second phase of the women's movement in the 1970s that a systematic interrogation of the social sciences from a feminist approach took place. Unlike the lineage of the comparative method, as shown by Chaudhuri (2004), the feminist method has an inextricable link with the feminist movement. The issue here is not whether each practitioner of feminist scholarship is an activist or not. The issue is that the basis of feminist knowledge emerged from a radical movement that questioned the given social order as both natural and divinely destined. We discussed the far-reaching impact of changing or not changing surnames above (see Box 10.3 about lesser known facts about feminist movement).

### Box 10.3 Did You Know?

Did you know that the suffragette movement of the West was a long-drawn out struggle. Despite various feminist movements, formal equality for women took long to come. Women in late nineteenth century England were not recognised as individuals in either the legal or liberal theoretical sense. Men still had formal power over the rest of the family, and women were mostly excluded from the public sphere. Mill and Taylor, along with some early United States feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, argued that the equality of women required full citizenship for women. This would include giving women enfranchisement. After 1865, when Mill was in the English parliament, he fought for women's suffrage. He also fought "to amend the laws that gave husbands control over their wives' money and property" (Eisenstein 1979: 128).

Source: <http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/o28f99.htm>

Furthermore by the 1980s, it was becoming clear that the feminist scientific revolution, like those that Kuhn (1970) had studied, would not take place without resistance (see also Unit 6). As Kuhn (1970) has noted, scientific disciplines are aptly named; they discipline thought by making some ideas seem natural and others almost unthinkable. The practice of science involves commitments to such disciplines. The commitments of the scholarly community to certain ideas and ways of thinking seem to stand in the way of new theories, however useful they might prove to be in the long run, as we will shortly discuss in the next section on features of the feminist approach to sociology. While calling for a critical appraisal of research in women's studies Krishnaraj (2005: 3008-3017) said, "Feminist research is expected to use theory not so much to test hypotheses but develop a better understanding through grounded concepts."

Let us now turn to the stages in the growth of a feminist approach and then to key features of the feminist method. But before proceeding to this important section of the unit, as you need to complete the Reflection and Action 10.2 exercise for fully understanding the thinking involved in pursuing the feminist method.

### Reflection and Action 10.2

Read once again sections 10.1 and 10.2 of the unit and write the answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

What are the implications of a woman retaining her maiden surname?

Is it correct for a boy or a girl to put the mother's name as guardian in the school admission form?

Is it natural for the male to dominate in the family?

Is it possible to write gender-sensitive language?

Is it at all necessary to write gender-sensitive language? If yes, why and if no, why not?

\*The Academic Counsellor may please organise a discussion on 'Critically looking at the Given Social Order' and encourage the learners to write short essays for publication in the local newspapers.

## 10.4 Features of the Feminist Method

Much as in the case of the comparative method (while there are certainly some common features within the vast body of studies that warrant them being called comparative or feminist), it is important to assert that important differences also characterise what can be broadly termed the feminist method. For purposes of elucidation, I will first begin with the stages in the development of a feminist approach to sociology and then see what could be seen methodologically as some common features.

### A) Stages in the development of a feminist approach to sociology

A useful way to mark the growth of a feminist approach to sociology is to identify three stages in the study of gender related issues since 1970.

- ❖ Initially, the emphasis was on sex differences and the extent to which such differences might be based in biological properties of individuals.
- ❖ In the second stage, the focus shifted to individual-level sex roles and socialisation, exposing gender as the product of specific social arrangements, although still conceptualising it as an individual trait.
- ❖ The hallmark of the third stage is the recognition of the centrality of gender as an organising principle in all social systems, including work, politics, everyday interaction, families, economic development, law, education, and a host of other social domains. As our understanding of gender has become more social, so has our awareness that gender is experienced and organised in race- and class-specific ways.

We can now usefully discuss some key features of the feminist method in the light of the above three stages.

### B) Some Key Features

It has already been emphasised that important differences exist between different feminist approaches. Along with noting down the direct and indirect links with different political and theoretical approaches, we are here making a case for delineating what a feminist method in sociology entails. To start with, we can clearly distinguish between the traditional sociological approach to gender and the feminist approach. Most introductory sociology textbooks still treat gender as an individual attribute and gender inequality as an outcome of childhood socialisation. In contrast, current feminist thinking stresses the far greater input of the division of labour, power, social control, violence, and ideology as structural and interactional bases of inequality, not only between women and men, but among women and men of diverse social classes and racial ethnic groups. Gorelick (1991: 461) referred to Maria Mies, who had in the nineteen seventies provided



Maria Mies  
(1931-)

methodological guidelines for feminist research. She stressed the need for replacing the practice of value-free research with a conscious bias towards women's struggles for social change. Secondly, she made a case for conscientisation of the researcher as well as the researched. Let us now outline the following key features that mark the feminist method.

❖ **Feminist sociology argues that research designs were based on men's experiences.**

Feminist social scientists demanded a fundamental transformation in how questions are asked and what criteria are employed to define an answer as acceptable (see Box 10.4 and Unit 4). Illustrative of this is the long practice of assuming that the head of the household is the eldest male member. It has been increasingly shown that the number of female-headed households in the rural areas of India is very high. But the very concept of a head of household was based on the urban middle class men's experience that women are 'housewives'. Another very common example is the manner that the category 'work' assumed that it meant regular work outside the home for which wages were given. However it has been increasingly realised that women for the most part work in the informal sector, in what are termed as household production units. Instances in the city of Delhi would be bangle and toy making, *zardozi*, assembling of electronic parts that are subcontracted to poor women in the slums, domestic workers etc. Indeed concerted efforts were made in the 1991 census to educate both census personnel and ordinary citizens that breaking stones or carrying bricks is also work. Apart from this informal work, which is growing with globalisation, the idea that housework is also 'work' is still considered alien (see Box 10.4 about ignoring women).

**Box 10.4 Women Ignored from Social Research**

One general line of criticism of feminists is that women are absent from the social analyses and social world of classical sociology. The language and analysis of classical sociology is that of men, male activities and experiences, and the parts of society dominated by males. Marx, Weber and Durkheim were typical of nineteenth century European writers who assumed that the social world was primarily that of male activities.

Source: <http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/o28f99.htm>

❖ **Feminist sociology is against a separation and reification of a division between the public and private.**

In sociology, when gender was seen primarily as an organising principle of the family, the other areas of social life were falsely conceptualised as "ungendered". The division between an ungendered "public" sphere and a gendered "private" sphere is both ideological and misleading (see Box 10.5). Illustrative of this would be the fact that male professionals would be preferred in the corporate sector and the argument given would be that men are more committed to work while women would be distracted; they get married and pregnant. The significant point is that men too

get married and become fathers but the dominant assumption is that the private sphere comprises the cleaning, cooking, shopping, child care, attending parent-teacher meetings, looking after the sick, would be the women's work. The public sphere of work for women cannot therefore be reorganised until the private sphere is. In developing countries and increasingly in the developed ones too there are part-time or full-time female domestic workers. Sri Lankan, Philippino and Bangladeshi women among others are migrating across national borders to run middle class homes. This leads us to the third point (elaborated below) about the intersection of gender with other categories like class or ethnicity.

#### **Box 10.5 Division between Public and Private Domains**

One aspect of the long history of modern, urban, industrial society was the development of a separation between the public and private spheres. These had not always been separated in traditional societies, although there was often a sex-based division of labour and male dominance. But there is no doubt that with the development of capitalism, cities and industry, a public sphere dominated by men and male activities developed. Women generally became restricted to the private sphere of household and family, and had limited involvement in political, economic, or even social public life. While women were involved in more public activities, there were movements to restrict the participation of women in public life, for example, factory legislation and the family wage.

Source: <http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/o28f99.htm>

#### **❖ Feminist sociology recognises the diversity of gender statuses in the social order.**

Commenting on refining methods of study, Krishnaraj (2005:3012) wrote, "...a positive feature of feminist method is the attention it pays to contexts rather than predefined, operationalised hypotheses." Feminist sociology focuses on statuses that intersect with social class, caste, race, ethnicity and international division of labour. Gender is therefore imbued with enormous differences in economic opportunity and political power (see Box 10.6).

Gender categories are not homogeneous. As mentioned above the domestic worker functions as "the bridge" between the public and private domains for she facilitates her employer's move into the public domain by taking over the latter's socially reproductive work, filling the gap as it were between the two domains. Although domestic service is low in the hierarchy of occupations, its easy availability throughout the world has caused economically vulnerable women with or without particular skills, training or education to migrate to distant places both nationally and internationally. Feminist research endeavours to emphasise diversified experiences and practices of women in terms of their race, age, ethnic, historical, backgrounds (see Stacey and Thorne 1998: 219-240). It makes a conscious effort to include more than to exclude. Sociological concepts such as class, status, honour help in examining women place in society.



### Box 10.6 Male/ Female Inequalities

Classical sociologists generally focused on differences and inequality. Marx was most explicit in this, but Durkheim and Weber developed various ways of examining difference and inequality. Issues such as the division of labour, exploitation and power, domination, and authority emphasise difference and inequality. Yet male/ female inequalities, or racial and ethnic inequalities, form little part of classical sociology. Feminists have identified patriarchy as a social system of inequality, but classical sociology had only a limited analysis of this. Marx and Engels did have a model of male/ female inequality, but it derived from property and economic considerations. Weber analysed patriarchy, but male/ female inequalities were not his primary concern in such analysis.

Source: <http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/o28f99.htm>

Indeed the belief that women move only on marriage or with families rested on a set of patriarchal assumptions such as that women are primarily and solely homemakers, that they are not independent workers, and that therefore migration for them can be only be as accompanying members of the migrant again believed to be the adult male breadwinner. Facts suggest otherwise. In terms of the scale of migration, women and children outnumber adult men. Of 150 million migrants worldwide, it is estimated by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) that 36-42 million are migrant workers and 44-55 million are members of their families. Furthermore female-headed migrant households are less likely to have adult male family members accompanying than male-headed household. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, (UNHCR), women constitute 51 per cent of the 6.1 million refugees for whom information by gender is available (Bhabha 2003).

## 10.5 Feminist Methods adopt the Reflexive Stance

The transformations we seek in the disciplines are also transformations of our own ways of thinking. It is useful and reassuring then to share with others that the 'actual expertise and language of women is the central agenda for feminist social science and scholarship' (Du Bois 1983: 108). Feminist researchers have over the last decade been increasingly emphasising the need to hear the voices of women. Malavika Karlekar (2004: 387) writes,

My confidence also grew in large part because of the ease with which women are today willing to share, to speak, and to rethink their lives again. Before I ventured back to the field again, I had many encounters of mutual sharing and trust which assured me that a context is not impossible to create and even recreate anew. For a fieldworker has to tell the story of many lives, one of which is surely her own, and when those voices she wishes to hear speak to her with a poignancy and an almost crystal-clear honesty, she works hard to suppress too many questions on her role and the problems of interpretation, understanding and so on. Twenty years ago I felt threatened, pained, inadequate, by that honesty and the reaching

out for answers. Today, I find it easier to cope with the expectations of respondents not only within myself but also because the scope of childcare, employment, domestic conflict resolution mechanisms, and so on, have increased and been legitimised. I can at least try and work towards some solutions to the age-old problem of wife abuse with a battered woman: with the balmikis I did not even have the courage to ask the question not only because I felt that it would be an invasion of privacy but also because I did not know how to approach it.

Engendering sociology means interrogating the processes by which sociological discourse was gendered by putting forth feminist reflexive understanding of sociology as emancipatory. Hence, for those of us committed to reflexive modernity, the task of engendering is one of underlining the ways in which sociological discourse is patriarchal, middle class, Hindu and Brahmanical. As Rege (2003: 41) said, "The uphill task is of reconceptualising basic categories of analysis, once the experiences of the marginalised have been brought to center".

Now at the end of the unit, let us complete the Reflection and Action 10.2 exercise in order to generate more debate on the theme of feminist approach to sociology.

### Reflection and Action 10.3

After once again reading the entire text of Unit 10, discuss some of the following questions with at least five adults around you. Then write the answers to the questions on a separate sheet of paper. Based on your answers, write an essay on 'My Vision of Sociology'.

#### Questions

Like the classical sociologists, do you also consider that there are natural differences between women and men?

Do you reckon the female to be associated with the world of nature while men are associated with culture?

Do you regard women to be emotional and men to be rational in their thought and activities?

Do you agree with the observation that classical definitions of the social world do not include all parts of human action and interaction?

Would you like to see a sociology that includes social spaces occupied by women and children and social domains where women's experiences have been centred?

## 10.6 Feminist Discourse in India

The feminist discourse in India has organised itself around its critique of marriage and family. In this context, you may say that the feminists in India have articulated the debate in the last three decades of the twentieth century by theorising not only around deconstruction of oppression of women but also its negotiation and transformation in real life situations. Focussing on the economic class aspects of women's oppression, socialist feminism<sup>®</sup> has engaged in discussing the relationship between sexual, economic class and racial oppression. Scholars, like Hensman (2005: 70), have provided a socialist feminist critique of marriage, family and

community as they feel that 'the original left critique is inadequate'. Similarly, John (2005: 712) has studied family and marriage in a historical perspective and shown how the social reform movement "during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engaged with the domestic domain via a critique of 'tradition', as embodied by specific subjects such as widows, child brides and others". Not just confined to the upper and middle class social reality, the feminists in India have drawn our attention to emerging critiques by Dalit and lower caste women. Formation of an all India group by the name of National Federation of Dalit Women symbolised another arena of debate around caste-based inequalities and Indian feminists faced the challenges that this critique brought out into the open about the invisibility of Dalit women's perception of exclusion from the mainstream the feminist movement (see Rao 2005). Violence against women and legal inequalities were of course the key themes discussed extensively by feminists in India but now they are entering the domain of marriage and family in the light of now fairly common occurrences, clashes of perceptions about sexuality and gender relationships (for an account of women's studies and sociology see John 2003).

## 10.7 Conclusion

We may conclude with a quotation from Ferree, Marx, Lorber and Heiser (1999: xii) that the feminist approach works to

make gender visible in social phenomena, asking if, how, and why social processes, standards, and opportunities differ systematically for women and men. ...[This approach also recognises] that gender inequality is inextricably entwined with other systems of inequality. Looking at the world through a gender lens thus implies two seemingly contradictory tasks. First it means unpacking the taken for granted assumptions about gender that pervade sociological research, and social life more generally. At the same time, looking through a gender lens means showing just how central assumptions about gender continue to be the organisation of the social world regardless of their empirical reality.

The tasks mentioned in the quotation are in line with the current practices of sociology. Almost all over the world, there is a conscious effort in higher education institutions to integrate theory and research on gender in the curricula as a whole. This indicates the currents of transformation in the discipline of sociology.

Instead of arguing for a separate feminist methodology in which only women can carry out feminist research, you can make a case for locating feminist research within the theoretical and methodological discourse in mainstream social sciences. The study of gender occupies now a significant space in sociological research. The contribution of the feminist approach to sociology is not confined to providing narratives of women's experiences and to highlight the signs of sexism in conventional sociology. The feminist approach has contributed the inclusion of new themes and concepts. You may wonder

if the feminist approach is the harbinger of a paradigm shift in sociology. In the works, like *Feminist Foundation: Toward Transforming Sociology*, edited by K. A. Myres et al (1998) you may find claims to this effect. We may agree or disagree with such a reading of the impact of the feminist method on sociology, you have the right to argue that feminist research has now grown quite sensitive to its critics and as a result it tends today to be more inclusive. It is inclusive in the sense of focusing on more diverse experiences and perspectives of women of different races, ages, colours, cultures and histories. This trend has meant useful analyses of gender relations, which are increasingly correlated with the issues of racism, ethnocentrism and socio-economic formations (for example see Jain 1988). Feminism is no more a fad and the feminist approach is reflective of larger transformations in the perceptions and constructions of social reality.

## Further Reading

**Sydie, R. A.** 1987. *Natural Women Cultured Men: A Feminist Perspective on Sociological Theory*. Methuen: Toronto (for a systematic analysis of classical sociologists, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, from a feminist viewpoint)

**Tong, Rosemarie** 1989. *Feminist Thought: A Comparative Introduction*. Westview Press" Boulder (for a discussion of patriarchy as a system characterised by power, domination, hierarchy and competition)

**John, Mary E. and Janaki Nair (eds.)** 1998. *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*. Kali for Women: New Delhi

**Chaudhuri, Maitrayee** 2004. *Feminism in India*. Women Unlimited/ Kali: New Delhi

**Du Bois** 1983. *Passionate Scholarship: Notes on values, Knowing and Method in Feminist Social Science*. IN G. Bowles and R. Duelli-Klein (ed), *Theories of Women's Studies*. Routledge and Kegan Paul: London.

