

Lecture 1: What Is Feminism?

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Estelle Freedman's *No Turning Back*, Chapter 1.

Consider this . . .

1. What are your preconceptions about the term "feminism" and about the history of feminism? What distinctions do you make between the terms "equal rights for women" and "feminism"?
2. Why is it critical for feminism to ask questions about race and other social hierarchies, and not only gender hierarchies?
3. What is a gender system, and how would you describe the gender system in your own society? What terms would help you do so?

I. Why Study Feminism?

To introduce you to this course, we first ask you to suspend your preconceptions about the term "feminism"; prepare to think historically about what the term means and why we need to understand it.

In today's world, the economic and political relations of men and women are changing more rapidly than ever. Debates over abortion and welfare in the United States, women's political progress in Scandinavia, work place glass ceilings in Japan, the rights of women in the Middle East, and microenterprise in South Asia all attest to efforts to come to terms with these changes. How do we explain the transformation of gender relations? What is the role of feminism in this process? Why is feminism both so influential and so controversial throughout the world?

After establishing some definitions of terms, we will discuss how this course approaches the broad subject matter of feminism and the future of women.

II. Defining Sex, Gender, and Gender Systems

A. In this course, we will be using the term "sex" to refer to the biological (genetic, reproductive) categories of male and female; the term "gender" usually refers to the socially constructed meanings of male and female in a given culture.

Some scholars refer to a gender system or a sex/gender system, meaning the rules and social practices that define proper gender behavior in a given culture.

B. Historically, most societies have had gender systems that value men more than women and grant men authority over women (gender hierarchy, or patriarchy).

Some simple societies have a form of gender parallelism that approaches a more egalitarian model, granting women authority over some areas

and men over others; but there is little evidence that there has ever been widespread matriarchy, or women's rule over, or without, men (except in myths, such as those of the Amazons).

Evidence of gender hierarchy persists

in the present: male child preference; the persistent wage gap in the United States; the over-representation of women among the world's poor (70 percent female) and illiterate (two-thirds female). We will explore these gender disparities and movements that seek to change them.

C. The term "feminism" is quite recent historically, and it has multiple meanings—historically specific ones and as an umbrella term for a range of social movements. As we will learn during this course, feminism is a historically specific political response to gender hierarchy.

1. For most of human history, few people questioned patriarchy; they believed that it was proper, even natural, for men to rule over women.
2. A major goal of this course is to explain why critiques of patriarchy emerged when they did historically, and what forms they took.

III. Defining Feminism

A. Today the term "feminism" is quite loaded politically. We will put aside contemporary stereotypes and caricatures of feminism to understand its history.

B. Feminism as a term in modern Western culture has very recent historical origins, as well as diverse contemporary meanings.

1. The French word *féminisme* first appeared in the late nineteenth century—from the word *femme* (woman) and *isme* (social movement or ideology)—as part of broader campaigns for social justice, including labor and socialist movements.
2. During the U.S. suffrage movement, after 1910, young women calling themselves feminists demanded the right to vote on the grounds of the human equality of women and men.

Most suffragists, however, did not adopt the term, which remained highly unpopular in the United States, even among those who fought for women's equality, until the 1970s.



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3. After the rebirth of the women's movement in the 1960s, more activists in Western societies began calling themselves feminists. Feminism gradually became an umbrella term for a variety of social movements that challenged gender inequality in law and culture.

C. For this course our working definition follows:

"Feminism is a belief that although women and men are inherently of equal worth, most societies privilege men as a group. As a result, social movements are necessary to achieve political equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies."

D. Another way of posing the concerns addressed in this course takes the form of two central questions you should think about throughout:

1. "What difference does gender make?" (This involves analyzing when and how men and women are treated differently, and whether those differences are treated neutrally or in ways that are disadvantageous to women.)
2. "Which women are we talking about and how are they affected by the subjects we study?" (How do categories such as race, class, religion, sexuality, nationality, and physical ability influence the meaning of gender?)

E. Keep in mind as well what feminism is NOT:

1. It is not a theory of women's victimization by men.
2. It is not for women only.
3. It is not a solely Western phenomenon.
4. It is never monolithic or static—varieties of feminist ideas keep reshaping its politics over time.

Summary:

Since the late 1800s, women and men have increasingly challenged the view that one's sex determines one's legal, economic, and political status. Despite strong resistance to change, most societies in the world today acknowledge some form of women's rights. Indeed, the transformation of women's work, political participation, and family life is one of the major historical trends of the past century and remains the subject of intense debate in the present. This course asks why, and how, these changes have come about; it provides both historical background to understand changing gender relations and the analytic skills to interpret gender systems and the feminist politics that seek to transform them.