

FEMINISM, LIBERAL. Emphasizing equal individual rights and liberties for women and men and downplaying sexual differences, liberal feminism is the most widely accepted social and political philosophy among feminists. Liberal feminists defend the equal rationality of the sexes and emphasize the importance of structuring social, familial, and sexual roles in ways that promote women's autonomous self-fulfillment. They emphasize the similarities between men and women rather than the average differences between them, attribute most of the personality and character differences between the sexes to the social construction of gender, and tend to promote a single set of androgynous virtues for both women and men. While rejecting strong claims of sexual difference that might underwrite different and potentially hierarchical rights and social roles, liberal feminists otherwise avoid the promotion of particular conceptions of the good life for either men or women, instead defending a broad sphere of neutrality and **privacy** within which individuals may pursue forms of life most congenial to them. While liberal feminists acknowledge that some choices made by women are questionable because conditioned by sexist social practices, they also tend to avoid maternalism and any second-guessing of those choices made without coercion or threats. Fully informed and mentally competent adult women are assumed to be the final judges of their own best interests. Thus liberal feminists tend to resist legislative intervention that would gainsay the judgment of women.

The preeminence of this perspective owes much to the fact that it encompasses a wide range of related but distinct views that fit comfortably within the framework of political **liberalism**. It does not fundamentally challenge capitalism or heterosexuality; nor does it recommend separatism, as do more radical feminists. Instead, it aims to extend the full range of freedoms in a liberal democratic society to women, criticizing practices that deny women equal protection under the **law** as well as laws that *de facto* discriminate against women. Liberal feminists reject utopian visions of an ideal society in favor of one that eliminates coercion and promotes autonomous choices among all its citizens.

With regard to sexuality, liberal feminism maintains the tradition of liberalism, valuing personal privacy and autonomy in ways that appear, to some, to conflict with the goal of eradicating sexist norms. For example, liberal feminists tend to adopt a libertarian or public health approach regarding commercial **sexual activity**. Thus many liberal feminists reject calls to criminalize or even condemn **prostitution** and **pornography** when those who participate in their manufacture and consumption do so without coercion. They defend this position by citing privacy but also by invoking the inherent value of autonomous choice. Liberal feminists defend the liberty to decide on one's **sexual orientation**, partners, and practices as beyond the reach of law.

Liberal feminism has its roots in the writings of, among others, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–1858). Many writers prior to Wollstonecraft, such as **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712–1778), had explicitly argued that men and women were by nature not merely different in kind but different in “natural rank,” with women being weaker physically, intellectually, and emotionally (358–61). Men were said to be more rational, women more emotional; their respective educations should reflect these differences. A few philosophers, such as John Locke (1632–1704), had argued that the sexes should receive the same education and that they shared equal rights and responsibilities with respect to their children (see *Some Thoughts*, 14; *Two Treatises*, 303). Nonetheless, these writers stopped short of defending complete sexual equality (either for social roles or legal rights), and putative sex differences have been, and in some parts of the world continue to be, the basis of laws denying women the right to retain property in **marriage** and the right to vote.

In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft wrote that many of the supposed differences between the sexes were either fabricated or exaggerated and therefore could not be used as the basis for differential rights and roles. Imposing different educational expectations on men and women was not only unjust but also counterproductive, tending to create less productive female citizens with “artificial, weak characters” (103). Both sexes, Wollstonecraft argued, have the capacity to reason; hence both should be educated as to enhance their rationality, which she defined as the ability to act as fully responsible moral agents. The realization of this ability would provide self-fulfillment for the moral agent and benefit society. On this account, women needed to become more rational, but there was no reason for men to cultivate their emotions.

John Stuart Mill echoed Wollstonecraft's sentiments in *The Subjection of Women* (1869). He described sex roles as a kind of caste system in which women were assigned lower status and restricted in what they were permitted to do simply because of their sex, even though there were no categorical differences between the sexes that could justify it. This not only stunted the moral development of women but also denied them the self-fulfillment that comes only with the freedom to pursue one's own good. Mill thought that when provided with the same educational and civic opportunities that men had, most women would choose to remain wives and mothers, improving domestic life for the family (“The Essay by John Stuart Mill” [on marriage and divorce; 1832], *Essays*, 76–77; see James Fitzjames Stephen's [1829–1894] reply to Mill, 180–98). Mill's future wife, Harriet Taylor [Mill], disagreed, arguing that women would choose to participate more fully in public life, going beyond simply voting and performing charity work. Women would choose to become the partners of men in productive industry and would have fewer children (“The Essay by Harriet Taylor” [on marriage and divorce; 1832], *Essays*, 84–86).

Feminists of all kinds continued to press for greater equality for women throughout the United States and Europe, culminating in the right to vote for Russian women in 1918,

some British women in 1918, and all adult U.S. women in 1920. American liberal feminism experienced a resurgence in the middle of the twentieth century with the popular works of Betty Friedan, who was the first president of the National Organization for Women (NOW, 1966) and co-founder in 1971 of *Ms.* magazine with feminist activist and journalist Gloria Steinem. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan argued that women had a problem that “had no name” (15–32). Women in the United States had the right to vote and hold property and had achieved a significant degree of equal protection under the law. However, Friedan argued, they often led lives that were unfulfilling, if not stifling. They spent too much time polishing and organizing already clean and tidy homes, experiencing boredom and anxiety as a result. Friedan urged women, once their children were attending school, to seek employment that would challenge their capacities and provide personal satisfaction. Women could enjoy a family with children but needed to get involved in pursuits outside the domestic sphere as soon as possible by entering into public life and paid employment.

Friedan’s early approach to the role of women in society is vulnerable to an objection that also plagues the views of Wollstonecraft and J. S. Mill: that this type of feminism is not about the liberation of women *per se* but only of middle- to upper-middle-class, heterosexual white women. As with the earliest forms of liberal feminism, Friedan made the mistake of supposing that all women faced the same form of sexual oppression. Friedan later came to accept that the feminism set forth in her early work reflected this bias, accepting the importance not only of class differences among women but also of sexuality as a feminist issue (see Tong, 26–35).

Following the work of feminists such as Friedan and Steinem, many obstacles to the full participation of women in public life were removed. Employment opportunities for women were widened, many discriminatory laws in the United States were abandoned, and sex-based employment discrimination was outlawed with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964). Women began to feel that they could achieve things for themselves rather than simply for their families. The focus on women as equally entitled to autonomous self-fulfillment blended seamlessly with a burgeoning self-help movement emphasizing a more satisfying sexuality for women. Books like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* became popular as women rejected the idea of their sexuality as something mysterious and shameful. Sexuality was reconceived as aimed at personal satisfaction as much as, *if not more than*, reproduction. This led not only to greater awareness of the female body and sexual pleasure but also to increasing recognition for lesbian and bisexual women. But many feminists noticed that the liberal feminist goal of removing legal and social barriers to the full participation of women in education and employment did not completely address the issue of women’s subordination. Two issues in particular remained to be addressed: the economic condition of women and the structure of the family. Liberal feminists took aim squarely at the nuclear family. Sex roles within the family had to become androgynous for the ideal of equality to be served, with neither parent assuming primary responsibility for rearing children and maintaining the home. “Mothers,” wrote Virginia Held, “need not be the ones who *mother*” (243).

Unlike feminists who saw the family as little more than a source of oppression for women, Susan Moller Okin (1946–2004) argued that the traditional family in the West was unlikely to disappear and could be salvaged. What was necessary was an end to gender-structured marriage. Ideally, marriage should be reconceived as an equal partnership in which neither partner should leave the world of paid employment for the domestic sphere, which necessarily disadvantages the partner who maintains the home. Traditional marriage

makes women vulnerable by channeling them into lower-paying, more flexible forms of employment before marriage, by reducing their negotiating power within marriage, and by impoverishing them in divorce. The expectation that women will be the primary caregivers for children and other dependents encourages women to make choices that militate against their own best interests; men are not similarly disadvantaged (134–69). Okin’s argument exemplifies the liberal feminist commitment to justice, to the relative similarity between the sexes, and to equal concern and respect for men and women.

Okin’s views in particular showcase a fundamental tension in liberal feminism. While she argues that the traditional family is *unjust*, she does not recommend that it be illegal or penalized. Instead, she proposes, for marriages where only one spouse has paid employment, that the income be divided in two by the employer and placed in separate accounts (181–82). The weakness and impracticality of this solution show how liberalism hampers itself when it takes on issues usually thought of as private—and therefore beyond the reach of justice (see Cohen). Injustice calls for institutional and legal remedy, but liberal feminism is loathe to address the problems of private life with public legal sanctions, which are regarded as a form of coercion in that realm.

Contemporary liberal feminists object to prostitution and pornography primarily because much of it involves coercion and choices that are not autonomous. In the 1980s, the issue of pornography became a central concern as some radical feminists argued that women participating in the manufacture of pornography and in prostitution were not, due to the background conditions of patriarchy, free to refuse. Legal scholar **Catharine MacKinnon** and feminist writer **Andrea Dworkin** (1946–2005) proposed legislation that would subject pornographers to civil lawsuits for the harm that pornography does (see their “model” ordinance in “Symposium,” appendix). MacKinnon argued that violence was used in most cases to get women to participate in pornography and prostitution. Further, women’s sexuality had been appropriated by men for their own purposes (“Men’s power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be”; 197), thereby robbing women of the autonomy necessary for their “yes” to be meaningful. MacKinnon also denied that pornography was speech, claiming instead that pornography *constituted* the subordination of women; as such, it should be legally actionable. Moreover, one cannot opt out of womanhood, despite liberal assertions that one can choose which aspects of one’s historical, social, and familial inheritance to claim as one’s own or reject. Other feminists, Carole Pateman for one, argued (*pace* liberal feminism) that prostitution was not the selling of sex but the selling of mastery. Prostitutes do not provide a service but sell their own subordination. The intimate bodily nature of prostitution makes it impossible that one is simply selling a service (*Contract*, 206–7). Thus radical feminists, in contrast to liberals, reject the possibility of “sound” prostitution, although many also reject its criminalization because doing so has harmful consequences (Pateman, “Defending Prostitution”; Shrage, 82–87).

Liberal feminists maintain that pornography is a form of expression that should be kept beyond the reach of governmental control. They have also pointed out that any violence and coercion involved in its production are already illegal. To insist that no woman in our society could freely **consent** to participate in the making of pornography (or in other sexual entertainment aimed at men) was “showing precisely the same disregard for women’s autonomy and dignity that previous courts showed when they ruled that a woman’s *nonconsent* to sexual intercourse did not mean that she had been raped” (Strossen, 189). Further, censorship would do nothing to stop discrimination against women and would only erode civil liberties. Martha Nussbaum has also argued that, in principle, a woman

could sell her body for sex without being complicit in her own slavery. The intimate bodily nature of sexual interaction is not relevant to the issue of its justice; freedom from coercion is (285).

Still, many liberal feminists oppose prostitution and pornography. Many women who pose for pornography and engage in prostitution are violently forced or coerced into it. Gloria Steinem, in "The Real Linda Lovelace," documented a case of a woman compelled by her husband into performing sexually for the film *Deep Throat (Outrageous Acts, 243–52)*. Childhood sexual abuse and later drug dependency and poverty are endemic among prostitutes and other sex workers (Illinois Coalition against Sexual Assault). However, for women who are not coerced and choose to engage in prostitution and pornography, liberals find themselves unable to criticize prostitution and tend to defend its decriminalization. Liberal feminists are, like radical feminists, usually opposed to the continued criminalization of these practices even in the case of nonviolent coercion (e.g., drug addiction), because criminalization tends to make prostitutes and other sex workers even worse off (Nussbaum, 297–98; Sample, 217). Showing that coercion has occurred is necessary but not sufficient for state intervention in commercial sexual activity; interference must also advance the interests of coerced agents.

Liberal feminists differ from "cultural feminists" and "sexual radicals" about sexuality. For cultural feminists, there are essential differences between men and women (whether cultural or biological); they advocate that women reject "male-identified" forms of life. Libertarian feminists or "sex radicals" do not (see Tong, 45–49). Cultural feminists insist that all current sexuality, be it heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or transgendered, is constituted and controlled by heterosexual men. Hence they reject sexualities that embody hierarchy and dominance and are promiscuous, seeking to empower women with a sexuality consistent with women's different nature. By contrast, sex radicals insist that "transgressive" forms of sexuality can be liberatory when practiced in a reflective way. Liberals insist that despite sexist social roles and norms, there remains a realm of autonomous choice with respect to one's sexuality: Women can to some degree choose their sexuality, at least in the sense that they can reject prevailing sexual norms when they reflect on them. Many liberal feminists also refuse to characterize promiscuity or **sadomasochism** as morally questionable, let alone degrading to women. Linda LeMoncheck, for example, suggests that we promote a "wide variety of sexual experiences, preferences, and desires. . . . [I]ndividual sexual needs . . . can be met with the active care and concern of a community of persons responsive to those needs" (*Loose Women*, 107). This is not to deny that some sexual practices are bad for or degrading to women. Indeed, LeMoncheck raises severe doubts about some consensual practices. When a woman consents to be treated as a dehumanized sex object in the prevailing cultural climate, that woman perpetuates a sexual norm that wrongly treats women as less than moral equals. Those who objectify women or acquiesce in their **objectification** violate the fundamental liberal feminist principle: Women and men are equally members of the moral community and deserve equal concern and respect (*Dehumanizing*, 24, 152–55).

The liberal principle of autonomy also extends to sexual orientation. Radical feminists have emphasized the extent to which every culture punishes women who violate social norms that insist that "normal" people must be heterosexual. Adrienne Rich observed in her famous 1980 essay that heterosexuality is compulsory for women. Compulsory heterosexuality is especially dangerous because it extends not simply to one's preference in sexual partners but to the wider forms of life that one may safely adopt: marriage (or at least cohabitation with a man), childbirth and child rearing, domesticity, and all the trappings of

femininity that limit the freedom and power of women. Liberal feminists acknowledge that our culture enforces such norms but argue both that women are nonetheless free to reject the norms and that any legal arrangements that favor heterosexuality over other sexualities are unjust. Women who choose to enter heterosexual institutions (such as marriage) and who choose male sexual partners are not thereby participating in an injustice, unless they do so in a way that is prejudicial to other forms of sexual life (Colker, 146–47).

Liberal feminists generally defend the right to **abortion**. In 1972, Judith Jarvis Thomson published the most famous liberal feminist defense of abortion, “A Defense of Abortion.” She appealed in part to a wide sphere of inviolable rights over one’s life and liberty—rights that would trump the rights of a fetus, even if that fetus were regarded as a person with all the rights that personhood entails. Thomson argued that contemporary arguments against abortion typically took the point of view of the fetus and completely ignored the point of view of women who would be sustaining a fetus. This male bias against the perspective of women denigrates their personhood and interests.

Despite its widespread acceptance, liberal feminism has come under attack from both the Left and the Right. One criticism is that by emphasizing the equal rationality of women and men, liberal feminism tacitly relies on a sexist conception of the human person that is male-biased in its very notion of rationality (Jaggar, 44–45). Some have argued that the notion of objectivity, too, is a product of male bias (MacKinnon, 120–24). This may undermine the liberal feminist claim that individual women (as well as men) are in a position to distance themselves from their cultural inheritance and reject practices they find objectionable or freely adopt new, more congenial ones. In particular, the liberal feminist defense of pornography, prostitution, and sadomasochism, to the extent that these practices are freely chosen, may be weakened. If the idea of a rational, freely choosing agent reflects male bias, then the possibility of freely choosing one’s sexuality and sexual practices under patriarchy is called into question. Others have argued that the liberal emphasis on instrumental rationality, in part in virtue of its emphasis on self-fulfillment, betrays a tacit commitment to (male) egoism as the standard of rationality, thereby downplaying (female) altruism and other-regarding actions (Elshtain, 374; Jaggar, 45). In this way liberalism might undermine its own effort to regard the differences between men and women as insignificant. Liberal feminists have responded by arguing that although there are strong obstacles to autonomous choice, they can sometimes be overcome, as the very existence of feminist resistance shows. Others have defended the notions of rationality and objectivity from the charge of male bias (for example, Haslanger, 239–42).

A second criticism, made by both some feminists and nonfeminists, is that the differences between men and women are greater than liberals acknowledge and that these differences should be taken into account to treat men and women fairly. The main point of Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) was that women tend to respond to ethical quandaries differently than do men. And cultural feminists have argued that women have, in general, a completely different approach to living. Whether such differences are cultural/historical or biologically grounded, androgynous sex roles (as in, for example, the family) may be a poor fit for many men and women and hence not entirely desirable (Elshtain, 375; Fraser, 41–66). Liberal feminists nonetheless defend rational free agency as an androgynous ideal, arguing that many differences between the sexes are either a product of sexism or not sufficient to justify differential social roles. Women and men “are more than the sum of their sexual natures” (Groenhout, 73).

Ultimately, there are two fundamental tensions in liberal feminism. One is between the rejection of sexual difference and unequal treatment, on the one hand, and the commitment

to improving the status of women, on the other. Critics of liberal feminism charge that by denying or ignoring the differences between the sexes, liberals are unable to advocate true sexual equality—which, in virtue of these differences, may not be best served or attained by identical treatment. Although many sexual differences may be a product of patriarchy, the androgynous ideal seems to disadvantage women if they do not adopt it as their own. Nancy Fraser notes that “equality strategies typically presuppose ‘the male as norm,’ thereby disadvantaging women and imposing a distorted standard on everyone” (44). Many women simply reject the role of primary breadwinner or public citizen as part of their core self, identifying instead as a private sphere nurturer. Liberal insistence only on equal protection under the law for women will not garner them equal concern and respect. Yet doing more than this seems to violate liberal neutrality.

The second tension is between the idea that women’s sexual subordination is a kind of injustice and the idea that sexuality is located in a private realm of autonomous choice. Because liberals are committed to neutrality about specific forms of the good life for humans, they tend to reject any constraint on what happens “between consenting adults.” Yet many women appear to agree to, or at least acquiesce in, relationships with men that are less than equal. Whether these relationships are institutionalized, as in marriage, or a template of patriarchal heterosexuality, as in sadomasochism and other relationships of sexual domination, they violate liberal ideals of equality and justice. Liberalism, however, relegates them to the realm of the private, beyond the reach of justice.

See also Aristotle; Coercion (by Sexually Aggressive Women); Consent; Feminism, History of; Feminism, Lesbian; Feminism, Men’s; Genital Mutilation; Harassment, Sexual; Law, Sex and the; Liberalism; MacKinnon, Catharine; Marriage; Marxism; Paglia, Camille; Pornography; Privacy; Prostitution; Rape; Rape, Acquaintance and Date; Sex Work

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