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Liberal Feminism

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Okin, Susan Moller. *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. New York: Basic Books, 1989.

Mill, John Stuart. *The Subjection of Women*, edited by Susan M. Okin, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1869/1988.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. London: Joseph Johnson, 1792/London: Penguin, 2004.

First articulated in the late eighteenth century, liberal feminism is a political philosophy whose express aim is to free women from oppressive gender roles and achieve sexual equality (also called gender justice). Although women's social situation changes from one generation to the next – due in large part to the influence of liberal feminists – the message of liberal feminism remains the same: women, as rational human beings, are deserving of the same social and political rights as men, and gender justice is best achieved by modifying existing social institutions and political systems. The political agenda of liberal feminism addresses present-day inequalities: early liberal feminists sought to gain the right to vote and equal access to education, while contemporary liberal feminists aim to secure equal social, political, and economic opportunities, equal civil liberties, and sexual freedoms.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of feminism is its claim that women are socially oppressed, especially since Western women in the twenty-first century do not appear to be oppressed. Yet contemporary liberal feminists contend that society is structured in ways that favor men.

Many liberal feminists (such as Mill in the nineteenth century and Okin in the twentieth) argue that the primary source of woman's subordination is her social role in the family, not just her biological role in reproduction or the male tendency to sexual violence (other oft-cited explanations for why women are the "weaker" sex). Since liberal feminism is the oldest version of feminism, it is the target of much criticism, especially by other feminists who argue that liberal feminists overlook differences of race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation relevant to an accurate assessment of women's situation.

While liberal feminism is an active political movement with a variety of participants, all feminists agree that the aims of liberal feminism remain unfulfilled worldwide. For this reason, liberal feminism will continue to attract zealous adherents as well as vocal detractors.

Marriage continues the cycle of inequality set in motion by the anticipation of marriage and the related sex segregation of the workplace. **Partly because of society's assumptions about gender, but also because women, on entering marriage, tend already to be disadvantaged members of the work force, married women are likely to start out with less leverage in the relationship than their husbands [. . .] In many marriages, partly because of discrimination at work and the wage gap between the sexes, wives (despite initial personal ambitions and even when they are full-time wage workers) come to perceive themselves as benefiting from giving priority to their husbands' careers. Hence they have little incentive to question the traditional division of labor in the household.** This in turn limits their own commitment to wage work and their incentive and leverage to challenge the gender structure of the workplace. Experiencing frustration and lack of control at work, those who thus turn toward domesticity, while often resenting the lack of respect our society gives to full-time mothers, may see the benefits of domestic life as greater than the costs.



Thus, the inequalities between the sexes in the workplace and at home reinforce and exacerbate each other. It is not necessary to choose between two alternative, competing explanations of the inequalities between men and women in the workplace [. . .]. When the pivotal importance of gender-structured marriage and the expectation of it are acknowledged, these explanations can be seen, rather, as complementary reasons for women's inequality. *A cycle of power relations and decisions pervades both family and workplace, and the inequalities of each reinforce those that already exist in the other.* Only with the recognition of this truth will we be able to begin to confront the changes that need to occur if women are to have a real opportunity to be equal participants in either sphere [. . .].

The family is the linchpin of gender, reproducing it from one generation to the next [. . .] family life as typically practiced in our society is not just, either to women or to children. Moreover, it is not conducive to the rearing of citizens with a strong sense of justice. In spite of all the rhetoric about

equality between the sexes, the traditional or quasi-traditional division of family labor still prevails [. . .]. Any just and fair solution to the urgent problem of women's and children's vulnerability must encourage and facilitate the equal sharing by men and women of paid and unpaid work, of productive and reproductive labor [. . .]. **A just future would be one without gender.** (Okin, 146–71)



P1. If a **society** is just and fair to women, then men and women will have equal social, political, and economic rights, liberties, and opportunities.



P2. But in many Western societies, men and women do not have equal social, political, and economic rights, liberties, and opportunities.

C1. Many Western societies are not just and fair to women (*modus tollens*, P1, P2).

P3. If a society is to be just and fair to women, then it ought not promote or engage in practices that contribute to women's oppression.

P4. If a society does not promote or engage in practices that contribute to women's oppression, then its social, political, and legal institutions should be modified so as to eradicate features that contribute to women's oppression.

C2. If a society is to be just and fair to women, then [Western] societies that seek gender justice should modify social, political, and legal institutions and eradicate features that contribute to women's disadvantage (hypothetical syllogism, P3, P4).

The Nature of Women's Disadvantage and Oppression

P1. If men and women do not spend the same amount of time performing domestic duties or doing unpaid labor in the home (including cooking, cleaning, raising children, etc.), then there will be an unequal distribution of labor in the family.

P2. In a traditional family, men and women do not spend the same amount of time performing unpaid labor in the home – women perform most of the domestic duties.

C1. There is an unequal distribution of unpaid labor in the traditional family (*modus ponens*, P1, P2).


P3. If there is an unequal distribution of unpaid labor in the family, then this situation is **unjust to women because the work is assigned in virtue of individual innate characteristics, and has long-term repercussions that make the woman vulnerable.**




C2. The traditional family is unjust to women because the work is assigned in virtue of individual innate characteristics, and has long-



term repercussions that make the woman vulnerable (*modus ponens*, P3, C1).

The Source of Women's Disadvantage and Oppression

- P2. (repeated): In a traditional family, men and women do not spend the same amount of time performing domestic duties – women perform most of the domestic duties.
- P5. Women perform the majority of domestic duties because men expect women to do most of the work in the home and are reluctant to contribute to household labor. These expectations inform the “gendered structure” of the family (causal reasoning for P2). 
- P6. If women spend more time working in the home than men, then they have less time to take advantage of opportunities to advance in the workplace than men do.
- C3. Women have less time and thus fewer opportunities to advance in the workplace (*modus ponens*, P6, P2).
- P7. If women have less time and thus fewer opportunities to advance in the workplace as men, they do not have equality of opportunity in social and political life.
- C4. **Women do not have equality of opportunity in social and political life** (*modus ponens*, P7, C3).
- P8. Women will have equality of opportunity in social and political life only if they do not perform the majority of the unpaid labor in the home (implied by P5–C4).
- P9. For women not to perform a majority of the unpaid labor in the home, then men will have to be responsible for at least half of domestic duties (by definition).
- C5. If domestic duties are defined by the “gendered structure” of the family, then men are not responsible for at least half of domestic duties (substitution, P5, P9).
- C6. **When men are not responsible for at least half of the domestic duties (the “gendered structure” of the traditional family), then women cannot achieve equality of opportunity in social and political life** (*modus ponens*, P5, C5).

Achieving Gender Justice

- P10. Gender roles, including norms and expectations regarding men's and women's roles in the family and in society, are learned in the family. 

- P11. If children are raised in traditional “gender-structured” families where women lack power and independence, then the children learn that inequalities between men and women are the norm and that they can be expected in social life (follows from P10).
- P12. Many children are now raised in traditional “gender-structured” families where women are vulnerable because they lack power and independence.
- C7. Many children will learn that inequalities between men and women are the norm, and that they can be expected in social life (*modus ponens*, P11, P12).
- P13. If many children will learn that inequalities between men and women are the norm and that they can be expected in social life, then when they grow up and start their own families, many people will perpetuate the idea that inequalities between men and women are the norm and that this can be expected in social life (i.e., the cycle of inequality).
- C8. When they grow up and start their own families, many people will perpetuate the idea that inequalities between men and women are the norm and that this can be expected in social life (i.e., the cycle of inequality) (*modus ponens*, P13, C7).
- P14. A **just and fair** society seeks to eradicate inequality in its existing institutions, especially ones that perpetuate inequality.
- P15. If the family is a social institution, then it should be an **egalitarian** structure. 
- P16. If the family is to be an egalitarian structure, then men and women will **share equally the paid and unpaid work, productive and reproductive labor.** 
- C9. If the family is a social institution, then men and women in the family will share equally the paid and unpaid work, productive and reproductive labor (hypothetical syllogism, P15, P16).
- P17. The family is a social institution.
- C10. A just society will encourage and facilitate the equal sharing by men and women of paid and unpaid work, of productive and reproductive labor (*modus ponens*, C9, P17).
- P18. If a just society encourages and facilitates the equal sharing by men and women of paid and unpaid work, and of productive and reproductive labor, then it will do so **by eliminating traditional gender roles and their corresponding expectations regarding work and family life.**
- C11. A just society will eliminate traditional gender roles and their corresponding expectations regarding work and family life; **for example, by passing social policies that facilitate equally shared parenting, reorganizing work life to make parenting a priority, and educating children regarding the problems with gender stereotyping** (*modus ponens*, P18, C10).