



GENDER

INEQUALITY

FEMINIST THEORIES AND POLITICS

EDITH LORBER

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GENDER INEQUALITY

Feminist Theories and Politics

Fourth Edition

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In Memory of Zina Segre
May 8, 1933–April 27, 1997

“Her wounds came from the same source as her power.”
—Adrienne Rich

Do we still need feminism? What has it done and what is there still to do? Feminism has transformed the social and cultural landscape in many countries in the past 40 years, but gender inequality still exists.

Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics presents the variety of feminist theories developed to explain the sources of gender inequality, and how the various theories have diverged and converged in the second wave of feminism as a political movement. My intent is to describe feminism's significant contributions to redressing gender inequality in order to document its enormous accomplishments in the last 40 years, to describe ongoing political activism, and to indicate the work still to be done.

The Fourth Edition continues the main perspectives of the first three editions—laying out the sources of gender inequality as seen by a variety of feminisms, and the politics to redress gender inequality. All of the chapters have been updated, and some have been expanded, rewritten, or reorganized. There are 17 new readings and new sections on feminism in China, India, South Korea, and Japan. In addition, the bulleted lists introducing each type of feminism include the critique as well as the feminism's theories of the sources of gender inequality, its politics, and its contributions. Many new suggested sources for research have been added. The Internet sources have been omitted, as these change and proliferate too rapidly to be kept up-to-date, and also can be accessed more easily using key words directly from Internet search engines. As in the Third Edition, the book ends with a consideration of whether we need a new conceptualization of gender inequality, and discusses new guidelines for feminist research and politics.

Some sections of this text have been adapted from my books *Paradoxes of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) and *Breaking the Bowls: Degendering and Feminist Change* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), and from my chapter, "Constructing Gender: The Dancer and the Dance" in *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, edited by James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (New York, Guilford Publications, 2008).

The Redstockings Manifesto was issued in New York City on July 7, 1969. It first appeared as a mimeographed flier, designed for distribution at women's liberation events. This and other documents from the 1960s rebirth years of feminism are available through the Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives for Action Distribution Project, P.O. Box 2625, Gainesville, FL 32602 or <http://www.redstockings.org>.

Note that the full title of *Signs* is *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*.

Throughout the various editions, I have benefited from discussions on feminism and current politics with students and colleagues, and in particular, from the insights and critiques of Maren Carden, Carolle Charles, Susan Farrell, Eileen Moran, and Barbara Katz Rothman—my multi-feminist writing group. I particularly thank Susan Farrell for her information on women ethicists and feminist religions. The comments of the reviewers of the last edition have guided the changes in this edition. I also thank Claude Teweles for getting me started on this book, and Sherith Pankratz and Whitney Laemmli for working closely with me on this edition.

Judith Lorber
New York City

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FEMINISMS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO GENDER EQUALITY

Feminism is a social movement whose basic goal is equality between women and men. In many times and places in the past, people have insisted that women and men have similar capabilities and have tried to better the social position of all women, as well as the status of disadvantaged men. As an organized movement, modern feminism rose in the nineteenth century in Europe, America, and Japan in response to the great inequalities between the legal statuses of women and men citizens.

MODERN FEMINISM'S FIRST WAVE

The *first-wave* feminists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fought for rights we take for granted today. It is hard to believe these rights were among those once denied to women of every social class, racial category, ethnicity, and religion—the right to vote (suffrage), to own property and capital, to borrow money, to inherit, to keep money earned, to initiate a divorce, to retain custody of children, to go to college, to become a professionally certified physician, to argue cases in court, and to serve on a jury.

The theory of equality that feminists of the nineteenth century used in their fight for women's rights came out of liberal political philosophy, which said that all men should be equal under the law, that no one should have special privileges or rights. Of course, when the U.S. Constitution was written, that concept of equality excluded enslaved men and indentured menservants, because they were not free citizens, as well as all women, no matter what their social status, because they were not really free either. The legal status of supposedly free women was the same as that of children—economically dependent and deriving their social status from their father or husband. In Ibsen's famous nineteenth-century play *A Doll's House*, Nora forges her dead father's signature because she cannot legally sign her own name to the loan she needs to save her sick husband's life, and she works

at home in secret to pay it back. When her husband finds out, he does not thank her but rather condemns her as immoral and dishonest and not a fit mother for their children. He eventually forgives her, but Nora refuses to continue to live as a doll-wife, and she leaves him, slamming the door of the doll's house behind her.

First-wave feminism's goal was to get equal legal rights for women, especially the vote, or suffrage. (Feminists were often called *suffragists*.) In the United States, women did not get the right to vote nationally until 1920.¹ Many European countries also gave women the right to vote after World War I, in repayment for their war efforts. French women, however, did not get suffrage until after World War II, when a grateful Charles de Gaulle enfranchised them for their work in the underground fight against the Nazis and the collaborationist government of Nazi-occupied France. Japanese women were also granted the right to vote after World War II in the constitution written under the American occupation of Japan.

The Russian revolution of the early twentieth century gave women equal rights, even though the Bolsheviks criticized the individualism of "bourgeois feminism." Their emphasis was on work in the collective economy, with prenatal care and child care provided by the state so women could be both workers and mothers. Chinese women had legal equal rights after the Chinese communist revolution of 1948, but patriarchal families, especially in rural areas, restricted their actual liberty.

Suffrage was the main goal of women's liberation in the first wave of feminism in Western countries, but rights concerning property, earnings, and higher education—many of which were granted by the end of the nineteenth century—gave women a chance for economic independence. These rights were vital for raising married women's status from childlike dependence on a husband and for giving widows and single women some way of living on their own instead of as a poor relation in their father's or brother's or son's household. Liberated women in the first part of the twentieth century included independent factory girls who worked all day and went dancing at night, and middle- and upper-class educated women who had "Boston marriages" (were housemates for life).

Another branch of nineteenth-century feminism did not focus on equal rights but on a woman's right to "own" her body and to plan her pregnancies. A twentieth-century feminist struggle that was as hard fought in Western countries as that for suffrage was the fight for legal means of contraception that could be controlled by the woman. Women could not be free to be good mothers and wives, especially if they were poor, if they had one child after another. But doctors were forbidden to fit women with diaphragms or cervical caps (the precursors of the coil and the pill). In the United States, even mailing information across state lines was illegal. The widespread use of contraception by married women was feared by traditionalists, who saw the downfall of the family. Feminists feared that men would sexually exploit unmarried women who were protected against pregnancy. For women themselves, the positive outcome of this long battle

for legalized woman-controlled contraception has been both greater sexual freedom before marriage and planned parenthood after marriage.

As is evident from this brief overview, the first-wave feminist movement had many of the theoretical and political differences of the feminist movement that succeeded it. The question of differences between women and men, and whether they should be treated *equally* because they are essentially the same or *equitably* because they are essentially different, is still under debate. The question of where feminist politics should put the most effort—the public sphere (work and government) or the private sphere (family and sexuality)—is also still with us.

FEMINISM'S SECOND AND THIRD WAVES

The *second wave* of the modern feminist movement² began with the publication in France in 1949 of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This sweeping account of the historical and current status of women in the Western world argues that men set the standards and values, and women are the Other who lack the qualities the dominants exhibit. Men are the actors, women the reactors. Men thus are the first sex, women always the second sex. Men's dominance and women's subordination is not a biological phenomenon, de Beauvoir insisted, but a social creation: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman . . . ; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine" (1953, 267).

Although *The Second Sex* was widely read, the second wave of feminism did not take shape as an organized political movement until the late 1960s, when young people were publicly criticizing many aspects of Western society. In the years since, the feminist movement has made many contributions to social change by focusing attention on the continued ways women are more socially disadvantaged than men, by analyzing the sexual oppressions women suffer, and by proposing interpersonal as well as political and legal solutions. However, the feminist view of what makes women and men unequal is less unified today than in first-wave feminism, and there is a myriad of feminist solutions to gender inequality. If feminist voices seem to be much more fragmented than they were in the nineteenth century, it is the result of a deeper understanding of the sources of gender inequality. It is also the contradictory effect of uneven success. Feminists who are now members of corporations, academia, or government, or who are lawyers or doctors or respected artists and writers, are well aware of the limitations of their positions, given glass ceilings and sexual harassment. But their viewpoint is different from that of the more radical antiestablishment feminist critics, who decry institutionalized sexual oppression and pervasive devaluation of women.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many feminists concentrated on increasing women's legal rights, political representation, and entry into occupations and professions dominated by men. Other feminists worked to eliminate

sexual violence, prostitution, and pornography; sexist depictions of women in the media and cultural productions; and sexual harassment of women workers and students. Still others focused on changing language, knowledge, and history to reflect women's previously invisible experiences and contributions.

The feminisms that emerged in the 1990s—multiracial/multiethnic feminism, feminist studies of men, constructionist, postmodern, and queer theories, challenge “what everyone knows” about sex, sexuality, and gender. Not content with reforming or resisting the patriarchy and misogyny of the gendered social order, these feminisms challenge the duality and opposite-ness of female and male, homosexual and heterosexual, women and men. They argue that there are many sexes, sexualities, and genders, and many ways to express masculinity and femininity. By rebelling against conventional deep-seated assumptions and value judgments, they force us to look at how we “do gender” and how in the process we have built and maintain an unequal social order.

Third-wave feminism, which also emerged in the 1990s, is a movement of younger feminists who grew up with feminism. Inheritors of women's studies curricula in school and a much less gender-segregated social, economic, and political world, they reject the idea that women are oppressed by men. Rather, they include men as feminist activists. They assume that gender equality is the norm, and that women's agency and female sexuality are forms of power.

GENDER INEQUALITY

The goal of feminism as a political movement is to make women and men more equal legally, socially, and culturally. *Gender inequality* takes many different forms, depending on the economic structure and social organization of a particular society and on the culture of any particular group within that society. Although we speak of *gender inequality*, it is usually women who are disadvantaged relative to similarly situated men.

Women often receive lower pay for the same or comparable work, and they are frequently blocked in their chances for advancement, especially to top positions. There is usually an imbalance in the amount of housework and child care a wife does compared to her husband, even when both spend the same amount of time in paid work outside the home. When women professionals are matched with men of comparable productiveness, men still get greater recognition for their work and move up career ladders faster. On an overall basis, gender inequality means that work most often done by women, such as teaching small children and nursing, is paid less than work most often done by men, such as construction and mining.

Gender inequality can also take the form of girls getting less education than boys of the same social class. Nearly two-thirds of the world's illiterates are women, but in Western societies, the gender gap in education is

closing at all levels of schooling, and among some groups, women surpass men in higher education degrees. In many countries, men get priority over women in the distribution of health care services. Contraceptive use has risen in industrial countries, but in developing countries, complications in childbirth are still a leading cause of death for young women. AIDS takes an even more terrible toll on women than men globally, since women's risk of becoming infected with HIV during unprotected sex is two to four times higher than in men. The World Health Organization's 2007 AIDS Epidemic Update reported that about 33 million people are living with HIV/AIDS, and that half were women.³ Sexual politics influence the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Many women with HIV/AIDS have been infected through early sexual exploitation or by husbands who have multiple sexual partners but who refuse to use condoms.

Sexual exploitation and violence against women are part of gender inequality in many other ways. In wars and national uprisings, women of one racial ethnic group are often raped by the men of the opposing racial ethnic group as a deliberate weapon of shaming and humiliation. Domestically, women are vulnerable to beatings, rape, and murder—often by their husbands or boyfriends, and especially when they try to leave an abusive relationship. The bodies of girls and women are used in sex work—pornography and prostitution. They are on display in movies, television, and advertising in Western cultures. In some African and Middle Eastern cultures, their genitals are ritually cut and their bodies are covered from head to toe in the name of chastity. They may be forced to bear children they do not want or to have abortions or be sterilized against their will. In some countries with overpopulation, infant girls are much more often abandoned in orphanages than infant boys. In other countries, if the sex of the fetus can be determined, it is girls who are aborted.

Gender inequality can also disadvantage men. In many countries, only men serve in the armed forces, and in most countries, only men are sent into direct combat. It is mostly men who do the more dangerous work, such as firefighting and policing. Although women have fought in wars and are entering police forces and fire departments, the gender arrangements of most societies assume that women will do the work of bearing and caring for children while men will do the work of protecting and supporting them economically.

This gendered division of labor is rooted in the survival of small groups living at subsistence level, where babies are breast-fed and food is obtained for older children and adults by foraging and hunting. The child-care providers (mostly women) gather fruits and vegetables and hunt small animals, while babies are carried in slings and older children are helpers. Those not caring for children (mostly men, but also unmarried women) can travel farther in tracking large animals—more dangerous work. Hunters who come back with meat and hides may be highly praised, but if the hunt was unsuccessful, they still have something to eat when they return to the home camp, thanks to the child-minders' more reliable foraging.

Most women in industrial and postindustrial societies do not spend their lives having and caring for babies, but most women throughout the world do paid and unpaid work to supply their families with food, clothing, and shelter, even while they are taking care of children. The modern forms of gender inequality are not a complementary exchange of responsibilities but an elaborate system within which, it was estimated by a United Nations report in 1980, women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive 10 percent of the world's income, and own 1 percent of the world's property. The gender gap in paid work is narrowing, but women still do most of the domestic work and child care, and at the same time do agricultural labor, run small businesses, and do a great deal of home-based paid work, all of which is low-waged labor.

The major social and cultural institutions support this system of gender inequality. Religions legitimate the social arrangements that produce inequality, justifying them as right and proper. Laws support the status quo and also often make it impossible to redress the outcomes—to prosecute husbands for beating their wives, or men for raping vulnerable young girls. In the arts, women's productions have been ignored so often that they have been virtually invisible, leading Virginia Woolf to conclude that Anonymous must have been a woman. Sciences have been accused of asking biased questions and ignoring findings that do not support conventional beliefs about sex differences.

Except for the Scandinavian countries, which have the most gender-equal laws and state policies, most governments are run by socially dominant men, and their policies reflect their interests. In every period of change, including those of revolutionary upheaval, men's interests, not women's, have prevailed, and many men, but few women, have benefited from progressive social policies. Equality and justice for all usually means for men only. Women have never had their revolution because the structure of gender as a social institution has never been seriously challenged. Therefore, all men benefit from *patriarchal privileges*—women's unpaid work maintaining homes and bringing up children; women's low-paid work servicing hospitals, schools, and myriad other workplaces; and women's emotional nurturing and caretaking.

The main point recent feminisms have stressed about gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, but is deeply ingrained in the structure of societies. Gender inequality is built into the organization of marriage and families, work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts and other cultural productions, and the very language we speak. Making women and men equal, therefore, necessitates social and not individual solutions. These solutions have been framed as feminist politics that emerge from feminist theories about what produces gender inequality.

FEMINIST THEORIES

The foregoing portrait of a gender-unequal world is a summation of the work of generations of feminist researchers and scholars. Feminist theories

were developed to explain the reasons for this pervasive gender inequality. Feminists are not satisfied with the explanation that it is natural, God-given, or necessary because women get pregnant and give birth and men do not. Each of the feminisms described in this book has theories of gender inequality, some similar and overlapping, and some quite different.

The theories of the feminisms I have termed *reformist* focus on the unequal gendered division of labor in the home and in the workplace, the devaluation of women's work, and the uneven presence of women in the main institutions of society, especially politics and the law.

Resistant feminist theories of inequality coalesce around the concept of patriarchy, a system of interlocked oppressions and exploitations of women's bodies, sexuality, labor, and emotions.

Feminisms I have termed *rebellious* see gender inequality as embedded in the social construction and maintenance of the gendered social order through doing gender as individuals, in interaction, and as part of families, work organizations, and throughout cultural and knowledge productions.

Many feminists have incorporated into their theories of gender inequality the ways that women's and men's social statuses, personal identities, and life chances are intricately tied up with their racial, ethnic, and religious groups, their social class and family background, and their place of residence. Nonetheless, these widely differing groups of people have to fit into two and only two socially recognized and legal genders in Western societies—"men" and "women." The members of these two major status categories are supposed to be different from each other, and the members of the same category are supposed to have essential similarities. Work and family roles, as well as practically all other aspects of social life, are built on these two major divisions of people. This gendering produces the *gendered social order*. Gender inequality is built into the structure of the gendered social order because the two statuses—women and men—are treated differently and have significantly different life chances. How and why these social processes have come about and continue to operate is the subject of feminist theories. What to do about them is the aim of feminist politics.

FEMINIST POLITICS

While much of the feminist movement of the twentieth century has happened in the United States, Canada, England, Australia, and Europe, there have also been vital and important struggles for resources and empowerment for girls and women in Asian, African, and South and Central American countries. As these countries broke free of colonial control after World War II and set up independent governments, they, too, gave their women citizens the right to vote. Thanks to strong women's movements, many of the new states wrote equal rights for women into their constitutions, and some even mandated guaranteed political representation. In 2008, in the new democracy of Rwanda, 56 percent of its parliament were women, thanks to

its 2003 constitution requiring that at least 30 percent of all parliamentary and cabinet seats go to women.⁴ In contrast, after the 2008 election, 17 percent of the United States Senate were women, and 14 percent of the House of Representatives.

Many countries throughout the world have had elected women heads of state in the past 50 years, but the United States has yet to elect a woman president.⁵ The presence of a woman head of state does not necessarily represent a triumph of feminism, as most women politicians do not present themselves as champions of women but as leaders of everyone. Feminist political and legal changes are much more likely to come from grassroots political movements and single-issue or general feminist organizations.

At the other end of the political scale, in some Muslim countries, women still cannot vote, leave the country without their husband's permission, or get licenses to drive cars. In the Middle East, women and men have struggled to reconcile the rights of women with the traditional precepts of Islam and Judaism. In Asia, the problems of poverty and overpopulation, even though they more often adversely affect women and girls, need remedies that affect everyone. Women's political movements in these countries may not be called "feminist," but they are gender-based battles nevertheless.

Feminist politics does not refer only to the arena of government or the law; it can be confrontational protests, such as Take Back the Night marches, or work through organizations with a broad base, such as the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS). It can take place in service centers, such as battered women's shelters, and informational activities, such as gender-sensitivity and anti-rape sessions for college men.

Neighborhood or grassroots feminist activism tends to be woman-focused and concerned with local problems, while transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and national and international governing bodies and agencies are loci for diversity-based political action. Some feminists have despaired as women's movements break up over racial ethnic, religious, and national identity politics. The *borderlands* view offers the possibility of perspectives and politics based on panethnic and cross-racial affiliations and coalitions.

Changing language and media presentations to remove sexist put-downs that denigrate women is also feminist politics. Other remedies for redressing gender inequality, such as creating culture, knowledge, ethics, and theology from a woman's point of view, may not look political, but to feminists, they are deeply political because their intent is to change the way people think about the world.

FEMINISM AND THE GENDERED SOCIAL ORDER

Second-wave feminism's major theoretical accomplishment has been to make visible the structure, practices, and inequities of the gendered social