



Women Rights and Feminism: A Historical View

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ABSTRACT

Women's rights and feminism are deeply interconnected and widely designed to give the basic idea of women position in this world. Feminism largely proliferated since the last five decades as both a multidisciplinary voice advocating for the transformation of societal behaviour towards women rights and as an area for constructing new theories. Evaluating historical development of women rights is imperatively supportive in defining the scopes of feminism and the dichotomous relations among waves of feminism. It has exposed the fight and unsolved mysteries of women's rights movements. Women rights and feminism strive to accentuate the anticipated progress of equality and the delay in desired justice for half of humanity. Accordingly, this article reconstructs the elements along with ideas of feminism that can empower women and make them enthusiastic to stand for their human rights. The main focus of this proposed article is to provide readers with a historical overview and description of women's rights evolution and interconnection with the term feminism and is offered for those who have a keen interest in understanding these approaches to the development of women's rights and feminism.

Keywords: Equality, Empower, Feminism, Human Rights, Women Movements, Women Rights.

Introduction

In the contemporary era, examining women's matters or feasibly re-evaluating works of literature about and also by women is a significant task in the academic business all over the world. The comprehension of a woman's life has been the fertile ground for each fieldwork and for theorising the concept of women rights. The idea of women's rights has been accepted worldwide as an imperative magnitude. It is now believed as an essential aspect for accomplishing the development of any country.

All human beings are the creation of one God and are equal in the sight of the law of nature, and have equal rights and freedoms to live with their very own self-respect and dignity. No man has the explicit right to infringe the rights of women. Many international declarations and conventions have affirmed the protection and promotion of the rights of women. The principle of equal human rights for both men and women is enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (1945). In Article 1, the Charter proclaimed "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without any distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion" (UN, 1945). Further, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), a revolutionary document, has also reaffirmed all rights to both men and women equally. Article 1 of the UDHR explicitly says, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (UNGA, 1948). Since then, most of all, international covenants, regional instruments, and domestic laws have strengthened and extended their efforts in fortification against inequality of 'sex'. After adopting the Universal Declaration, which is only a moral obligation on the international community, the UN turned in the direction of shaping a legally binding document, i.e., a comprehensive treaty on 'Human Rights'. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) were adopted in 1966 and entered into force in 1976. Both the Covenants are based on the concept of equality of sex among other aspects. ICCPR ensured to all humans 'the equal protection of Law.' At the same time, ICESCR promised to all individuals 'the equal socio-economic statuses' (Vijapur, 2010, p. 141).

Women Rights

After the first half of the twentieth century, i.e., in the 1970s, the worldwide awakening on problems and issues of women were taken up as primary agenda of world-class to take concerns to an end. UN had declared the International Year of Women 1975 at the first World Conference in

Mexico City and where it proclaimed the 'Equality, Development, and Peace' for Women' decade (1976-1985). In 1976-1985, the second World Conference on Women took place in 1980 at Copenhagen in the mid of this decade. It led to many activities and initiatives for women at both National and International junctures. The main focus was on the significance of the women's role in developing all socio-economic, political, and cultural spheres (Mahapatra, 2006, p. 30). While the first time in 1993, the Declaration and Programme of Action at Vienna, the agreement embraced that women's rights and human rights are indivisible. It called for the integration of women's rights and asserted that the abolition of violence against women is a must responsibility upon the States under the Charter of human rights. Soon after a decade in 1995, there was another significant World Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing, commonly known as the 4th World Conference. It constituted an agenda for achieving 'Gender Equality' as a prerequisite for social justice at all levels.

Credibly, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979 is the most needful accepted progress of women's rights at the juncture of international law. It provides wide-ranging equal rights to all women on the same basis as men. The preamble of the CEDAW advocates, "the complete development of countries' welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields" (UN, 1979).

Beyond this, women's rights take birth by the development of the concept of equality and non-discrimination. Often women's rights are discussed and debated whenever there is a violation of women's rights. Gender discrimination or gender inequality has existed in our society for a long time. Feminists also believe that gender is a critical factor in forming people's socio-economic and political lives and processes. At present, we have entered into the third decade of the 21st century, but we are pretty incapable of rejuvenating our society where the total 'gender equality' survives. From the last few decades, gender equality has been a well-known notion of discussions under the theoretical approaches. Positively, things are quite changing.

Women as a global cradle and fundamental element of society had a distinct role in shaping and making women rights history (Jayapalan, 2001, p. 1). Several feminist movements enhanced women's lives and rights. Many feminists have contributed to realising feminism and women's rights. Moreover, "Women's rights are human rights" was perceived as the central aim of the Fourth World Conference on women's rights in Beijing in 1995. In every sphere of world dimensions, whether political, socio-economic, or literary it has been a uniting point for women across many boundaries that gives a new contour in the creation of concerted approaches for protecting women's rights (Ansari, 2006, p. 271). Women's rights undergo a surprising endeavour to rethink the link between history and rights, gender justice, and relegation of women status. Its significance relies not only on its impact on contemporary times but also on what it discovered in times of the feminist movement. (Susan, 2006, p. 50).

Origin and Development of Women's Rights

Both men and women had together developed the history of whole humanity from its very beginning. The term human right is an old phenomenon and as old as humankind. During the 13th century, in England, Magna Carta of 1215 was very major and the first legal document in history which gave a new contour to human rights. In the same era, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a great Christian philosopher, admitted that natural law should be the fundamental concept of all laws. The natural law idea of Greek political theory was a radical concept to counter claims of the divine theory of rights. Later on, remarkable developments took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The great political philosophers, John Locke (1632-1704) and Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) advocated the theory of natural rights and legal rights respectively. The Locke gave the idea of natural rights and postulated that the State shall protect the right to life, liberty, and property.

If we go back to Hobbes's theory of the state of nature, he believed that all humans are equal by nature. In particular, all humans are possessed of reason equally means the desire to preserve the life of their own and the capacity of preserving it. The standard interpretation of his argument is that since the state of nature there is a constant situation of war so it is in the interests of individuals (both women and men) to enter into a social contract. They should give up their freedom in exchange for the shelter and security that the State provides them. All human beings including men and women, irrespective of their egoism, should determine the State's existence and justified its rules and regulations. Therefore 'reason' leads to recognising the most significant path for preserving ones' own life, and is good to submit their powers to the State to make its authority, which will use to protect them. Likewise, Aristotle also did not deny that men and women are equal (Gaub, 2010, p. 209-211).

In respect to understanding the origin and development of women's rights, undoubtedly, it is appropriate for us to elucidate ourselves with the history of 'feminism.' Feminism comprises many political and socio-cultural movements, theories, and moral philosophies based on women's rights and gender discrimination. The theory of 'feminism' was emerged to raise the concerns of women. As a movement, it had travelled a long history of the revolution, which divulged the opposition to that social institution made available the situation of women's oppression. Feminism is an idea for 'social transformation' and an effort that is required in determining the end of injustice to women (Agarwal, 2008, p. 15). The concept was developed in Europe in the eighteenth century when there were significant social and rational cataclysms taking place, mainly in France and Britain. People were coming forward in opposition to the existing social and political order. Equality and liberty became the most rampant and adequate values of the time. Women were also involved in those movements for their 'liberty' and 'equality.' Many philosophers and great thinkers stood in support of women's rights and gender equality (Rehman, 2005, p. 18). They aimed to induce an equitable place for women with men in the world rather than to substitute women from men. Feminism worked as a driving force behind the women's movement. The concept of feminism asserted women's interest as a sex. Feminists do

not believe that women must dominate men. They also are not anti-men. Feminism has a humanistic concern. It is all about the liberation of women and their restoration in society as equal humans. It advocates the complete political, social, and economic equality of women with men.

In women's movement, there were three cores of philosophical positions, which can be termed as 'Liberal Feminism,' 'Radical Feminism,' and 'Socialist-Feminism'. Though, the ideologies of these significant movements of 'feminism' were very much different in their analysis of the roots of the subordinated condition of womanhood.

Liberal Feminism

The emergence of contemporary Liberal Feminism can be traced from the eighteenth century, which was also known as the *Enlightenment* of *Western Europe* or the 'first wave' of the feminist movement. The liberal philosophy was centred on the equality, reason, and liberty of an individual. Mary Wollstonecraft, a British feminist writer and liberal philosopher, in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), wrote against gender inequality, injustice, and oppression. She believed that women were proficient in 'reason,' so the education was entitled to them accordingly. Mary Wollstonecraft thought a woman was as capable of 'reason' as men, but conceit, feebleness, and frivolity were the natural provenances of her sex, on this basis, she argued for equal education for women.

Further, Mary Wollstonecraft insisted on the right to employment, property, and the security of civil laws for ensuring economic rights. So, a woman should not be forced to get married exclusively reliant on the kindness of her husband. Expressly, she wrote for the same political rights as men and, it was a deplorable tyranny if rights were denied (Agarwal, 2008, p. 16). She exhaustively condemned the laws, traditions, and customs that restrain a woman's liberty. Mary adopted the unambiguous indication that women are chief and primarily human beings and not sexual beings. She led the feminist movement for the emancipation of women in France. In 1791, Olympe De Gouges wrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Citizen*, revealed on the Declaration of the Rights of the Man and the Citizen of 1789. The declaration was ironic and exposed the failure of the French Revolution, which had been dedicated to equality. It states: "*This revolution will only take effect when all women become fully aware of their deplorable condition, and of the rights, they have lost in society*" (Gouges, 1791).

Further, J.S Mill (1806-1873), an ardent of Liberal thought, advocated women's political rights in his famous book, *Subjection of Women* (1861). This vibrant reclaiming of women's rights was recognised as transformative potentials for women. Women were relegated in all spheres of life. However, the Liberal thought contributed some efforts to mechanise some space to women in the socio-political ground, but that space was quite unsatisfactory, which was asserted by champions of women's rights in their work. Nearly in the mid of the nineteenth century, the emancipation of women was started slowly. However, it took pace quickened in the twentieth century and tremendously matured after World War I (Hate, 1969, p. 3). Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* published in the year 1963. The book was extensively credited for the revitalisation of feminism in America (Susan, 2006, p. 48). Betty attacked the passive roles of women, sex discrimination, and the prevalence of male control over women in society. However, she suggested that education and profession are the only effective measures for the amelioration of the status of women (Singh, 1988, p. 192).

Liberal Feminism examined how and why women are relegated and subordinated by society. There were many deviations of opinions as the liberal thinkers saw at the question of women's rights from their very philosophical and methodological perceptions. The theory of Liberal Feminism was based mainly on equality, reason, and individual freedom. (Tong, 1992, Chap 1). It was the mainstream face of liberal philosophy. Liberal thought was persuasively emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century and moved from the early philosophers and intellectuals to contemporary scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth century. During the end of the nineteenth century, the movement was focused on equal rights of property, opposed the chattel marriages and ownership of the woman and her children by the husband. They wanted the liberation of women as sexual equality or gender justice and wished to free women from all tyrannical gender roles. Liberal Feminism did not think that social structure needs to be reorganised. They accepted and considered it as valid but supported for the enhancement of social customs, attitudes, and laws without shifting the patriarchal standards for equal rights of women. They considered the rules and norms of the existed social structure to solve problems of sex inequality. They attacked women's lack of political and economic equality and intervened in the reproductive liberty of women by governments (Nehere, 2016, p.1). Liberal Feminism did not contemplate the link amid sexual oppression, the sexual division of labour, and the economic class structure. So, it demanded positive changes. Indeed, it did not support the idea of integrating women into grounds of actions that were associated with men, but it stretched to give an affirmative significance to womanhood.

Radical Feminism

The starting of Radical Feminism chronicled with the emergence of the 'second wave' of feminism nearly in 1969-1970. The radical feminism had coped significant ties with Liberal Feminism. Liberal feminists have had not reflected the links between sexual subjugation, gender-based division of labour, and the economic structure. Radical feminists claimed for the demolition of the patriarchal structure and their discriminatory norms, which affected women's rights. *Shulamith Firestone*, *Kate Millet*, *German Greer* are some advocating personalities of radical feminism. Kate Millet argued in

her *Sexual Politics* (1970) that the relationship between man and women is the exemplar of all relationships, therefore, sex is primarily political: "Social caste supercedes all other forms of in egalitarianism: racial, political, or economic, and unless the clinging to male supremacy as a birth right is finally forgone, all systems of oppression will continue to function simply by virtue of their logical and emotional mandate in the primary human situation" (Millett, 1970, p. 25). Male control over the public and private world constituted patriarchy. Therefore women's liberation needed the elimination of males' control. For this task, both men and women together have to eliminate gender discrimination, reproductive status, and temperament fabricated under patriarchy (Tong, 1992, p. 96). Shulamith Firestone, in her pioneering work, *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), blamed that biological difference is one of the root causes of the patriarchal structure of the society and male dominance over women. She found that women's status as a 'class' was not the reason, but her identity as sex or as a 'woman' was the main reason of her oppression.

Furthermore, Radical Feminism also demanded equal rights of women with men to pursue a career and working life. Simon De Beauvoir, an existentialist philosopher, wrote '*The Second Sex*' (1949) as a rise of modern feminism. She was concerted in her pioneering work, on the marginalisation of women, to explain the lower status of women (Ram, 2004, p. 6). She observed women as immanent and restricted, men as autonomous and supreme (Shah, 2012, p. 17). She stressed that women needed to go beyond their inner subservience. Thus, patriarchy was identified by the Radical feminists as a historical fact of oppression and subordination than other economic and political realities.

Hence, the elucidation for women's 'oppression' is grasped as rested in 'sexual oppression.' The 'sex' is the leading root cause of their subordination. It is understood as the self-regulating, oldest, and even the most reflective practice of disparity. The Radical feminists accept as true that 'patriarchy' was an independent historic fact ingrained in biology than the economy, and hence, gender relationships are the ultimate kind of oppression. Therefore, Radical feminists do not concur on marriages and families for the reason that these institutions lay down the pave to establish patriarchal societies. Sexual oppression is the primary form of women's oppression identified by Radicals. Men are the beneficiaries of this organised and universal form of power. Radical believe that all men unequivocally have absolute power over women. However, it does not mean that all men always oppress all women, nor does this deny that some of them want to abolish this patriarchal system.

Radical feminist philosophers deemed 'sexual oppression' to be overwhelmingly embedded, often divulged it as the form of coercive power. It is a sturdy concern in recuperating or realising constructive rudiments in femininity in amalgamation with its location of men as the beneficiaries of sexual power relations, consequences in a comparatively sharp division pooped up amid men and women. However, other Radical feminist writers note that male domination is a social structure and not the consequence of some in-built male propensity. In other words, feminists in this tradition see differences between men and women as inevitable. Indeed, the Radicals present a social and political change required to overthrow the system of male domination as far-reaching. They generally advocate a revolutionary social change model and want women to unite and become self-reliant and overthrow male dominance by a complete sexual revolution.

Socialist Feminism

Socialist Feminism struggled for the individual transformation as female empowerment. Socialist feminists stressed the relationship between family and women with paid and unpaid work from the 1970s. Marxists and Socialists consumed the same views on the oppressive conditions of women; they elucidated it as result of class-divided society and private property (Desai and Maitrayei, 1990, p. 16). They observed that women's work in the family and the economic sphere delineated their oppressive status in society. They were concentrated on advancing the social status of women by the fortification at the place of work. Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), a socialist feminist, regarded that the problems of women can be solved through the process of the Socialist revolution. The socialist feminists had faced critique of the welfare state because they failed to depict the clear and definite approaches of their philosophy and the benefits of dependent women in the Welfare State (Nehere, 2016, p. 10).

The Socialist feminist thought had attempted to uphold the significance of some elements of Marxist thought concerning class, labour, and distinction in its feminist approach (Krolokke and Sorenson, 2005, p. 23). They stated that women's oppression predated the development of class-based societies. Therefore, the class division cannot cause women oppression. However, some Socialists women believe that a Socialist society is also not found having complete equality. For Socialists, overthrowing capitalism is not enough. They have also felt that patriarchy needs to be overthrown for bringing equality. Socialist Feminism has many forms that also influenced psychoanalytic feminism.

There are many forms of Socialist Feminism which sometimes incorporate the influence of psychoanalytic feminisms. The three significant Socialist feminism thoughts can be categorised as arising from arguments amid Radical and Marxist feminists are:

1. The first aspect encompasses the concern of the social construction of sex (gender), which was primarily seen in terms of 'Freudian psychoanalysis.'
2. The second significant aspect of socialist feminism tried to make one theory that is 'capitalist patriarchy' by amalgamating the work of Radical and Marxist feminists.
3. The third aspect proposed a full-sized developed version of systems in which 'sexual' and 'class' subjugation interact, but they are not cast as dependent forms.

The relationship amid class and sex is respectively, capitalism and patriarchy that has identified the above three aspects of Socialist Feminism by

their opinions (Freedman, 2003, p. 464).

Class-divided society and private property are the leading causes of women's subordination in the opinion of socialists. There are four basic structures in which powerlessness of women rooted: 'production,' 'reproduction,' 'sexuality,' and 'socialisation' of children. Several Socialist feminists also think that unpaid domestic work caused women's oppression. They are not against men, but they feel to bring collaboration amid men and women and support women's causes.

Conclusion

Thus, it is understood in general that feminism is for both liberation and equality. For a long time, there has been a tendency recognised that all types of actions related to women belong only to the private domain of individuals in the family. Because of this belief, women's issues are discussed only in the domestic domain. However, a gradual change in attitude towards the question of women has begun to include a different dimension. A new type of visible awareness among women and this phenomenon has given rise to the women's movement. The women's movement is one of the dominant thrust areas, specially 'Gender Studies' has an interdisciplinary nature. It is a way and an indicator of social change in the community because until now, women have been in the backyard with a lower status in society compared to their male counterparts.

As an ideology, feminism initially emerged as a means of backing women's liberation and equality but it has broader aims to provide women a prosperous dignified future. It has several focuses, i.e., empowerment of women, their emancipation, equality, the abolition of male domination and gender discrimination. It focuses on structural and cultural characteristics of regional and local levels and emphasises on the need for different forms of contextual emancipation of women. Feminism attempts coalition of differentiations rather than oppositional divisiveness. The difference must not become a fact of dogmatism but solidarity.

This paper on "*Women Rights and Feminism: A Historical View*" divulges that the advancement of the theories of feminism helps to understand the enthusiastic struggle of the women for safeguarding their rights. Indeed, the feminism and its efforts had flourished the women's rights, without which the human rights of women were only a far dream. The doctrine of movements had recognised aims and policies that remains startlingly destined to failure. However, triumph in recognising advanced women rights and equality is merely the critical step in changing the attitude of society towards women. The fight for equality, does not comprise only intensifying women's movement and approaches to endorse specific women's rights, even it also involves the challenging task of shifting the opinions of society.

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