

# **“A” Level Sociology**

## **Teaching Notes for Students**

**Module: Family Life**

**Unit 6: Feminist Perspectives**

**The Aim of these Notes is to help you understand:**

1. A variety of feminist perspectives on male / female relationships.
2. The significance of the concepts of patriarchy, economic class and sex class in feminist thought.

**The Objectives of this Study Pack are to help you understand:**

1. The differences and similarities between varieties of feminist perspectives.
2. The idea of "malestream" bias.
3. The relationship between the concepts of class and patriarchy in feminist thought.
4. The theoretical relationship between ideology and people's material conditions of life.
5. The concept of "dual mode of production".

## Introduction

In these Notes we are going to examine a number of **feminist perspectives** relating to male / female relationships across a range of social institutions (but mainly family life and work,).

As you will discover as you plough your way through this (thankfully thin) set of Notes, "feminism" and "feminist perspectives" do not actually feature explicitly in any area of the syllabus except for "sociological theory" (which just about covers everything). However, I've decided to discuss them in the context of "family life" and "gender" because feminists have generally focused their theoretical attention upon these very important areas of social life.

In this respect, the following is intended mainly as a sort of "**theoretical overview**" of various feminist perspectives and we can justify this by noting two points:

1. Firstly, sociologists have been - and still are - **criticised** for what feminists have called their "**malestream**" bias. That is, the general preoccupation with **explaining male experiences** in and of the social world to the **exclusion** (until very recently at least) of **female experiences**.

From a feminist viewpoint, women tend to be discussed within Sociology (as elsewhere) as "appendages" of men (as you may have already discovered if you've studied areas of the syllabus such as "Work and Leisure", "Social Stratification" and "Deviance"). Feminist perspectives not only serve to redress this "male bias", they also offer a valuable contribution to the development of sociological theory and knowledge.

The Radical feminist **Kate Millett** ("Sexual Politics", 1971), for example, was particularly scathing when she argued:

**"...sociology examines the status quo, calls it phenomena, and pretends to take no stand on it, thereby avoiding the necessity to comment on the invidious character of the relationship between the sex groups it studies. Yet by slow degrees of converting statistic to fact, function to prescription, bias to biology (or some other indeterminate) it comes to ratify and rationalize what has been socially enjoined or imposed into what is and ought to be. And through its pose of objectivity, it gains a special efficacy in reinforcing stereotypes...Functionalists, like other reactionaries, are out to save the family".**

2. Secondly - and related closely to the above - feminism has been particularly concerned with the analysis of male / female relationships in terms of the relative significance of the concepts of "social class" and "patriarchy". A great deal of work has been done in relation to these concepts and explanations of male domination / female emancipation.

Before we look in more detail at a variety of feminist perspectives, a couple of general observations can be usefully made about the need for a "feminist perspective" on male / female gender relationships.

In the main, feminist perspectives tend to **reject** "malestream" (and especially Functionalist) arguments about the nature of gender relationships for three basic reasons:

- a. Firstly, any explanation of male / female relationships must include an analysis of **power inequalities** that stem from **economic, political and ideological inequalities** in our society.
- b. Secondly, feminism tends to take it as axiomatic (that is, as "self evident") that men and women in our society (indeed, the majority of, if not all, known human societies) do **not** enjoy some form of "**symmetrical**" relationship that is - at worst - "different but equal" or - at best - truly equal. All varieties of feminist thought (even the most politically conservative) tend to begin from the observation that women are not only socially different but also fundamentally unequal to men.
- c. Thirdly, in relation to the "gender and work" theme developed earlier, women's involvement in paid work is seen as **not** simply an extension of their family role. In some instances, as we have already seen, reference is made to women's "dual role", whilst in others the focus is placed upon the central role of females in the workplace (for example, as a main family "breadwinner"). Whilst feminists tend to disagree about the relative importance of the concepts of **class** and **patriarchy** as guiding concepts in the explanation of women's exploitation by men, the majority of feminists tend to agree that each is significant...

So, having got that out of the way, we can now turn towards an outline of various feminist perspectives which, in no particular order of significance, involves a consideration of:

- a. **Liberal feminism.**
- b. **Marxist feminism.**
- c. **Radical feminism.**
- d. **Socialist feminism**

To begin with, therefore, we can...err...begin at the beginning with:

### 1. Liberal Feminism.

Unlike the other forms of feminism noted above, Liberal feminism has tended **not** to be overly concerned with the development of a general body of **theoretical knowledge** about women's lives (and their relationship to men). This branch of feminism has, on the other hand, tended to be more concerned with day-to-day **questions** of **legal / political / economic** and **social equality** for women. As we will see, this has been both one of its great **strengths** (insofar as raising women's awareness, agitating for social change and so forth) and one of its greatest **weaknesses** (since, as you should be aware, lasting social change involves something more than changing people's attitudes - an idea we will develop in more detail in a moment).

In this respect, Liberal feminism has been concerned with such things as issues of **overt discrimination** against women in all areas of social life (work, education, the mass media and so forth), as well as arguing for various forms of **legal protection** and **social rights** for women (**anti-discrimination legislation, equal pay, child-care** facilities for working women, support for single mothers and the like).

As may be apparent, the main theoretical thrust of Liberal feminism has been to argue that **women** - as human beings - are **not inferior to men** and, on this basis, they should by right enjoy the **same political, legal, economic and social rights** and **responsibilities** as men.

Much of the political focus, in this respect, has been on the question of "**equality of opportunity**". That is, the argument that women should be able to **compete equally** with men in all spheres of social life (but especially the workplace and education).

Unlike their Marxist and Radical sisters, **Liberal** feminists have **not** advocated **revolutionary** changes in either the structure of society and / or male / female relationships. As I've already noted, this "**practical**" **approach** has achieved some notable **successes** (in terms of anti-discrimination, equal pay and maternity rights, for example), but it has also attracted a good deal of criticism (not the least from feminist writers). Such criticism has tended to focus not on the sentiment of "equality" (although Radical feminists would, as we will see, like to go further than this), but rather around the **means** to achieve it.

As I've suggested, Liberal feminists have focused their attention on "equality of opportunity"; what such feminists want is simply **parity** with men in terms of general rights and responsibilities. Since such feminism doesn't advocate wide-ranging, structural, changes in the organization of society, it's **main weapon** (at least in modern times) in the fight for equality of opportunity has been the **legal system**. In short, if women are unfairly and unreasonably discriminated against (in employment, for example) then laws are needed to "redress" the power imbalance, as it were.

The main **problem** here, however, is that **legal changes** do **not** address the **causes** of a situation (a law against theft, for example, does not stop people stealing. Whilst it may make them think about the consequences of stealing, if a person wants / needs to steal then they will find a way...).

**Similarly**, for an **employer** to **discriminate** against women, for example, it must be because they see some **advantage** in so doing (whether it involves paying lower wages, gaining a competitive edge over competitors or whatever). A law making discrimination illegal (even if it is thoroughly, efficiently and effectively **policed**) may be generally **desirable** (just as laws against theft may be seen to be desirable), but it **fails to address the things that make an employer discriminate against women in the first place**. In effect, what this means is that employers will look for ways of **avoiding** their responsibility "under the law" for as long as it is advantageous for them to do so. **Discrimination**, for example, will simply **change its form**, not be eradicated by legal changes.

**Question:**

**Can you suggest ways in which employers are able to discriminate women without breaking the law?**

We can, for example, see **evidence** of this in terms of the **Equal Pay Act (1976)** which, with its subsequent amendments and legal interpretations, makes it illegal for an employer to pay women less than men for the same job or a job comparable in stature. While, in a similar way to the **Sex Discrimination Act**, the **worst excesses** of employer discrimination have been removed, the Act doesn't appear to have had a great deal of effect in terms of women achieving pay parity with men.

In **1975**, for example, average female hourly earnings were 72% of male hourly earnings.

In **1988** average female hourly earnings were 71% of male hourly earnings. Similarly, **average female weekly wages** remain resolutely and substantially less than average male weekly wages...

The **reasons** for the above, as we have seen in earlier Teachers' Notes ("Women and Work", for example), are not difficult to find. Women tend to be **horizontally segregated** from men in the workforce.

For example, they are, in percentage terms, more likely to be employed in manual work and, of course, they are more likely to exchange "flexible working hours" (part-time work) for lower rates of pay (all part-time work in our society - for both males and females - tends to attract lower rates of pay, with a few notable exceptions...).

### Political Disclaimer!

The following comments are of a deeply subjective and political nature and, should you be of a nervous political disposition, I would advise not reading the next paragraph (I'll let you know when it's okay to read on).

...This is unless, of course, you happen to be an ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer (no names, no Lawsons) who can manage to get paid £50,000 a year for a "few hours a week" spent dispensing his invaluable advice to Barclays Bank - not bad for someone who presided over one of the longest and deepest economic recessions in Britain this century - nice work if you can get it...

Okay, normal service being resumed, it's also pertinent to note that **Equal Pay legislation** has **not** been very **effectively or resolutely policed**...

As I've suggested, **Liberal feminists** have been **criticised** (and variously derided as "bourgeois / middle-class" feminists) for their failure to understand that in any society that is fundamentally **unequal** in its **economic and social structure** "equality of opportunity" is a fairly meaningless concept (to paraphrase an observation once made by **Anatole France**, everyone - rich and poor alike - is free to sleep under the bridges of France, but only the rich man can sleep in a castle...).

#### Question:

**What do you think France meant by this observation and how might it be applicable to the concept of "equality of opportunity"?**

What this effectively means, perhaps, is that in a society divided along class lines and driven by economic exploitation, women - like working class men - are at a fundamental economic disadvantage...

To see how other feminists have attempted to resolve the problem of female inequality we can now turn to a discussion of,

## 2. Marxist Feminism.

As the name suggests, **Marxist feminists** have tended to explain **gender inequalities** from the viewpoint of Karl **Marx's** analysis of **Capitalism**. As we have already seen in relation to family life, various feminist writers have analysed institutions such as the **family** in terms of its **structural relationship** to **Capitalist** forms of **economic production**. In this respect, the emphasis is placed on the way **women** are generally **exploited** through such things as **domestic labour, child care** ("services" that leave men free to be either exploited economically in the workplace or, indeed, to do the exploiting - Marxists call this type of "free service" a "**use value**" - the value of unpaid female labour to Capitalism can be expressed in terms of how it

helps capitalists to carry-out economic exploitation, rather than in direct monetary terms) and as a "**reserve army of labour**".

Whilst this may, or may not, be a valid characterization of female exploitation, a frequent **criticism** of this perspective is that it appears to "overlook" (or ignore) the fact that, **historically, women** have **always** been **exploited** in some way by men. Thus, in the attempt to theorize female exploitation in terms of Capitalism (an economic system that has only existed for about 300 years), Marxist feminists apparently fail to explain how and why women are exploited in non- and pre-Capitalist societies.

To an extent, this is a valid criticism acknowledged by Marxist feminists and their response to it tends to be along the following lines:

1. Firstly, Capitalism is seen to be the highest, most efficient and systematic form of economic exploitation hitherto devised. In addition, it is an expanding economic system that now touches all societies in the world. As such it is seen to be deserving of special consideration.
2. Secondly, it represents the only economic system in which women have been systematically marginalized economically. In all other modes of economic production (such as Feudalism), women have played a reasonably central economic role. Thus, since Capitalism is seen to institutionalise the exploitation of women, this needs to be explained in economic terms.

Although I said at the start of this section that Marxist feminism derives much of its theoretical impetus from the work of Marx, it's probably true to say that Frederick **Engels** (Marx's long-time friend, supporter and collaborator) has been equally influential in the (early) development of Marxist feminism. Engels, in particular, was concerned to show how the "**bourgeois nuclear family**" came into being in tandem with Capitalism (in the sense that it arose out of the necessity for the owners of wealth to pass-on their property through legitimate heirs which lead to the development of a form of family organization that allowed this to take place efficiently and successfully).

In this respect we can see how **structural pressures** produced by the requirements of Capitalist **economics** produced a **change** in **family organization** - one that, to be sure, benefited men generally but which was not simply something "dreamt-up" by men in order to consolidate their power over women (although this was, indeed, an "unintended" consequence).

Thus, in simple terms,

1. For Capitalism as an economic system to be reproduced over time, it has to be possible for wealth to be passed-on from generation to generation.
2. In order to do this, the wealthy individual has to have some way of knowing who is their legitimate heir.
3. Marriage - and the development of a nuclear family arrangement through which females behaviour could be legally controlled - provides the framework for this assurance.

Thus, although **men** were the **main beneficiaries** of this development (because it was **men** who held **positions** of **wealth** and **power** that they needed to protect), the impetus for its development was **Capitalism**. In effect, this system of **patriarchal descent and inheritance** came into being because of **structural economic pressure**. The wealthy had a "problem" (how to ensure wealth was passed to legitimate family heirs) and the solution to this problem became the nuclear family...

**Question:**

**Why do you think the ability to pass-on wealth to a "rightful heir" might have been significant for the reproduction of Capitalism?**

In the above (oversimplified for the sake of clarity) development we can see the crux of the Marxist feminist position, insofar as it is argued that, in order to **understand** the basis of **male / female inequality** we have to analyse the **structural (economic) arrangements** that are ultimately responsible for producing this inequality.

However, whilst this type of argument may (or indeed, depending upon your point of view, may not) satisfactorily resolve this particular problem, Michelle **Barrett** ("Women's Oppression Today", 1980) has pointed out that it leaves a further question unanswered, namely, **why it should be women - rather than men - who suffer economic marginalization**.

For example, whilst it may be fairly apparent that the way the family as an institution is organized does indeed provide Capitalists with certain "use values" (in the forms of "free" services), it is not immediately apparent **why** it has to be **women**, specifically, who provide such services. As long as someone provides them, it should not particularly matter to both the Capitalist - or indeed Capitalism as a system of production - who these people are.

A fairly obvious **solution** to the question of why woman are dominated by men is to introduce the concept of **patriarchy** (the **male domination of women**). Indeed, this is a concept favoured by many **Radical feminists**, as we will see in a moment.

**Question:**

**What is meant by the idea of a "patriarchal ideology"?**

**Include some examples of the form this ideology might take (for example, the idea of a "mothering instinct" in females).**

From a Marxist feminist perspective, however, **Barrett** argues that whilst a **"patriarchal ideology"** (that is, a **set of ideas that seek to rationalize and justify males domination of females**) is clearly a useful and powerful concept in this context, she takes-issue with Radical feminists over the idea that it is of central or primary importance in the explanation of "female oppression".

**Barrett** argues that, like any form of ideology, patriarchy is simply a set of ideas. Similarly, **matriarchy** is an ideology that is logically no-more or no-less plausible and / or consistent - yet matriarchal societies, if they have ever existed (which is open to doubt) are few and far between.

For an ideology to take root - to become part of the normal, accepted, plausible, framework of ideas that people use to explain and justify their behaviour - it has to be **grounded** in some form of **material reality**. People have to **experience** the **reality** of an **ideology** in their **everyday lives** if it is to become successfully established.



Thus, for **example**, it is of little use trying to expound an ideology of female superiority over males if, in their everyday lives, people do not experience this superiority.

To put it another way, if I as a lecturer, continually tell you what an excellent student you are and, at the same time, you get consistently bad marks in your exams, then what are you likely to believe:

- a. The "ideological" aspect of my telling you how good you are, or,
- b. The "material conditions" aspect of the fact that you get bad marks?

In this respect, what this means is that there has to exist some **social mechanism** that both makes a patriarchal **ideology real** and **relevant** and serves to **limit** the impact of **alternative ideas** and **explanations**. This "social mechanism" - whatever it may actually be - has to be both all-encompassing and oppressive - yet at the same time **appear** to be natural, normal and inevitable (so that, in this case, women actually participate "willingly" in their own exploitation - just as the wage labourer participates willingly in their exploitation by an employer).

In relation to the above, therefore, it might be useful to look in more detail at the basis of **Barrett's** general argument. Whilst it is necessarily complex and rather involved, we can (over) simplify it in the following way...

According to **Barrett**, if we are to understand the **cause** of "**women's oppression today**", we need to look at the **early development of Capitalism**. In Britain, for example:

- a. As a Capitalist mode of production started to develop to firstly challenge and then replace the previous mode of production (Feudalism) it produced new relations of production (if you are unsure what this means, the Notes "Crime and Deviance: Orthodox Marxism" is a useful source of reference - alternatively, a textbook such as **Haralambos** "Themes and Perspectives" will be helpful).
- b. The cornerstone of these new relations was the fact that people sold their labour power in exchange for a wage. In this respect, an employer only had "rights" over an employee whilst the latter was in the workplace.
- c. In early Capitalism there were no welfare services provided by the State (government). People either worked, begged for charity or they starved...

If, for the sake of illustration, we **personalize** this situation, consider the **example** of two single people (one male, one female, both employed) who decide to set-up home together.

If the woman became pregnant (and, considering there was no contraception this was highly probable - women could only control their fertility by abstaining from sexual intercourse) she would have to stop work in the last few weeks / months of that pregnancy. In addition, following the birth of their child:

1. No child-support services were provided by the State.
2. No extended family structure existed to provide support for the family (since, as writers such as Laslett have shown, high mortality rates in the late Feudal / early Capitalist period (the late sixteenth / early seventeenth centuries in Britain) meant that it was rare for people to survive into what we would call "early middle age").

Average life expectancy in 1690 was, according to Joseph ("Sociology For Everyone"), just 32 years...

#### Note

In calculating "average life expectancy" we are presented with a number of reliability problems:

- a. No official records of birth and death exist for this period (16th - 17th century).
- b. As an average, it includes everyone in society. Since we know that the rich have longer life expectancies than the poor, it would be reasonable to assume that life expectancy for a working class male / female in 1690 would have been less than 32 years.
- c. In the past especially, high rates of infant mortality (death within the first year of birth) distort the average figures. We can illustrate this in the following way:
  1. In 1900, average life expectancy in Britain was around 40 years.
  2. If, however, we only include people who survived their first year of birth, average life expectancy rises to about 58.

In terms of the above, therefore, it might be reasonable to assume that the **life expectancy** for **working class males and females** was around 40 years of age - which does, of course, mean that few would have survived into what we would call "old age"; few, in effect, would have survived long enough to become grandparents. Those that did, however, would have been either too old and sick to provide much support for their (married) children and we also know that the vast majority of the old in this period lived out their last years in asylums and institutions rather than the family.

3. Given this situation, our family group would have been faced with a relatively stark **choice**. One parent would have to work and, given that the female would have stopped work during pregnancy / child-birth, it appears logical to assume that this situation would have continued - the female would have assumed responsibility for child-care whilst the male would have continued to work.

This situation would be **repeated** across many thousands of family groups and, in effect, people's **individual choices** effectively become **constrained** by (**structural economic pressures**). Over time, therefore, this "routine" relationship starts to become established as the **norm** - not because people particularly want it or because of some form of unconstrained choice but simply out of economic logic and necessity.

In **Marxist feminist** terms, the importance of this **economic dimension** to people's relationships is stressed. Just as an **employee** became **dependent** upon an **employer** for a job, a wage and hence survival, so this kind of **dependent relationship** became **mirrored** by the **family** group. In this instance, the **woman** becomes **dependent** upon her **partner** for survival. In both instances, of course, this is a highly-dependent relationship and, therefore, one characterized by relations of domination and subordination.

In addition, these **relationships** become **routinized over time**. The Capitalist seeks to justify and maintain his domination (because it is advantageous to him) and the male seeks to justify and maintain his domination (because, in exchange for sharing part of his wage he receives domestic services in return).

**Barrett** argues, therefore, that it is hardly surprising that in a situation where:

- a. One individual has power over another and
- b. The powerful individual stands to benefit by exercising that power, then
- c. People become effectively "locked-into" these relationships. It becomes - eventually - a normal part of people's lives (as, over time, children are socialized into these expected male / female, employer / employee roles).

For **Barrett**, therefore, a "**patriarchal ideology**" only develops effectively out of the **initial relations of (male) domination and (female) subordination produced** by the **Capitalist** system of production - **not the other way around as many Radical feminists have argued**.

Thus, the combination of the material fact of economic dependency coupled with the ideological rationalizations of this dependency becomes a powerful social brew in which women are the eventual "losers".

**Question:**  
In what ways do women "lose out" in this relationship?

According to **Barrett**, the cause of "women's oppression today" (to coin a phrase) is **not** simply to be found in economic dependency (although it remains a significant factor). A patriarchal ideology that has been developed, practiced and refined over two or three hundred years is a powerful ideology...

In this respect, while for Capitalism - as a system of economic production - it doesn't really matter who is employed (and exploited) the fact of **female biology** becomes significant only in **combination** with this form of **economic organization**. Biology - both male and female - is a necessary - but in itself **not** a sufficient - condition for female exploitation. If, for example, men gave birth, or the State, extended family and so forth had been able to care for children, then things would have been (or indeed could be) different...

To **sum-up** this (rather complicated) section, we can note that, according to Marxist feminists, **female biology** becomes **exploited** in a particular way through its **combination** with a particular form of **economic organization** (and not vice versa as Radical feminists have argued).

Before we turn towards an examination of Radical feminism we can **illustrate** the **difference of interpretation** between Marxist and Radical feminist thought in relation to patriarchy in the following way:

As we have seen, ideologies, by definition, develop out of the need to explain and justify a particular set of material conditions. They are not the cause of these conditions. For feminists, therefore, there are two basic ways of seeing the development of a **patriarchal ideology**:

1. In **Marxist feminist** terms, whereby the material conditions under which this ideology arises is economic. Men dominate women economically and rationalize this situation in a variety of ways.
2. In **Radical feminist** terms, whereby the material conditions under which this ideology arises is, ultimately, biological. Men dominate women because they use their superior strength, capacity for violence and ability to exploit female biological dependency during pregnancy and childbirth to dominate women.

Each of the above interpretations has possible consequences for the future of male / female relationships.

In the **former**, like-minded males and females could work together to deny the effectiveness of patriarchy, to change the economic system and so forth.

In the **latter**, however, since the cause of the (female's) problem is men, this has clear implications for their possible future co-operation, as we will see in a moment.

### 3. Radical Feminism.

For Radical feminists, two concepts assume a central significance in terms of any analysis of male / female relationships:

#### 1. "Patriarchy":

The domination of women by men.

#### 2. "Sex class":

The idea here is that, because of their biology (specifically, the ability to bear children) and patriarchal domination, women become **dependent** on men for their material survival and protection. In this respect, since **all women** have a **common biology** and are **all subject to male oppression** they constitute a **distinct class** - one that has its own interests and political agenda.

In this section, therefore, we are going to look at how these concepts have been developed by Radical feminists such as **Shulamith Firestone** ("The Dialectic of Sex", 1972), **Kate Millett** ("Sexual Politics", 1970) and **Christine Delphy**.

For **Firestone**, patriarchy originates in the division between men and women within the family group (she argues that the "biological family group" has existed at all times and in all societies and, for this reason, sees **patriarchy** as a **fundamental characteristic** of male / female relationships in all known societies).

The **biological family unit** is seen, by **Firestone**, to be the **source of patriarchal domination** and she characterises it as being based upon four "**facts**" (I've qualified this because, as we will see in a moment, it is not altogether clear whether or not these really are facts):

1. Women, because of their reproductive biology, have always been dependent upon men for their protection and survival.
2. Human infants are dependent upon adults for a relatively long period of time (during which they have to be looked after).
3. There is a basic and **universal mother - infant bond** based upon the fact that the mother actually gestates the child - it comes from her body. Firestone sees this as a special, interdependent, relationship unlike that which exists between a father and child.
4. The biological (reproductive) division between the sexes is the origin of all other divisions - economic, political and ideological.

On the basis of these "facts", **Firestone** argues that **social class**, for example, has a **biological origin** and **patriarchy** represents the **ideological means** whereby men **exploit** female **biology** in their own interests. For this reason, Firestone (in common with many Radical feminists) **rejects** the idea that the condition of female exploitation is necessarily and exclusively related to Capitalism (although, of course, Capitalism is seen to be an exploitative economic system). Capitalism, like any economic system, is seen to be built upon the exploitation of female biology by men and, for Radical feminists (unlike their Marxist counterparts), the revolutionary overthrow of Capitalism is **not** seen as a solution to women's exploitation (since it cannot change the fact that men will still be able to exploit female biology).

The implications of this analysis are relatively clear. If:

- a. The "**sex class**" interest of women is emancipation from male domination (just as for Marxist feminists the "class interest" of workers is emancipation from the Capitalist) and
- b. The origin of male domination is the exploitation of women's dependent biology (**men**, in this respect, are the "**sex class**" **enemy**, just as for Marxist feminists Capitalists are the "class enemy"),

it follows logically that women can **only be emancipated** from male domination once they are able to **free** themselves from their **biological dependency** on men.

For Radical feminists, this **emancipation** can be achieved through such means as:

- a. **Removing their biological dependency** - if conception and foetal development takes place outside the womb, for example, women can no longer be exploited biologically.
- b. **Renouncing heterosexual relationships** in favour of homosexual (**lesbian**) relationships. **Daly**, for example, cites "male aggressiveness" as a central element in the domination of women and has advocated **lesbian relationships** as the **only form of sexual relationship** that is **free from the tyranny of patriarchy**.

Whichever "solution" is pursued, it's clear that the **"destruction of "the family"** is required as the **first step** along the road to either true equality or the establishment of a society based upon **matriarchal domination...**

There are a number of **methodological problems** apparent in this type of analysis and **Barrett** ("Women's Oppression Today") has clearly and forcefully identified a number of these when she questions the **validity** of the "**facts**" upon which Firestone, for example, bases her analysis. As **Barrett** argues:

"...although Firestone puts forward a feminist polemic [that is, a one-sided argument] and is concerned to show how advances in reproductive technology could liberate women, her analysis incorporates popular assumptions about the family. The "facts" of which she speaks are culturally and historically variable. Childbirth, for instance, is considerably more disruptive to women's lives in some societies than in others. The dependence of children upon adults has varied widely at different points in time with contemporary capitalism reaching the apogee of decades of financial and emotional dependence. As Aries ["Centuries of Childhood", 1962] has convincingly demonstrated, the concept of "childhood" itself is an historically specific one. The universality of mother / child interdependence has been challenged by anthropological evidence of different cultural child-rearing practices. These first three "facts" are all no more than a description of beliefs about the family in contemporary capitalism that Firestone has generalized into universal biological imperatives. The fourth "fact" is a

theoretical assertion bearing no obvious relationship to the premises it is supposed to follow. We can conclude nothing more from this than that the ideology of the family has succeeded, with this writer at least, in presenting historically variable structures and meanings as "natural" and therefore inevitable".

**Question:**

What does Barrett mean when she says "The fourth "fact" is a theoretical assertion bearing no obvious relationship to the premises it is supposed to follow"?

Barrett's basic criticisms can be summarized as follows:

1. Radical feminists fail to understand that the gender relationships which exist within the family group in capitalist societies are created by - and are specific to - the economic imperatives of this economic system (as we have seen earlier).
2. There is **no real evidence** to suggest that women constitute a "**sex class**", since it is clear that, apart from a common biology, women may have no real shared interests "as a class apart from men". It is difficult to see, for example, what "common interests" are shared by upper class and working class women - aside from the fact that they are women.
3. "Patriarchy" is **not** a universal ideology that is somehow "free floating" in society. It stems from the particular material conditions of people's lives in Capitalist society.

#### 4. Socialist Feminism.

In the preceding outline of feminist perspectives you might be forgiven (but not by me) for thinking that the three variants - Liberal, Marxist and Radical - represent fairly discrete (that is, "complete in themselves") perspectives which do not have much - if anything - in common. Whilst this is, to some extent, true, it's important **not to overstate these differences**, since it is evident that there are also a number of **broad areas of general agreement**. As I hope you have seen throughout the course, whenever "sociological perspectives" are discussed there is a tendency to **overstate theoretical differences** for the sake of **conceptual convenience**...

In relation to **Liberal, Marxist and Radical feminism**, therefore, we can note the following:

1. There is a general agreement amongst feminist writers that women represent an "oppressed minority" (or, perhaps more-correctly, an "oppressed majority") in our society. Women generally are seen to suffer a "dual discrimination", insofar as they are oppressed both economically and in terms of their gender.

**Question:**

In terms of "dual discrimination", in what ways can women be considered as an "oppressed majority"?

2. Each perspective tends to be (justifiably) critical of a "malestream" bias in the social sciences generally (just as there is a "malestream" bias in the Arts and Natural Sciences). The validity of women's history (frequently referred-to somewhat ironically as "**herstory**" by feminists) and life experiences is frequently ignored or down-played by male writers. Feminist perspectives provide a significant (and overdue) attempt to redress the imbalance.

It's especially ironic, perhaps, that in a subject such as Sociology, where the majority of students at all levels (GCSE, A-Level and Degree) are female, the overwhelming majority of writers and academics are male - men, moreover, who have tended to concentrate their efforts upon analysing male histories and male experiences and, in so doing, have relegated the analysis of female experiences to areas such as "family life".

**Question:**

**What reasons can you identify for the fact that most Sociology students are female?**

3. Whilst writers working within each perspective have tended to develop both a different analysis of the causes of female oppression and different political strategies aimed at removing such oppression, it is evident that both the concepts of **class** and **patriarchy** are extremely useful as a means of explaining the "underlying causes" of women's oppression.

4. The concept of patriarchy (which has tended to be either ignored or downplayed by male sociologists) helps us to consider historical and cultural female oppression in all types of society (non-, pre- and Capitalist). The concepts of both "economic class" and "sex class" also help us to understand the particular forms that female oppression and discrimination take in various societies and historical epochs.

In terms of the above the position of women in any society tends to be somewhat unique (although not necessarily so - as we have seen earlier, blacks in our society have tended to suffer from a "**dual discrimination**"). In this respect, it is evident that in order to analyse female contributions to and experiences in our society we have to understand them in terms of a **combination of both class and patriarchy**:

This follows because:

- a. Not all women share a common class position and class interest in Capitalist society. As you should be aware, the experiences and life chances of upper class females are significantly different to those of working class females (where the position of the former may be closer to that of men than to their working class counterparts).
- b. To view women simply as a "sex class" whose basic interest involves emancipation from men would leave unresolved the problem of economic exploitation.

**Socialist feminism**, therefore, whilst having a number of things in **common** with other feminist perspectives

- support for practical action to improve the position of women's lives on an everyday basis (Liberal feminism),
- attacking the causes of women's economic oppression (Marxist feminism),
- challenging the patriarchal assumptions that underpin male / female domestic relations (Radical feminism),

is also a **distinct perspective** in its own right. **Unlike**, for example:

**Liberal feminism** - Socialist feminists do not see legal and / or political changes as sufficient in themselves. Women have to be emancipated as a **class**, rather than on a piecemeal, ad hoc, basis.

**Marxist feminism** - since the revolutionary overthrow of Capitalism does **not** seem very likely to occur, this "solution" to female exploitation tends not to be seen as a particularly useful one to pursue.

**Radical feminism** - whilst patriarchy is seen to be a significant factor in female oppression, Socialist feminists do **not** see women as a "sex class", nor do they see all men as "the class enemy". Not all male / female relationships are characterised by oppression and exploitation, for example.

Technological "solutions" to female exploitation are also viewed with suspicion (since control over development and exploitation of technology has traditionally been a male preserve), as is the idea that a matriarchal society is somehow superior and preferable to a patriarchal society.

In essence, perhaps, **Socialist feminism** seeks to **combine political analysis** with **economic and domestic reform** as a means of improving the social position of women.

In theoretical terms, the main idea that tends to set **Socialist feminists** apart from other feminist perspectives is probably the recognition that **neither patriarchy nor class** are, in their **separate** ways, explanations for female oppression. Various social factors are seen to shape women's lives (class, gender, ethnicity, age and so forth), with **no single factor** being seen as the key to unlocking women's oppression.

**Marxist feminists** tend to be **criticised** for placing too much emphasis upon class relations in the economic sphere (women considered as part of the working class, for example) and not paying enough attention to female experiences outside the labour market (within the family / domestic sphere, for example).

**Radical feminists**, on the other hand, tend to be **criticised** for over-emphasizing the factors that separate women from men (their biology in particular - over-stating the significance of biological differences - and also unsubstantiated / uncritical assumptions about male and female psychology).

In this respect, the Radical feminist interpretation of the concept of patriarchy as a form of "trans-cultural" phenomenon (that is, one that is common / inherent to male / female relationships across all societies) is seen to be theoretically-doubtful for two main reasons:

- a. The position of women has **differed comparatively** (across different cultures) and historically within the same society.
- b. It ignores the fact that, in economic terms, both **males and females** may have **common class interests** that **over-ride biological differences**.

The relationship between "economic class" and "sex class" is considered to be important by Socialist feminists in the sense that female biology is clearly significant insofar as it gives men the **opportunity** to dominate women by limiting their ability to compete economically. However, **economic discrimination, segregation** and so forth is evidently a factor that affects women's **social choices** and **experiences**.



Economic discrimination, for **example**, clearly has a socializing influence in relation to women's desire to marry, raise children and the like (domestic labour, for example, may be seen as a preferable alternative to low wage, low skill, repetitive work...

**Sylvia Walby** ("The Historical Periodization of Patriarchy", 1988) personifies the Socialist feminist perspective when she argues that we need to understand male / female relationships in terms of "**dual modes of production**".

1. A "**patriarchal mode**" that is found in domestic labour, paid work and so forth (where women are exploited on the basis of gender).
2. An "**economic mode**" where women, like men, are exploited on the basis of their class.

**Question:**

**What do you think is meant by the idea of a "patriarchal mode of production"?**

For **Walby**, this "dual form" is considered significant for two reasons:

- a. The **patriarchal mode** is **never** found in **isolation** from the **economic mode** - female discrimination is **always** based upon some form of economic discrimination / exploitation (since men can only exploit a "biological advantage" in a wider social context involving the economic organization of a society).
- b. Although **patriarchy pre-dates Capitalism** (in the sense that it has existed in all human societies in one form or another), **Capitalism** is seen to be a **significant economic development** because of the way in which it **systematized economic exploitation** - raising it to new and hitherto unseen heights, for example.

In particular, the **marginalization of domestic economies** and **subsistence farming** in favour of the ascendancy of paid (factory-type) work is seen as significant since it expanded male power bases and opportunities at the expense of female power bases.

For **Walby**, as for many **Socialist feminists**, Capitalism and patriarchy do not necessarily work hand-in-glove, however. On some occasions there is a **dynamic tension** between them.

For **example**, **Walby** argues that such tension has developed between the interests of a Capitalist class (the desire to employ the cheapest possible form of labour, regardless of sex) and the interests of men (patriarchy) who may resist attempts by employers to replace male workers with (cheaper) female workers.

**Walby** argues that, out of this tension (a "**dialectical relationship**" in technical terms) there has been a resulting **change** from "**private patriarchy**" (where women are mainly controlled and exploited within the family group) to "**public patriarchy**" (whereby female economic involvement is restricted in some way - certain types of work, lower levels of pay and benefits and the like).

**Summary**

1. Feminist perspectives have attempted to redress what they see as a "malestream bias" in the social sciences by focusing upon women's lives and experiences.
2. Liberal feminism is the least radical of feminist perspectives. It has, however, probably been most effective in improving the status and economic position of women in our society.
3. Despite anti-discrimination legislation in Britain, women remain at an economic disadvantage to men.
4. Marxist feminists explain female subordination primarily in terms of their economic class position. Patriarchy is an important, but secondary, concept.
5. Radical feminists explain female subordination primarily in terms of patriarchy. economic forms of exploitation are seen to derive from this fundamental form of female subordination.
6. Socialist feminism is closer to Marxist feminist types of analysis, but political action has tended to focus upon raising the consciousness and conditions of life for women, rather than upon revolutionary politics.

**Examination Questions.**

1. Assess the contribution of feminist perspectives to an understanding of contemporary family life (9 marks).
2. Evaluate the claim that patriarchy, not social class, is the most important explanation of gender inequality (25).
3. Identify two similarities between the position of women and ethnic minorities in the labour market (2 marks).
4. How might feminists explain the similarities between the position of women and ethnic minorities in the labour market (8 marks).
5. Assess feminist explanations of the sexual division of labour in modern Britain (10 marks).