

Liberal feminism

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1. Definition

Context of emergence

Liberal feminism, also known as egalitarian feminism, emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries. This was a period of great social change in Western countries: the French and American revolutions, the transition from a feudal society to an industrial society, from a monarchical State to a democratic State based on the rule of law, the development of capitalism, etc. Major social movements appeared, such as labour, abolitionist, and feminist movements.

What is liberalism?

Liberalism is a political philosophy that emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries alongside the advent of modernity and the rise of capitalism. It is a doctrine that encourages the development of freedoms, particularly in the political and economic spheres. The key notions of liberalism include individual freedom, democracy, equal opportunities, and equal rights.

Liberal feminism was thus born in Western countries from the contact of educated women with liberal ideas. Liberal feminists want to apply the philosophy of liberalism to gender equality: the oppression of women lies in their lack of political and civil rights. It can, therefore, be countered by reforms aiming at establishing equal opportunities for both women and men. Women's 'liberation' would, thereby, be achieved by putting an end to discriminatory practices, and by pushing for equal rights.

Feminism of equal rights

Liberal feminism is a feminism of equal rights, i.e., egalitarian feminism; that is, it demands political equality - women's right to vote and stand for election, access to the labour market - but also equal rights when it comes to marriage, education or work (equal pay). In short, liberal feminists revendicate their right to play an active role in society and to be treated in the same way as their male counterparts. In contrast to pro-sex feminism, but similarly to radical feminism, liberal feminism is traditionally opposed to prostitution.

Consequently, it is a reformist (not revolutionary) feminism, which does not question the system but believes in its capacity to reform. Liberal feminism is individualistic, not group-based: rights are granted to individuals, who are assumed to be equal and, therefore, equally deserving, rather than to one gender. So, anyone believing in a feminism limited to equal rights for men and women is referring to liberal feminism.

2. The movement's history

Liberal (or egalitarian) feminism echoes the spirit of the French Revolution and its claims for freedom and equality. Olympe de Gouges became one of the first prominent figures of liberal feminism in France, by publishing her famous *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Citizen* in 1791, in response to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* of 1789. In Article 1, she states that "Women are born free and equal in rights with men". It claimed equal civil and political rights, but also the right to freedom, property, security, divorce, and the abolition of slavery.

At the same time in England, Mary Wollstonecraft was also considered a pioneer of liberal feminism, notably with her pamphlet *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792. A century later, John Stuart Mill defended the civic and legal equality of women and their right to vote in his essay *On the Subjection of Women*, published in 1869.

The ensuing 17th to the 19th centuries saw the gradual rise of feminist movements based on political liberalism, demanding the same rights for women as those already granted to men. Nevertheless, the first major advances in gender equality did not happen until the 20th century. The first half of the century is characterized by the first wave of feminism in the West. The suffragettes demanded the right to vote for women. This struggle was mainly led by liberal/egalitarian feminists, although more revolutionary feminists also took part in the movement.



Source¹

The first country to grant women the right to vote was New Zealand in 1893. While France was a forerunner when it came to male suffrage, it was not until 1944 that French women obtained the right to vote and stand for election. This first wave, centred around the fight for the right to vote and political equality, is traditionally associated with liberal feminism, while the second wave is rather linked with radical feminism.

Second-wave feminism took off in the early 1960s, a period marked by the civil rights movement for African Americans and the independence movement for decolonisation. Although women were granted the right to vote and more were entering the labour market, this did not automatically result in equality: feminists still demanded the right to equal pay. Furthermore, women could not open a bank account or freely dispose of their assets without their husband's permission.

Liberal feminists invented and popularised the concept of 'sexism' to refer to ideas and social practices that keep women in a subordinate role. Sexism is, according to them, the fundamental cause of discrimination. It is based, among other things, on biological determinism (or essentialism), an ideology that asserts that certain behaviours or abilities are inherent to women or men and derived from biological characteristics. Following this ideology, differences between women and men are natural, rather than social or cultural: women are naturally prone to domestic work and disinterested in politics or productive work, while men are naturally prone to governing but unfit to take care of children or the home.

¹ Wikimedia Commons, "Suffragettes demonstrating outside the Police Court", by Johnny Cyprus, July 7, 2009. Available at:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Suffragettes_demonstrating_outside_the_Police_Court.jpg

Sexism is further based on socialisation into traditional roles. In 1963, the liberal feminist Betty Friedman published *The feminine mystique*, a book in which she denounced the American ideology of femininity which defines women merely as wives or mothers. Lastly, sexism emanates from a view of women being objectified and conceived as sexual objects (in advertising, in the street, at work, etc.), which restrains their freedom (to dress and act as they wish, to move around in public spaces, etc.).

3. Liberal feminism today

Liberal feminism has traditionally focused on equality from a legal standpoint, which could be considered almost fully achieved in some Western countries, as evidenced by the constitutions of democratic countries that acknowledge the fact that no individual can be discriminated against based on their gender. In practice, however, gender equality in law is not necessarily synonymous with real and effective equality, which is why liberal feminism continues to exist.

At work

Since the 1970s up until recently, there has been a significant increase in women's paid work. This feminisation of the labour market has enabled women to tap into their potential differently than by being wives or mothers.

Liberal feminists emphasise that women must enter the labour market, but also that there are inequalities to be corrected in this market. This results in a phenomenon of sexual segregation: women and men are unequally distributed depending on their jobs, which also impacts their income.

There is an over-representation of women in sectors such as sales and services, teaching, nursing, personal care, as well as accommodation and catering. In contrast, men hold more positions in transport, construction, natural sciences, management, public services or fishing and forestry.

While women are more represented in sectors that were once considered male - lawyers, accountants, notaries, veterinarians and doctors - they are still confined to the least prestigious positions in the hierarchy (under-representation of women as CEOs, vice-presidents, directors, heads of department, etc.). This is often referred to as the famous "glass ceiling"².

Moreover, there is little evidence of the reverse movement (men entering traditionally female professions) because these environments grant them less recognition, while positions usually pay less and are more precarious. The labour market is still very gendered, and this differentiation has

² Explained here in further details: Natacha Bernerd, "L'économie sous le prisme du genre", June 2020, Gender in Geopolitics Institute, available at: <https://igg-geo.org/?p=1252>

significant consequences on wages. The wage gap is narrowing over time, yet this trend has levelled off since 1992. According to INSEE³, French women earned on average 28.5% less than men in 2017, and 16.8% less for doing the same job.

This wage gap can be partly explained by factors such as years of experience (women enter the labour market later), career decisions (gendered socialisation pushes women to have different career expectations than their male counterparts) or family choices ('baby penalty': discrimination against women raising children). Nevertheless, there is always an unexplained part, i.e., simply due to discriminatory practices.

In politics

While women represent 52.3% of the electorate in France⁴, they constitute only 38.7% of the deputies of the National Assembly⁵, 31.6% of the senators⁶, and 16.7% of the presidents of the departmental councils⁷. They represent only 17.2% of mayors in municipalities with fewer than 1000 inhabitants and 12.9% in those with more than 1000 inhabitants⁸. Finally, only 7.7% of the presidents of EPCIs (Établissement Public de Coopération Intercommunale) and one vice-president in five are women⁹.

Having more women in positions of power would trigger positive changes to make women's voices heard, as women are generally more progressive than men.

On television

According to a study by the CSA (Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel) carried out in 2018¹⁰, women's airtime is 39% against 61% of men's. Women are less likely to play the role of a heroine (38.4%) than men (61.6%). In addition, young women who fit the norms of hegemonic femininity¹¹ are over-represented: only 4% of women on television are over 65 years old, whereas they represent three times that number in the actual population.

³ Simon Georges-Kot, « Écarts de rémunération femmes-hommes : surtout l'effet du temps de travail et de l'emploi occupé », June 18, 2020, INSEE. Available at: [https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4514861#:~:text=En%202017%2C%20en%20France%2C%20les,de%20travail%20\(figure%201\).&text=Plus%20de%2040%20%25%20de%20cet,in%3%A9galit%C3%A9s%20de%20temps%20de%20travail](https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4514861#:~:text=En%202017%2C%20en%20France%2C%20les,de%20travail%20(figure%201).&text=Plus%20de%2040%20%25%20de%20cet,in%3%A9galit%C3%A9s%20de%20temps%20de%20travail)

⁴ Insee, Single electoral register, data as of April 14, 2019

⁵ HCE, « Parité en politique : entre progrès et stagnations », 2015

⁶ HCE, « Les chiffres clés de la parité aux élections sénatoriales », 2018

⁷ HCE, Report « Quel partage du pouvoir entre les élu.e.s au niveau local ? », February 2017

⁸ HCE, « Parité en politique : entre progrès et stagnations », February 2015

⁹ HCE, « Parité dans les intercommunalités ? Propositions pour une égale représentation des femmes et des hommes dans les instances communautaires », November 2018

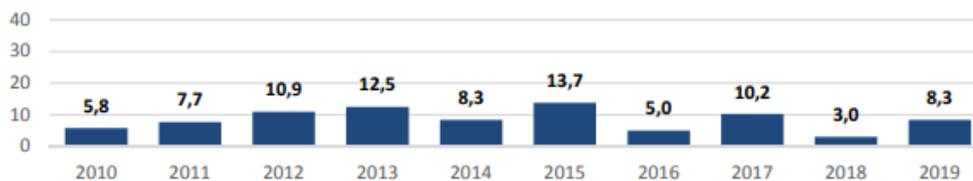
¹⁰ CSA, Barometer of women's representation on television, 2018

¹¹ Hegemonic femininity is the culturally valued form of femininity, according to norms of bodily and emotional femininity (youthfulness, thinness, grace, gentleness, empathy...)

The Bechdel test aims to examine the presence of women in film and reveal the under-representation of women and the abundance of sexism in fiction. To pass the test, the film must contain two named, speaking female characters whose conversation is not related to a man.

As far as directors are concerned, only a quarter of the French films produced in 2019 were directed or co-directed by women, for a budget that was on average 40.2% lower than those directed by their male counterparts¹². Having more female directors at the helm would allow for more female actors and less stereotyping in cultural works.

Part des réalisatrices dans les films d'initiative française de plus de 7 M€ (%)



Source : CNC

Part des réalisatrices dans les films d'initiative française de moins de 1 M€ (%)



Source : CNC

Captions above:

Share of female directors in French-initiated films with a budget over 7 million euros

Share of female directors in French-initiated films with a budget under 1 million euros

In advertisements, just like in the film industry, women are very often objectified and sexualized, portrayed naked to sell a car, a food, household or beauty item, or even insurance or banking services.

4. Liberal feminist solutions

To counter sexism at the root of the inequalities that women have to face, liberal feminists have sought to educate the public on this issue. This is one of the great successes of this feminist

¹² CNC, Movies directed by women in 2019, March 5th, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cnc.fr/documents/36995/151799/Synth%C3%A8ses+CNC+N%C2%B010+-+Les+films+r%C3%A9alis%C3%A9s+par+des+femmes+-+Mars+2020.pdf/c9492bfd-39a1-f4c6-a60d-a3bba257d14d>

movement, as sexism is now a widely known, used and negatively connoted concept. They also lobbied for gender-neutral education, especially textbooks in the 1960s and 1970s, supported sending girls into non-traditional fields and professions, and advocated for parity measures (50% women everywhere) to achieve equality.

Today, in line with economic liberalism and globalisation, liberal feminists believe that women's entry into the labour market is the solution to the economic emancipation of women in so-called 'developing' countries.

It can, therefore, be considered a relatively moderate feminist movement. For example, liberal feminists do not talk about systemic discrimination (women's oppression comes from a system, the patriarchy, which needs to be changed), an idea dear to the more revolutionary feminists (Marxists and radicals). Instead, they believe in the power of changing individual mindsets, not in the need to overthrow the system as a whole.

5. Strengths and weaknesses of liberal feminism

Strength: a relatively 'popular' feminism

Liberal feminism is rooted in the dominant political and economic values of liberalism, that is, the society in which we live (individual freedom, equal opportunities, democracy, etc.), which is why it is more easily won over by public opinion. Its demands for legal equality are difficult to challenge today; it would be difficult to justify in Western countries being against women's right to vote or their access to education. These are major victories won by liberal feminism and are no longer questioned.

But: a bourgeois feminism

Liberal feminism has been carried by privileged women, especially in terms of class (but also other power relations related to race, sexuality etc.), fighting mainly for white women with a bourgeois background. In this framework, women have come to be seen and understood as a homogeneous group whose diversity has not been taken into account. For instance, liberal feminists may have questioned the number of women in politics but not the number of women of colour, or the number of working-class women. As a result, other forms of oppression, especially class oppression, were not challenged.

This is the reason why, in the 19th century, the German Social Democratic Party and the Workers' International struggled in labelling themselves as feminists, seen as a bourgeois movement. They argued that the legal equality demanded by liberal feminism would only lead to real equality through socialism. From this idea, a feminism described as socialist was derived.

A system feminism

Liberal feminism is based on the misconception that civic equality is sufficient to achieve gender equality. Indeed, while it is true that lack of voting rights, education or access to the labour market were major obstacles to achieving gender equality, inequalities can not only be considered from a legal standpoint.

Liberal or egalitarian feminism is system feminism, and sometimes even right-wing feminism: today it is the institutionalized feminism promoted by certain States or international organisations such as the UN, sometimes in an opportunistic manner. Liberal feminism does not question even promotes, capitalism, which is at the root of the oppression of many women in the world. So, even if civic equality were achieved in all countries, the economic and ideological oppression of women would persist, with other forms of oppression specific towards women of colour, members of the LGBTQI+ community, women suffering from poverty or disabilities, etc.

Liberal feminism is analytically deficient in terms of the causes of women's inequality and oppression. The 'enemy' is not identified as men, and the subject of power and hierarchical relationships between women and men is barely addressed.

A focus on work

By insisting on finding a way out of oppression through work (liberal values), contemporary liberal feminism appears to be ethnocentric and very white. The solutions it proposes are not always adapted to developing countries. Women always worked (free domestic labour), and access to the formal labour market does not necessarily signify liberation nor empowerment. Purely economic solutions tend to make the social or ideological aspects of gender equality invisible.

6. Conclusion

In that respect, liberal feminism made a lot of progress possible, especially in first-wave feminism, but gradually lost its unexpected and innovative appeal by becoming part of the dominant values of society. By seeking to build consensus and rally the masses, its activism tended to become harmless and uncritical. Moreover, its anchorage in (neo-)liberal, therefore individualistic values prevents the theorising of women's oppression as collective, systemic and structural.

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