

Gender Inequality:

Addressing Equity Problems from A Socialist Feminism Perspective

Worldwide, the sex/gender equity problems found within the family and workplace are abundant. Women face discrimination issues (which involve both access discrimination and treatment discrimination), occupation segregation, discrepancies in earnings due to different classifications, and differential evaluation. Women often have a relatively low sense of personal entitlement, often abetted by the organizational structures on which our society is formed. With the assumptions and focal points of the socialist feminism perspective in mind, the sufficiency of the course readings is analyzed with regards to global statistics. Socialist feminism does not assume the need for a different analysis of family and workplace issues as described by liberal feminism. A social feminist perspective supports and complements the liberal analyses of gender inequity in the wide society. Furthermore, a social feminist perspective does not require different solutions than those suggested by liberal feminism; this perspective simply goes deeper into concrete and employable strategies that would be effective in resolving family and workplace inequities. This paper outlines and presents several specific concepts descriptively from a socialist feminism perspective. These concepts include a general notion of 'equality' (detailing ideas of absolute equality and a gender-specific approach to equality), the elimination of gender as an organizing standard (applying to cultural institutions), the notion of a 'just society', the fundamental alteration of social institutions, and economic structure of society and family.

Equality is perceived as a cultural and societal goal. The socialist approach to the social purity campaigns commonly attempts to inflict 'virtue', which is to inflict morally appropriate behavior upon society through the *force of law*. Socialist feminists use the State (albeit the patriarchal State that is the adversary of women) to impose their ideals of a just society. Lips (2005) discussed ways in which gender equality should be defined under the law. Of several perspectives taken into account, one was the notion of absolute equality. Grounded in liberal feminism, this concept would require legislation to be sex blind and gender neutral and to deny the

existence of any meaningful differences between women and men (with the exception of reproductive differences). Socialist feminism definitely would support and comply with this standard, but would probably go to further lengths to achieve equality. One likely action would be to employ legislation specifically targeted to the needs of women as a disadvantaged group. In addition, measures would be taken (e.g. use of impartial terms like “spouse” or “parent”) so that protections and benefits would be accessible to both women and men. Another liberal based perspective presented a gender-specific approach, which recognizes biological, economic, and social distinctions between the sexes and identifies women as a disadvantaged group. With regards to this approach, socialist feminists would see to it that legislation that is damaging to women would be eradicated, while provisions that are beneficial to women in rectifying the inequalities between women and men would be upheld. This is further supported by the socialist viewpoint, since socialist feminism candidly accepts the assumption that women are subordinated. Among the various feminist perspectives and their distinctive standpoints, the idea of whether or not it is good for women to have complete equality under the law is continuously deliberated. In attempting to attain equality in the workplace, liberal feminists suppose the repeated failed attempts indicate that women must (according to social norms) adjust to the male-structured workforce. If women are to accomplish equal rank with men, the assumption has been they must be equipped to survive and succeed in a man’s world. Liberal feminists suggest that if gender equality in the workplace is so desired, there must be some modifications made in the workplace for women. Consider a common issue: secretarial workers (the vast majority of whom are women) are increasingly finding their work tasks computerized. This results in social *and* occupational segregation, since these women are virtually chained to their computers. Such modifications may benefit both women and men by making the workplace more compliant to the particular needs of all. The labor that has traditionally been done by women – child care and the continuation and

preservation of home and family life – is important work that should be publicly acknowledged and mutual. Family and relationship tasks are acclaimed as a necessary appendage to the wage-work process, for men as well as women. Even though socialist feminism focuses more on the ‘class’ component rather than the ‘gender’ component, gender is actually one biased quality that defines a class. For example, not only do men have similar biologies, they also hold similar political appeal which is maintained through the institution of patriarchy. This ‘institution of patriarchy’ is represented as a white male culture with male-centered economics (also known as capitalism). Furthermore, since socialist feminism roots class affiliation in biology, the classes are established with men and women inevitable opponents. Thus, the interests of men are unavoidably in disagreement with the interests of women. A socialist feminist solution assumes that it is only after capitalism and the family structure in which men dominate are eliminated that women will be equal with men.

Many liberal feminists argue that the long-term objective of feminism should be to eliminate gender as an organizing standard in society. This line of reasoning is continued and supported by a socialist feminism perspective since these cultural institutions (family, workforce, sexual division of labor) are considered major factors in subordination. As long as gender is a considerable category to view women and men as essentially singular, it will be objectified to make distinctions. One liberal implication of restructuring society to deemphasize gender would suggest that policies regarding families would change. Our culture’s conception of male dominance and masculinity has influenced relationships and these conceptions have become solidified when those relationships are formalized in the structure of marriage. Also present in the cultural institution of marriage, as Lips (1991) suggests “...men’s access to economic resources is directly controlled by forces outside the family, whereas women’s access to economic resources is subject not only to those external forces but also to her husband’s mediation of those forces.” Groups of differing size and

gender composition would make up households, thus families would not be based on gender. Women and men would be equally expected to take accountability for children, thus parenting would no longer be gender associated. Division of labor within the family would not be supported. The man would not inevitably be the chief economic supporter of the family since the pay structure for workers would not differentiate because of worker's gender or because of the gender appropriateness of particular jobs. Professional caretaking of children would no longer be considered and salaried as a low-status occupation but would be compensated according to its proficiency level. Women would have equal access to the full range of available jobs, to progression and authority within these jobs, and to respectful interpersonal treatment as they work at these jobs. If women and men had equal work related power, they would presumably be equally likely to be promoted into influential positions and would be paid equal average salaries. Women would no longer be exempt from positions of power and authority by a sex-centered professional structure or by dominating men's view of them as 'different'. This is the ultimate goal of socialist feminism. Only when women and men are seen as collectively interchangeable within society will gender equality confront and eliminate the experience of sex differences that lead to separateness in the family and division of labor. The dissimilarities between women and men are a result of the importance our society places on gender -- because our notions of gender are socially formulated. Accordingly, socialist feminists stress that deemphasizing gender as a pertinent 'class' in the way society is ordered is an essential aspect of weakening those social expectations.

The term *equality* is described as socioeconomic by socialist feminists. To illustrate, look at how closely related the concept of *equality* is to the concept of *justice*. Socialist feminism promotes socioeconomic equality, and the move towards 'justice' illustrates the concept in terms of a particular social condition. In other words, socialist feminism provides a detailed framework in which social and economic preparations represent a just society. Under this framework, such a

society would be without white male culture or capitalism. Justice is viewed as an end-state – a point at which explicit societal arrangements are employed. When such an ‘end-state’ exists, women can presumably say ‘we have justice’. Alongside liberal feminism, socialist feminism recognizes that a profound and comprehensible awareness of injustice must precede action to amend the injustice. It should be noted, however, that people value justice, and this value affects the nature of collective actions they are willing to advocate. “Even when people *are* aware of an injustice, such as sex discrimination, and even when it affects them directly, they are unwilling to accept a means of correcting that injustice that itself seems unfair” (Lips, 1991). Before society can operate under equality between women and men, individuals within society must be made conscious of the fact that gender inequalities are present and influence them personally, and that strong action must be taken to equalize these gender inequalities. Socialist feminists believe that people are more likely to organize change if they feel that the current arrangement is unjust, particularly if it is seen as disadvantageous to them. For example, people often do not identify sex discrimination, and even when this recognition is apparent, there is little acknowledgment that they have been affected personally and individually by it. So in order to degenderize society to promote socioeconomic equality, women must first recognize themselves as targets of subordination, and then act to change the structures in which class oppression operates. Furthermore, integrating men and women in the labor force entails more than removing obstacles to women in male-dominated fields. Socialist feminism promotes a breakdown of the barriers that men face in female-dominated fields as well. Sex discrimination is a key factor in the continuation of the division of labor along gender lines, and has been revealed in a tendency to pay women less than men for equivalent or comparable work, to assess women’s work performance less highly than men’s, and to show partiality to men over women during hiring processes. Legislation has been introduced to counteract sex discrimination in hiring and to promote pay equity between women

and men, which is supported by socialist feminism. It is revealed just how culturally entrenched the obstructions are, and what concrete measures and actions (e.g. legislative action) must be taken before men and women attain true occupational and economic equality. From a socialist feminist perspective, to do this requires taking the 'gender' out of the workforce, family, and society altogether – then, equality will thrive.

Socialist feminism supports the analysis by liberal feminists that society's institutions must be altered fundamentally rather than simply made 'more receptive' to women's participation. It has been argued that "hierarchical, competitive, and individualistic values that permeate most institutions are fundamentally opposed to designing a system that would stress equality among groups" (Lips, 2005). Social feminists attempt to develop the best possible vision of the ultimate goals of change. They include strategies and approaches for making the system work for women (and men) and policies for a radical transformation of that system. Socialist feminists have in common with liberal feminists a basis of concern for gender justice. They urge that the advancement of the idea that the genuine needs of *both* sexes must weigh equally in any consideration of justice will come to abolish subordination in our society's cultural institutions. Class hierarchies, supremacy differentials, and dominance-submission comprise the social structure adopted by people as an adaptation to a social *order* that generates a particular social *structure*. Socialist feminists strive to alter the social structure in ways that make the dominance aspect of power less important, thus reducing the subordination within cultural institutions. This is important from a socialist feminism perspective: the kind of future society that might emerge in which females are not automatically associated with lower status than males will lift the restrictions and burdens of a gendered culture. Accordingly, in the process of creating changes in the authoritative relationship between the sexes, the social structure will be positively altered in ways

that make the 'dominance of males and submissiveness of females' aspect of power less important.

Since economic structure is the root of all gender inequality in socialist feminism, a closer look at the 'economic structure' within the family is beneficial as an explanatory aid to this concept. The interpretation by Galbraith (1991) of the role of women in maintaining and increasing economic growth can be somewhat supplemented by a socialist feminist perspective. In modern industrial societies the function that wives perform, according to the author, is exclusively an administrative force by which to manage production and consumption of the family. Here also, the notion of capitalism comes into play. Housewives actually promote the capitalists because they provide the time (by devoting themselves completely to the family) for men to work for paid employment. As the men increase the family income, they also increase consumption, which renders management by the women. When a husband's income exceeds a certain point, it is expected that his wife will be needed to manage "things" within the household. The consumption of the family has reached the point where it requires full-time attention. In fulfilling this non-stop role as family manager, the housewife automatically aids in the development of the next generation workers. And she also, in turn, is part of the 'reserve army' of workers. As an advantage, especially from a socialist perspective, this could ultimately prepare the woman for independence – prepare her to break free from the bondage of subordination within the cultural institution of family. It could also potentially (and hypothetically) affect global statistics – by moving away from the family 'ideal' and into the workforce, women will continue working many hours, but they will receive much more reward financially (anything is better than the unpaid housewife job). They start making more money, and perhaps invest it – this would increase the 'ownership' of wealth. Then, they would be able to cut back on supplying food for others, since it's just as easy to order take-out or cook for yourself. It is easy to see *why* women complete 2/3 of the world's labor, receive 5 percent of the world's pay, and

own less than 1% of the world's wealth, and produce 80% of the food supply when considering women's subordinating roles within the family. I like to consider what Galbraith (1991) said: "the more immediate reward to women from an understanding of their economic role is in liberalizing the opportunity for choice...once women see that they serve purposes which are *not* their own, they will see that they can serve purposes which *are* their own."

In our current patriarchal society, the gender equality problems found within the family and workplace are all too copious. Women face discrimination (which occupies both access discrimination and treatment discrimination), occupation segregation, wage gaps in financial earnings due to different classifications, and differential evaluation. In our society, there is structured inequality in the power relationships between women and men in many of our cultural institutions. The goal of socialist feminism has been and still is to make that structure observable and understandable. The more visible that structure is, the more likely we are to take the gender out of our classified culture. The views of liberal feminists provide a solid ground for socialist feminism; thus the socialist feminist perspective does not assume the need for a different analysis of family and workplace issues as liberal feminism has provided. A social feminist perspective supports and complements the liberal analyses of gender inequity in the wide society and does not require different solutions than those suggested by liberal feminism. This perspective only goes deeper into concrete and employable strategies that would be effective in resolving family and workplace inequities. The global sex/gender equity problem is a very complex issue, and much can be said concerning the matter at hand. The concepts examined here include notions of 'equality' and 'just society', the elimination of gender as an organizing standard, the fundamental alteration of social institutions and how these alterations would/do effect the economic structure of society and family. The definitive hope is that one day each person will have the freedom to realize

her- or himself fully, without regards to gender, and will join others in creating an egalitarian and classless society.

## References

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