**Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory is a major branch [within sociology](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-sociology-3026639) that shifts its assumptions, analytic lens, and topical focus away from the male viewpoint and experience toward that of women.

In doing so, feminist theory shines a light on social problems, trends, and issues that are otherwise overlooked or misidentified by the historically dominant male [perspective within social theory](https://www.thoughtco.com/theoretical-perspectives-3026716).

**Key Takeaways**

Key areas of focus within feminist theory include:

* discrimination and exclusion [on the basis of sex and gender](https://www.thoughtco.com/sociology-issues-4133509)
* objectification
* structural and economic inequality
* power and oppression
* [gender roles and stereotypes](https://www.thoughtco.com/gender-definition-3026335)

Overview

Many people incorrectly believe that feminist theory focuses exclusively on girls and women and that it has an inherent goal of promoting the superiority of women over men.

In reality, feminist theory has always been about viewing the social world in a way that illuminates the forces that create and support inequality, oppression, and injustice, and in doing so, promotes the pursuit of equality and justice.

That said, since the experiences and perspectives of women and girls were historically excluded for years from social theory and social science, much feminist theory has focused on their interactions and experiences within society to ensure that half the world's population is not left out of how we see and understand social forces, relations, and problems.

While most feminist theorists throughout history have been women, people of all genders can be found working in the discipline today. By shifting the focus of social theory away from the perspectives and experiences of men, feminist theorists have created social theories that are more inclusive and creative than those that assume the social actor to always be a man.

Part of what makes feminist theory creative and inclusive is that it often considers [how systems of power and oppression interact](https://www.thoughtco.com/intersectionality-definition-3026353), which is to say it does not just focus on gendered power and oppression, but on how this might intersect with systemic racism, a hierarchical class system, sexuality, nationality, and (dis)ability, among other things.

Gender Differences

Some feminist theory provides an analytic framework for understanding how women's location in and experience of social situations differ from men's.

For example, cultural feminists look at the different values associated with womanhood and femininity as a reason for why men and women experience the social world differently.Other feminist theorists believe that the different roles assigned to women and men within institutions better explain gender differences, including [the sexual division of labor in the household](https://www.thoughtco.com/expressive-roles-definition-3026318).

Existential and phenomenological feminists focus on how women have been marginalized and defined as [“other”](https://www.thoughtco.com/concept-of-other-in-sociology-3026437) in [patriarchal societies](https://www.thoughtco.com/patriarchal-society-feminism-definition-3528978). Some feminist theorists focus specifically on how masculinity is developed through socialization, and how its development interacts with the process of developing femininity in girls.

Gender Inequality

Feminist theories that focus on gender inequality recognize that women's location in and experience of social situations are not only different but also unequal to men's.

Liberal feminists argue that women have the same capacity as men for moral reasoning and agency, but that [patriarchy](https://www.thoughtco.com/patriarchy-3026445), particularly the sexist division of labor, has historically denied women the opportunity to express and practice this reasoning.

These dynamics serve to shove women into the [private sphere](https://www.thoughtco.com/private-and-public-spheres-3026464) of the household and to exclude them from full participation in public life. Liberal feminists point out that gender inequality exists for women in a heterosexual marriage and that women do not benefit from being married.

Indeed, these feminist theorists claim, married women have higher levels of stress than unmarried women and married men.Therefore, the sexual division of labor in both the public and private spheres needs to be altered for women to achieve equality in marriage.

Gender Oppression

Theories of gender oppression go further than theories of gender difference and gender inequality by arguing that not only are women different from or unequal to men, but that they are actively oppressed, subordinated, [and even abused by men](https://www.thoughtco.com/the-relationship-between-gender-and-violence-3026201).

Power is the key variable in the two main theories of gender oppression: psychoanalytic feminism and [radical feminism](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-radical-feminism-3528997).

Psychoanalytic feminists attempt to explain power relations between men and women by reformulating Sigmund Freud's theories of human emotions, childhood development, and the workings of the subconscious and unconscious. They believe that conscious calculation cannot fully explain the production and reproduction of patriarchy.﻿

Radical feminists argue that being a woman is a positive thing in and of itself, but that this is not acknowledged in [patriarchal societies](https://www.thoughtco.com/patriarchal-society-feminism-definition-3528978) where women are oppressed. They identify physical violence as being at the base of patriarchy, but they think that patriarchy can be defeated if women recognize their own value and strength, establish a sisterhood of trust with other women, confront oppression critically, and form female-based separatist networks in the private and public spheres.

Structural Oppression

Structural oppression theories posit that women's oppression and inequality are a result of [capitalism](https://www.thoughtco.com/capitalism-definition-p2-3026124), patriarchy, and [racism](https://www.thoughtco.com/racism-definition-3026511).

Socialist feminists agree with [Karl Marx](https://www.thoughtco.com/karl-marx-biography-3026494) and Freidrich Engels that the working class is exploited as a consequence of capitalism, but they seek to extend this exploitation not just to class but also to gender.

Intersectionality theorists seek to explain oppression and inequality across a variety of variables, including class, gender, race, ethnicity, and age. They offer the important insight that not all women experience oppression in the same way, and that the same forces that work to oppress women and girls also oppress people of color and other marginalized groups.

One way structural oppression of women, specifically the economic kind, manifests in society is in [the gender wage gap](https://www.thoughtco.com/pay-inequality-based-on-gender-3026092), which shows that men routinely earn more for the same work than women.

An intersectional view of this situation shows that women of color, and men of color, too, are even further penalized relative to the earnings of white men.

In the late 20th century, this strain of feminist theory was extended to account for the globalization of capitalism and how its methods of production and of accumulating wealth center on the exploitation of women workers around the world.