

**Feminism is one of the most recent ideologies to emerge, although its origins can be traced far back into history. We examine its historical roots and identify and discuss the different forms of feminism that have developed over the last two centuries. We then link feminism with other ideologies and conclude with a critique and assessment of feminism in the modern world.**

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## **POINTS TO CONSIDER**

- Since feminism is ignored in so many areas of key importance in other ideologies, is the term 'ideology' really appropriate for it?
- Why is feminism very new, very middle class and very Western? Or is it?
- How susceptible to rational analysis is radical feminism?
- Have the main elements of the feminist critique of Western society been answered and reformed over the last three decades?
- Why have so many feminist perspectives been absorbed into mainstream culture and political parties?
- Are men the new 'oppressed' gender in Western society?

Women must keep quiet at gatherings of the church. They are not allowed to speak; they must take a subordinate place, as the Law enjoins. If they want any information let them ask their husbands at home; it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church. (St Paul, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 14:34–5)

St. Paul enjoined self-effacement and discretion upon women; he based the subordination of woman to man upon both the Old and the New Dispensations. . . . In a religion that holds the flesh accursed woman becomes the devil's most fearful temptation. (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949)

While women represent 50 per cent of the world population, they perform nearly two thirds of all working hours, receive one-tenth of world income and own less than 1 per cent of world property. (UN Report, 1980)

It is an obvious point that half of humanity has always been women, obvious, that is, until one considers how few women appear on lists of 'great people' who have shaped the course of human history. History – or '*His-story*' as some feminists describe it – is that of men and their doings. Women, if they appear at all, do so as a support for men, or as suffering the consequences of war and disaster. Rarely, they appear as rulers in their own right, often characterised by male historians as endowed with particular viciousness and ruthlessness, qualities common in men but 'unseemly' in women. Either women lack the potential to make noteworthy contributions to society, which is unlikely, or something else is at work here.

Feminism, one of the most recent ideologies to emerge, attempts to analyse the social position of women, explain their apparent subsidiary role in history and offer the basis for reform and the advancement of women in all areas of society. Feminists believe that there is a fundamental power struggle between men and women. This, like the struggles around class and race, is potentially revolutionary. Indeed, it is the oldest power struggle, the least public in its manifestations of conflict, the most fundamental in its implications for society.

Although concerns about the condition of women have been traced to medieval times, or even classical antiquity, it makes more sense to begin our survey with the end of the eighteenth century and the French Revolution. The Enlightenment and the revolution influenced women in France and elsewhere in Europe with the prospect of liberty and equality. Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), is an important early 'feminist' writer. She argued that women should have the same legal rights as men on the grounds of equal humanity, moral worth, rationality and freedom. It was wrong that women should be defined by their sex so as to be denied educational, legal, economic and political rights. Once equality was established there would be a beneficial revolution in the relationship between men and women.

Sensible as such ideas appear today, they challenged the male-dominated power structures that held sway at all levels of society during the nineteenth

century. Men who recognised the case for universal male suffrage, who fought for rights for the industrial working classes, usually resisted their extension to women. As men were steadily enfranchised women hoped that their interests could be advanced by means of vote and parliament. The campaign for female suffrage became the major feature of what is called 'first-wave feminism'.

## 'First-wave' feminism

The 'first wave' of feminism (roughly 1830–1930) was similar to other nineteenth-century political campaigns, such as Catholic emancipation or anti-slavery, in which women had been active. These early feminist philosophical arguments were translated into political movements that focused on property and divorce rights, and equality in voting rights.

J. S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) supported those rights. Greatly influenced by his wife, Harriet Taylor, Mill argued that women should have equal rights with men, based on equal reason and education, an equal right to work and to vote. There was no rational reason why the uniqueness of women in having children should lead to their being denied equal rights with men. Indeed, in 1867 Mill, as an MP, made a failed attempt to add female suffrage to the Reform Bill.

In the USA the rights of *man*, spelt out in the Declaration of Independence, were an obvious starting point to argue for the rights of *woman*. A 'National Women's Suffrage Association' was set up in 1869 to advance these rights. Political campaigns by women began later in Britain, but in 1903 the 'Women's Social and Political Union' was formed to fight for female suffrage. So was born the *Suffragette* movement.

As the male franchise grew, the arguments for denying women the same rights as acquired by working-class men steadily lost their force. New Zealand was the first country to give women the vote on the same basis as men in 1893. The USA followed in 1920. The First World War had raised the profile of women in employment and so political recognition had to be made of their contribution to the war effort. In 1918 women were allowed to vote on reaching the age of 30. By 1928 women in Britain had the vote on the same basis as men, though in much of continental Europe the vote came much later – in France not until after the Second World War and in Switzerland in the 1980s. By then women in the democracies had acquired legal and political equality.

The results, however, were not entirely satisfactory. The extension of the franchise did not dramatically increase female participation in political life. Women also remained worse off than men, especially in wages and job opportunities.

Suffrage alone clearly was, and is, not enough to transform the position of women. Feminists of the 'second wave' sought to analyse why this should be so and what was to be done.

## 'Second-wave' feminism

A radically new development occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, the so-called 'second wave' of feminism, inspired by such writers as Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1953), Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (1970) and, most famously, Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (1970). It shifted the entire debate from what might be generally considered *political* to the psychological, cultural and anthropological fields. These explorations extended the women's movement far outside the conventional bounds of political discourse and posed a formidable challenge to most basic assumptions of culture and civilisation.

Women needed radical social change *and* political emancipation if they were to be 'liberated' from thousands of years of male **oppression**. *Liberal* and *radical* feminism agreed in their demand for both elements to improve women's lot. Both equal rights legislation and considerable social change, especially in popular attitudes on gender issues, are needed to improve the lot of women and redress the power balance between men and women.

In Britain, a great deal of legislation has been introduced to advance the cause of greater gender equality: Abortion Law Reform (1967), Divorce Law Reform (1969), Equal Pay Act (1970), Sex Discrimination Act (1975), Employment Protection Act (1975) and Domestic Violence Act (1977). However, there has been very limited progress in dealing with the forces of structural gender inequality in society and enforcement of legislation is weak.

Some second-wave feminists argued for greater inclusion of women on the grounds of female moral superiority. Women were especially endowed with sympathy, emotion and a culture of co-operation as a consequence of their experience of motherhood. Men were seen as being tough, competitive and emotionally limited. Human history was a struggle between these conflicting male and female virtues between and within people. Feminists involved in the peace movement, for example, argued that the potential for destruction is now so great that it is vital that the female side of humanity gains more influence in politics and society to avoid nuclear war and environmental destruction.

### oppression

The social process whereby one group or individual holds back other groups or individuals from having the power to pursue their own interests and keeps them in a position of subservience by coercion. Women, social classes, the disabled, racial and religious groups, homosexuals are all groups that see themselves oppressed by the power and values of 'majority' society.

## 'Third-wave' feminism

By the 1990s some feminists argued that second-wave feminism was becoming rather dated. Major civil liberties and legal advances for women had occurred. Technological developments, such as the contraceptive pill and household labour-saving devices, had liberated women from the burdens of unplanned childbearing and the grind of housework that had held back earlier generations. Some of the major writers of second-wave feminism, such as Germaine Greer in *Sex and Destiny* (1985), became sympathetic to the importance of family life and child rearing for women, while Camille Paglia, in *Sex, Art and American Culture* (1990), questioned the 'victim' status of women in much feminist writing.

The 1990s, it was claimed by feminists of what might be called 'third wave' or 'new' feminism, was the time to consolidate what had been achieved. Women are still disadvantaged in many areas of life in modern societies, but the principle of female equality, now largely accepted and backed by legislation, needed to be made a stronger reality in *practical* rather than just *theoretical* terms. A number of issues of gender discrimination remain to be addressed: female pay in Britain remains, on average, around 75 per cent of male wages; women are more likely to be found in low-paid, part-time, low-status, insecure, low-skilled and temporary work than men are; few women are at the top of the major professions of law, medicine, academia, the media and the senior civil service. In addition, in 2001 40 per cent of the FTSE Index companies were identified as having no women on their board and the proportion of leading businesses with women on the board fell from 69 per cent in 1999 to 57 per cent in 2001.

Unlike second-wave feminism, contemporary feminism doubts the importance of conventional political activity in changing structures of inequality in society. Natasha Walter, in *The New Feminism* (1998) and *On the Move: Feminism for a New Generation* (1999), is an important contemporary feminist writer. She addresses some of the issues raised by the position of women in contemporary society and argues that, while a great deal of gender inequality still exists in modern societies, there are a number of changes to be considered. Women's lives cannot be seen just in terms of 'oppression', or inequalities addressed by politics. Women have new forms of power in work, politics and the media available to them to redress gender inequalities. Besides, women do not need a 'feminist' movement as such to advance their interests. They can use the existing power structures in work and the many other organisations in which women participate to forward the feminist cause while advancing their own individual interests. Finally, these changes in feminist thinking amount to a new form of feminism, one much more in tune with the **individualistic** and **apolitical** world in Western societies.

New feminism can be criticised on similar grounds to its second-wave predecessor. It concentrates on privileged women – white, middle-class, well-educated, Western, Christian, employed, heterosexual – and does little for the vast majority of women in the world. Women in developing countries face far worse forms of gender inequality than those in the West, with far fewer resources than their sisters in industrialised nations, and receive little help in their struggle.

Today, any self-respecting Western woman would see herself as a ‘feminist’, with considerable choice in lifestyle and career, and not automatically dependent on a male. Feminism is not associated only with the radical or political left of politics. Women of all political persuasions argue for female equality in principle. Neither is it only a movement confined to the developed world. Women in developing countries increasingly see a crucial role for themselves in social and economic progress, in population control and environmental protection. They look to both the traditions of their own society and the major elements of Western feminist thinking for inspiration.

### **apolitical**

Put simply, this term means ‘lacking in political content’. One might see apolitical views as having no ideological perspective, no underpinning political beliefs. ‘Apolitical’ is often used as a term of criticism for those who have no interest in politics.

### **individualistic**

Ideas and actions that centre on the individual and his/her needs and interests. By contrast, ‘collectivist’ ideas and policies that see social progress and individual advancement as occurring only by the action of a group, such as a nation, class, religion or race.

## **Main elements of feminist thought**

Feminist thinkers do not adhere to a simple ‘left-right’ view of politics (politics being based on fundamental class and economic conflicts in modern democracies). Neither do they see politics in terms of the state, as most ‘traditional’ ideologies and movements do. Female emancipation, and the achievement of female equality with men, requires a broader front than party politics or the achievement of power within the state. It requires an analysis of the power relations between men and women in all areas of society. One can see this in a number of areas:

- sex, gender and ‘sexism’;
- public and private spheres of life;
- patriarchy.

### **Sex, gender and ‘sexism’**

Another crucial principle is the distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. Sex is a biological fact; the key difference between men and women is women’s ability to have children. Men have physical power and aggressive tendencies, the biological function of which is to protect their women and children. Most

societies have placed a major emphasis on male *physical* power. Industrial societies still place great stress on these gender divisions, even when their importance is clearly in decline with falling birth rates and growth of work dependent on educational and intellectual abilities.

For most feminists (but not all) these biological distinctions were of very minor significance. What *was* significant was *gender*. This is a social construct; a cultural phenomenon that assigned different roles to women and a whole apparatus of imposed behaviour patterns, expectations, thoughts, aspirations and even dreams. It is not 'biological' or 'natural' that women should take the bulk of childcare responsibilities; this has occurred as a result of social and cultural developments that should be changed to the benefit of women and, most feminists believe, men.

*Sexism* is an ideology of oppression of one gender over another that promotes the idea that 'genderised', socialised relations between men and women are natural and biological, and unable to be changed. There are sexist women but most sexism in society is male and directed towards the subjugation and exploitation (sexual or economic) of women. It is an ideology of 'imperialism' of men over women and reflects the power relations between men and women in society, with men having control over most forms of power.

### **Public and private spheres**

The first challenge was the conventional distinction between *public* and *private spheres* of social life. Most, but not all, political writers had focused almost exclusively on the public realm of government, law, economics, the state, and had more or less assumed that the relationship between men and women (especially the married relationship) was essentially a private matter, outside the scope of politics.

Feminists boldly asserted that there was no such public-private distinction and that the most intimate dimensions of such relationships had profound political consequences. Moreover, the politically powerful public sphere, dominated by men, impacted on the politically weak private sphere, still dominated by men but within which the lives of women were confined.

If women were to be truly equal with men then there would need to be female emancipation within both the private sphere and the public sphere. Perhaps men or the state should have a greater role in child-rearing, releasing women for a greater role in the public sphere. Perhaps there should be a 'wage' for the work done by women in the private sphere. Whatever the answer, there is agreement among feminists that such divisions are not 'natural' or 'biological' in origin, but social, and as such can be reformed by social and political change.

## Patriarchy

This can be perceived as the mainspring of feminism. Men and women have gender roles in society, but women have their role imposed on them by men. Consciously and unconsciously, in virtually all cultures and all times, women have been imprisoned within this imposed world. This *patriarchy* ('rule by men') permeates all aspects of society, public and private, as well as language and intellectual discourse. It thus remains the most profound of all tyrannies, the most ancient of all hierarchies. The root of oppression rests in men's superior strength and greater brutality, together with the female terror of being raped and the patriarchal ideologies that enslave minds.

One of the most important ideological props of patriarchy is religion. Most religions allot a predominant role to male gods. Most known societies are *matriarchal* ('ruled by women') in neither their social structures nor their theology. Nevertheless, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are particularly singled out for opprobrium by feminists as being religions that place women in a role subordinate to men in both theology and society. Patriarchy is thus a social construct, not a natural condition.

Women's movements therefore seek liberation from patriarchy by various means ranging from specific political campaigns, such as demand for liberal abortion laws, to 'consciousness-raising' by debate, discussion and publications, or simply 'living the future' – adopting a 'liberated' lifestyle and related values and sharing these with the 'sisterhood'.

## Schools of feminism

'Feminism' is an ideology with a difference. This makes it peculiarly difficult to analyse and criticise in the terms usually applied to ideologies. Firstly, it *includes* a great deal that other ideologies skim over or take for granted, especially the distinct experience of women in society. Secondly, it *leaves out* much of the territory usually dealt with by ideology, such as law, the state, government, legitimacy, economic systems and historical explanation. Much of its language, ideas and evidence are drawn from such disparate disciplines as psychology, socio-biology, literary studies, sociology and anthropology.

Some critics have even challenged the notion that feminism can properly be called an 'ideology' at all, preferring to see it as a cultural or even a literary movement. Others have argued that it is an incomplete ideology, and really makes sense only if incorporated into more orthodox schools of thought such as liberalism, socialism or conservatism. However, it can hardly be denied that feminism has made a substantial impact and, whatever one's reservations in according it the title of 'ideology', it is like most ideologies in at least one respect: there are sharp, even bitter, divisions within feminism on its aims,

goals, methods, theories and inspirations. Four major strands of feminist thinking can be identified:

- liberal feminism;
- socialist feminism;
- conservative feminism;
- radical feminism.

### **Liberal feminism**

Liberal feminism dominated the ‘first wave’ of feminism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with intellectuals such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor and J. S. Mill all making contributions. Liberal feminism focuses on the full extension of civil and legal rights to women by legislation. This form of feminism is essentially liberalism, stressing the importance of the individual, with the emphatic assertion of female equality. It demands a ‘level playing field’, secured by law, so that women earn the same as men and can aspire to the same jobs as men. It accepts the competition of the marketplace and assumes that women can, and should, compete equally with men.

In the second wave Betty Friedan, among others, argued that women were directed by a cultural myth that made them look to the family, the private sphere, as their proper role in life. Equal rights would enable women to become educated and have a greater role in public life. British feminists took up this cause, and later, so did politicians. A series of acts assigned greater rights to women, among which were the Abortion Act (1967), the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). Such legislation gives women rights that enable them as individuals to have greater choice about their lives.

Liberal feminism may be criticised as little more than Western liberalism with a female dimension, and most of its goals are already achieved or within striking distance. Less moderate critics regard it as merely a prop to sustain the status quo. Others see it as essentially the preserve of middle-class women who ignore the plight of their counterparts in the working-class.

Liberal feminism remains a very important element in the West today. Most women in developed societies have individual choices and freedoms that are now almost taken for granted, but they owe much to the liberal feminist struggles for equal civil and political rights over the last two centuries.

### **Socialist feminism**

Some of the ‘utopian socialists’ of the nineteenth century, such as Fourier, Saint-Simon and Robert Owen, believed that their ideas had important implications for women. For example, Fourier envisaged a highly permissive sexual environment, with women liberated from the burdens of childcare and

housework by transferring most of these family functions to the community. Owen, in particular, thought of religion as enslaving women through marriage.

Marx, however, was much less interested specifically in the liberation of women, and was conservative in his own family life. A socialist revolution, he believed, would liberate women as a desirable side effect. Subsequent communist regimes have paid lip service to women's equality but in practice have tended to take a conservative position, especially on the political role of women. Male left-wing leaders in many movements, especially in the 1960s, had attitudes that led some women to lose faith in traditional socialist politics and drove them towards a more radical agenda. Some groups, like 'Militant' in the 1980s, were scornful of the women's movement, seeing it as irrelevant, a middle-class intellectual indulgence and a diversion (like anti-racism) from the central revolutionary task of overthrowing capitalism.

Engels, on the other hand, showed considerable interest in the situation of women. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) he stated that the family was the root of women's oppression, but that it had its origin in an economic system, capitalism, based on private property. It is dominated by men; property is owned by men and passed on mainly to men. The whole ideology of the system was designed to reinforce this control of women by men, which reduces women to the status of men's property.

Socialist feminists, therefore, see that only the ending of capitalism and the liberation of women from its shackles, both ideological and institutional, can end the oppression of women. Feminism is part of the class struggle and can only be achieved as part of that general struggle. Some socialist feminists believe that class is so important in forming attitudes that it cuts women off from their fellow women in other, opposing classes. Middle-class women have more in common with each other and their fellow middle-class men than they have with their working-class sisters.

Women play a key role in capitalism, serving its interests in several ways. Women in the labour force increase productivity, weaken the wage bargaining powers of male labour, and enter or leave the labour market in times of capitalist 'boom' or 'bust'. They are vital in producing, raising and socialising the next generation of workers into the values of the system. The family ensures that men at work will remain disciplined in order to keep an income. Finally, women reduce the domestic burden of child rearing, allowing men to concentrate on meeting the demands of the capitalist system.

Marxist feminist Juliet Mitchell, in *Woman's Estate* (1971) and *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), argues that female oppression in capitalist society is not just economic, but involves many aspects of psychology and culture that can and must be changed.

Socialist feminism is open to criticism from a variety of angles; for example, the destruction of the family as the cement of the private property system is as likely to produce an atomised and irresponsible society (perhaps modified by despotism) as a co-operative one. Such experiments in collective living as have been tried have not been a great success. Marxists of a more traditional hue have taken the view that the pursuit of such goals as pay for housework diverts attention from the central goal of abolishing capitalism. Non-Marxist socialists dismiss the image of the working man cosseted and indulged by his house-keeping, child-raising and domesticated wife as hopelessly outdated.

### Conservative feminism

This may at first sight appear something of a contradiction in terms. There have been, however, some attempts to construct a theory of female liberation based on the belief in 'equal but different' roles and the natural division between the public and private areas of social life. Attempts to be equal on men's terms, according to men's values and in men's interests are doomed to failure and create a new form of female exploitation and manipulation, with grave social consequences for the upbringing of children and the relationship between the sexes. Conservative feminists take the view that women should have 'sovereignty' within their *own* sphere of life. Cultural manifestations of this approach, such as the strict dress code of many Islamic countries, may appear repressive but in reality they strengthen respect for women and their freedom.

Thus family life is a very important and respected sphere of female activity and fulfilment. Many conservative feminists argue that too much feminist theory attacks the vital role of women in child rearing and home making. Indeed, many women actually want to be family centred, and find deep fulfilment there, rather than in careers and salaried work in the public sphere. Some feminist writers, such as Jean Bethke Elshtain in *Public Man, Private Woman* (1981), have evolved a variation of these views and claim that women's life experience, for example of motherhood, has nourished values such as co-operation, tenderness and sensitivity that have universal application.

### Radical feminism

The most recent and most interesting form of feminism, if the most difficult to fit into the conventional definitions of ideology, is radical feminism. It is a very important element in the second wave of feminism.

Radical feminism holds that the suppression of women is a fundamental feature of almost all societies, past and present, and is the most profound of all the tyrannies. This oppression, this *patriarchal* oppression, is all-pervasive and takes many forms – political, cultural, economic, religious and social. It functions by a socially defined role for women, *gender*, which has little to do

with genuine social differences and everything to do with the exploitation of women *as a group* by men. This exploitation permeates the whole culture and must therefore be challenged by an attack on all fronts – political, economic, cultural, artistic, philosophical and scientific.

Within this broad coalition there are a number of competing standpoints. One of the most extreme of these claims that everything, including science, philosophy and even language itself, is the product of a given social order, an order totally dominated by men. This male hegemony must be challenged by a rejection of all that it entails, even to the point of creating a new language for ‘women to speak unto woman’. A rather less extreme, but nonetheless challenging, view is that women are essentially different from men, more attuned to the maternal virtues of tenderness, caring and intuition, and are more in harmony with life, nature and the ecological nature of the planet itself. Feminist critics, however, feel this is a retreat to the comfort of a romanticised version of woman’s nature favoured by men. This, of course, raises the fundamental, and as yet unresolved, issue of whether women are actually substantially different from men.

The implications of feminism for men raise interesting points. Some feminists believe that to liberate women is simultaneously to liberate men: the two sexes will be able to negotiate a new and healthier relationship. To others, men seem redundant: women simply do not need them (hence the famous remark, ‘a woman needs a man as a fish needs a bicycle’). This easily leads to the more extreme manifestations of feminism; for example, Andrea Dworkin, in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1974), comes close to defining ‘maleness’ as essentially violent, negative, destructive. Male sexual redundancy might even be approaching, thanks to modern scientific advances, to the point of men being unnecessary even for breeding. For some feminists this has led to ‘political lesbianism’ in which women relate only to each other at every level, not just sexual, in modes determined by themselves without reference to the male world.

Critics argue that these several strands of feminism are mutually incompatible. The widest gap is between those who argue that there is very little fundamental difference between men and women, and those who identify profound biological, even spiritual, differences. Some critics of feminism condemn it as essentially elitist, ethnocentric, racist and even sexist. Feminism’s strongest supporters are to be found in the wealthy industrialised societies of the West, among women who have largely achieved legal and political equality. Women in the developing world, whom Western feminists are accused of neglecting, suffer oppression on a scale unimaginable in the developed world. Indeed, within developed countries feminism is criticised by black women as being concerned with emancipation that essentially benefits white women and does little for their black and brown sisters.

Changes in the economy have reduced the role of large-scale, male-dominated industries that placed a premium on physical strength. The 'new economy' of 'high-tech' industries and services is almost designed to enhance the employment opportunities of women, reliant as they are on education and social skills, brain rather than brawn. Women do not require men for economic support. Increasingly, many women do not need a man for his role in child rearing. The economic value of men to women as providers declines with rising male unemployment – and unemployability – rates. There are growing concerns about the 'redundant' male in modern society. Seeking solace in drink, violence and crime, as his 'proper', traditional social roles decline, the 'redundant' male falls behind women in education and the world of well-paid jobs that are associated with the new knowledge-based economy. Time will tell if there will be a need for a 'men's movement' to enhance the role of men in society.

## Summary

Feminism is a relatively new ideology, dating, for all practical purposes, from the late eighteenth century. Three 'waves' of feminism can be detected. The first, of about 1830–1930, was concerned chiefly with legal and political rights. The second, in the 1960s and 1970s, focused on much more fundamental personal and relationship issues. The 'third wave' in the last decade or so has been essentially a reflection on and reappraisal of what has been achieved. Feminism is different from other ideologies in that it largely ignores or takes for granted much of what other ideologies are concerned with. Even more significantly it denies the boundaries between the 'private' and 'public' spheres. The key target of feminism is 'patriarchy' – male domination in all its myriad forms. Feminism can, however, be divided into several different 'schools' each with a distinctive focus – liberal, socialist, conservative and radical – that sit uneasily with each other. Critics of feminism have denied that it is really a distinctive ideology at all; the most sceptical have dismissed it as an indulgence of middle-class Westerners. Finally, unlike almost all other ideologies which eventually give birth to political parties, feminism has not done so. Its influence, at least in the West, has been enormous.

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## SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- 1 'The central concept of feminism is patriarchy.' Do you agree with this statement?
- 2 'Feminism is unique in that it makes no distinction between the public and private areas of life.' Discuss.
- 3 'Feminism ignores almost everything that other ideologies regard as crucial; that is its fundamental weakness.' Do you agree?
- 4 Is feminism obsolete?
- 5 Are the divisions between feminists more important than the beliefs they have in common?

