

Implications of Liberal Feminism for Pakistani Society

Abstract

This research aims to understand liberal feminism, its outcomes and implications. Scholars have emphasized that liberal feminism revolves around the prevalent inequality regarding those women who are marginalized and dejected. Such disparity is causing havoc in society and sexual abuse is the outcome and result of these discrepancies. Pakistani society has received a strong impact of such inequality yet some paradoxical situations exist. On one hand, women consider that they are being rejected and not treated equally whereas other groups of researchers reject this notion. Despite this oscillating situation, liberal feminism appears to hold a very significant socio-political impact on Pakistani society.

Keywords: *Liberal Feminism, Implications, Marginalized, Women, Pakistani Society.*

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is an array of social ideas, political moves and morals that are diversified, confrontationally and often contradictory, mostly motivated, or concerned by women (Adawo *et al*, 2011). It is considered the movement and liberation of women who are marginalized and subordinated (Thompson, 2001). In words of Phillips (1987), "Feminism and equality includes writings from such authors as Juliet Mitchell, Michele Barrett, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Ellen DuBois to provide students of politics and philosophy with a guide to the political theory of feminism".

Liberalism:

"Liberalism is a political and economic doctrine that emphasizes individual autonomy, equality of opportunity, and the protection of individual rights (primarily to life, liberty, and property), originally against the state and later against both the state and private economic actors, including businesses". During the course of time many philosophers and thinkers have propagated the idea of liberalism in order to promote a just and fair society. The intellectual fathers of the ideology were English philosopher John Locke who developed a theory of political authority based on natural individual rights and the consent of the governed, and the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith (1723–90), who argued that societies prosper when individuals are free to pursue their self-interest within an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and competitive markets, controlled

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neither by the state nor by private monopolies. Liberalism is a family of doctrines that emphasizes the value of freedom and holds that the just state ensures freedom for individuals (Brunell, L. & Burkett, 2021).

Liberal Feminism:

K.J Warrant (1996) defined liberal feminism as a “....meaning that it advances the theoretical tradition of liberalism while it contributes to a political theory based on the foundation that men and women are of equal human worth. It is also a critical practice of assessing the laws and social practices sustained by liberal theory which might inhibit the realization of men’s and women’s equality”. Liberal feminists of 18th, 19th and 20th century were of the view that women’s ability and right to participate in public life at least through the suffrage, examined the institution of marriage and legal framework of divorce and property laws and challenged the practices of denying women access to the same quality education as men and to the professions.

There are different approaches within the same paradigm of liberal feminism. To defend their stance one group of liberal feminists claims that both men and women are of equal worth; while another group claims that since women are superior to men, therefore all women should be given equal opportunity to prove their worth to society; yet others argued that women’s virtues are superior to men’s virtues so they should be allowed to be influenced on public policy and political activity.

In general, Liberal feminism stands on the notion of equality between men and women of the society but it is also being criticized by feminist groups such as Marxist, Radical and Lesbian feminists. Marxist feminists have criticized capitalism as causing the sexual division of labor in the family and have criticized liberal feminists’ focus on equal opportunity. Liberal feminists likewise are concerned about the sexual division of labor in the family but they seek to change social norms regarding male and female roles in family maintenance—increasing women’s role in providing the economic resources for the family and promoting equal opportunity for women in economics and politics while increasing men’s role in providing for the care of the family (Okin, 1989).

Feminists who theorize gender inequality or disparity as comprised of four themes (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017) show men and women as not only distinctly, but also inequitably positioned in society. Women have fewer economic resources, lower socioeconomic class, less authority and self-actualization prospects than men and who share their social location whether it’s a location focused on class, race, job, ethnicity, faith, education, nationality or any junction of such considerations. As argued by Ponthieux & Meurs (2015), the second half of the 20th century witnessed the convergence of economic status of males and females but now it is a well-established notion that it is undisputed that women have on average lower job earnings than men, work part-time more often or not at all and accomplish the lion's share of unpaid work at home. Arguably, the emergence of this gender inequality can potentially create turbulence in societal patterns. In this regard, Ritzer & Stepnisky (2017) have proclaimed that regardless of the composition of society with diverse profiles, inequality erupts as a result of the presence of unnatural variation. In this perspective, Schwartzman (2006) has proclaimed

that these theoretical underpinnings demonstrate a paradigm that goes beyond types of individualism and abstraction that are predominant within liberalism by paying attention to systems of power and culture and by analyzing the actual experiences of women who reside within those structures. By recognizing the grounds of women's oppression and subjugation, several feminist movements have evolved in various times and the basic aim is to eliminate gender oppression to achieve gender equality. In diverse feminism varieties, liberal feminism is considered as dominant (Enyew & Mihrete, 2018). Due to its dominance, Kameri-Mbote (2016) has argued that the thrust of liberal feminism has dragged women to the public spheres because of inherent political representation of women in liberalism domain. Therefore, liberal feminism theory has the central point to endeavor for equality within the domain of conversing women participation in political agendas. This seeks for identification of those ways where the law can eradicate such obstacles which restrict women's access to better education, participation in political activities, employment opportunities etc.

In the words of Nehere (2016) liberal feminism tends to focus on basic societal organization rather than on any kind of revolutionary change. The basic principle of liberal feminist scholars is gender equality with values like, capabilities of human beings for reason, moral agency and self-actualization, and the guarantee of legal rules for practicing the capabilities. The perception of contemporary feminist circles around the notion that gender is a socially constructed multifaceted mechanism to manipulate women by having a gender specific division of labor (Choudhry, Mutalib & Ismail, 2019). Risman (2004) has argued that it exists as a form of deeply-ingrained sexist ideology, conforming to the view that the work at home is a private space of responsibility in patriarchal philosophy whereas work in public is a public sphere of responsibility. The men hold more power in the public sphere, are more important and therefore, obtain more money to help their growth and self-achievement. (Choudhry, Mutalib & Ismail, 2019).

McDowell (2008) has asserted that women face sexism, marginalization, abuse and limited mobility in society leading to persistent creation of imbalance. In regards to gender based division of labor; it is detrimental for women particularly for single mothers who often experience widespread poverty (Hays, 2003). According to liberal feminism philosophy, inequality in marriage seems to be a common problem faced by women. In this regard, classic studies of Jessie Bernard (*The Future of Marriage*, 1972/1982) reveal that marriage as an institution induces men to experience a pre-eminent sexual dominance. According to marital property tradition, men are the heads of the household and are absolved of responsibility, whereas women become helpless by entering into marriage contracts and have to offer services related to physical, emotional and domestic arenas, to their spouses.

In the context of Pakistan, much of the literature tracing the women's movement of the 1980s and 1990s is in opposition to military despotism and creed (Bhasin et al., 1994). Diverse slogans initiated by feminists in Pakistan have been used in the political context. This has resulted in escalated confrontation among the state, the military and capitalist development (Zia, 2009). For the past several years, liberalism in feminist thinking has been in endeavor to confront the problem of uneven, diverging characters in relation to religious identities (Zia, 2009). The existence of discriminatory practices that oppress women in private spheres while

male dominates in the public spheres is highly questioned by supporters of liberal feminism (Kameri-Mbote, 2016).

Objectives:

- a) To explore and understand how liberal feminism influences Pakistani society.
- b) To understand different perspectives within liberal feminism and society particularly in Pakistan.
- c) To understand how liberal feminism offers a comprehensive lens for understanding the situation of women rights in Pakistan.

Major Domains within Liberal Feminism:

Liberal Feminism can be further divided into two sub domains i.e., Classic Liberal Feminism and Egalitarian Feminism. Classical-liberal feminism and egalitarian-liberal feminism are, themselves, families of doctrines with significant internal differences, many of which this article seeks to describe. Nonetheless, the difference between classical and egalitarian-liberal feminist thinking about freedom has significant consequences for how each frames the problem feminism aims to address, how each specifies the content of a liberal feminist agenda, and what role is assigned to the state (Baehr & Amy R., 2021).

Egalitarian-liberal feminists hold that much can and should be done to support the personal and political autonomy of women and to achieve parity in the processes of democratic self-governance in liberal societies like the United States. They tend to see the state as a potential ally in the pursuit of these ends and endorse measures like anti-discrimination law, affirmative action, and welfare state programs, as well as measures to change the culture and secure parity in participation in democratic self-governance. These features put egalitarian-liberal feminism squarely on the left side of the political spectrum. (Baehr & Amy R., 2021).

Classical-liberal feminists, by contrast, tend to hold that feminism's political task is limited to opposing laws that treat women differently from men, a task which they hold has been largely accomplished in societies like the United States. They tend to endorse the outcome of largely unfettered economic and associational arrangements and oppose, for example, anti-discrimination law, affirmative action, and welfare state programs. These features place classical-liberalism on the right side of the political spectrum. However, some classical-liberal feminists hold that the task of liberalizing the culture remains on the liberal feminist agenda, although they consider this a non-political task and reject uses of state power to this end. Such classical-liberal feminists are culturally on the left. Other classical-liberal feminists reject the project of liberalizing the culture and are culturally on the right. (Baehr & Amy R., 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Literature Review for this article is carried out by surveying relevant scholarly articles, books and other relevant sources relevant to feminism, its types, impact and area of research. Google Scholar is used to collect articles for the relevant data and the review provides a summary and critical evaluation of the relevant topic and its implications with respect to Pakistani Society. This conceptual article involves extensive research on the literature and

different research articles and books are analyzed in order to understand liberal feminism and its impact on society. Articles are searched by typing keywords such as liberalism, feminism, liberal feminism, liberal feminism and impact on society. Initially article titles were analyzed and relevant materials were carefully selected.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

While articulating on liberal feminism, there have been strong arguments in favor of women: does autonomy owe to lack of personal autonomous condition? Particularly in country like Pakistan, there are plenty of examples, advocating liberal feminism in the sphere of protecting women against oppression and violence. Marginalization of women as argued by Thompson (2001) is the base of providing the liberal feminism wave and women in Pakistan support it in all its aspects. The advocates of liberal feminism are assumed to work for giving leverage and augmenting the liberation of women. The philosophy of propagating liberation has been amalgamated with political stances where the effort is to proliferate liberation in the capacity of political agenda. On the basis of arguments of different liberal feminism scholars, it is argued that the freedom of women is required to be endorsed as a remedy for reducing oppression in a male dominant society. In the context of marriages, it has been largely witnessed that women are silent and bear the aggression of husbands which ultimately comes out as violence and creates imbalance not only in that particular family but in society as well.

A significant argument which has erupted in the last couple of years is the dissemination of women's oppression in our media and drama industry. This sphere has induced women in our society to support the liberal feminism depicted in the form of dramas. Its reason lies in the fact that there are certain old societal beliefs that women are considered less creative and have less contribution in shaping society. This orthodox situation has eroded the society which has given the opportunity to those who are liberal feminism advocates. This may be the cause for the dispersal of gender discrimination. In the light of these arguments, liberal feminism's basic philosophy revolves around eradicating this unfair discrimination with the help of diverse tools including political tools. On the other hand, some criticism is present on the philosophy of liberal feminism such as the conception of radical feminism.

Radical feminists have strong disagreement with liberal feminism arguments, since radicals believe that the path of liberal feminism is insufficient to get women out of the oppression in the existing scenario. Radical feminism rejects the existing patriarchal system citing that legal and political systems are not sufficient to provide liberation to the women and that religion and family systems are also required to incorporate for liberation provision. Simply by doing this, oppression can be decreased in our society. In our social setup, family and religion are being used as tools to liberate women and provide equality. As argued by Lewis (2007), in radical feminism philosophy, women are exploited by men via their status and sexual associations. Western society provides justification to such acts in the name of liberal feminism.

Understanding the status of women in Pakistan under the lens of Liberal Feminist Perspective:

Liberal feminism helps us to understand the inequalities and disparities between men and women in our society. Men hold the position of power, dominance and prestige due to the patriarchal nature of our society and women have to adopt a secondary role. Men are considered to be the bread earners of the family therefore they have greater economic opportunities while women, even if they are earning, are unable to have the same power and respect in our society. Pakistan is ranked 151 out of 153 countries on the gender parity index of World Economic Forum (Abdel-Raouf. et al ,2020). Pakistani women's literacy is so low that more than five million primary-school-age girls don't go to school. According to UNICEF (2020), 18 percent of Pakistani girls are married before turning 18. The prevalence of forced conversion and marriage are difficult to accurately estimate due to reporting deficiencies and the complex nature of the issue. The literacy rate of women in Pakistan is lowest among South Asian countries since violence against women has increased. Most cases are not even reported and even if they are reported women in our society find it hard to get justice due to cultural barriers and social pressure they face.

Liberal feminist as a perspective to Understand Gendered politics of Pakistani society:

There are different implications of feminism throughout the world this is because every place has its own culture, norms, values and set of traditions which all the people regardless of their gender has to follow therefore if the feminist movement is successful in one part of the world, it doesn't guarantee that the same movement will be successful elsewhere. Feminism is a global movement and has profound effect in Pakistan where society, in the main, follows the patriarchal structure i.e., men hold the position of power in our society.

The main goal of liberal feminist political agenda is to promote equality and understanding among women of all backgrounds. While they are far away from reaching their goal, they are able to promote change in the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society. Due to their advocacy and consistent movement women now in Pakistan have more opportunities than before both in public and in private sectors. They can not only participate in politics but also have equal opportunities of education. Women these days are being supported to do their professional jobs along with their household duties but they are unable to achieve their goals because of the patriarchal and religious structure of our society.

The cultural mindset of parochialism, narrow-mindedness and suppression of womenfolk needs to be addressed through greater awareness of the status of woman in Islam and her role in contemporary society. The traditional values and perceptions about the role and status of women must be given due consideration, so as to make effective policy frameworks to improve the social status of women. Communities at the local level, both in urban and rural areas, need to be integrated into the policy and implementation strategies regarding the uplift of the female population in Pakistan (Raza & Murad, 2010). The main criticism women face is the way they represent themselves and their contradiction with our religious values. People who criticize liberal feminists or the feminist movement as a whole are of the view that our religion provides equal opportunities to women though with limitations. These limitations are for the protection of their own dignity. This is due to the fact that western liberal feminist

movement is heavily criticized and rebutted by our society due to contradiction in norms and values in both cultures.

Hurst argues that supporters of the “women in development” discourse advocate that women should be given “the chance to occupy positions of ‘power’ in terms of political and economic decision making.... The difficulty with this view of ‘empowerment’ is that if it can be bestowed, it can just as easily be taken away. In other words, it does not involve a structural change in the power relations (Hurst 2004).”

Michel Foucault (1980) argued for a relational view of power, which also goes against the notion of power as a finite entity. In Foucault’s conceptualization, power cannot be held, but it can be exerted through the web of social relations in which each individual is enmeshed. However, the degree of agency that individuals have is contested. According to Foucault, individuals internalize oppressive social norms to become self-limiting and self-disciplining. People are therefore socialized subjects who are constrained in their actions by the overarching social paradigm. In relation to this discussion of the political sphere, the dominant paradigm is patriarchal and therefore women can only operate within the parameters of this framework.

Major Outcomes and Implications

Some feminists debate that men and women are of equivalent human value; some argue that some women are superior to some men, and therefore women must be able to show their value; others argue that women's virtues are superior to men's virtues and that they therefore deserve an impact on public economic and political operation. The argument of liberal feminists lies in the fact that society will get immense benefits through women’s contribution in the public domain. While liberal feminists believe society in general would prosper from the efforts of educated women, these early liberal feminists in general did not give much thought to the realities of working women. It is a general perception that in the working environment, women contribute a lot and it has been witnessed that society at large has seen plenty of improvements. Earlier liberal feminists have focused on this working class such as Maria Stewart (1803–79) and Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) to the circumstances of Black women and working-class women. We argue that despite the advocacy of the working class, for instance, in the corporate context, it has been witnessed that women are being oppressed and are even suffering from mental disturbances. In the name of women’s contribution in the context of the working environment, the situation is different from what liberal feminists’ advocates have asserted.

Another major outcome is the emergence of some movements (e.g. Me Too movement, Mera Jism Meri Marzi etc). As an outcome, such movements appear to have significant impact in shaping society. Such movements erupt in order to counter the argument of the prevalence of inequality that is the main subject of liberal feminism. Voice against sexual violence has especially been raised in order to curb this situation. Herouach (2019) asserts that “liberal feminists argue that society holds the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and physically capable than men”. Such false belief on the part of society has paved the way for the emergence of such movements in order to remove inequality. While

explaining liberal feminism, Rousseau declares that women are considered as an emotionally complementary creation to man. He advocates that men should be provided education in such areas as courage, temperament, and justice etc. while women should be given education regarding patience, flexibility etc. Universal argumentation in liberal feminism has taken the validity of women's rights into account, undermined women's assumptions, and it is believed that biological features can in no way describe psychological or social gender (Herouach, 2019).

Men and women both have important roles to play in society; both have their proper responsibilities to fulfill. When inequality prevails in a society, problems erupt and such problems are really dangerous for any social setup to move on. Liberal feminism revolves around the concept of inequality where women are not given their rights and the entire blame rests on men who are thought of instigating such inequality. Even on social media, such inequality is associated with males. The gender bias prevails in our society and Pakistan society has witnessed the impact of liberal feminism. It has also been witnessed that most of the time, special transmissions are broadcasted where cruelty is discussed on part of man. Even in such transmissions, some examples are disseminated in order to gain sympathy. We argue that despite the significance of liberal feminism, there are certain unwelcome implications seen in our society especially movements such as “*Mera Jism, Meri Marzi*” which may be taken as an example of this implication. Most advocates of this movement have argued that women are not meant to fulfill just home chores; they insist that women are perceived as a service provider to men and that in so doing, women are treated as unequal. There are many females who get professional education and after marriage, the husband and his family do not allow her to do a job or even step out of the home. Due to this, the stance of liberal feminists gains approval and substantiation. It has been witnessed that women came out of their homes, holding banners in their hands and raising slogans against such inequality. Although this has happened in Pakistani society, on the other side, most religious scholars, analysts and writers have denied the concerns of this movement, being of the view that these women are involved in maligning our society and the slogan which has been raised is unethical. Diverse religious scholars have argued that women are assumed to take the responsibility of building generations and this is possible only while staying at home. Even against such a movement which was initiated by women, there was another group of women who rejected these arguments, leading to negative implications for liberal feminism stance. But despite such debate, our society has really received a significant impact due to liberal feminism.

CONCLUSION

This study shows evidence that liberal feminism is about addressing inequality in a society. The subject of inequality is more prominent when it comes to women in a society. Pakistani society has also received the impact of this due to which some unrest and imbalance has been generated. We as a collective nation need to address factors that cause real inequality. Men and women are significant components of our society and both have their own responsibilities. To develop a society, the actual role required of men is to be played by them and the same is the case for women. Liberal feminism can help reduce inequality by advocating equal rights for women in every sphere of life: the right to vote, to participate in

politics, being included in public policy matters as well as being given equal economic opportunities so that they can play their role in the development of society as a whole.

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