

# Women's Liberation Through Liberalism: A Historical Overview

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## Abstract

Liberal feminism, rooted in political and economic liberalism, emphasizes individual rights, equality, and rationality in addressing women's subordination. Influenced by thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, it advocates for women's suffrage, education, legal equality, and participation in public life, while challenging the traditional public-private divide that confines women to domestic roles. Although liberal feminism has significantly advanced women's rights, it has been criticized for focusing primarily on legal reforms and individual autonomy, often overlooking structural inequalities related to class, race, and patriarchy. Despite these limitations, it remains a foundational strand of feminist theory, contributing to ongoing efforts toward gender equality and social justice.

**Keywords:** Liberal Feminism; Gender Equality; Women's Rights; Patriarchy; Public and Private Sphere.

## INTRODUCTION

Feminism as a distinct theoretical framework is a relatively modern concept, although feminist ideals have been expressed in literature and philosophy for centuries. Feminism encompasses not only the feminist movement, but also the theoretical frameworks that underpin it. While some individuals actively participated in feminist movements, others contributed to the development of feminist thought through their scholarly writings and fiction. Together, these dual approaches have enriched feminist theory, informing and influencing one another in a reciprocal and dynamic process.

Feminist theory uses knowledge and research to understand and change the social conditions that affect women. It's not just an extra part of feminist activism, but a necessary tool to understand why women are treated unfairly. By studying and analysing the reasons behind women's subordination, feminist theory helps us find ways to improve women's lives and create a more equal society.

Theories such as liberalism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, sociological structuralism, and anthropology have been employed to explain the oppression of women, attributing it to various factors, including women's purported natural inferiority (Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Rousseau), legal systems, psychological dynamics (Sigmund Freud), the social division of labour and the emergence of private property (Engels), and universal patriarchal ideologies (Juliet Mitchell). These diverse perspectives have contributed to the development of multiple branches of feminist thought, each examining the complexities of women's oppression from distinct angles and offering unique solutions to address their subordination.

This discussion will focus on liberal feminism, exploring the ideas of prominent thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Grimké, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and John Stuart Mill.

The 19th century saw a surge in debates about women's roles in society in England and the United States, particularly among liberal feminists. Influential liberal thinkers, including Thomas Hobbes, John Locke,

Jeremy Bentham, and James Mill, advocated for individual rights and freedoms. Hobbes and Locke proposed that civil society is a private domain where individuals can exercise their rights without state interference. They believed that humans initially lived in a state of nature, and to ensure security, life, property, and personal freedom, people voluntarily established civil society and the state through a social contract. This contract involved individuals relinquishing some rights to enjoy freedom.

In the economic sphere, Adam Smith argued that societal happiness increases when individual happiness is prioritized. This, in turn, occurs when individuals are free to pursue maximum private profit without state interference.

Liberal feminism emerged in England, rooted in economic and political liberalism. Philosophically, liberal feminists believe in the power of human reason, which they see as a universal and impartial guide. They argue that individuals, regardless of sex, should be able to make decisions and judgments without external influence. In practical terms, liberal feminists advocate for equal rights for women, including:

- The right to vote.
- Equal legal rights as men.
- Access to education.
- Representation in the political process.

Liberal feminists also challenge the traditional idea that women's place is in the home. They argue that women should have the freedom to participate in public life and make their own choices. The rise of capitalism in England coincided with the development of political liberalism. Liberal thinkers emphasized individual freedoms, private property rights, and limited government intervention, creating a fertile ground for capitalist ideals to flourish.

According to Whelehan, the concepts of public and private spaces are used to determine how much the state should interfere in people's lives. The public sphere includes areas where state intervention is considered acceptable, whereas the private sphere is where individuals have complete freedom. However, this distinction has traditionally been used to maintain men's power and control. Men are seen as belonging to the public sphere, where social interactions and rational decision-making occur. In contrast, women are relegated to the private sphere, associated with emotions, nature, and irrationality.<sup>1</sup>

In essence, this division perpetuates gender inequality, reinforcing the idea that men are naturally suited for public life, while women are confined to domestic duties. There is a clear hierarchy where domestic and caregiving responsibilities are relegated to a subordinate status, secondary to the more valued public, professional, and rational pursuits.

Mary Wollstonecraft was a 19th-century feminist who fought for women's right to vote. She believed that men and women are equal and can make rational decisions. According to her, everyone has natural rights, regardless of their sex. In her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argued that a democracy isn't truly democratic unless women have the right to vote. She also criticized the idea that women should be limited to the home and not participate in public life. She believed that education and access to work outside the home were essential for women's dignity.<sup>2</sup>

Frances Wright was another 19th-century feminist who emphasized the importance of reason and critical thinking for women. She believed that women should be able to think for themselves and find truth without relying on religious institutions or traditional practices. According to Wright, these institutions and practices were designed to keep women oppressed.<sup>3</sup>

Sara Grimké, a 19th-century feminist (1792-1873) was a prominent American abolitionist, feminist, and writer. Born into a wealthy slave-owning family in South Carolina, Grimké rejected the injustices of

slavery and sexism. Grimké's advocacy for women's rights and abolition was groundbreaking. She wrote influential letters and essays, including *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, spoke publicly about women's rights and abolition, despite facing opposition. Grimké's work emphasized the importance of equality, justice, and human rights, inspiring future generations of social reformers. She believed that women needed more than just equal rights. They required social changes to improve their lives. Grimké argued that women, as a group, were oppressed by men, and that this needed to be addressed. Grimké fought for women's suffrage, pointing out that women were taxed without having a say in how their money was spent (taxation without representation). She also advocated for equal pay for equal work, education, and the development of women's intellectual and critical thinking skills. Grimké opposed the idea that women should be limited to the home and excluded from public life. According to historian Donavan, Grimké believed that the division between public and private spheres was arbitrary and based on custom. She argued that since men and women are intellectually and morally equal, they should have the same rights and responsibilities.<sup>4</sup>

Donavan says, Stanton's central liberal thesis is that women, as individuals, need rights in order to stand on their own. Grant us minimal basic rights and then let us take care of ourselves, our property, our children, and our homes. In the Lockean tradition Stanton sees government as a protection against tyranny: it should allow the individual woman to function freely, to enjoy her natural rights. Two moving examples of Stanton's individualism are a letter to the 1851 convention, in which she urges educating daughters in "courage" and "self-dependence", and her final address, the "Solitude of Self". In the latter she states her conviction that because every person is isolated, a woman must learn to take responsibility for herself. Stanton rightly notes that the concept of "the individuality of each human soul" is rooted in part in the protestant idea, "the right of individual conscience and judgement."<sup>5</sup>

Susan B. Anthony was a leading American feminist who fought for women's rights, especially the right to vote. She believed that women should have the same rights as men, including the right to vote, own property, and make their own decisions. Anthony's main goal was to secure the right to vote for women. She travelled extensively, giving speeches and collecting signatures to support women's suffrage. She also believed that women should have access to education and employment opportunities, allowing them to be independent and self-sufficient. Anthony advocated for women's right to make their own choices about their lives, including marriage, family, and career. She wanted women to be able to control their own lives and make their own decisions. Anthony's work laid the foundation for future feminist movements, inspiring generations of women to fight for their rights and equality.

John Stuart Mill was a British philosopher and economist who advocated for liberal feminist ideas. He believed in the equality of women and men, and argued that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. In his book *"The Subjection of Women"* (1869), Mill argued that women's subordination to men was a result of social and cultural norms, rather than natural inferiority. He wrote, "The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement."<sup>6</sup>

Mill believed that women should have equal access to education and employment, and that they should have the right to vote and participate in politics. He argued that women's participation in society was essential for their own development and for the benefit of society as a whole. Mill wrote, "The emancipation of women is practicable and desirable, and is in fact the most important of all the means of improvement which are now in progress."<sup>7</sup>

Mill's liberal feminist ideas were groundbreaking for his time. He believed that women's equality was essential for a just and free society, and that it was the responsibility of men to support and advocate for women's rights. John Stuart Mill believed that women are not naturally inferior to men, and that their supposed weaknesses, such as being nervous or intuitive, are also found in some men. He believed that women's subordinate position in society is not due to their nature, but rather because of customs and laws that discriminate against them. He argued that men have historically denied women education and equal rights, forcing them to rely on marriage for survival. Mill pointed out that the idea of women's inferiority has never been tested or proven. Instead, it has been perpetuated through customs and laws that have been passed down through generations. He believed that it's time to challenge these customs and laws, and to recognize women's equal rights and dignity. In his words, the current system of inequality between men and women "rests upon theory only," and has never been put to the test. He argued that it's time to rethink this system and to create a more just and equal society for all.<sup>8</sup>

John Stuart Mill believed that treating women as equals would lead to the greatest good for the greatest number of people. He argued that women should have the same rights as men, including the right to vote and participate in politics. Mill thought that women should be able to make their own decisions and choices, without being influenced by a higher authority, such as a monarch or God. Mill also pointed out that it's absurd to educate women but not give them the same rights as men. He believed that women should be able to choose their own representatives in parliament and have the same opportunities as men. By giving women equal rights, Mill thought that society as a whole would benefit and that women would be able to reach their full potential.

Liberal feminism has been criticized by radical and socialist feminists for not going far enough in challenging the status quo. One of the main criticisms is that liberal feminism maintains the idea of a "private sphere" where women's experiences are not thoroughly politicized. This means that issues like marital rape and domestic violence are not fully addressed.

Additionally, liberal feminism is closely tied to capitalism, which can make it difficult to address issues of economic inequality. Liberal feminists often focus on individual success and self-advancement, rather than challenging the systemic issues that perpetuate inequality.

This approach can also overlook the experiences of women from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Liberal feminism has been criticized for being centered on the needs of middle-class women, and for not fully addressing the ways in which class and race intersect with gender.

Overall, critics argue that liberal feminism does not go far enough in challenging the root causes of inequality, and that it often prioritizes individual success over collective action and systemic change. Here are the criticisms of liberal feminism rewritten with some improvements.

Liberal feminism could be criticized for overlooking the experiences of women with disabilities. By focusing on individual autonomy and self-advancement, liberal feminism can neglect the ways in which ableism and sexism intersect, perpetuating the marginalization of women with disabilities.

On the other hand, Liberal feminism's emphasis on individual choice and autonomy can be problematic, as it overlooks the ways in which societal structures and norms can constrain women's choices. This criticism argues that liberal feminism places too much responsibility on individual women to challenge patriarchal norms, without adequately addressing the systemic barriers that prevent them from doing so.

Liberal feminism criticized for not fully addressing the ways in which women are expected to perform emotional labour, such as caregiving and emotional support. By focusing on equal access to education and employment, liberal feminism can overlook the ways in which women are still expected to perform unpaid

emotional labour, perpetuating their exploitation.

Liberal feminism has been criticized for not adequately addressing the ways in which colonialism and imperialism have shaped women's experiences. By focusing on individual rights and autonomy, liberal feminism can neglect the ways in which colonialism and imperialism have created systemic inequalities that affect women's lives, perpetuating their marginalization.

Liberal feminism has been criticized for relying too heavily on the state to address women's issues. This criticism argues that liberal feminism's emphasis on policy changes and legislation can overlook the ways in which the state can also perpetuate patriarchal norms and inequalities, limiting the potential for transformative change.

Liberal feminism has played a significant role in advancing women's rights and equality. By emphasizing individual freedom, equal opportunities, and legal reforms, liberal feminists have achieved notable successes. However, critics argue that this approach overlooks systemic issues, such as patriarchy and intersectional inequalities, and often benefits privileged women. Despite these limitations, liberal feminism remains a crucial part of the broader feminist movement, pushing for continued progress and inclusivity. A nuanced understanding of its strengths and weaknesses can inform more effective strategies for achieving gender equality.

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### **References:**

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