Feminism – a brief recap

Feminism is a movement which aims for equality for women – to be treated as equal to men socially, economically, and politically. It is a movement that is focused not on ‘hating’ men, or suggesting that women are superior. Instead, feminism is focused on highlighting the power and oppressive nature of the patriarchy (male dominance in society). Feminists see the patriarchy as a limitation to women receiving the same treatment and benefits as their male counterparts.

bell hooks

Born Gloria Jean Watkins (September 25, 1952) bell hooks was raised in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. This was a small, segregated town in rural Kentucky, America. hooks explained how her community turned the hardships created by racism into a source of strength, and this provided young Gloria with her resistance to racism, as well as the negative and positive experiences that would shape her feminist ideology. Although society expected hooks to be a quiet, well-behaved young woman, she became instead a woman who “talked back.” This action, for which hooks eventually named a volume of essays, actually refers to the development of a strong sense of self that allows black women to speak out against racism and sexism.

In 1984, hooks published Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. She had identified a lack of diversity within the feminist movement, and argued that these diverse voices had been marginalised, being put outside the main body of feminism.

“Women in lower class and poor groups, particularly those that are non-white, would not have defined women’s liberation as women gaining social equality with men since they are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status.” Here hooks argues that feminism’s goal to make all women equal to men is flawed; not all men are equal to men as a result of oppression, sexuality, ethnicity. hooks used her work to offer a more inclusive feminists theory that advocated for women within a sisterhood to acknowledging and accepting their differences.

hooks challenged feminists to consider gender’s relation to sex, race, class and intersectionality. She argues that male involvement within the equality movement was important, encouraging men to do their part. Like Judith Butler (see Factsheet 125), hooks questioned the approach of feminist to treat women as a single and coherent group. hooks has forcefully argued that poor black women have more in common with poor black men, than with the white middle classed feminists, and this had been ignored by white academic feminists.

Activity

Revisit Emma Watson’s HeForShe campaign. In what way does this support bell hooks’ perspective of what feminism should be or should aim to achieve?

Intersectionality

The term intersectionality is used to describe overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination or discrimination. Its meaning is that multiple identities intersect to create a whole that is different from separate component identities. These individual identities can include gender, race, social class, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, age, mental disability, physical disability, mental illness, physical illness. These various aspects of identity are not mutually exclusive, instead they are working together to construct a new identity. Intersectionality theory proposes that individuals think of each element or trait of a person as inextricably linked with all the other elements – you cannot separate the various overlapping identities of an individual or group.

Intersectional identities are not usually addressed – law and policies will often only address one form of marginalised identity, and not intersection of multiple oppressed identities. Intersectionality proposes that all aspects of the individual’s identity should be seen to be interacting with each other simultaneously, and therefore affect the privilege and perception of the individual within society. Intersectionality is not just a perspective of personal identity, it is a way to view power hierarchies within identities. The framework of intersectionality also provides insight into the way multiple oppressions can interact and interrelate.

bell hooks argues that experiences of class, gender, sexuality etc cannot be completely understood if the influences of racialisation are not considered. hooks argues that understanding intersectionality is vital to gaining political and social equality and improving our democratic system. hook describes intersectionality as something which can create and maintain systems of oppression and class domination. “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression”
**Activity**

Think of a range of celebrities – actors, sports personalities, reality TV stars, models etc. Now, use the Venn diagram below to sort these different celebrities (one for your male celebrities, one for your female). Consider the traits for which each celebrity is most known – for example Alan Carr is a white male, comedian who is openly gay, and has femme personality traits.

You should aim to have a list which is diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity and sexuality.

What do you notice about the identities of some/all celebrities? Which types of identities are evident in two or more categories? Are these the types of identities which are more or less likely to experience oppression in society?

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**Liesbet van Zoonen**

Elisabeth van Zoonen (b. 1959) is a Dutch professor of Popular Culture. Her research focuses on gender and diversity, politics and popular culture, as well as digital and social media. In *Feminist Media Studies* (1994) van Zoonen examined feminist theory and was the first to point out that feminist research had not been considered within the field of media studies. Her work puts her as a key figure in third wave feminism. Van Zoonen concludes that there is a strong relationship between gender (stereotypes, pornography and ideology) and communication, but it is also the mass media that leads to much of the observable gender identity structures in advertising, film and TV.

Van Zoonen has a postmodernist understanding of science as something which is socially constructed and grounded in the social experiences of its practitioners. Scientific feminist research always includes 3 perspectives: the individual, the social and the cultural influences in order to understand the different meanings of media content. For van Zoonen, culture is seen as “ways of life” or, as she quotes theorist John Corner, “the conditions and the forms in which meaning and value are structured and articulated within a society” (Corner, 1991). Feminist media studies focus on how gender is communicated within the media. For van Zoonen “gender is a, if not the, crucial component of culture”, in particular when investigating the production of mass mediated meanings.

**Activity**

In contemporary society, are women still conforming to the ‘media-created woman’ for a man’s pleasure? Discuss and offer contemporary media examples to support your ideas.

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**Historical review of feminist media studies**

Feminist theory has an “unconditional focus on analysing gender as a mechanism that structure material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them” (van Zoonen, 1994). For many years, feminists have criticised women’s magazines as commercial sites of exaggerated femininity which serve to pull women into a consumer culture on the promise that the products they buy will alleviate their own bodily insecurities and low self-esteem. But it is difficult, when applying a feminist perspective, to reconcile the pleasure women get from consuming women’s magazines, and the political correctness surrounding hegemonic constructions of gender identities. Van Zoonen argues that women’s magazines mediate images that tell women “how to be a perfect mother, lover, wife, homemaker, glamorous accessory, secretary – whatever suits the needs of the system”. Feminists of the 1970s saw the ‘media-created woman’ – the wife, mother, housekeeper, sex object – as a person only trying to be beautiful for men.
Gender

Constructing meanings through signs is a fairly complex process because the notion of sign is quite extensive as it can regard written and spoken language, objects, images, motion pictures and so on. Many signs in the media are conventional and commonly known as they are culturally generated. Colours can be used to signal sex differences for example a baby wearing pink is a sign for its female sex, while boys would rather wear blue. The association of pink with femininity and blue with masculinity was made in 19th century France. In the 18th century however, a pink silk suit was regarded as appropriate attire for a gentleman. Gender should therefore not be seen as a fixed property of individuals, but rather as a part of an ongoing process where subjects are constituted, often in paradoxical ways as van Zoonen suggests. These underlying cultural structures build our perception of our environments and things that we look at and interpret. It can be described as a process of constructing the world according to the inherent sign systems. But vice versa do the objects we are looking at also construct our personality, gender roles.

Van Zoonen also highlights that some strategies for analysis have not been helpful for economic equality, citing the female-dominated American journalism field which subsequently reduced its status and salaries. Van Zoonen argues that this counterproductive progress is as a result of flaws in liberal, radical and socialist feminist media analysis; the flaws concern the conceptualisation of gender as “a dichotomous category with a homogenous and universal meaning, and the promise of mass media being instrumental to the control needs of respectively, society, patriarchy and capitalism”. Or in other words, other feminist media analyses have viewed gender as binary, with one single meaning. Van Zoonen’s critique is similar to Butler’s (see Factsheet 125).

Van Zoonen’s formulation of a theoretical premise begins from Harding’s definition of gender “as an analytic category within which humans think about and organise their social activity, rather than as a natural consequence of sex difference, or even merely as a social variable assigned to individual people in different ways from culture to culture” (Harding, 1986). This concept of gender argues that there is no one defined meaning of gender, but that it varies according to the social or historical contexts. It also suggests that the meaning of gender will be the focus of continued “discursive struggle and negotiation, the outcome having far-reaching socio-cultural implications” (van Zoonen, 1994).

The Media’s Roles in Constructing Gender

Van Zoonen argues that the influence of the media is dependent on:
- Whether the institution is commercial or public
- The platform upon which they operate (print versus digital media)
- Genre (drama versus news)
- Target audiences
- The place the media text holds within the audiences’ daily lives

Van Zoonen builds on Stuart Hall’s negotiated readings, arguing that the negotiated readings and subsequent focus on the way meanings are encoded and decoded “implies acknowledgement of gender construction as a social process in which women and men actively engage.”

Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model

Transmission models of communication position women as oppressed by the dominant culture expressed in media messages. Women, then, are apparently being flooded with images that do not reflect their own selves. As such, the interaction between men and women becomes a one-way process. However, van Zoonen also notes that media is used to assert one’s identity, and as such women should establish and express an appropriate feminine identity for each social situation. Women can use media to “try out different feminine subject positions”.

![Meaningful Discourse Diagram](image-url)
Gender and power
Van Zoonen considers power as a key element of feminist thought and suggests that it is used or is evident in the following ways:

- **As a non-issue** when it is emphasised that women are a disadvantaged, minority group that needs equality and rights more than they need power.
- **Something an individual possesses**, for example the power to criticise men or a group of men for the power they have over women.
- **As an offspring of material conditions**, when economic power relations of capitalism are named as the cause of women’s oppression.

She notes, however, that society is not created by order and binary divisions of the oppressed, and those who would oppress. Van Zoonen cites the experience of black feminists, such as bell hooks, where the individual can be both the subordinate in relation (woman vs. man) and dominant in another (white woman vs. black woman). So, van Zoonen argues that the focus should be not who is ‘in power’ and who is not, but to “theorise the multiplicity of relations of subordination” (Mouffe, 1992) and to consider how these relations of subordination for individual and collections, such as gender and ethnicity, are being established. Van Zoonen understands that gender is a particular discourse, “a set of overlapping and often contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference which arises from and regulates particular economic, social, political, technological and other non-discursive contexts”.

**Activity**
**Reflect on the ideas of both bell hooks and Liesbert van Zoonen. What similarities do you notice?**