

# An Exploration of Socialist Feminist Perspectives on Gender Difference: Patterns, Criticisms and Refutations

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**Abstract:** *Difference-based feminism has not abandoned the pursuit of equality, and the essential differences between the sexes make it imperative that gender differences are respected. Socialist feminism sees the positive value of women's differences, advocates the elimination of gender inequality from the perspective of reconstructing women's identities, and emphasizes the importance of gender theory for women's emancipation. As for the causes of gender inequality, socialist feminism is aware of the double oppression of women in the public and private spheres, and points to the path to equality at this stage, with women's full access to the labour market, the transformation of the private sphere into the public sphere, and the elimination of gender differences in the responsibilities, duties and identities of the sexes in different spheres. Finally, the socialist feminist future of equality is ideal and achievable, and the attainment of socialist equality of opportunity will ultimately lead to the complete emancipation of women in a communist society.*

**Keywords:** *socialist feminism; communism; gender differences; equality*

Equality and difference is a central issue in feminism and has been the subject of much academic attention. The aim of this paper is to clarify the theoretical sources and basic contents of the socialist feminist view of gender difference, as well as to criticise and refute it. In the first part we will sort out the theoretical framework of socialist feminism on gender difference, and on this basis we will try to answer the question of what a socialist feminist view of gender difference looks like in terms of biological and social gender difference, and the public and private spheres. We will find that gender difference is shaped by biological gender and social gender from birth to death; the goal pursued by socialist feminism is to treat all arenas equally and to achieve equality between men and women in both the workplace and the home. In the second part we will sort out the criticisms that socialist feminism has faced. The third section is a refutation of the above criticisms. In this section we will find that equality of gender differences has value and that, as a late-stage feminist school, the future of socialist feminism is within reach, despite its many problems. Socialist feminism seeks to eliminate the impact of gender differences on gender equality under a new mode of production, as well as the annihilation of gender itself. The discussion is necessarily incomplete, but hopefully it will be useful for socialist feminism.

## 1. A socialist feminist view of gender difference: the equality of difference

What does gender difference mean as a synonym for gender inequality? In the face of the double oppression of capitalism and patriarchy, socialist feminists have pointed out how they have set up gender differences between men and women and used gender differences to define superiority and inferiority. Gender difference provides a broader perspective for the development of women's thought and theory. The diversity of cultural concepts and the pre-existing characteristics of women in different societies can explain the subordination of women.

### 1.1 Theoretical framework: the direction of equality

Over the past century, society has changed dramatically and the gender differences between men and women have become more complex and diverse in character and content, have not lost their significance with the development of productivity and technological progress, and show no signs of disappearing. Socialist feminism is a combination of Marxism and radical feminism. In order to fill the gaps in Marxism on women's issues, socialist feminism unites the radical feminist view of gender

difference. To this was added gender theory with a view to developing and expanding its own identity and explanatory power. Firstly, we can see, with the help of Marxism, that the sphere of capitalism for the oppression and exploitation of women is comprehensive. The fact that capitalism allows women to recover some of the rights they have lost, as long as it does not affect the vested interests of those who have the advantage under the existing system, does not mean that women have a 'vacuum' in which to fully exercise their rights in certain areas. Capital is able to identify the extent to which feminism has an impact, and to assess and counter it. The impact of this counter-attack on women as a whole is comprehensive, but the degree of impact and the way it works is different. The goal of the Marxist struggle is to attack men as a class, taking the form of a political struggle to destroy the class. Once the 'male' class is extinguished, women as a class are liberated. The removal of class oppression means that gender oppression also loses its basis of existence.

To complement the gender blind spot of Marxism [1], socialist feminism takes the path of radical feminism, which argues that gender differences constitute the substance of social life and that women are created, not born. "Gender is not only the way in which female sociality is gendered from male sociality; they also see gender as the way in which women are subordinated to men. Gender is not 'different but equal'. Rather, gender is an elaborate system of male domination." [2] Patriarchal social formations fully dominate women and femininity. Patriarchy uses gender to regulate and define women, and any part of it that is not absorbed or recognised by patriarchy is illegitimate. Radical feminists expose the destructive gender difference in gender relations, which refers specifically to women's idiosyncrasies and focuses on the implications of women's responsibilities, sexual relations, etc. as distinct from those of men. And it shows how this destructive gender difference works in the system of inequality in which women are oppressed.

Finally, the goals of socialist feminism are similar to those of Marxism. Specifically, through the communist revolution, women are first rescued from class oppression, capitalist relations of production are overthrown, women are economically removed from their dependence on men, and ultimately a communist society is created in which women participate fully in public life. By spending only a small amount of energy on previously private life, they could achieve equality and emancipation. And on this basis socialist feminists sought to eliminate the effects of gender differences on gender equality. "Socialist feminism seeks a society that unites the capacities of all its members for physical and mental work, for rational and emotional connection, for work, for sex, for art, for recreation; those categories that are no longer considered to be part of human activity are excluded. Of particular importance is the fact that socialist feminism seeks a society in which 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are eliminated." [3]. In other words, rather than emphasising gender differences as radical feminism does, socialist feminism wants to abolish the distinction between the sexes.

### ***1.2 Biological gender differences and social gender differences***

It is generally accepted that biological gender is innately determined, while social gender is socially constructed on the basis of biological sex. As the beginning of the issue of gender equality, biological gender differences have long played a negative role in pointing out that women's collective identity is different from that of men, even if it has different manifestations, and has been the starting point and reason for gender inequality. Gender as an analytical tool, however, "its application and the more specific distinction between biological and social sex have advanced feminist theory on the issue of gender difference. Feminists distinguished between biological and social sex, pointing out that the two kinds of difference belonged to different categories. It enabled feminists to oppose biological determinism in all its forms and thus to shift the focus from the biological sex of men and women to the socially constructed processes that shape masculinity and femininity." With regard to the roots of women's oppression, in the eyes of traditional Marxists, class oppression of women comes first and male oppression of women is subordinate to class oppression. In the process of exploitation, women give their bodies or sex for free or in return, losing their subjective value as the 'other half' of humanity. The oppressed woman is far less important than the oppressed worker. Class issues are far more important than gender issues, and gender differences between classes are equally more important than gender differences between genders. Radical feminists believed that sexuality and reproductive activity were at the root of women's subordination and that overthrowing patriarchal rule was more important than resolving differences between classes. Radical feminism recognises that the formation of gender-related knowledge and ideas is male-dominated, and that male domination is effectively denying that women are the other half of the source of current knowledge and that women are equally capable of critiquing that knowledge. The knowledge and theories that are produced only serve to maintain unequal relations between men and women. Socialist feminists believe that women are shaped

by their biological and social sexes from birth to death. This includes the shared experience of women and the gender differences in modern society in terms of different identities, classes, races, etc. Unjust collective identities due to gender differences construct the basis of feminist struggles. Socialist feminism recognises gender differences between individuals and differs fundamentally from liberals in placing greater emphasis on the role of gender, "liberals believe that individual gender differences are relatively superficial, that there are universal identical essences between people, that these essences constitute the commonality of womanhood, and that social circumstances can change this human essence but cannot essentially. The social environment can change this human nature but cannot determine it essentially. Socialists believe that the essence of man is shaped by society." [4] Gender difference as a part of nature has a specific expression in a specific historical context and can be constructed later to change the unequal expression of gender difference. In modern societies, all people have specific backgrounds and societies are made up of many groups, which are also influenced by a variety of factors that distinguish biological gender differences from social gender differences. In short, patriarchy denies women and at the same time re-inscribes social meanings. Male-dominated social institutions and cultural systems define what women are and what they are, and then give way to the use of laws, customs and traditions that tangibly or invisibly blur the manifestations of women's oppression and dominate the norms and codes of behaviour of women. Inequality is given a rational and legitimate status.

### ***1.3 Public and private spheres***

According to the liberal feminist view of home and work, the distinction between the public and private spheres is the most distinctive feature of the distinction between the genders of labour [5]. Capitalism draws a clear line between the workplace and the home, and the home is artificially drawn into the private sphere. Labour is also artificially mapped into two different spheres, with domestic work being private and exclusive to women. Gender also suggests that women do not choose their social roles entirely on the basis of their own preferences, but that in adolescence children's choices are unconscious and shrouded in social ascriptions. As adults, however, there are already clear gender differences and mechanisms for the division of labour. The social roles and ways of behaving assigned to women make them inferior to men, and Marxism transforms the distinction between the public and private spheres of liberal feminist thought into a distinction between production and reproduction (procreation), with the family, procreation, the private sphere and the subordination of women, all ultimately reflecting the public mode of production. Once the private sphere has changed, the unequal status of the public sphere must disappear. Socialist feminism 'agrees with the traditional Marxist argument that women's emancipation requires women's participation in social production. But this alone is not enough, women must also be brought closer to more prestigious and glamorous professions, to supervisory and administrative functions. There should be no separate 'women's work' in public industry." [6] For socialist feminists, traditional Marxists define equality and freedom as the public sphere, liberal feminists define both in the private sphere, and both liberalism and traditional Marxism exorcise women into the private sphere of life. Both are incomplete. "The existing public-private division reflects the ideology of male domination and devalues the importance of women's labour outside the market." [7] Women's everyday experience also shows that the public and private spheres are the result of an artificial division and that in reality it is impossible to distinguish clearly and precisely between the public and private spheres. Not only this, but the morality of differentiation derived from the dichotomy between the public and private spheres is also questioned by socialist feminists as to its justness, "Pre-existing patriarchal ideologies and women's traditional position in domestic labour initially made women's labour potentially marginal, and accordingly, they were likely to be subordinate." [8]. Based on the relationship between biological and social gender and the public and private spheres, socialist feminism proposes a path to women's emancipation and gender equality: the use of women as labourers, which allows for the relocation of women from the private sphere of the family to the public sphere of social production, breaking the binary narrative structure of the public and private spheres in Marxism. In fact, the goal sought by socialist feminism is to treat all arenas equally, to achieve equality between men and women both in the workplace and in the home, an equality that transcends all social relations that enslave the self and the other. That is, in the family, the satisfaction of women's needs for subjectivity and the just distribution of responsibilities and duties between the sexes in terms of sexuality, production, status, procreation and emotional care, and the restoration of women's full mastery of their own flesh. In the workplace, women have the autonomy to use the value created by paid labour and to decide on the exchange and distribution of productive activities, breaking down the inherent division of labour in "separate" spheres. Freedom from male domination of women's work and interests.

At this point, we can summarise the socialist feminist view of gender difference: liberal feminist theory is committed to ignoring or minimising the impact of gender difference, and radical feminism advocates emphasising and celebrating women's identities. Socialist feminists, drawing on the in-depth exploration of gender difference in Marxism and radical feminism, approach gender difference by identifying with the existence and impact of gender difference, which is shaped by the combined biological and social genders of both sexes from birth to death. The importance of gender theory lies in the fact that a conscious reconfiguration of gender is an important means of coping with the adverse effects of gender difference in the public and private spheres, and also provides important support for the development of the independence of socialist feminism, i.e. the theory of alienation and the theory of the dual system. For the source of gender difference, Marxism unites gender difference in class and the enemies of equality point to capitalism. Radical feminism confronts patriarchy head-on and extends the effects of gender difference to society as a whole. Socialist feminism sees the inequality between the sexes due to gender differences as a result of the combined effects of capitalist patriarchy; as to the causes of gender inequality, socialist feminism is aware of the double oppression of women in the public and private spheres, and points to the existing path to equality at the current stage of historical development, namely the transformation of the private sphere into the public sphere, while ensuring that the family remains and plays a positive role, and the elimination of it is only when women have full access to the paid labour market and participate in the functioning and distribution of the public sphere that true equality between the sexes can be achieved. Finally, with regard to the future shape of gender difference, socialist feminism seeks to eliminate the impact of gender difference on gender equality under a new mode of production, as well as the elimination of gender itself.

## **2. Criticism of socialist feminism**

### ***2.1 The value dilemma of gender differences***

A criticism of the difference theory is that the justice of objectively real gender differences is difficult to secure. Before one can judge how the gender factor works, one first needs to know how gender is included in the scope of action. Because women's roles and positions are constructed under gender discrimination, the overlap with inequality factors puts gender differences at risk of being unjustified. Once oppressed groups acknowledge differences with other groups, they risk giving some legitimacy to existing institutional systems of inequality, particular identity markers and discourses, and the combination of gender difference with other factors may create new and previously similar discrimination arising from gender difference, which is seen as justifying gender inequality. Adopting gender-neutral principles and policies that ignore gender differences in liberal feminism can perpetuate the disadvantage of being defined as an oppressed group because of gender differences. Gender neutrality does not contribute to changing the situation of women's groups. Secondly, homonationalists argue that gender differences do not lead to equal outcomes. Societies are made up of groups, and people do not easily give up or change their social group identity, even when they are oppressed. And gender oppression will not be followed by significant increases or decreases in abandonment and change of gender. As long as group gender differences remain, certain groups will continue to be privileged by virtue of their gender differences. As Will Kymlicka [9] mentions, "Differentialism views gender equality in this way: as long as women are able to compete on their own merits for roles defined by men under gender-neutral rules, this is gender equality. But it is not true equality to allow men to construct social institutions in their own interest and then to disregard the gender of the competitors in deciding who will get roles in those institutions."

### ***2.2 A troubled and equal future***

Socialist feminism claims to be eclectic, fully absorbing the theoretical achievements of both Marxism and radical feminism, and trying to find a balance between them. However, it remains subordinate to the Marxist theoretical framework and does not form an independent theoretical system. "Socialist feminism can be reduced to Marxism if capitalism is the main enemy, and to radical feminism if patriarchy is the main enemy." [10] Marxism itself is an unsatisfactory deconstruction of gender difference and, while focusing on the critique of the oppression of working class women in the capitalist world, places too much emphasis on the congruence of class and gender attributes and does not fully accommodate the gender differences and inequalities suffered by women outside of the class, nor does it adequately take into account whether there are gender factors lurking under the commons that are detrimental to women. Secondly, there is the questioning of the future of socialism. Engels

proposed the path to women's emancipation as the full participation of women in the public sphere, and as a fundamental historical feature, as the working class grew in power, the demand for equality on the side of inequality grew stronger and stronger, and the class struggle would eventually overthrow capitalist society. But the various relations between capitalism and patriarchy do not, as Marx envisaged through his observations, lead to the destruction of one side leading to the subsequent demise of the other. Rather, they mutually reinforce and flourish with each other. And the gender difference does not disappear when women enter the labour market; there is a clear gap between the pay of men and women for the same positions. "Far from eliminating gender domination, women's entry into the labour market is more like a transfer from 'private patriarchy' to 'public patriarchy'." [11] Capitalist oppression has capitalist manifestations, and there must be other forms of oppression outside the capitalist world. It is reasonable to argue that capitalism is not the root cause of women's oppression and that the end of capitalism and private ownership will not lead to the end of female oppression. Following this direction, the overthrow of capitalism and the construction of a communist society makes perfect sense in itself, but may not be the only or inevitable option for women's emancipation and gender equality.

Finally, we can sort out the criticisms that socialist feminism has faced. Gender difference is objectively real, and differences in the way gender difference is treated create a divide in feminist theory, with criticism of gender difference theory focusing on the combination of gender difference with established and unequal social relations. The value of gender-differentiation theory is thus difficult to prove, as its justice and the positive meaning of promoting equality are difficult to maintain and correct by means; this does not mean the 'end' of the future of socialist feminism. The next section defends socialist feminism in two ways.

### **3. Arguing for socialist feminism**

#### ***3.1 The value of gender differences***

Theoretically, there are two alternative paths to equality for women, both of which start with "equality-difference" and follow different paths. The first is the convergence of gender traits and values in the same way as men, using men as the standard. It is not only in the form of a standard, it is fundamentally the standard for society as a whole. This path reflects the values of real society and adequately paints a picture of equality in the world but otherwise lacks substance and maintains value convergence with the existing system, the system of rights. For feminists who recognise the existence of gender differences with men and seek equality, they necessarily embark on a second path: to be different from men. In terms of the body, they recognise a different importance to men in the reproduction of society. And in terms of rights, women lack the same full democratic rights as men. The recognition of gender differences is known legally as a protective measure or the principle of special interest, and morally as a double standard. Socialist feminism has opted for the latter. Alice Young argues that ignoring gender differences in favour of equality in these contexts leads to oppression in three ways. Firstly, "it is the process of assimilation of those who come after, the inability to see that gender differences lead to the disadvantage of certain groups, and that assimilation means having to play by the rules of the game, to justify oneself by rules and standards. The group that sets the standards then has the privilege of defining particularity, controlling the ways and means by which it is transformed into sameness. This results in a permanent disadvantage for the oppressed group." [12] Secondly, "the universal ideal of humanity that removes gender differences from social groups allows privileged groups to ignore their own group specificity. By neutralizing and universalizing norms that express the perspectives and experiences of privileged groups, the disregard for gender difference perpetuates cultural imperialism." [12] To insist on the positivity of group gender difference in these situations is a politics of liberation and empowerment. Political leaders of oppressed groups reject assimilation, while often affirming group solidarity. Third, "groups that deviate from supposedly neutral standards will be denigrated, which often leads to the internalised devaluation of the members of these groups." [13] The desire to assimilate can produce characteristics that generate self-dislike and double consciousness. Assimilation rule-makers will demand that people conform to the mainstream in their behaviour, values and goals. But because of gender differences, conformity does not necessarily lead to the desired conversion outcome. Therefore, in order to change the existing status of women's rights, it is clearly unreasonable to use a uniform standard to measure the situation of different people in the face of gender-differentiated individuals. Differential treatment in order to achieve equality is relevant. Secondly, with the development of gender theory, the comparable value approach used to explain the division of labour came into view. Employment choices and pay levels for both genders are

influenced by experience, level of education, etc., but this is not sufficient to fully explain the causes of the gender employment gap. This provides room for gender differences to come into play. Those who subscribe to this approach believe that gender is a strong explanation for the gender pay gap between the sexes; if the pay evaluation system is well attained and employers are able to evaluate their employees objectively and fairly, the goal of equality can be achieved. The achievement of a pay evaluation system is predicated on a sound and fair gender construct. Gender theory also adds to socialist feminism a group of women who are not covered by the concept of 'class', and thus gains the theoretical power to translate Marxism into socialist feminism.

### **3.2 Accessible future**

Gender equality, as an integral part of socialist equality, is a prerequisite for the achievement of comprehensive human development, and is likewise a necessary path to human emancipation worldwide. The issue of equality is a product of a specific historical stage, and with the development of productive forces, equality will also be finally reached with the next stage of social formation. "The establishment of a capitalist society achieves political equality, however, political equality is not yet true social equality, the latter can only be achieved in a communist society. The implication is that in order to achieve true social equality, a communist society must be achieved." [14] In other words, true equality between the sexes needs to be achieved in higher social conditions, and for the problems faced by women at this stage, socialist feminists believe that certain unequal measures need to be taken to eliminate a range of problems such as employment discrimination due to gender differences. It is only then that it is possible to lay the foundations of background equality for women's full participation in all public spheres. Dara Koester and James [15] focus on the unequal treatment of women in the public and private spheres, arguing that domestic labour is as productive as labour in the public sphere, where women are subject to capitalist exploitation of surplus value, and labour in the private sphere is considered valueless and unrecognised. The way to achieve gender equality was through the payment of wages for domestic work, which was paid by the state. Vogel argues that the problems in the private sphere are difficult to solve by legal means and that there are two ways to reduce the heavy burden of domestic work on women's shoulders. The first is the socialisation of domestic work and its transfer to the public sphere, in the form of the creation of organisations that seek solutions between the state, society and the family. The second is the sharing of the domestic work that the former does not take care of, in proportion to the number of men, women and children. The two together could lead to a gradual reduction in domestic work. Furthermore, Cohen makes a moral case for the future of socialism on the issue of equality of opportunity, which for women means that the opportunities that women can have and seize are one of the roots of the problem of gender disparity in the workplace, while the existing orders and rules are a precipitation and synthesis of the situations that women have faced in the past, and they are meant to promote the social benefits of different historical periods, which does not mean that there is an alignment with women's interests over time. For socialist feminism, equality of opportunity is a necessary precondition for achieving equal competition between the sexes in the public sphere. Cohen argues that "liberal equality of opportunity removes the limits imposed by social status on a person's life chances; secondly, left-liberal equality of opportunity fills in the limiting results of social circumstances not addressed by liberal equality of opportunity; and finally, socialist equality of opportunity attempts to correct all non-selective disadvantages, including natural and social misfortunes, on human limitations." [16] The achievement of socialist equality of opportunity would allow "gender differences in outcomes to reflect only gender differences in preferences and choices, and no longer gender differences in natural and social capacities and powers" [17], with gender differences between people depending on individual preferences, including income and leisure preferences. But Cohen is also aware that this unequal expansion would run counter to the principle of 'sharing', and has adopted the principle of 'community' to remedy this. In this way, although the inequality in the distribution of rights due to gender differences is not completely eliminated, we can use socialist equality of opportunity in the existing social environment and social relations to separate the relationship between individual circumstances and gender differences, and to reunite gender differences with equality of opportunity, with the aim of gradually eliminating the negative effects. In this way, socialism not only achieves formal equality, but also takes its own step forward in terms of substantive equality.

### **4. Conclusion**

Finally, feminists used a variety of terms to describe the suffering of women, to describe the

distinction between equality and difference. Stirring up controversy over feminist perspectives has led to the production of entirely new categories and knowledge. The tension between equality and difference was never a pointless internal conflict of one against the other, but a bond that held women of all differences together, and the confusion of feminism was sublimated in the discussion. The future of socialist feminism is based on a full understanding of gender difference, and equality that affirms difference is true equality. Not only is it desirable, it is feasible.

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