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## **Key Concepts in Feminist Theory**

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**Sylvia Walby**

**Key Concepts  
in Feminist Theory**

## Introduction

The key questions which this paper has been asked to address are whether women are 'empowered' or 'victimised' by their entry into the public sphere and which concepts are best to address this issue. The central issue is thus the theorisation of changes in gender relations, especially women's increasing integration and participation in the labour market and formal politics in the West, in particular in 'modern welfare states'. The concepts which might be used to capture these changes might include: 'participation', 'integration', 'exclusion', 'marginalisation', and 'segregation'. I shall argue for the need for macro level concepts to capture changes at the societal level, such as that of 'patriarchy', as well as mid-level concepts such as these.

I shall argue that an answer these questions concerning the position of women requires a theory of patriarchy, one which is both structural enough to grasp the scale and interconnectedness of these changes on a macro level, while flexible enough to capture change and diversity. Thus I would add: 'patriarchy' to this list of key feminist concepts. The most effective route to conceptualising these issues is to develop the notion of different forms of patriarchy: that is, the differences between more public and more private forms of patriarchy; the separation of different degrees of patriarchy; the distinguishing of six patriarchal structures in paid employment, the household, the state, male violence, culture and sexuality; and differentiating more detailed patriarchal practices within these. Further, that it is essential to separate degree and form of patriarchy. These ideas are based in *Theorising Patriarchy*, developed in 'Methodological and theoretical issues in the comparative analysis of gender relations in Western Europe' (1994), and further developed in *Gender Transformations* (1997).

## **'Victimised' or 'empowered'?**

There is an issue in feminist theory, as in all social theory, as to the relationship between agency and structure. This issue arises in an acute form in the debates on the theorisation of changes in gender relations and in particular in relation to the question of whether women are 'victimised' or 'empowered' as a result of these changes. There is a constant dilemma in feminist theory over the extent to which women's actions are seen to be constrained by social, in particular, patriarchal structures. On the one hand, if the account is theoretically led by structural concepts there is a danger that women are seen as passive victims. This approach has been heavily criticised as inappropriately denying women agency. Theories which conceptualise gender relations in terms of patriarchal structures have often been criticised for inevitably viewing women as victims and underestimating women's agency and capacity to political action. On the other hand, if the account is theoretically led by voluntarist concepts of women's actions, then there is a danger that women will be seen to be colluding with their patriarchal oppressors. If women are seen to have full agency and decision making powers, this may lead to the view that women are then choosing or collaborating with their oppressors. This approach can be criticised for inappropriately suggesting that women actively create their own oppression.

This issue of structure and agency is a classic dilemma in all social theory. I have mapped it out here as a choice between two symmetrically problematic positions. The dilemma is that if women are seen as having agency then they must be seen as choosing their oppression, and if they do not choose it, as in structural account, then they are merely passive victims.

The problem with such an approach which dichotomises structure and agency is, as Giddens (1984) has repeatedly pointed out, that it neglects the duality of structure as being composed both of institutions and

agency. Social science must have concepts which allow for both the abstraction of institutional formations, which are beyond and above any individual action, as well as recognising the reflexivity of human actors. We need concepts which mean that we do not have to choose between an account led by either structure or agency, but one in which they are seen as mutually compatible, co-existing and complementary.

I would argue that it is possible to do this within a theory of patriarchy. That such a theory does not inevitably neglect women's, nor indeed men's, agency and political action. One example of this is the explanation of the change from private to public patriarchy in *Theorising Patriarchy* (Walby 1990). Here the changes are explained as a result not only of structural change, in particular changes in the capitalist economy which led to an increased demand for waged labour; but also as a result of the power of organised feminism at the turn of the century and its successful campaign for political citizenship. It is this focus on the importance of women's collective agency, as a political movement, which clearly gives place to women's agency in the creation of new structures of gender relations, new forms of patriarchy. A second example, from *Patriarchy at Work* (Walby 1986), is of the importance of men's organisations in restricting women's access to the better forms of paid work, of the role of some trade unions in creating sex segregation, that is men's agency leading to a structured patriarchal practice or institution. The impact of men's activities on the extent and nature of women's participation in paid work depended significantly upon the structural context, in particular, upon the balance of patriarchal and capitalist forces. It is important to acknowledge the importance of men's agency in theorising gender relations. Men have often been active in building institutions which suit their needs rather than those of women. Men's traditionally greater access to and involvement in the public sphere has typically given them greater opportunities for effective collective agency than have traditionally been available to women. A related example is that of the analysis of male

political opposition to first wave feminism, and the specificity of the concept of backlash in the comparison of the US and the UK (Walby, 1991).

These examples have been of collective agency rather than individual agency. Many of the interventions in the debates about women's agency have tended to focus on individual agency. This latter focus has a tendency to underestimate the extent to which women while always making active choices do not do so under circumstances of their own choosing. However, I think it is possible to simultaneously hold that women actively make choices, which doing so in conditions which are determined by institutions and structures over which they do not have power.

**Contemporary increases in women's employment:  
are younger women 'empowered' and older women 'victimised'?**



One of the central questions to be addressed is whether the increasing participation of women in the public sphere, especially employment, empowers them. Some writers have argued that women's participation in paid work is key to women's emancipation, while others see its effects as either neutral or contingent (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Lim, 1991; Tinker, 1991). On the one hand it can be argued that being paid for work (usually outside the home) is an improvement over working for no pay (usually within the home); that this can give women a degree of autonomy and independence from the men with whom they might live; and that this has positive implications for women's ability to participate in wider forms of decision making, for instance in elected parliaments and as members of significant professional groups, such as judges. On the other, it can be argued that women's employment is typically segregated from that of men, not infrequently part-time, marginalised, less well rewarded with pay and pensions, and may constitute merely an extra or double burden rather than a source of emancipation.

One outcome of this debate is the view that the impact of women's paid employment on the rest of women's lives depends upon the context in which it is performed (Standing, 1989). This context includes whether women are able to control effectively the resultant wage; and whether there is a social infrastructure, such as public provision of care facilities, to enable them to balance effectively the demands of domestic activities as well as employment. Whether a favourable context exists varies across time and between different countries.

So, do the new forms of public patriarchy mean that women are more victimised or more empowered? In order to answer this I would first revise the terminology, and second differentiate between different groups of women.

I would use notions of 'inequality' and 'disadvantage' instead of 'victimised', and 'political capacity' instead of 'empowered'. This is because in the face of an increase in inequality, it is possible that political capacity is either increased or decreased - there is no necessary relationship between the two. (Cf. Marx's argument about the immiseration of the proletariat, the greater exploitation of workers by bosses, which could lead to greater political militancy).

The differences between women need to be recognised in order to avoid over simple generalisations. In most contemporary Western European societies, especially the UK, young women, especially those who are increasingly highly educated and in employment, are experiencing less inequality with similarly aged men than previous generations. However, among middle aged people, women are particularly disadvantaged compared to men, as they face a return to the labour market but with few relevant qualifications and, especially in the UK, to part-time jobs which offer significantly worse conditions of employment. That is, I am arguing for the importance of age and generation in differentiating between gendered groups (see Walby 1997). Young women in the UK have recently not merely closed the gap in educational qualifications with young men, but are overtaking them (*Education Statistics for the United Kingdom*, 1995). Those young women who then gain employment are doing so in higher level occupations, such as management and the professions, than previous cohorts of young women (Census, 1971, 1981, 1991). The wages gap between women and men who work full-time has been reduced so that while in 1970 such women were earning only 63% of men's hourly earnings in 1995 this was up to 80% (*New Earnings Survey*, 1970, 1995). However, this is an age related set of changes. Older women are much more likely to be in lower level occupations, such as cleaning and shop work, to work part-time, and to be paid less. For instance, the wages gap between part-time women and men has not decreased to the same extent that it has for full-times, reducing from 54%

of the hourly rates of full-time men in 1974 to 60% in 1995 (*New Earnings Survey*, 1974, 1995). It should be noted that over this period while there has been a very marked increase in the proportion of women in employment, the percentage of employees in employment who were female rising from 34.1% in 1959 to 49.6% in 1995 (*Employment Gazette*, 1987, 1991), almost all of these new jobs have been part-time. It is crucial to differentiate between women and not make too many generalisations about the impact of changes in employment on women as a whole. Age is a major differentiator of the forms of gender inequality that women experience. It appears to be more important as a divider of women in those societies undergoing the most rapid changes (for instance, the changes in Ireland are much more rapid than those in the UK, with correspondingly greater implications for age differences between women (*Labour Force Survey*, 1994). The significance of age is under theorised in feminist theory.

While many younger, educated women who have gained employment have often been empowered by these changes in the form and degree of patriarchy, those who have not, for instance lone mothers without employment, and older women, are not. But are these women 'victimised' by their lack of employment? I shall focus on older women here and ask about their choices and their constraints. In order to address this we need a more sophisticated analysis of time and the intersection of the life course of individuals with that of the transformation of the form of patriarchy, that is, the significance of time for gender relations is that provided by the intersection of structural and biographical change. The question is over the way in which prior events impact upon current events via personal biography in the context of structural change. The choices that people make early in their lives affect the range of choices open to them later. This is particularly important for women who early in their lives make crucial life course decisions. For women key decisions as to whether to gain educational qualifications, to marry or not, to have

children or not, to stay in employment or take a break to care, have irrevocable consequences for the rest of their lives and the choices open to them in the future. Even if women appear to face the same opportunity structure now, their realistic range of options are different, depending upon their earlier decisions which set a trajectory which is very hard to change. These life course decisions intersect with structural change in the gender regime, in the form of patriarchy. There have been very significant structural changes in gender relations over the twentieth century in most Western societies, with moves from private to public patriarchy. This means that the form of patriarchal relations around which women take crucial life decisions is different now from what it was a few decades ago. Women today will decide on the balance of commitment to education and employment on the one hand and caring and dependence on the other under quite different patterns of gendered opportunities than women of previous age cohorts. Older women will have made these life decisions under a gender regime more private, more domestic, than the more public system of today. Yet once these decisions are made they are hard to undo, a woman's life trajectory is set accordingly, with only very limited room for manoeuvre later. Thus women who face ostensibly similar gendered opportunity structures do so from quite different situations based significantly on age cohorts (as well as obvious differences due to class and ethnicity). Their options and decisions are thus quite different. Women who have adapted their lives to a system of private patriarchy, a domestic gender regime, have a different set of resources and vulnerabilities as compared with those who have grown up in the new forms of more public patriarchy, a more public gendered regime. They will have different values and moralities, different political agendas and priorities.

Women who have built their lives around an experience and expectation of a domestic gender regime are particularly disadvantaged as those structures change to a more public form. For instance, expectation of

support for life from a husband was more realistic historically than it is today with the vastly increased divorce rates. Younger women today build their lives around the opportunities and limits of a public gender regime, preparing themselves for a lifetime of paid employment with education and training, delaying or rejecting child birth and marriage. Middle aged women, who did not gain educational qualifications or labour market experience, who had children and husbands early in life, now face a situation in which they are expected to enter the labour market to support themselves either fully or partially, and find themselves disadvantaged not only as compared with men of their own age, but also with younger women. But the concept of 'disadvantaged' is better than that of 'victimised' since it potentially recognises that women have made choices, albeit under new structural circumstances not of their own making.

Private patriarchy, the domestic gender regime, lives on in the biographies and memories of older women, even as they struggle to live under the current structures of public patriarchy, a public gender regime. The two systems in some sense co-exist, one as traces in older women's biographies, the other as current structures.

Age and generation are important then not only in representing different stages of the life cycle, but because people of different ages embody different systems of patriarchy, different gender regimes. Their life trajectories are structured by the different systems. They bring to the present traces of different pasts. Their choices and constraints are affected by this.

## **Increases in women's participation in politics**

Are women more politically active as a result of recent increases in women's paid employment? One of the traditional ways in which a positive connection can be made is to suggest that women are more likely to be politically active if they enter the public sphere, in particular that the increase in women's paid employment facilitates the organisation of women, for instance through trade unions, professional associations and entry into jobs which link to legislatures such as the legal profession. Indeed we have seen an increase in women being elected to national legislative assemblies which to some extent correlates with the increase in women's paid employment (although this is very uneven between countries). The most obvious supporting comparison is the higher proportion of women in the elected national assemblies in the Scandinavian countries which also have high rates of women's paid employment, as compared to the countries of Southern Europe which have both low rates of women participating in both their national parliaments and paid employment.

However, there are important caveats to this argument. First, over the implications of broadening the meaning of the concept of 'political'; second, over the impact of such participation. The first point is that women's political activity is not restricted to elected legislatures. Women are active in social and political movements and in organisations which are not always conceptualised as 'political'. Indeed it can be argued that the personal is political. Most analyses of women's politics underestimate the significance of first wave feminism which was an extremely powerful and effective political movement, especially, but not only, in Britain. Further, there is large scale organisation of (often non-employed) women in associations such as (in the UK) the Women's Institutes, Town Women's Guilds, the Mothers Union - although these are not usually considered to be 'political' in the conventional sense. (Walby, 1988; Banks, 1981). There is a further question about the direction of women's political empowerment, when (in some countries, including the UK)

women are more likely than men to engage in conservative electoral politics than men. So, while there is clearly a correlation between women's participation in paid employment and in formal national elected assemblies, the connection between participation in paid employment and a broader range of political activity is less clear.

The second caveat is over the impact of these forms of political agency. Are 'women's interests' advanced if women enter the structures of state power? Such a question requires an answer to the question as to what 'women's interests' are (Jonasdottir, 1991). There is a question as to whether the gender of the political actor is significant, for instance, whether the presence of more women in parliament affects the politics and policies of that body, or whether the wider structures of power are more important, so that, for instance, if women have little power in wider society they will have little impact on the policies of parliaments. Lovenduski and Norris' (1995) study of the UK argues that the gender of the Member of Parliament makes a little difference to their voting practices, but not much, while Skeije' Scandinavian study suggests that it does make a difference. Certainly there is some correlation between women being elected and state policies which support child care (see Walby 1994), though causality is a more complex issue.

Many of the issues involved in the layering of time and its embodiment in both biographies and institutions apply also to political institutions. Despite the qualifications, we see the significance of the steady building of women's participation in the public sphere of the state and formal national politics after the initial impetus and dramatic change brought about by first wave feminism. There has been a steady spiral of effects in which women's greater public participation in one arena leads to greater public participation in another, linking in particular, the state and employment, over the course of the century. We have not yet seen the end of this spiral of changes. The past affects the present not only as a

result of the concatenation of events, not only as a result of the rounds of restructuring of social institutions, but also through traces in individual biographies.

## **Segregation**

The concept of participation does not distinguish between kinds of participation, so that the location of women in a decision making hierarchy cannot be read off from their overall level of participation. Women may be participating in an institution but be subordinated within it, for instance they may be segregated into less powerful positions.

Segregation is a very important concept in the analysis of gender relations. Segregation is the social practice in which men and women are separated from each other, usually with the dominant group taking the better positions. There are important differences in the use of the term according to whether neutral, negative or positive versions of this practice are the focus of the concept. These usually depend upon whether it is a strategy implemented by the dominant group to further their domination (the usual meaning), or whether the term also covers a defensive strategy by the subordinate group which involves concentration (though the term separatism is more usual in such instances), or whether it can be used in a neutral technical manner (such as labour market segregation which treats as equivalent both the above practices, as in the Siltanen, Jarman and Blackburn (1992) segregation index).

A second issue in the definition and use of the concept is that of whether, or to what extent, this concept can be used in a variety of substantive contexts. Is segregation only of use in the analysis of gender relations in employment, or can its usage be extended to politics as well? I think it is



appropriate to use the concept in a variety of arenas, from participation in employment to presence in elected legislatures. Indeed the strength of the concept is that it transcends such distinctions. It is also a concept which captures the dynamic nature of segregation, that it is both a structure and a set of actions, that it exists always in dynamic equilibrium, not a forever fixed structure, that it is reproduced constantly by the actions of the individuals who compose it, that it can be changed by people's actions.

I used the term 'segregation' as a type of patriarchal strategy in a dichotomy opposed to that of 'exclusion', during the analysis of changes in patterns of occupational segregation in *Patriarchy at Work*. In *Theorising Patriarchy* I used it to refer to the main strategy in public patriarchy, as opposed to the exclusionary strategy of private patriarchy. This was designed to capture two quite different forms of patriarchy: the private one built around men's exclusion of women from the public and confinement to the private world of the family household; the public one which did not prevent women from gaining access to the public, but which used segregatory strategies to subordinate women within all spheres of social action.

Recent changes in gender relations in many Western countries have involved an increasing shift in the form of patriarchal strategy away from that of excluding women from the public sphere to that of segregating women when they are in the public sphere. This has occurred unevenly across different countries.

Both the history of Swedish gender relations written by Yvonne Hirdman (1994) and the history of gender relations in the UK which I have written share some common features, especially in the changing importance of segregation to the nature of the gender system. These accounts have some parallels in our theorisation of the change from a macro system of

gender relations based around the subordination of women by confining them to the home, to that of new forms of segregation. There is a further parallel in that both accounts seek to stress the importance of politics and struggle in the process of changing the nature of the gender system. And another in that we both think that we need macro concepts to capture the notion of an overarching gender system (Hirdman, 1990). And a final one in that we seek to develop mid-level structural concepts to capture the periodisation of the gender system or system of patriarchy.

However, Hirdman and I differ over some concepts. This occurs, in particular, when Hirdman uses the notion of gender contract in order to capture and conceptualise agency within her account. I think that this concept over-emphasise individual struggle and accommodation at the expense of collective struggle and accommodation. Further, it has the disadvantage in that the term has connotations which leave it is open to being interpreted in a quite voluntarist manner (Pfau-Effinger, 1994), even though this may well not be what Hirdman herself intends. Finally, while I use the concepts of gender relations and, on occasion, gender regime, I still retain the use of the concept 'patriarchy' because it unambiguously conveys the sense that women are subordinated in a structural manner in a system from which men as a collectivity, if not every individual man, benefit.

## **Conceptualising changes in the sexual division of labour**

The conference introduction used the phrase the 'breakdown of the male breadwinner model' in order to describe changes in the sexual division of labour. However, this conceptualisation captures only part of the range of structures over which these changes in gender relations are taking place, and leads to a disproportionate focus on work/family/state. It also has a tendency to conflate the degree and form of gender inequality, that is, it does not allow an analytic separation between the degree and the form of patriarchy, or structured gender inequality.

The key issue here is to develop the concepts which allow us to understand the circumstances under which women who enter paid employment are able to use this change to empower themselves. While for young white educated women in Western Europe and North America the connection between paid employment and reduced gender inequality may seem routine, this is not the automatic perception held by women of colour, women of the South, working class women and older women (Hooks, 1984; Elson and Pearson, 1981). Women who for structural reasons enter employment at a disadvantage, such as racialised minorities, older woman without qualifications, and women in the poor South of the world are differently positioned from white, educated, professional women. The literature from Black feminists is very strong on this issue - that entry into paid employment is not necessarily liberation, although it might be for advantaged white women (Hooks, 1984). Under some circumstances there is a clear causal link between employment and reduced gender inequality, as in the case of many educated young white women in the UK over the last 100 years, but the specification of the conditions under which this occurs is not yet complete.

We need to understand the full range of conditions under which paid employment can be used to empower women, and for this it is necessary

to analytically separate the degree and form of gender inequality. The political context of the entry to paid employment is crucial. This affects the legal regulation of the work e.g. whether part-time work has the same or fewer protections; whether child care is available. We need concepts which facilitate the differentiation of various forms of household, which enable us to ask, rather than presume, whether 'husband present households' are more oppressive than those where they are not. We thus need concepts for politics, citizenship and the state; for assessing the relevance of sexual practices and morals; for asking about the significance of male violence in restricting women's activities; for different forms of household. In short we need to have concepts for all the six areas, mentioned at the start of this paper, not only the three of work, family and state. We need to be able to separate the impact of the form of patriarchy from the degree of gender inequality.

## **Conclusion**

Mid-level concepts of segregation, exclusion, integration, participation are important. But concepts at the level of the system of gender relations, of patriarchy, of the separation of the form and degree of patriarchy, are necessary also. In order to have an adequate conceptualisation of the changes in gender relations consequent upon women increasingly participating in the public sphere, we need to have concepts of time which link the effects of structural changes and individual women's biographies. All women actively make choices, but many of the circumstances under which they act are not of their own making.

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