UNIT 5 FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

UNIT STRUCTURE

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this chapter you will be able to,

- understand the various interpretations that feminist research methodology evokes
- explain the issue and challenges of feminist research.
- analyze the scope of feminist research methodology and its impact on gender.
- examine the interrelationship between social science research and gender centric research.
- explain the various types of feminist research methodology and its impact on gender situation.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit seeks to provide a deep understanding of the sociological perspective on feminist research methodology. The feminist research has its origin in various 'feminist struggle' in 1960s and 1970s which exposed and challenged the basic societal structures and patriarchal ideologies that have oppressed women since ages. As a researcher they become aware of the contradiction between their daily life experiences as women and the

dominant research models, major research studies and their findings. No doubt, many scholars argue that feminist research and activism go hand in hand, but this in no way undermines the approach as a researcher ensures that their work is valid, objective and reliable. The research process incorporates all stages of the research question, to literature review, to summarizing the research findings. "The word Research is composed of two syllables, RE and SEARCH. The dictionary defines the former as a prefix meaning again, anew or over again and the latter as a verb meaning to examine closely and carefully, to test and try or to probe. Together form a noun describing a careful, systematic, patient study and investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken to establish facts or principles."

Whenever one undertakes Research it implies that the process undertaken has the following distinctive characteristic;

- The Research process adheres to a framework encompassing at times singular, or at other plurality of perspectives.
- The Research process makes use of only those Techniques, Methods and Procedures which have proven time and again their validity and reliability.
- Research process is designed in such a way that there is no scope for subjective bias i.e., it is unbiased and value free or value neutral i.e., objective.

Methodology encompasses the following precepts as they relate to a particular discipline or field of enquiry;

- a collection of theories, concepts and ideas;
- Comparative study of different approaches;
- Critique of the individual methods.

5.3. BACKGROUND OF FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGY -

Feminist methodology means 'research from feminist understanding'. The invisibility and unheard voices of women, their unaccountable presence and participation in several social set-ups, have

raised the questions of 'inequality' and 'placement of women' in society at large. Therefore, 'inequality' and 'placement of women' correspond to 'description' and 'explanation'. These two terms also serve as two areas of feminist sociological inquiry (Ritzer, 2013) or distinctive feminist method of research (Harding, 1987). The means used to conduct the scientific enquiry through feminist standpoint is called feminist methods. Therefore, feminist methods came into the light to eradicate the domination of men or patriarchal view point in conducting unbiased researches, which offered an equal space to women and their views.

"Proposals for feminist research methods have either been directed to the elimination of unconscious sexist bias in research, when a male perspective and double standards are taken for granted, or to the replacement of supposedly objective structured interviews and quantitative analysis by more reflexive and interactive unstructured interviews and a method of writing sociology that is said to allow the subjects to speak for themselves." (A Dictionary of Sociology, 1998) In the '60s, '70s, and '80s, feminist researchers called attention to the pervasive androcentric bias within science and social science research. Feminist empiricists worked to correct these biases by adding women to research samples and by asking new questions that incorporated women's experiences and perspectives. Feminist empiricists thought that by doing so, they could improve the accuracy and objectivity of claims about the universal knowledge that could be obtained through positivistic research.

Feminist empiricists' insights on androcentrism and their goals of eradicating sexist research cascaded across the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, history, sociology, and education and across the fields of law, medicine, and communications. The 1970s and '80s saw the publication of many groundbreaking feminist research anthologies critical of androcentric research that made significant contributions to the deconstruction of traditional knowledge frameworks, such as the work of Gloria Bowles, Renate Duelli Klein, Helen Roberts, and Nancy Tuana.In contrast to this endeavor, feminist researchers of the '80s and '90s launched other important challenges to traditional research, starting with a basic foundational question:

What is the nature of the social reality? A new set of feminist epistemologies (ways of knowing) and methodologies (ways of asking questions) interrogated, disrupted, modified, and at times radically challenged dominant models of knowledge building within and across the disciplines, beginning with a critique of positivism, the mainstream research paradigm based on the scientific method. Feminists challenged basic tenets of positivism and scientific objectivity, particularly the idea of value-free science that stresses the detachment of the researcher from the researched, universality, and the idea that there is a social reality waiting to be discovered. Instead of working to improve mainstream research by including women, as feminist empiricists had done, some feminists challenged the viability and utility of positivism's hallmark concepts of objectivity and universality. These feminists claimed that knowledge is achieved by paying attention to the specificity and uniqueness of women's lives and experiences rather than by correcting studies by simply adding women.

Feminist Methodology can better be understood as various ways of dealing with biasness, inequalities and injustice in researches subjected to women. It is a way to study social reality, far from any indifference and disparity by using an approach constructed by the personal experiences and understanding of their position in the society. Feminist research studies, analyses the social conditions of women in a 'male stream' and patriarchal set up. It documents aspects of reality, from gender inclusive perspective and in the process exposes the norms, folkways and mores which encourage taken for granted sexist biases, at the community level and the gender insensitiveness of the government and the political parties. It argues that women have lived in a social order which is unequal and discriminating for them. Feminist research is critical of the other research methodology as male centric, as traditionally men have dominated social life and thus the ideology has an inherent male bias. Moreover the research is owned by the powerful (men) as a tool to control women, and lastly there is a major difference in the way the world is perceived by men and women, due to their social status .

Essentially it aims to display and establish a correlation between structures and conditions that have contributed to the skewed contemporary times, when it comes to gender relations. As a research technique, it identifies the underlying factors that have contributed to this skewed society, and proposes measures that can alleviate the problems. It advocates, empowering the women, to give them a voice, ultimately leading towards a more just and gender inclusive and participatory society.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

A) Fill in the Blanks

i) Feminist scholars challenged the basic tenents of _____ and scientific objectivity.

ii) Feminist methodology can be understood as ways of dealing _____.

5.4 CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS OF FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The generation and production of knowledge has been an important part of feminist theory and is at the centre of discussions on feminist epistemology. Elizabeth & Anderson (2004) defined feminist epistemology as the way in which gender influences our concept of knowledge and practices of inquiry and justification of feminist standpoint. Judith Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow (1986) identified five basic feminist epistemological principles. Firstly, it talks about "taking women and gender as the focus of analysis" secondly, it highlights the importance of consciousness raising; thereafter, it emphasizes on rejection of subject and object by valuing the knowledge held by the participant as being expert knowledge and acknowledging how research valued as "objective" always reflect a specific social and historical standpoint. Fourth principle is concerned with ethics in the process of research and in the use of research results; lastly, as an intention to empower women and change power relations and inequality.

Though there is no single definition of feminist research or feminism yet, many researchers and authors define certain key elements as standard features. These key point help draw a line between feminist researches from traditional research methodology. What makes feminist research uniquely feminist are the kinds of questions, methodologies, knowledge, and purpose brought to the research process, Feminist methods actively seeks to remove the power imbalance between researcher and subject; it begins with the standpoints and experiences of women and aims to change social inequality. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used by the feminist researchers. There is no one method or strategy for feminist research. Instead of focusing on which type of research is better, it makes more sense to allow the context and purpose of the research to guide the choice of research tools and techniques.Feminists who are critical of feminist empiricism's "add women and stir" approach place women's lived experiences at the center of knowledge building. Feminist standpoint epistemology is an alternative model of knowledge building (see Sandra Harding and Dorothy Smith) that borrows from the Marxist and Hegelian idea that an individual's daily activities or material, lived experience structures understanding of the social world. For both Karl Marx and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the master's perspective is partial and distorted, while the worker-slave's is more complete because he or she must comprehend both his or her own world and the master's to survive. Feminist standpoint scholars argue that a woman's oppressed location within society provides fuller insights into society as a whole; women have a more nuanced understanding of social reality than men do precisely because of their structurally oppressed location vis-à-vis the dominant group, men. Sociologist theorist Dorothy Smith stresses the necessity of taking into account women's everyday experiences. She pays particular attention to finding and analyzing the gaps that occur when women try to fit their lives into mainstream methods of conceptualizing women's situation. Examining the differences between two perspectives gives the researcher a more accurate and theoretically richer set of explanations of the lives of the oppressors and the oppressed.

5.5 TYPES OF FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGY - I

As stated earlier research methods are techniques for gathering data usually into either quantitative or qualitative method. According to Oakley (1997) the feminist methodology has incorporated quantitative methods, traditionally being associated with words such as positivism, scientific, objectivity, statistics and masculinity. In contrast, qualitative methods have generally been associated with interpretivism, non-scientific, subjectivity and femininity. Various contemporary feminist methods are used to justify the techniques through theories that are constructed with women centric themes. Though these theories are built around inclusion of women and are wide-spread but mainly following theories classify broad understanding of feminism:

- Cultural feminism
- Existentialist feminism
- Liberal feminism
- Radical feminism
- Socialist feminism

- **Cultural feminism :** Alice Echols credits Brooke Williams with applying the term "cultural feminism" in 1975 to describe the de-politicisation of radical feminism. "Echols prefers the name "cultural feminism" for this trend because it equates "women's liberation with the development and preservation of a female counter culture." (Alcoff, 1988). Term 'Cultural feminism' is used to describe theories that commend natural differences between women and men.

Cultural feminist believe that the women's oppression resonate with the biological difference from its counterpart. Masculinity along with backward beliefs, economic institution and social system are considered the enemies of women. "Cultural feminist politics revolve around creating and maintaining a healthy environment-free of masculinist values…"

Daly's definition of women mainly focuses on female biology. As a cultural feminist, she emphasizes on female energy which reflects female

spirit/ body. As she points out "Since female energy is essentially biophilic, the female spirit/ body is the primary target in this perpetual war of aggression against life. Gyn/Ecology is the re-claiming of life-loving female energy" (Alcoff, 1988). The essence of cultural theory is to render importance to female biology which has been suppressed under patriarchal thought. Similarly, menstruation has been negatively interpreted as something dirty, filthy and a thing to feel disgust about, therefore devaluing the female spirit/ body and intellect which is going under a natural physiological process. Cultural feminism thus, presents a positive image about female biology and glorifies the female attributes. As Rich states, "Our great mental capacities...; our highly developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring, multi-pleasured physicality" (Alcoff, 1988). Ironically, this glorification of female biology does not correspond to her real self in society when it comes to menstruation. Society has set of beliefs and adheres to it in best possible way it can. The cultural feminism emphasizes on the affirmative qualities of women linked with women's role like nurturing, caring, cooperation and affection towards others.' It highlights the similarities as well as differences in association to men.

- **Existential Feminism :** Existentialism is a philosophical and cultural movement which relies on the thought that philosophical thinking must be based on the experiences of the individual. It advocates that moral thinking and scientific thinking together are not sufficient for understanding all of human existence, and, therefore, t a further set of categories, governed by the norm of authenticity, is necessary to understand human existence. Authenticity in existentialist context refers to understand our responsibility towards our own existence. .Simone de Beauvoir was influenced by the existentialist philosophy which can be seen in her feminist theories and her work. Existentialist thought invokes the principle that humans have no fixed nature and they are expected to change with the change in their socio-cultural milieu. Simone de Beauvoir's book *'The Second Sex'* (1949/1957) was a breakthrough in history of feminism. It presented the idea of "Woman as Other," which established a theory on femininity that conceptualized

socio-cultural ideology that illuminated woman as everything man is not. Simone de Beauvoir also emphasized on how men controlled, suppressed and subjugated women's sexuality and reproduction under the realm of patriarchy. She advocated that gender was not an essential characteristic of people, but rather something that one becomes through socialization. "One is not born," she wrote, "but becomes a woman." Through this quote she conveyed how a woman's attitude towards her body and bodily functions changes and how society influences her attitude towards her perception of self. Simone de Beauvoir's work has been indispensable piece of feminist theory impacting second- and third-wave feminist thought and politics that mainly focused on women's sexuality, reproduction, social impact of patriarchal culture in the society.

Radical Feminism: Radical feminism views patriarchy has been oppressing women since ages and the inequality between men and women needs to be eliminated in social, political or economic context. Through participation in patriarchy, men learn how to hold other human beings in contempt, to see them as nonhuman, and to control them. Within patriarchy men see and women learn what subordination looks like. Patriarchy to radical feminists is the least noticed and yet the most significant structure of social inequality. Radical feminism is based on two beliefs (1) that women are of absolute positive value as women, a belief asserted against what they claim to be the universal devaluing of women; and (2) that women are everywhere oppressed by the system of patriarchy (Ritzer, 2013). Early radical feminism, arising within second-wave feminism in the 1960s, typically viewed patriarchy as a "transhistorical phenomenon" prior to or deeper than other sources of oppression, "not only the oldest and most universal form of domination but the primary form" and the model for all others (Willis, Ellen 1984) Later politics derived from radical feminism ranged from cultural feminism to more syncretic politics that placed issues of patriarchy as sources of oppression.

Violence as overt physical cruelty lies at the heart of radical feminism's linking of patriarchy to violence: rape, sexual abuse, enforced prostitution, spouse abuse, incest, sexual molestation of children, hysterectomies and

other excessive surgery, the sadism in pornography, the historic and cross-cultural practices of witch burning, the stoning to death of adulteresses, the persecution of lesbians, female infanticide, Chinese foot biding, the abuse of widows, and the practice of clitorectomy "Radical feminists see in every institution and in society's most basic structures- heterosexuality, class, caste, race ethnicity, age, and gender- systems of oppression in which some people dominate others" (Ritzer, 2013).

Liberal Feminism: also known as 'egalitarian or main stream feminism'. It is based on the simple idea that all people are created equal and should not denied equality of opportunity because of gender. Both genders are benefit by the elimination of sexism. Jessie Bernard in the study, The Future of Marriage analyzed the institution of marriage as the system of oppression. According to Bernard, there are two types of marriages, one is the man's marriage and other is the wife's marriage. In the man's marriage "he holds to the belief of being constrained and burdened while experiencing what the norms dictate- authority, independence, and the right to domestic, emotional, and sexual services by the wife" (Ritzer, 2013). Whereas, in the wife's marriage corresponds to 'cultural belief of fulfilment' vis-a-vis feeling of dependency, powerlessness, provider of sexual services to her man. The study concluded that two sets of people, one is married women and other is unmarried men were ranked high on stress indicators. On the contrary, unmarried women and married men were found low on stress indicators.

Liberal feminism is based on 'Enlightment beliefs' of rationality, education and the natural rights that extend to all men and women. This is articulated in John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women,* with his statement that "what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing- the result of forced oppression others." Women can work together within a pluralistic system and mobilize their constituents to effect positive and productive social change. Demands will be met if mobilization is effective and pressure is efficiently wielded. Liberal feminists believe society does not have to be completely restructured to achieve empowerment for women

and to incorporate women into meaningful and equitable roles. This view tends to be adopted by professional middle class women who place a high value on education and achievement. These women are likely to have the economic resources to better compete with men for desirable social positions and employment opportunities.

Liberal feminism thus appeals to "mainstream" women who have no disagreement with the overall structure of the present social system, only that it should be nonsexist. The national organization for women is the formal group representing this branch, with a statement of purpose calling for an end to restrictive gender roles that serve to diminish opportunities for both women and men.

- **Socialist Feminism:** Socialist Feminism also referred to as 'Marxist Feminism,' Socialist Feminism generally adopts the Marx- Engels model described earlier that links the inferior position of women to class based capitalism and its alignment with patriarchal family in capitalistic societies. Socialist feminism argues that sexism and capitalism are mutually supportive. The unpaid labour of women in the home and their paid labor in a reserved labor force simultaneously serve patriarchy capitalism. Many socialist feminist believe that economic and emotional dependence go hand in hand. Fearful of the laws of economic security, a husband's power over his wife is absolute. Capitalism needs to be eliminated and socialist principles need to be adopted at both home and workplace. Sexism and economic oppression are mutually reinforcing so a socialist revolutionary agenda is needed to change both. Socialist feminism appeals to working class women and who feel disenfranchised from the presumed economic opportunities in capitalism. Although socialist feminism is explicitly tied to Marxist theory, there are key differences between the two. Whereas Marxist theory focuses on property and economic conditioned to build an ideology, socialist feminism focuses on sexuality and gender. Men and women retain interest in their own gender group, so it is unclear if socialism is being struggled for is the same for both men and women (Hartmann, 1993).

"The major argument of The Origins is that the women's subordination results not from biology, which is presumably immutable, but

from the social relations that have a clear and traceable history and that can presumably be changed" (Ritzer, 2013) .

"The compelling part of the Marxism analyses for feminist socialist is this analyses of class relations under capitalism- which they accept as a major source of oppression the problematic part of Marxism analyses is that it makes patriarchy a function economic relations. Socialist feminists accept the radical argument and prove that patriarchy while interacting with economic conditions is an independent structure of oppression." (Ritzer, 2013)
Although feminist empiricists and standpoint researchers stress the importance of acknowledging women who had been left out of mainstream research models, some important questions remained. Which women's stories were being told? Whose life experiences were included, and whose were left out? Feminism's interaction with post colonialism, post structuralism, and postmodernism fostered a turn toward feminist difference research. Feminist researchers became increasingly conscious of the diversity of women's experiences. They argued against the idea of one essential experience and recognized a plurality of women's lived experiences

Feminist scholars and researchers continue to engage in issues of difference across gender, ethnicity, and class. Feminists are currently expanding their focus on difference to include issues of sexual preference, disability, and geographical region. Many feminist researchers, including Bhavnani, Hyun Sook Kim, and Diane Wolf, stress the importance of women's experiences in a global context with respect to issues of imperialism, colonialism, and nationality. Analyses incorporating race, class, and gender differences often ignore the diversity among women with regard to their particular geographical and cultural placement across the globe. Two key questions for feminists who take a global perspective are the following:

How does one conceptualize and study difference in a global context?

What research frameworks empower and promote social change for women?



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

B i) Who is the author of this book 'Subjection of Women'?

B ii) Who is the author of the book 'The Second Sex' ?



5.6 LET US SUM UP

- The feminist research has its origin in various 'feminist struggle' in 1960s and 1970s which exposed and challenged the basic societal structures and patriarchal ideologies that have oppressed women since ages.
- Many scholars argue that feminist research and activism go hand in hand, but this in no way undermines the approach as a researcher ensures that her work is valid, objective and reliable.
- The research process incorporates all stages of the research question, to literature review, to summarizing the research findings.
- Feminist methodology means research from feminist perspective.
- The invisibility and unheard voices of women, their unaccountable presence and participation in several social set-ups, apart from 'home', have raised the questions of 'inequality' and 'placement of women' in society at large.
- Therefore, 'inequality' and 'placement of women' correspond to 'description' and 'explanation'.These two terms also serve as two characteristics of feminist sociological inquiry or distinctive feminist method of research.
- The means used to conduct the scientific enquiry through feminist standpoint are called feminist methods. Therefore, feminist methods came into the light to eradicate the domination of men or patriarchal view point in conducting unbiased researches, which offered an equal space to women and their views.