UNIT 1 FORMATIVE FEMINIST DISCOURSES

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will discuss the interrelation between gender and class from the discourses of formative feminist perspectives. It will focus on the analysis of the category of ‘class’ and how women remained outside this conceptualization. For instance, the articulation of women and work did not take into account the lives of working class women, who were already forced to work in two shifts, taking care of the family unit and participating in wage earning activities. Further it did not take into account the specificities of cultures other than the West, where social structures may be significantly different. In the unit, we shall discuss whether women account for a class position.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

• Explain the theory of class and its origins within Marxism;

• Examine how feminists understand Marxist theory and the notion of class; and

• Explain the concept of class in relation to social institutions.
1.3 FEMINISM AND CLASS: AN ANALYSIS

1.3.1 What is Formative Feminist Discourse?
The unit discusses the institution of class from the formative feminist discourse. Formative feminist position can be viewed as a broader political economy framework within which different feminist strands emphasized the social location of women’s labour in the capitalist economy. The years between 1940s and 1970s can be referred as the formative period in the development of feminism internationally. During this period, feminists from different theoretical positions like Marxist, radical, socialist and second wave addressed the specific issues of women in relation to race, class, caste, ethnicity and nationality. This description of formative feminist discourse has been drawn from the work of Alma m. Garcia (2013) on the development of Chicana feminism as a discourse. The unit will discuss feminists’ analysis of class in the initial years of feminist struggle that can be referred as theoretical positions on feminism and the class question.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of Marxist-feminist analysis of the conception of class which we can refer to the formative feminist discourse. Two theoretical issues became central to the analysis of class within the Marxist-feminist debates, the degree to which women’s oppression is constructed independently of the capitalist mode of production and the degree to which the oppression of women located in the realm of capitalist ideology (Brenner and Ramas, 2000, 2006). The formative feminist discourse on class looked at women as the source of domestic labour within the family which in turn served as the basis for women’s oppression in the capitalist regime. Briefly, women’s oppression was more or less discussed in reference to the capitalist class relations which never transcended the hierarchy between women and men as equal beings in the labour market.

Michele Barretta Marxist feminist analyses women’s oppression as a complex subject which is integrated with the family-household system. Household as a form of social structure is interlinked with the ideology of family. It is believed that family comprises biologically related members and is organized through the ‘principle of dependence’ (c.f. Brenner & Ramas, 2006). To elaborate, the naturally related members are dependent on the wages of a few adult members who can be the father/husband and all members are primarily dependent upon the unpaid labour of mother/wife. In this analysis, Barrett argues that the class system is not inherent to capitalism; moreover it is an ideology that is historically produced within the family-household system.

This idea of class relation existed even in the pre-capitalist period to promote family relations that acknowledged the male dominance. To quote, “the ideology was accepted by the organized working class in the nineteenth
century and was determinant in forming craft-union political strategy” (Brenner and Ramas, 2006, p. 14). Class is described as an ideology which suited both the state and the working class to create an organized male dominated capitalist culture in the mid-nineteenth century. The removal of women from the craft union could be the evidence for pushing women into the domestic sphere and creating a sex-segregated labour market in Britain. The sexual division of labour within the household has its base in class relation or class ideology which became an integral structure of the labour market. Eventually, women’s engagement with a particular form of labour and differential wage were the legitimated norms in the labour market and pushed women into the sphere of family. To quote, “Barrett’s crucial contention is that the family-household system is not inherent to capitalism but has come to form a historically constituted element of class relations” (Brenner and Ramas, 2006, p. 14). Therefore, Barrett argues that the working class men should have fought against the family-household system to strengthen the class revolution in the world. The family-household system was the foundation for creating a class difference between women and men, hence the understanding women’s oppression in a class relation requires discussion on family-household system. Barrett’s approach was criticized due to its theoretical simplification in the following ways:

1) If the principles of capital accumulation are sex blind, how does the division of labour persist and reinforce in the labour market.
2) It fails to analyse the material basis of women’s oppression in the capitalist society.
3) The analysis fails to address why the family-household system got deeply rooted within the capitalist society.

According to Brenner and Ramas (2006), it is significant to analyze the formation of sexual division of labour between capitalism and family-household system within the contradictory framework. On the one hand, Karl Marx and Fredric Engels argued that capitalism required women to join the labour force which laid the foundation for their material possession. On the other hand, women’s role in biological reproduction has historically posed challenges for women to join the labour market. The exigencies of biological reproduction such as pregnancy, childbirth and lactation were incompatibly with capitalism and the capitalists preferred not to incur expenditure on such variable capital. As a result, the capitalist economy did not accept women as workers in the nineteenth century. The contradictory relationship between capitalism and the family-household system has had multiple repercussions on women. Women were not considered ‘productive economic units’ equal to men in the labour market.

Let us now look at other issues concerning women and class which emerged in the course of feminist struggle. German feminist Maria Mies stated that
in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, sexist and racist ideology received material and scientific acceptance in the Western society. It is reflected in the works of Proudhon, Marxists Economist who argued that women are inferior beings as they remain close to animal life (Custers, 2014, p. 39). Peter Custers's (2014) work on \textit{Capital Accumulation and Women's Labour in Asian Economies} analysed Proudhon's claims about women. Proudhon propagated the ideology of housewife in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century through the institution of marriage. He was against women's paid employment and advocated for women's primary responsibility towards domestic work. He opposed those women who were engaged in factory and literary work. For him, those women could not be proper mothers and housewives (p. 40). The ideology of housewife was promoted among the working class movements of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century Europe and the consequent benefit was cherished by the capitalist class. German feminist scholar Bennholdt-Thomsen argued that the model of female as housewife and male as the bread earner emerged in the First World during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century to organize the working class. The ideology of housewife has gained ground due to the capitalist mode of production which primarily denied women's access to paid labour (c.f. Custer, 2014). These issues had not received adequate attention in the analysis of class prior to feminist discourse.

\subsection*{1.3.2 Second Wave Feminism and the Debate over Class}

Feminist engagement with the analysis of class began in the 1960s and 70s. As you have read, there are different feminist strands but not all the feminist strands have looked the question of class critically. For instance, radical feminists in the United States saw patriarchy as “the determinate social relationship under all modes of production” (Custers, 2014, P. 20). They argued that the social system is characterized by male domination over the female and power rests with the male only. The class relation that different social groups share with the means of production comes after patriarchy. The socialist-feminists moved further to redefine the relation between women and class. According to them, women's relation to the means of production is different to that of men since they control the labour power of women. Hence, certain issues such as: women’s labour and housework and women as an independent class have been dealt by feminists thereafter.

During the first part of the 1970s, the debate on women and class was centred on the conceptualization of housework. Some interesting contributions were made by the American author Margaret Benston and Italian feminist Maria Rosa Dalla Costa. When the second feminist wave was on the rise, Margaret Benston (1969) wrote an essay. ‘The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation’ in which she argued that the root cause of women’s secondary status is economic in nature and women as a group share a definitive relation with the means of production (cited in Custers, 2014, p. 40).
Benston argues that women can be equivalent with the wage earners of the capitalist economy and their share in the domestic labour needs to be analyzed. Women as a group have been working outside the economy therefore their labour is treated as invisible and subsistence. Dalla Costa took a similar position and offered a critique to Marxist understanding of domestic labour. She argues that the separate spheres of men and women were created by capitalism in which men hired as wage labourers and women remained locked within the family. Further, she made the claim that women are not only the primary producers of use value or services but they are linked to the production of surplus. Domestic labour is not under the direct control of capitalism therefore it is invisible, unregulated and unevaluated labour. For example, domestic labour doesn’t have any time in which it must be completed. Dalla Costa defines domestic work as qualitatively different from the wage work and is the foundation for the production of labour power (refer Custers, 2014). Analysis of housework and its valuation was formed as a theoretical standpoint during the second wave feminist struggle.

**Check Your Progress:**

What is household labour?
1.3.3 Reproduction and the Class Structure

Reproduction and class are intrinsically related. The acceptance of women’s role in the reproductive sphere became the basis for creating the class structure between women and men. Prior research has shown different trends on women’s relation to the labour market. Women in the nineteenth century were withdrawn from work after the birth of their first child. Similarly, women shaped their work in and around their reproductive responsibilities and simultaneously made economic contributions. Women with children gained access to employments such as: part-time work, home-based work and seasonal work. Studies show that where women were allowed to work with their children, their work participation rate increased; for example, Italian mothers in the New York canneries, immigrant mothers in New England textile miles and English cotton factories (cited in Brenner & Remas, P. 27).

The question that still remains valid is why the aspect of reproduction, i.e., child care was addressed outside the capitalist mode of production. Brenner and Ramas analyzed the relation between capitalism and reproduction in pre-industrial and capitalist economies. In the pre-industrial society, reproduction was accommodated into the ‘sphere of production’ as the ‘means of production’ was under the control of home-based workers. Hence, both women and men were working as productive units in the pre-capitalist society. However, with the rise of factory production, factors such as loss of means of production, controlling workers wage and time and manipulation of workers’ labour for surplus posed a severe threat to the survival of working class in the factory production system. Under these conditions, family-household system was seen as an appropriate system to address the challenges of the working class.

For working-class men and factory production, reproduction and production remained as separate spheres. Barrett criticized this separation of family-household system from factory production on the pretext that this separation is a product of gender ideology of difference. Child-care responsibilities and factory work become incompatible in the capitalist mode of production. Further, it was argued that since wages were low, working adults were unable to pay for child care for which women remained in the job of child rearing. Other reasons like difficult child birth, unacceptability of bottle-feeding and lack of information on sterilization were some of the listed factors which significantly contributed towards the sexual division of labour. A wide range of support services such as paid maternity leave, nursing facilities during working hours, and on-site crèches were viewed to be distant dreams for women workers. Both material base (insufficient wealth) of the working class and the existing gender ideology had significantly contributed towards the construction of the family-household system as an obvious answer to the survival of the working class. The impact of gender ideology
or stereotypes manifests in different ways of which the most explicit is the gender differential wage.

### 1.4 CAPITALISM AND GENDER DIFFERENTIAL WAGES

Gender segregation and differential wages have been significant features of the labour market both informal and formal. Feminists scholars like Barrett and Brenner have stated that there is a firm interrelationship between women’s work in the pre-capitalist society, the division of labour and gender differential wage in the contemporary context. In medieval Europe, it was observed that among the serfs and peasants, marriage was a convenient option for this particular class of people to farm their land for survival. Therefore, certain tasks were divided along the gender lines. Husbands ploughed the land and turned the hay while wives milked cows and fed chickens and ducks (Coontz, 2005 cited in Ryle, 2012). In many African societies, clearing the field for cultivation is considered to be a man’s job and growing the crop is women’s responsibility (Beneria and Sen, 1997). For Example, among the Rwala Bedouins of the Middle East, you can find a rigid sexual division of labour under which the work of conducting business was considered to be the men’s space and women were not allowed to participate (Coltrane, 1996, In Ryle, 2012).

Therefore, Barrett stated that the gender difference in the labour market has historically originated from existing gender division of labour in a pre-capitalist society. In the contemporary context, the men as employers have accepted women in jobs which show similarity with their gender roles within the family. Other than this, factors such as women’s lack of participation in trade unions, lesser mobility in searching jobs, constraints of domestic duties and work as flexi labour force significantly placed them as a disadvantaged class in the labour market. Capitalism has exploited these differentials to sustain the working class labour and to capture women as the source of cheap labour. Custers (2014) in his analysis on women’s labour looked at the works of Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg. Zetkin stated that women were economically and socially interdependent in the pre-capitalist period as they were engaged in productive activities. However, under the capitalism, most of the productive activities like food processing and sewing in which women were engaged earlier were taken up by the industries and women became the source of labour in the family. Capitalism has altered the division of labour between women and men. Zetkin campaigned for granting women’s right to wage labour and pleaded for giving social recognition to the task of mothering. Rosa Luxemburg considered mothering and housework as unproductive work as they do not produce surplus value and earn profit under capitalism. Though feminists see this stand as anti-feminist, but the issues of ‘household labour’ and ‘mothering
as social performance’ were later developed into theoretical positions by the contemporary feminist discourse about which you are going to read in the next unit of the block.

**Box No. 1.1**

Brenner (2006) writes “from the pre-capitalist division of labour within the home, I was assumed not only that women needed less food and could subsist on lower wages, but also that they often sacrificed their own needs to those of husbands and children. This ideology of women’s sacrifice allowed employers to pay women less……………..In our view, ideology concerning women’s lower costs of reproduction may have encouraged employers to pay women less and may have made it more difficult for women to organize themselves to demand more……………..the supplementary character of their wage earning, their ultimate destination as wives and mothers, distinguish them from men” (p. 33-34).

An analysis of the above paragraph will suggest that women were seen as a supplementary class; therefore their labour in the home, factory or industry remained secondary and undervalued. Two positions have clearly come out in this description. On the one hand, Barrett argues that the ideology of female dependence provided justification for their low wage; on the other hand, according to Brenner capitalism was unable to accommodate women’s reproductive needs in the factory work. In sum, capitalism undermined the family-household system by pulling women into the wage labour and reinforced the sexual-division of labour by maintaining gender segregation and differential wage parameters in the labour market.

The formative feminist discourse on class and women has reference to both the family-household system and capitalism, as these two institutions primarily viewed women as outside the class system. Heidi Hartmann (2002) argues that the patriarchal system has created an arrangement within the family in which the labour of women and children was controlled by the men and by doing so men learned the techniques of hierarchical organization and control. The difference between the family and capitalism can be summed up as follows:

1) **The direct personal control operates within the family and**

2) **Indirect impersonal control operates within capitalism. The mechanisms which are available to men to set aside women from the category of class were traditional division of labour and techniques of hierarchical organization (p. 98).**

These forces or mechanisms were powerful in pulling women and children into the free market economy, yet maintained gender segregation and hierarchy.
**Box No. 1.2**

**Industrialization in England and United States**

Capitalism had a serious impact upon women in terms of appropriating their labour. To understand its impact, it is important to see the women’s position in transitional economy from agriculture to factory production to industry. In the 1500s and 1600s, agriculture and woollen textiles had been the mainstay of livelihood in England. In that period, men used to work on small farms (owned or rented) and women used to cultivate their household plots. Towards the 1700s, the demand for cotton textiles in England increased which in turn demanded more of agricultural labour population. The merchants distributed materials to be spun and woven and created a space for women in the domestic industrial system. In the late 1700s, the domestic industries were organized into factories to control the process of production. These factories were concentrated in rural areas to pull in maximum of women and children into factory production. In this process of change, when spinning work became industrialized, women lost their jobs and when weaving became mechanized women as handloom weavers seemed to be obsolete. The capitalization of factory production increased the subordination of women by withdrawing the work from home and excluding women from participation. In this scenario, men were capable enough to organize in trade union to achieve benefits for themselves. The process of organized factory production shows an interaction between patriarchy and capitalism that maintained the job-segregation by gender in the labour market and became the root cause of women’s subordinated class position (Hartmann, 2002). Both radical and socialist feminists have drawn the inter-linkage between patriarchy, capitalism and class. Women as a subordinated social group share specific relation to the means of production as against the men.

**Check Your Progress:**

Do you agree that women’s subordinated class position is a product of the gender ideology? Explain in your own words.
Women, Class and Capitalism: Some Empirical Reflections

The relationship between class and women is neither unitary nor homogenous in nature. Hence, the intricate relationship between these two categories needs to be interrogated or studied empirically. Let us look at some of the case studies in Asia on women and class to understand how class plays out in different women’s lives and conditions.

K. Kapadia’s (1999) study on the ‘working class’ in rural manufacturing industry of South India emphasized the process of class differentiation which is influenced by the categories of gender and caste. She argues that working class is not homogenous and is fractured or divided on the gender lines. The case study of artificial gem cutting industry in rural Tamil Nadu indicated that female workers position in relation to production (including assets, autonomy, and employer) radically differs compared to the men. In the gem cutting industry, women entered into the workforce after 1976, with the campaign of ‘Garibi Hatao’. Under this campaign, it was announced that all bonded labourers were free from debt and could choose to walk out from the employer’s labour contract. However, it was not an easy task for the male labourers to initiate any kind of direct revolt against the owner. Labourers used to revolt in a subtle and covert form such as taking frequent breaks in the working hours and continuous absenteeism. This form of indirect and covert reaction forced women to join the workshop to compensate for labour loss in the industries. The workshop owners allowed wives and children of male workers to join the labour force.

This study captured the intricate relationship between gender norms and class which was made clear to the women workers as soon as they entered into the workshop. For instance, women workers were usually referred by the term ‘worker’s wives’ and they were instructed to behave according to gender and caste norms. Similarly, married women workers never received their wages directly and the male workers used to get joint wages. Male workers often negotiated with the employers for their wives’ nature of work and payment. Therefore, men used to paddle the machine sitting on in place and women worked the day long carrying out different odd jobs. Women’s entry into the factory work made them to work as bonded labourers for their husbands rather than working for the workshop owner. Kapadia argues that women were seen as a different kind of working class which is defined and governed by gender norms. The analysis of women’s position in the class structure corroborates the formative feminist view on class since they argued that women’s class position is determined by the gender ideology and their role within the family-household system. The gender is analysis of class needs to be engaged with. The important questions are do women occupy a class position? If yes, it needs to be discussed in relation to men.
Check Your Progress:

Discuss a similar case study or published work to show how women’s class position varies in relation to men.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit discussed the construction of class from a feminist perspective. The unit gives an understanding of class from diverse theoretical positions such as radical, socialist and Marxist feminist perspectives which encompassed the formative feminist discourse during the initial period of international feminist movement. The unit exposes the learners to various debates on housework, reproduction and unpaid labour, and the interface between capitalism and patriarchy. It discussed class differentiation along gender lines and explored women’s specific social location and its influence upon their class position.

1.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss the concept of class in formative feminist discourse.

2) Define socialist feminism and use this theoretical position to discuss the relationship between women and class.

3) Analyse the interconnection between women, class and division of labour with the help of case studies.
1.7 REFERENCES


1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS
