

Feminist Political Economy

Subjects: Geography | Sociology | Psychology, Social

Contributor: Iffath Syed

Feminist political economy is a concept from feminist material scholarship. It connects market relations with domestic relations. It examines the roles of women, tensions related to women's paid and unpaid work, how production and reproduction issues affect women, and the interactions at the micro, meso, and macro level contexts within women's lives.

Keywords: Feminist Political Economy ; Feminist Political Economy of Health ; Feminism

1. Introduction

Feminist political economy suggests that material and cultural discrimination against girls and women are the primary factors that influence their social conditions^[1] and health. The problems women face emerge from the discrimination and disadvantage that they experience as they carry out the gendered activities making up their daily lives^{[2][3][1]}. Materialism examines the economic needs of the family, the work of women in the home and in labor markets, and the needs of employers. "Materialists contend that both bodies and ideas must be understood within the context of material conditions"^{[1][4]}. Materialism accepts that biological factors affect and are affected by material conditions and vice versa^[3]. Materialists argue that there is usually one group or class that produces while another class controls; and while people produce and reproduce, they require food, clothing, and shelter. Historically, these class relationships have been explained through property ownership (e.g. feudalism, slavery). Today, class relationships are explained with laborers, who exchange their labor for wages, and an elite class that controls and influences waged work. Materialists do not assume social harmony, and people do not necessarily do things as they please^[1].

Feminist political economy suggests that women are directly affected when women's wages are lower than men, and that women tend to be confined to households because their work is not exchangeable for wages in the market^[5]. Women who do participate in labour markets often do so as a reserve supply of labour on either daily, weekly, seasonally, or part time basis to respond to demand. The dual demands of their work in the home and the labour market have a direct effect on the way women participate in the workforce as well as on the sex segregation of women's work and women's wages^[1]. For example, if a job is defined to have social care, the likely it is that the work will be done by a woman, defined as unskilled, and; therefore, is low-paid. This results in gender inequalities in income and wealth, which make women vulnerable to poverty^{[1][3]} and health inequities.

The invisibility of women's work is because of an assumption that women are responsible for social reproduction, which overlaps both the public and private realms^[6]. There is a perception that good women care for their families and others, either uncompensated or low-paid, to attain feminine moral worth^{[7][8]}. As a result, while the work in the home is considered to be free from constant supervision, it is detrimental to women's material conditions and perpetuates health inequity because it is unpaid or underpaid, unregulated, invisible, undervalued; and characterized by long hours, dull, repetitive, and isolated work^[1]. Material conditions such as employment opportunities, wages, and scarcity of day-care will still constrain women's roles and confine them to work primarily in the home, even if ideas of women's place in the home changes^{[1][4]}.

Feminist political economy approaches are often employed by feminist scholars. Many feminist scholars, such as Dorothy Smith, argue that the issues for women arise from culture, intellectual discourse, and politics developed and written exclusively by men and from the standpoint of men rather than women^[9]. Women's history is actually not theirs, but is rather that of men (ibid). They also argue that there is a ruling apparatus or a dominant class, which excludes the working class, the voices of women, men of color, native peoples, and homosexual men and women (ibid). Women's lives have been subordinate to or outside of this ruling apparatus and dominant class (ibid). Ironically, women's subordination under the ruling apparatus and dominant class occurs despite the reality that the organization of work includes women's work, as wives, secretaries, and in their ancillary roles (ibid). In other words, women are crucial to the paid economy. Yet, women's contributions to both the paid economy (and also unpaid economy) are often dismissed or under-recognized.

2. Influence

Feminist political economy approaches are useful because they explain the underlying processes that make women vulnerable to inequities. For example, marriage or having children sometimes has an effect on women to discourage them not only from pursuing continuing education, but also from continuing their work, which would directly impact rates of poverty [9] as well as health and wellbeing [10]. Women are also vulnerable to inequities because of the double burden of work in the home and in the labor force which frequently causes stress and fatigue [9]. This also causes problems and inequities in women's health and being [10].

Women tend to provide a majority of care in both public and private environments, and maintain the health and lives of those in their households, families, and communities through unwaged and low-waged invisible work [11]. This phenomenon is often dubbed a double-burden, especially in the health care sector, which comprises of over 80% women [8]. The invisibility of women's work is because of an assumption that women are responsible for social reproduction, which overlaps both the public and private realms [8]. There is a perception that good women care for their families and others, either uncompensated or low-paid, to attain feminine moral worth [11]. As a result, while the work in the home is considered to be free from constant supervision, it is detrimental to women's material conditions and perpetuates inequities because it is unpaid or underpaid, unregulated, invisible, undervalued; and characterized by long hours, dull, repetitive, and isolated work [1]. Material conditions such as employment opportunities, wages, and scarcity of day-care will also constrain women's roles and confine them to work primarily in the home, even if ideas of women's place in the home changes [1].

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