

Can women ever benefit from emphasising their difference to men?

When looking into the past, into world history, one can blatantly see how male dominated it is. Great men have actively made and written history. However, why has the other half of the world population remained silent? Why have women been isolated and kept away from history? Feminism has attempted to answer these questions so as to understand why women have systematically had an inferior stand and has equally aimed to improve their status, their rights and their equality. In fact, feminism's main pillar and goal is, and has been, the creation and implementation of equality between men and women. The ways in which equality has been sought have, however, diverged: on the one hand we have so called "equality" feminism and on the other "difference" feminism. Both are concerned with the same issues, striving to achieve the same goal, yet their theoretical approaches stand miles apart. The former advocates an equality discourse which emphasises common features between men and women and exalts our common humanity – they employ equality as a means and an end. The latter emerged as an opponent to the former which was criticised for being exclusionist and reductionist. Hence "difference" feminists aim to achieve equality by putting emphasis on the differences between men and women as these differences can, from this viewpoint, work in women's advantage. The goal of this essay is, therefore, to verify whether "difference" feminism's premises can be corroborated, whether they correspond to reality and whether this approach is the most appropriate one to assure equality between men and women. In order to do so, I shall firstly establish what "difference" feminism's main assumptions are and illustrate its general hypothesis. Secondly, I shall proceed to analyse several examples which will serve as both representations and contradictions of difference feminism's conjectures. Finally, I will identify general trends within difference feminism's discourse which contradict the belief that women ought to highlight their differences in order to achieve equality.

In order to comprehend the core and drive of “difference” feminism we must first analyse “equality” feminism and its main assumptions. “Equality” feminism was thus the primary expression of a desire and struggle for equality which was initially articulated in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir. In fact, “In 1949, Beauvoir considered that the status of women would improve with a change in their economic and social circumstances and with their recognition as equals” (Deutscher, 2002: 8). Beauvoir, who stood as one of the first perpetrators of “equality” feminism, believed that the implementation of equality between men and women ought to and could only be achieved through the use of an universalist argument which portrays both men and women as mere human beings and therefore inherently equal. The logical conclusion of this argument is that if both sexes are equal on that level, if they share a common humanity, they must also be equal in every other sphere of their lives. This supposedly universal argument was however voiced by a rather restricted group of women - white, middle class, heterosexual women led this movement henceforth advocating for limited rights under a universal banner.

The exclusionary character of these movements did, however, propel the rise of a ‘counter-movement’, one which shared the same final goal yet that differed in the means to achieve it. Indeed, “Whereas Beauvoir fought for equality between men and women, some contemporary French feminists have broken with the ideal of equality in favor of affirming sexual difference” (Deutscher, 2002: 8). This ‘counter-movement’ thus materialised in the belief that “formal equality-seeking was neither sufficient for the achievement of women’s full participation in society nor substantive equality” (Changfoot, 2009: 3). In fact, it is argued that this formal equality-seeking ignores and excludes poor women, working class women, lesbian women and women of colour, hence the majority of women, thus employing a false universalism to corroborate its specific perspective and assumptions. One other criticism focuses on the fact that if women are to establish equality between the two sexes by stressing their innate equality derived from a common humanity they are destined to abide to male subjectivity, to pre-conceived identities – they must become *like* men in order to attain equality. One can consequently denote an apprehension of what would be the

subsequent homogenisation which would render both sexes identical, hence inevitably entailing that women ought to behave like men if they wish to be treated as one. Changfoot remarks this same distrust by arguing that “difference feminists were highly sceptical and critical of the possibility of both structural and attitudinal change from equality demands because existing power structures and attitudes were highly resistant to change” (Changfoot, 2009: 3).

“Difference” feminism thus aims to employ differences to create equality, yet, which differences does it refer to? Which particularities does it propose to highlight to bring about equality between the two sexes?

Many feminist thinkers have isolated various distinct singularities particular to women, singularities which men are devoid of. The implication of this argument is that men need women and vice-versa. In effect, both parties possess particular characteristics and qualities which can only be used to produce the best and most balanced results when combined. Carol Gilligan elaborated an argument in 1977 in defence of “difference” feminism which focused mainly on women’s notions of morality and conceptions of self. The author begins by stressing women do boast a distinct moral conception, yet its nature seems to be undetermined. Gilligan proceeds to support her argument by providing evidence that several thinkers such as Freud, Piaget and Kohlberg had previously noticed and commented on this distinctiveness. Freud had admitted that ethics and morality were perceived differently by women when stating “I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in man” (Gilligan, 1977: 484). Piaget, on the other hand, carried out a study on children’s games and concluded that “In contrast to the boys’ interest in the codification of rules, the girls adopted a more pragmatic attitude (...) in comparison to boys, girls were found to be ‘more tolerant and more easily reconciled to innovations’” (Gilligan, 1977: 484). Finally, according to Kohlberg women behaved differently and possessed a distinct moral compass for they remained “at the third of his six-stage developmental sequence. At that stage, the good is identified with ‘what pleases or helps others and is approved of by them’” (Gilligan, 1977: 484). The

confirmation and exaltation of the differences that these authors and many others pondered on served, however, a specific purpose, one which aimed at denigrating women's abilities, which rendered them inept and inadequate. Gilligan recognises this technique and thus states that "And yet, herein lies the paradox, for the very traits that have traditionally defined the "goodness" of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development" (Gilligan, 1977: 484).

The subjectivity and instrumentality of these traits is therefore unlimited and volatile, for their purpose and their core elements can easily mutate, depending on who is voicing and using them to satisfy their own interests. Difference feminists, unlike the previous authors, focus on these same differences yet by transforming their negative character into a positive one, into a valid argument, they attempt to highlight the uniqueness of women's attributes so as to put them forward as advantageous. For instance, Swanee Hunt employs the same conclusions reached by Freud, Piaget and Kohlberg to aid and construct the conception of women as bearers of "higher moral or ethical standards than their male counterparts" (Hunt, 2007: 113). In this specific case difference is thus equated with superiority, thus gaining a positive connotation. She goes on to state that "Greater female political participation would bring significant rewards" (Hunt, 2007: 111) for various reasons.

The first motive would be that women are inherently more trustworthy than men. This statement is substantiated by research sponsored by the World Bank which demonstrates "that countries with a higher number of women in parliament enjoy lower levels of corruption" (Hunt, 2007: 111) but also "that women are less likely to be involved in bribery and that corruption is less severe where women make up a large share of senior government officials as well as the labor force" (Hunt, 2007: 111). Secondly, Hunt notes that women's increasing participation and involvement in the political sphere is correlated with economic growth and competitiveness. This correlation is thus corroborated by the following statement which clearly expresses that "countries that do not fully capitalize on one-half of their human resources are clearly undermining their competitive potential" (Hunt, 2007: 112). Hunt proceeds to remark that there is a general conviction amongst female politicians

that an increased female representation would lead to a boost of the government's legitimacy. The explanation for this conclusion is conveyed by an Inter-Parliamentary Union poll which ascertains that "political activism by women led to "tangible improvements" in social services, the environment, the safety of women and children, and gender equality." (Hunt, 2007: 112). The logical sequence of this postulation is that women are naturally more concerned about marginalised citizens and social activism in general than men. The author continues to strengthen the argument for a renovation of women's role in politics by portraying women as inherently more altruistic, tolerant, understanding, optimistic and consequently naturally inclined towards conflict resolution. It is thus argued that "If we put women in leadership, they have a degree of tolerance, an understanding that allows them to persist even when things seem to be very bad" (Hunt, 2007: 113) and that "Unlike men (...) "women have the power and emotional inclination to hold onto hope when it comes to negotiating with former enemies" (Hunt, 2007: 113). Hunt draws on the assertions made above to construct the argument that women's own particular perspective and interest for the social good and their inclination towards peaceful agreements and cooperation might truly benefit both domestic and foreign policy.

The use of sex differences employed above in Hunt's *Let Women Rule* thus serves the interests of women, the desire to achieve equality, the wish to stand at the same level as men. This approach to difference thus benefits women, for it portrays them as capable and concerned human beings. Yet, a change in approach has the ability to close many doors, to render women incompetent and powerless and to alienate them from, amongst others, the world of politics.

An example of the instrumentality of difference is present in Fukuyama's article *Women and the Evolution of World Politics*. Fukuyama begins by analysing the example of a chimp colony in the Netherlands and of a group of chimps in the Gombe National Park in Tanzania which have both been the object of a series of studies. These chimps' societies are said to be populated by biological differences – male chimpanzees are depicted as aggressive and Machiavellian whereas females are characterised as peaceful and co-operative.

Subsequently, Fukuyama establishes a comparison between chimpanzees and humans by noting that “Chimpanzees are man’s closest evolutionary relative, having descended from a common chimp-like ancestor less than five million years ago. Not only are they very close on a genetic level, they show many behavioral similarities as well.” (Fukuyama,1998: 25). By juxtaposing human with chimp societies and labelling the visible sexual differences within the latter as biological, Fukuyama is asserting that women, as argued by Hunt, are naturally more peaceful, co-operative and understanding than men. The following logical sequence of Fukuyama’s argument does, however, gain a different shape than Hunt’s. By adopting a realist lens and envisaging the world as being populated by war and violence, Fukuyama’s argument entails that international politics ought to be populated by aggressive men and succeeds in securing men a permanent and unquestionable part in every sphere that presupposes power and control. The author equally revels in defending his argument from feminist attacks by using biology as his shield,

“Theories of international relations like realism that see international politics as a remorseless struggle for power are in fact what feminists call a gendered perspective (...) The problem with the feminist view is that it sees these attitudes toward violence, power and status as wholly the products of a patriarchal culture, whereas in fact it appears they are rooted in biology” (Fukuyama,1998: 27).

The assertion that there are inherent differences between men and women and that the latter are ultimately peaceful and co-operative, in this specific case, denigrates women and pushes them further away from the public sphere. Indeed, as argued by Tickner, “The association of women with peace can play into unfortunate gender stereotypes that characterize men as active, women as passive; men as agents, women as victims; men as rational, women as emotional” (Tickner, 1999: 4). Tickner equally remarks how the exaltation of sexual differences is often used to reduce women’s power to a restricted scope, “Associations of women with peace, idealism, and impracticality have long served to disempower women and keep them in their place, which is out of the “real world” of international politics” (Tickner, 1999: 8).

The most emblematic successes for difference feminism can be found in post-conflict Rwanda which was “the first country in the world to have a majority of women in parliament with 56%. Women hold 45 of the 80 seats in the lower house, and nine of the 26 in the upper house.” (Sedghi, 2012). The motive behind this staggering percentage resides in the belief that “women as a group’ have a different relationship to politics and that increasing their representation will lead to better governance and a more egalitarian society” (Hogg, 2009: 35, 36). In fact, there is a general consensus in Rwanda that women have a specific predisposition towards peace building and tolerance which is, undoubtedly, a truly appealing attribute within a post-genocide context. The goal would thus be for women to act and be perceived as non-ethnic, neutral political actors, which seems to lie at the core of “the RPF’s promotion of women’s greater representation [which] has been grounded in the assumption that the ‘nonethnic woman representative’ as subject will have a different relationship to politics, and therefore that women’s greater inclusion will ‘better’ the post-conflict political climate” (Hogg, 2009: 42). The Rwandan case consequently seems to be the most blatant evidence that highlighting sexual differences and adapting, in this case, the political world to them will benefit women. Yet, if one persists to analyse this case one comes across rather discouraging and contradicting facts. Firstly, the insistence on neutrality might reveal itself to be counterproductive for “Ethnic tensions and discrimination are not transformed by policies of nonidentification; on the contrary, such a policy can make it more difficult to discern instances of discrimination” (Hogg, 2009: 37). Secondly, the increase of women’s representation might itself be instrumental for in the case of developing countries attempting to initiate the transition to democratic governance, “women’s political participation is seen as a means of promoting this ‘transition paradigm’ and subsequently for securing its status as a ‘donor darling’ for procuring international aid ” (Hogg, 2009: 46). Finally, “Devlin and Elgie found little evidence that women’s increased representation had augmented policy outcomes to any significant extent, e.g. to any level that moves outside of the RPF’s policy parameters” (Hogg, 2009: 47). Women’s high representation in Rwanda thus comes across as a mere facade, one which has been reduced to a paper-thin, shallow

degree. Ironically, the undemocratic endeavours that women's increased representation would put an end to, as women are claimed to be auxiliaries to the democratic transition, are the same ones which encouraged women to enter and participate in the political sphere. Women's presence thus served to satisfy the authoritarian state's own vested interests.

The interpretation of the examples provided above may lead us to believe that relying on the exaltation of differences might not be the most appropriate technique to improve women's status in society nor to foment equality. In fact, even though this essay has only provided mere individual cases, they reflect general, overarching tendencies within difference feminism which we can draw certain conclusions from. Firstly, one can denote an essentialist undertone present within these arguments which depicts women as a homogeneous group which boasts cross-cutting, natural female qualities, which in reality do not exist, to support its subsequent assumptions. Secondly, the arguments that derive from this false universalism are far too subjective and volatile to be used and applied consistently. Depending on one's own interests, status and, in this case, sex, the difference argument might acquire an entirely new form and serve to attain opposing purposes.

To conclude, the discussion surrounding equality and difference feminism has been a long, systematic and unsolvable one. However, it is possible to discern certain traits within the latter that might render it unappealing. In fact, difference feminism relies on the assumption that there are stereotypical attributes shared by all women, that there are inherent differences between men and women which might benefit the latter. This argument is based on the idea that women possess unique characteristics which will bring about stability, order and peace when integrated into the political, economic, social and cultural spheres. Throughout this essay we have analysed examples of this type of application of the difference argument which is blatantly directed at improving women's status. We have also, however, analysed examples in which the exaltation of difference is equally used to reduce women's status and to maintain men in power. The implication of the exposition of these two examples is that differences and their recognition can be as easily manipulated to either profit or deteriorate women's prominence in the public sphere. The volatility patent in the

difference argument inevitably renders it unpredictable and perilous, for an instrument can easily gain different shapes and trigger different consequences depending on who is making use of it.

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