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Imagining Gender Equality: Perspectives on Equality from a Feminist Viewpoint

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*Sex and Gender,
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ABSTRACT

The perspective on equality from a feminist viewpoint is proposed based on revealing the unequal patriarchal social structure. It explains the inequality of the patriarchal system from two aspects: temporal inequality and structural inequality. Based on this, the feminist perspective on equality deepens the understanding of the dynamics between the sexes in the process of transitioning from a formal view of equality to a substantive view of equality. However, when faced with internal divisions within feminism and the impact of external environments, the existing feminist perspective on equality reveals shortcomings such as being overly abstract, lacking representativeness, and not being inclusive. By constructing a model of four types of gender relations, this approach analyzes and critiques the existing feminist perspective on equality while expanding its modes of expression and value connotations, further elevating it to an inclusive, open, free, dynamic, and unique collection of equality values.

Rousseau (2019) once said, "What people acquire the most, yet understand the least, is knowledge about man." The inscription "Know thyself" often provokes deep reflection, yet it can also lead to a sense of forgetfulness. Since the Enlightenment, the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity have become commonplace, yet they remain vague, particularly regarding gender. People indeed overlook their own differences and the current state of inequality. For a long time, the divide and separation between the sexes have resulted in a double standard in the understanding of equality: on one hand, the establishment of the standard of the rational person places every "individual" in a state of opposition (Hobbes, 2019), protection (Locke, 1988), and freedom (Rousseau, 2018, p4). On the other hand, the differential treatment based on the standard of the rational

person excludes some individuals from the state of equality. The unequal treatment under this kind of "equality" poses challenges to the establishment of women's status and subjectivity. As a result, women's voices are overlooked, and the gender-oppressive social structure systematically destroys the values of equality established during the Enlightenment, leading individuals to confront the need for a new narrative of equality.

DECONSTRUCTING INEQUALITY FROM THE "MALE PERSPECTIVE"

Women, as "products of man's rib" have historically lacked an equal subject status to men, let alone the

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enjoyment of “human” equality. This gender perspective from a historical viewpoint places men and women in a sequential order. The idea that men came first and women followed provides a kind of fatalistic confirmation of women's dependence. However, the division between the genders is not only innate; acquired transformation has also led to women being gradually tamed in the process of being historically captured by men. Women are bound by various symbolic identities, just as daughters are dependent on fathers, wives on husbands, and mothers on sons.

It can be seen that there are two analytical approaches to understanding women's unequal circumstances: innate and acquired. However, these two approaches are not entirely opposed to each other. Gender inequality exists not only as a symbolic formality but also in actual practice. The author will analyze this issue from both temporal and structural perspectives.

Temporal Inequality — Innate Inequality and Acquired Inequality

The division in the timeline arises from differing understandings of the question regarding the origin of the two sexes. The feminist perspective that believes in the innate existence of two sexes argues that the inequality between the sexes is gradually shaped by external factors. In contrast, the feminist perspective that views the existence of two sexes as a result of external influences claims that gender inequality is inherently present. Thus, the gender differences arising from gender inequality correspond to the perspective of innate theories, while the gender inequality stemming from gender differences aligns with the perspective of acquired theories.

First, regarding the theory of innateness: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Beauvoir's assertion (2010) in *Le deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*) aptly interprets the fallacy arising from the inequality between the sexes. As rational beings, women's rationality is often artificially separated, and the label of irrationality is frequently bound to their gender. For example, anatomical comparisons between male and female brains, where women's brains are generally smaller than men's, leading to the perception that women's intelligence is inferior to that of men (Mill, 1878). Although Rousseau's (2019) passionate writings reveal the origins of human equality and inequality, he uniquely overlooks the vision of women's equality, describing women's subordination as natural and endearing. This contrast in perception is inevitable. From a patriarchal perspective, the physiological inequality between the sexes determines that, since men contribute more through physical strength, they are entitled to more rights. Consequently, women, who are physically weaker than men, are seen as inevitably lagging behind and destined to be subordinate to men. This physiological determinism is an innate bias that has, paradoxically, found tangible proof in a peculiar historical reality. The

transition from ancient matriarchal societies to modern patriarchal societies not only signifies a transfer of power but also represents a societal leap forward. The linear view of social development has provided a progressive endorsement to the perception of male superiority over females (Bachofen, 2018). Moreover, the guidance of public opinion and the embourgeoisement of education have, imperceptibly, transformed the differences between the sexes from a matter of fact into a matter of value. “Women should adorn themselves to please men.” (Wollstonecraft, 2019) As “innately feminine” individuals, women are compelled to accept their subordinate fate in a patriarchal society.

Secondly, regarding the theory of acquired characteristics. “Human beings are born with two sexes.” Fouque's advocacy (2019) in *Il y a deux sexes* (*The Two Sexes*) similarly articulates the abnormality of gender inequality arising from differences between the sexes. Femininity has always been shaped throughout the process of growing up, and the sexual repression imposed by men on women has endowed what were originally normal physiological facts with social significance. Women seek a “male instinct” from their initial instincts, and their attachment to their fathers is not only an anxiety over the absence of a penis but also an acknowledgment of their own subordination (Freud, 1991). The alienation of sexuality is the generalization of women's particularity under the male supremacist view. When reflected in reality, this manifests as a tendency to avoid the “female domain”. The “black box” in Chizuko Ueno's perspective (2020) and the “black continent” in Fouque's writings (2019) both indicate the exclusion and isolation of female differences within the male discourse system. Thus, women have always been separated from the public sphere. From political citizen assemblies to economic production values, and cultural narratives of heroism, all represent the expulsion of women and the masculinization of these domains. The differences that distinguish women from men are consciously distorted into perceived deficiencies in male characteristics. This innate difference is valued as an acquired inequality, which is not only a logical fallacy but also a stereotype rooted in subjective bias. However, the overall mechanisms of society have rationalized this distortion.

In summary, the assertion of innateness is an intrinsic viewpoint of liberal feminism. It seeks to demonstrate the falsehood and irrationality of the patriarchal society's unequal status for women, which is based on the assumption of male-female inconsistency, by reaffirming the “objective” fact of “gender sameness”. In contrast, the assertion of acquired characteristics emerges as the opposite of liberal feminism, denying the very foundation upon which patriarchal society establishes its legitimacy. Overall, both innate and acquired explanations of inequality serve to deconstruct and critique the patriarchal view of equality.

Structural Inequality — the Spiritual Sphere and the Material Sphere

There may be differences in how temporal inequality is defined, but the historical oppression of women has been continuous and unbroken. Therefore, the ambiguous analysis of time needs to be clarified through the delineation of spheres, and this determination of spheres, from a feminist perspective, serves as an analysis of the continuous subordination of women. The author divides this into two spheres: the spiritual sphere and the material sphere.

First, regarding the inequality in the spiritual sphere. The analysis of sexual psychology has a subtle connection with the social status of gender. Under the Oedipus complex, the doubt and internalization regarding one's own gender lead to the perception that women, who lack a penis, are often seen as "castrated males". A castration order lies between men and women. As Lacan stated, "Without the penis, all enjoyment and desire are suspended." (Fouque, 2019) Once women accept this "castration perspective", they become subject to the sexual order repressed by men. However, applying psychological analysis to the construction of social order does not provide conclusive evidence. Just as some of Freud's female students developed the theory of "womb envy" based on female physiology—centering their explanations on physiological characteristics—they argued that the uterus possesses inclusiveness and openness that men do not have (Walstedt, 1976). This symmetrical narrative of "feminine writing" enables women to possess a more active sexual experience than men. As Luce Irigaray said, "No one can forbid a woman from constantly caressing herself... whereas a man needs tools to caress himself: his hand, a woman's body, and verbal seduction." (Baer, 2010) At the same time, this narcissistic tendency toward a single gender is, in Fouque's view (2019), a form of symbolic immaturity: "This is the age of the self, where everything is like a vending machine product—self-made, self-displayed, self-promoted. We live in appearances; everyone carefully presents themselves and tries hard to package themselves, yet neglects self-improvement."

Secondly, regarding the inequality in the material sphere. The subordination of women arises from the alienation of labor. Marx pointed out the inequality of classes, but he attributed women's labor to "natural instinct", overlooking women's long-term productive activities. To understand this overlooked productive activity, feminist perspectives provide two concepts: domestic labor and reproduction.

When it comes to women's domestic labor, the standard for evaluating the value of labor has long been dominated by the market. Compared to commodified and marketized labor, non-commodified and non-marketized labor does not generate exchange value but only use value, while the latter is regarded as the "only channel" through which exchange value is produced.

Women are confined to the home, overlooked in "meaningless" domestic labor (Christine, 1984). Meanwhile, men who can generate value engage in the unpaid appropriation of women's domestic labor. Regarding women's reproductive activities, labor that exists outside the market merely serves to provide the market with the "raw materials" of labor. The assertion of production supremacy has led to modern men being regarded as "human", children seen as "pre-human", the elderly as "post-human", and women as "non-human" (Chizuko, 2020). In this way, the value of women's reproductive activities is undervalued and subject to the exploitation of male production. It is evident that women's labor is continuously alienated and undervalued. Men's appropriation of women's labor becomes the material basis for women's subordinate status. This also constitutes the material foundation of patriarchy (Bowman, 2016).

To sum up, the dual spheres reveal multiple structures of inequality characterized by binary oppositions, namely "penis envy—womb envy", "separation — inclusiveness", and "production — reproduction". The discourse of the former is patriarchal, while the discourse of the latter is feminine. After exposing the inequality inherent in male supremacy, the feminist vision of returning to equality enables a transformation and reshaping of the discourse paradigm. It is evident that the revelation of the inequalities within the social gender structure is a crucial aspect of feminist views on equality. It not only interprets the current living conditions of women but also highlights the dangers of an unjust hierarchical system. As Mary Wollstonecraft (2019) said: "Unjust distinctions of rank turn civilization into a curse; they divide the people of the world into two classes—luxurious, dissipated tyrants and cunning, envious dependents—both of whom are almost equally prone to corruption."

CONSTRUCTING A CONCEPT OF EQUALITY FROM A "FEMALE PERSPECTIVE"

The vision of a rational order between the sexes has become the driving force for various feminist schools to shape their own concepts of equality. Although various feminist perspectives have demonstrated the inequality of male supremacy through different channels, they share a common goal in constructing gender equality, albeit with different approaches. These can be broadly summarized into three models:

Homogeneous and Equal

This view of equality advocates a formal equality, placing both men and women within the category of "rational beings." It calls for an approach of "equal treatment for equal situations; different treatment for different situations" in social interactions. Under this

perspective of equality, it calls for minimizing intervention in the behaviors of both genders. “I like to regard men as my companions; however, their scepter, whether real or usurped, must not extend over my head unless the reason of that person is worthy of my respect; in this way, I submit to reason, not to man.” Wollstonecraft’s argument (2019) may be the most profound affirmation of this rational choice based on equality.

This view of equality first establishes a “neutral” standard—that of the rational person—as the criterion for measuring the status of both sexes, thereby providing a possibility for women to receive treatment roughly equal to that of men. Secondly, the guiding principle of rationality encourages a shift from separation to interaction between the sexes. While reflecting on male biases, it enhances women’s own value, thereby providing women with more opportunities to move beyond the confines of the “home” and into broader public spheres, paving the way for women to establish their own careers. Finally, the advocacy of uniform equality makes the connotation of female gender symbols more diverse. It encourages women to receive education that was previously exclusive to men and to develop their own strengths, thus providing a reasonable basis for women to fight for the right to education, labor, and political participation.

However, this view of equality also has its shortcomings. The formal equality perspective, in establishing the standard of the “rational being” has a vague definition of what constitutes “rationality”, which tends to masculinize female traits. The principle of “equal treatment for equal situations” implicitly suggests that women who possess more masculine traits are more likely to receive equal treatment with men. Meanwhile, “different treatment for different situations” implies that differences in the degree of masculine traits among women will lead to differentiated treatment among women themselves. In this way, not only does it fail to bring true equality to women, but it also creates internal stratification among women (Bowman & Yu, 2018). At the same time, relying solely on women’s own efforts to achieve a modest “equivalent return” is wholly inadequate. Until equal status between the sexes is fully established, the so-called female self-determination often amounts to compromises based on formal equality, while the actual social status of the sexes remains one of absolute inequality. Thus, under the framework of formal equality, the true beneficiaries are a small number of elite women and the majority of men, while the unequal gender status continues to persist unchanged.

Difference and Equality

This perspective emphasizes that feminism, while pursuing the goal of gender equality, highlights and shapes the unique qualities of women. It represents both an inclusive view of equality and a substantive form of equality. Whether it is Fouque’s concept of “plural universality” (2019) or Chizuko’s idea of “gender rela-

tivity” (2020), both endow gender discourse with a broader vision and a tendency toward the common progress of humanity.

From Discourse on Genitalia to Discourse on Reproduction

Phallus’s monism regarding sexual organs is an expression of patriarchal discourse, characterized by an inherent tendency toward separation. Historically, this is reflected in the patriarchal society’s political, economic, and cultural isolation and alienation of women. It abstractly reduces the concept of the two sexes to “one”. Under this logic, there is no Other, or even if there is an Other, it still belongs to the same unity. In this way, the “many-to-one” social system established by men is not threatened. According to Fouque (2019), such a social system is a “highly narcissistic and childish form of democracy.” As long as there are two sexes, the abstract, hypothetical neutralization and undifferentiated equality built on the aforementioned logic can only run counter to its original goals, potentially leading to increasing inequality and discrimination.

Unlike the symbolic oppression associated with genitalia, the symbolism of reproduction is more substantively inclusive. Discourse on reproduction represents a pluralistic dialogue formed by the binary combination of both sexes. It is a discourse that embodies “a way of thinking about the Other,” a heterogeneous “between you and me,” a tolerance for the pleasures of the Other, acceptance of the Other, selfless giving, love for those around us, a commitment, a hope of kinship, which seeks to eliminate all forms of authoritarian individualism and racism (Fouque, 2019).

From Absolute Gender to Relative Gender

From the labor devaluation under gender domination to the low value of production under class domination, the alienation of labor represents not only the loss of the utility of women’s labor but also the objectification of women’s subjectivity. Overthrowing the social mechanisms of sexual oppression and establishing the primacy of reproduction will liberate women from the alienation of labor based on gender. However, this is merely a “female version” of the previously oppressive society and does not truly dismantle a relationship of dependency; it is an inevitable flaw of essentialist discourse. Therefore, women should understand what they are fighting for in their pursuit. In general, the position of men in patriarchy and capitalism hinders the recognition of needs such as mutual care, sharing, and growth between people. These needs can be realized in a non-patriarchal society where relationships are not differentiated, but the ability to achieve this realization is often appropriated by men. “The society we aim to build is one that sees interdependence as liberation rather than as a shameful condition.” (Chizuko, 2020) Perhaps when “the things done by men can be relativized using the language of women.” (Chizuko, 2020) such a society of interdependence will become possible. Gender

relativity shapes a community of social gender solidarity. It is not limited to domestic unity but represents an international alliance, a true form of feminist internationalism.

However, the two forms of substantive equality mentioned above are not without flaws. Contemporary critical race feminism and postmodern feminism have both challenged this general notion of feminist equality. The former critiques this substantive equality as being achieved through the exploitation of Black women and men by white women and white men. In this abnormal struggle for equality, Black women end up with even heavier shackles (racial discrimination compounded with gender discrimination), while losing the freedoms they originally had (the freedom to unite with white women) (Bowman, 2016). The latter fundamentally questions the generality of the notion of substantive equality. The subjectivization and contextualization of any discourse reduce the expression of each viewpoint to personal, intuitive, and irrational feelings, unable to escape the speaker's living environment. The evaluation of the "veil of ignorance" in discourse remains merely a human fantasy and aspiration (Morrison, 2005).

Alternative Views of Equality

Since the formal equality perspective of gender homogenization has been cloaked in the "invisible expressions" of male oppression, the unequal social structure has begun to reassert its control over women through a form of soft violence. The first wave of feminism fought for many rights for women, and the criminalization of sexual assault is undoubtedly a significant demonstration of the successes achieved during that movement. However, juries are informed each time they hear similar cases that "sexual assault is the easiest to prosecute but the hardest to prove." Interpreting a victim's "no" as a "yes" and viewing the perpetrator's provocative words as "romantic flattery" creates an invisible "second rape" of women's discourse by male discourse (MacKinnon, 2007). It seems that women have never had an active voice that belongs exclusively to them. As a result, some feminist schools of thought have begun to discuss an alternative perspective on "equality" by exploring women's "own voices".

Gilligan Speaks of "Different Voices"

Lawrence Kohlberg (1977) measured the moral development levels of both genders and proposed that men's moral development is generally higher than that of women. He divided moral development into six stages across three periods. The first period is the pre-conventional stage, where a person's moral behavior is driven by self-interest, making choices based on pleasure and pain. The second period is the conventional stage, where moral behavior is assessed through others' evaluations of one's actions, weighing the benefits and drawbacks between shame and praise. The third

period is the post-conventional stage, where moral behavior is not based on specific group relationships but guided by abstract moral principles.

In his studies, Kohlberg (1977) found that when faced with the question of whether it is acceptable to "steal medicine to save a wife", female participants were more likely to consider specific and practical issues, while male participants tended to provide clear answers based on abstract principles of justice.

Carol Gilligan (1995) argued that these different modes of judgment reflect characteristics that are distinct to women, and such differences do not indicate a disadvantage for women. She found that when facing moral dilemmas, women exhibit a unique cognitive approach that is different from that of men, specifically manifested in: First, women tend to view interpersonal relationships more as interactions, seeing them as "a web of connections", while men are more likely to perceive them as a hierarchy. Second, women prefer to obtain more specific information when judging moral issues and often show care for others while trying to avoid harm. In contrast, men tend to think through abstract principles, seeking a decisive choice. Third, the ethical framework for women is often centered around care or responsibility, while for men, it is centered around justice or rights. Fourth, men often approach identity issues with a sense of separation and division, whereas women tend to focus on attachment and connection. It is evident that the cognitive styles of both genders are not superior or inferior to each other; rather, the uniqueness of women possesses a value that should not be overlooked.

Shaping Asymmetric Equality

Unlike the previous tendency of "rationalization" in the view of formal equality, the discourse interpretation from a female cultural perspective reveals a kind of "female advantage" after being continuously explored and compared. Cultural feminism in the 1980s did not advocate for the overthrow of patriarchy; instead, it called for a reevaluation of women's values to highlight their importance. This ideology envisions that if the entire social system were built on women's values, society would be enriched with productivity, peace, and justice (Li, 2020). The moral reverence for motherhood, the purity and elegance of feminine temperament, and the emotional and intuitive nature of women's speech are all enriched with valuable qualities of civilizational progress. Thus, a tendency towards separation is manifested under the slogan of "Female as Superior" shouted by feminists (Li, 2020). "Female superiority" emphasizes superiority without rejecting the notion of inferiority, while men tend to insist that male traits overshadow everything else. The author views this perspective on inter-gender relations as a form of "asymmetric equality". However, the establishment of this equality is quite tenuous, as both its expression and direction have been questioned.

“Difference is Not Innate”: A Challenge from Baer

When feminists critique male-centric psychology, they should not only oppose a phallogocentric discourse but also thoroughly question the fundamental theoretical premise that “the body is paramount.” However, feminists often cling to the former. The idea of “using one’s own spear to attack one’s own shield” has led to the proliferation of discourses such as “womb envy” and “feminine writing” (Li, 2020), resulting in a form of female expression that closely resembles male discourse.

“Those feminist scholars who emphasize culture and power are also limited to thinking within their own fields of knowledge. Psychological theories emphasize the experiences of childhood and gender differences, and Chodorow’s ‘object-relations’ theory fully incorporates this. Scholars who focus on male domination tend to borrow from Marxist or critical legal theories, or use both for reasoning. Even if they insist that applying Marxist perspectives distorts rather than elucidates reality, fundamentally, they are merely substituting ‘class’ for ‘gender’ in their analyses.” (Baer, 2010) Baer’s critique is valid. Just as when analyzing the inequalities of patriarchy, the methods employed by patriarchal theorists treat the facts of gender differences as inherent value judgments. This way of deriving values from facts is inherently unreasonable. However, in correcting this irrationality, feminists still seek to use the argument of a hypothetical fact of non-difference as proof of a value system for gender equality. Yet, this hypothesis cannot be proven or disproven, ultimately rendering such a defense fragile and untenable. Thus, a viewpoint that shifts from one extreme to another emerges, transitioning from male supremacy to female supremacy. However, this extreme positioning has not infused the feminist movement with greater confidence and momentum; rather, it has provoked a more intense backlash from men, leading to a pervasive atmosphere of misogyny in society (Li, 2020). At the same time, feminists’ descriptions of women’s unique discourse lack originality. Although it highlights certain feminine qualities that have previously been overlooked, it ultimately remains just one part of the patriarchal binary discourse system. Therefore, Baer questions the existence of gender differences. In her view, “the physiological attributes of women and men are facts, but the differences resulting from these attributes are socially constructed. Gender differences do not have fixed meanings.” (Baer, 2010) The traits of both genders are different expressions of gender functionality. In suppressing women, men also suppress themselves.

In summary, this article is skeptical about the existence of alternative views on equality. However, the expression of diverse voices not only amplifies women’s

voices but also includes those of different races, regions, and beliefs. The feminist perspective on equality is facing both postmodern challenges and opportunities.

CHALLENGES AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON EQUALITY

Postmodernism’s challenge to universality stems from an anti-essentialist tendency. Whether it is male monism, female monism, or the binary view of gender, all are unable to escape the historical cycle of moving from one form of essentialism to another. Postmodernists believe that this cycle is “insignificant” for most people, because as marginalized individuals, they are excluded from the rational values of the abstract community due to the influence of subjectivity and contingency. Empirical conclusions derived from experience are merely a rearticulation of power discourse (Butler, 2007). The powerless masses can only shift from one form of dependency to another. The truths or powers of the past have changed significantly over time, yet the slaves they produce have become increasingly impoverished. With this disdainful perspective, critics of racial feminism and postmodern feminism argue that the previously established feminist view of equality is merely a call and rationalization of interests for a segment of elite women.

Questioning the Applicability of the Feminist Perspective on Equality in the Context of Diverse Gender Structures

Currently, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (or queer), non-binary, and intersex individuals, as well as asexuals, have significantly challenged the traditional binary structure of gender. Unlike traditional views, any form of non-normative sexuality was once regarded as a sexual deviation and subjected to unequal treatment, either through suppression or attempted treatment (Foucault, 2000). For several centuries, the women’s movement has largely focused on advocating for the rights of heterosexual “normal women” within a traditional gender framework (Butler, 2004). However, when the notion of “normal” is disrupted, the traditional adherence creates an unequal structure that upholds a binary heterosexuality. Consequently, women who identify as lesbian or gender non-conforming face double oppression. What dilemmas will the established feminist perspective on equality encounter in this context, and how will it respond? Below, the author will analyze this within the context of different gender construction models¹.

¹ In discussing gender construction, the author will use “static” and “dynamic” to describe the degree to which gender models accept the diversity of gender characteristics; “unidimensional” and “bidimensional” to describe the value considerations of gender models regarding gender transition; and “binary” and “pluralistic” to describe the levels of factors considered by gender models. The connotations of these three terms are not mutually exclusive, but rather interrelated and influential.

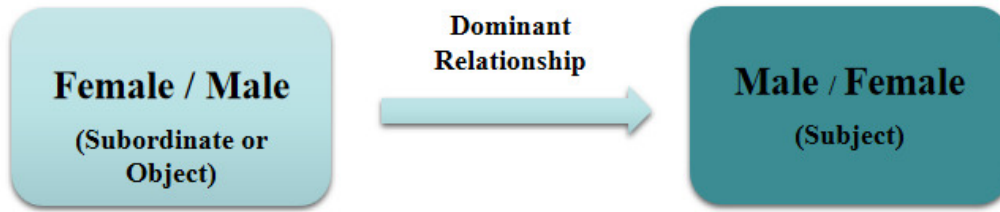


Figure 1 | Static, Unidimensional Binary Structure of Gender



Figure 2 | Static, Bidimensional Binary Structure of Gender

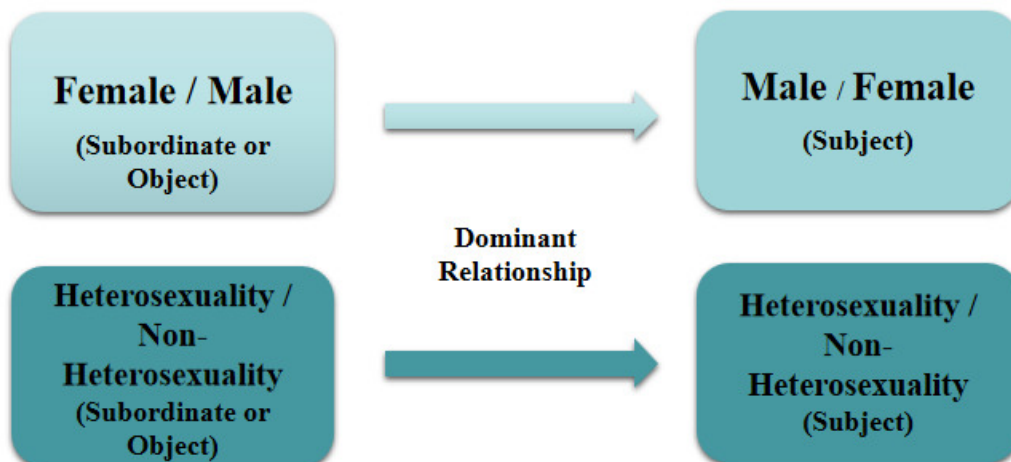


Figure 3 | Dynamic, Unidimensional Gender Diversity Structure

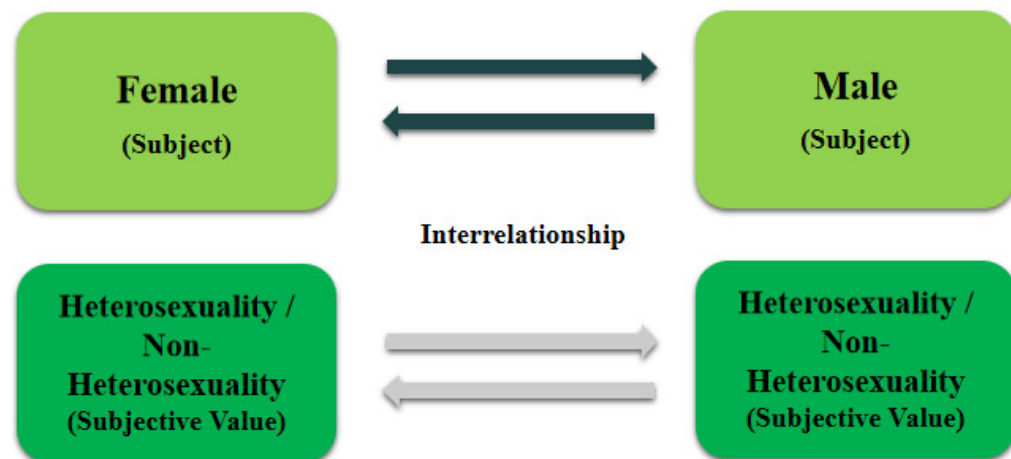


Figure 4 | Dynamic, Bidimensional Structure of Gender Plurality

Model 1: Static, Unidimensional Binary Structure of Gender

Under the influence of essentialist values, this gender model only recognizes heterosexual relationships. Gender relations are either characterized by male superiority and female inferiority or by female superiority and male inferiority (A diagram illustrating this gender construction model can be seen in **Figure 1**). In terms of the feminist perspective on equality, this is an absolutely unequal gender construction. By only recognizing one sexual orientation, this gender structure merely formalizes the relationship of gender equality at an abstract level. Once applied in practice, this framework of formal equality easily leads to substantive inequality.

Model 2: Static, Bidimensional Binary Structure of Gender

Under this gender model, only heterosexual relationships are accepted, but they are not influenced by essentialist values. In this model, the relationship between the two sexes is interactive: they either rise together (transcending subjectivity) or fall together (objectification of the subject) (A diagram illustrating this gender construction model can be seen in **Figure 2**). Here, the feminist perspective on equality not only requires maintaining a state of gender equality in practice but also aims to transcend the formal connotations of equality at the level of values. By endowing the value of equality with rich substantive meaning, it promotes the conscious and continuous mutual absorption and critique between the two genders, thereby achieving true equality and harmony in their coexistence. However, this richness of substantive meaning lacks inclusivity, as it overlooks the sexual autonomy and choices of individuals. The feminist perspective on equality built on this foundation still does not adequately address the concerns of individuals.

Model 3: Dynamic, Unidimensional Gender Diversity Structure

In this model, homosexuality and other sexual orientations are tolerated, but are influenced by essentialist values. Under this model, either men are considered superior to women, or women are considered superior to men; similarly, either heterosexuality is regarded as superior to other sexual orientations, or other sexual orientations are regarded as superior to heterosexuality (A diagram illustrating this gender construction model can be seen in **Figure 3**). In this context, the feminist perspective on equality can only reveal the patterns of gender inequality, but it cannot objectively address the inequalities between different sexual orientations. This leads to the establishment of substantive equality being achievable only through an objective acknowledgment of gender relations concerning specific sexual orientations. When confronting an individual's specific sexual

orientation, the limitations of one's own understanding may prevent recognition of that individual's orientation. Instead, there may be a tendency to suppress individual sexual autonomy in order to maintain the perceived universality of one's own orientation.

Model 4: Dynamic, Bidimensional Structure of Gender Plurality

This gender structural model emphasizes that gender and sexual orientation are not static, singular dimensions, but are in a state of constant change and interaction (A diagram illustrating this gender construction model can be seen in **Figure 4**). In this model, gender and sexual orientation are viewed as plural, fluid, and mutually influential social constructs ([Saray & Nadya, 2015](#)). An individual's gender identity and sexual orientation can change over time, influenced by factors such as environment and social relationships, exhibiting a high degree of flexibility and inclusiveness.

The feminist concept of equality constructed on this basis not only needs to uphold the value orientation of formal equality, but also, on the foundation of integrating progressive values, must proactively respond to the various possibilities of individual gender interactions. Therefore, a comprehensive view of equality is not limited to a single or just a few value connotations; it should encompass more, even without boundaries, and accommodate more beneficial values of sexual consciousness as individuals fully develop ([Renegar & Sowards, 2009](#)). So that the full and free development of each gender becomes the condition for the full and free development of all genders.

In summary, the feminist perspective on equality is influenced by gender construction patterns. In a non-inclusive structure, this perspective, with its non-inclusive ideological stance, neglects the diversity of individual gender interaction patterns, thereby highlighting the hegemonic status of specific gender interaction modes. Consequently, the outcome of equality values is substantively unequal. In an inclusive structure, if the feminist perspective on equality maintains a non-inclusive attitude toward equality, it can be harmful. Thus, this view of equality not only fails to address the diversity of actual individual gender interaction patterns, but also attempts to use the illusion of substantive equality to reduce or even eliminate the freedom of individuals to choose their own modes of gender interaction. On this basis, the essence of equality becomes a forced uniformity. On the contrary, within an inclusive framework, if feminist views on equality adopt an inclusive attitude, the meaning of equality can accommodate a wider range of value orientations, such as attention to individual specifics, full respect for the freedom of sexual orientation choices, and a sustained commitment to beneficial directions. In this context, equality becomes genuinely substantive and possesses transcendent value.

This feminist perspective on equality allows for a tangible consensus on a continuously evolving theory. As Kane stated, “By broadly listening to the voices of individuals of different genders and sexual orientations, we also promote the necessary fluidity of social gender.” (Bowman & Yu, 2018)

The Impact of Gender-Related Elements on the Consensus of the Feminist Perspective on Equality

The differential treatment between the sexes is not only limited by gender differences, but is also influenced by a variety of social factors such as race, religion, region, nationality, generation, and ethnicity. Whether directly or indirectly, the inequality that exists between men and women is persistent and remarkably similar—namely, the comprehensive oppression of women by men. When faced with these complex social phenomena, the feminist perspective on equality is unable to analyze and address each factor individually, which leads to its value connotations encountering challenges to consensus in specific contexts. The author takes “gender-race” and “gender-urban/rural region” as examples.

When feminism confronts issues of race, the question of “for whom are we fighting for equality” often becomes a point of contention and opposition within feminist debates. Black feminists firmly believe that current feminist theories are rooted in the perspectives of white women, advocating not for the rights of all women but merely for the interests of white women. In a society deeply influenced by racial stereotypes, any form of biased treatment can be perceived as a form of racial discrimination. In the United States, the right to equal treatment is often regarded as a negative liberty, which opens the door for the state to evade its obligations of equal protection (Bowman & Yu, 2018). At the same time, the choice of standards for strict scrutiny or rational basis review in judicial determinations of discriminatory actions often depends on the discretion of the judges (Bowman & Yu, 2018). This creates an opportunity for a form of gender bias to lead to “judicial missteps”. Coupled with racial factors, the factual determination of such discrimination becomes even more difficult to confirm.

Thus, feminism's response should not primarily focus on gender issues but should first address racial issues. At the same time, women and Black individuals, as oppressed groups, share many common discourses. Based on the logic of dialogue, a theory of intersectionality emerges. “Intersectionality analyzes various power structures from a social perspective, including racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and class relations, which are intertwined and interact to form a complex system of oppression. This ‘matrix of domination’ affects women of different social statuses in varying degrees and in different ways.” (Bowman & Yu, 2018) Intersectionality is, in fact, an objective description of the complex forms of subordination that women experience in different situations. Its introduction has reshaped the

analytical dimensions of feminist perspectives on equality. If gender construction is its core, then factors such as race, region, and ethnicity constitute its exterior. This exterior is not tightly wrapped, but is instead in full contact with various complex social, political, and cultural forms.

In addition to racial factors, the differences between urban and rural areas are significant yet often overlooked. In China's rapidly developing urbanization process, the form and boundaries of rural areas have become increasingly blurred. In the past, rural lifestyles and habits were exported to the cities, but now the trend has shifted, with urban culture being exported to the countryside. The countryside, a region from which the population has been excessively drained, is gradually becoming a mixed space populated mainly by women, left-behind children, and elderly individuals. As a result, rural women are more firmly internalized within the family compared to their urban counterparts. They gradually lose their identity as women and are reduced to merely being members of the household. Under the dual pressure of caregiving responsibilities, they suffer from both material and psychological exploitation ((Bowman & Yu, 2018). Thus, the feminist perspective on equality that originates from the viewpoint of urban women is inadequate, as it cannot address the economic relationships and fragmented living situations in modern rural society. Rural women become “dependents who must care for others” (Gao, 2012), leaving them with little possibility of having their voices heard. Therefore, feminism should not be confined to an illusory vision of harmonious relationships; rather, it should promote economic equality and establish the state's responsibility for social welfare. This is crucial to ensure the personal independence and freedom of movement for rural women, thereby providing reliable material support and institutional backing for the realization of gender equality in both urban and rural areas.

The Demystification of the Unique Feminist Concept of Equality — a Critique From Posner

Almost every feminist school of thought shapes a discourse that is uniquely feminine, from the “rational woman” of liberal feminism, the “otherness” of radical feminism, the “uterine advantage” of cultural feminism, to the “reproductive value” of socialist feminism and the “inclusive harmony” of ecofeminism (Li, 2020). All of these express Gilligan-style “different voices”. However, can these traits, which are claimed to be exclusively feminine, only be exhibited by women? Richard Posner provides a negative answer to this question.

In Posner's study of judicial practice regarding tort liability, some female judges advocate for replacing the traditional “reasonable man” standard with the “caring neighbor” principle from feminist tort law. However, each type of tort liability has its specific applicability. The emphasis on altruism reflects a certain empathy among these female judges, but not all altruistic actions

are legally recognized. For instance, when someone incurs a cost of \$110 to prevent an anticipated loss of \$100, the law typically will not hold that person liable for failing to prevent the accident simply because they did not effectively avert it. In such cases, the law cannot impose liability on someone for not preventing an incident if the cost of prevention exceeds the expected loss (Posner, 2002). Moreover, it is one-sided to regard altruism as a cognitive trait exclusive to female discourse simply because of the compassion shown by female judges, as some male judges also exhibit the same altruistic tendencies. The characteristics of both genders are often distributed on average between men and women. Even though female judges in practice tend to emphasize equity, value broad standards, pursue substantive justice, and exercise discretion, while male judges tend to focus on legal provisions, emphasize technical details, and prefer complex cases, no legal system is built upon these two extremes. Instead, it maintains a position of moderation and balance. Therefore, some feminist legal perspectives, including feminist views on equality, merely represent “adjustments on a known continuum” (Posner, 2002), rather than the creation of a fundamentally new approach to understanding issues.

However, Posner overlooks one crucial point: the expression and application of a particular viewpoint do not exist within a single, unified system. In patriarchal discourse, there is a deeply ingrained tendency toward separation, often dividing the abstract from the concrete, the general from the particular, and the public from the private. Although men can also be as caring as women, this form of care is often abstract, general, and assimilative. Once it enters specific situations, such care tends to fade and become indifferent and cold as the distance increases. However, by transcending binary oppositions and entering into a perspective of multiple interactions, the specific, particular, and those invisible marginal elements can continuously reflect and self-transform through dialogue with the core elements. This transformation of the discourse system is precisely what feminism aims to achieve. Once the system of binary opposition is deconstructed, the two genders will coexist in substantial equality through multiple interactions, consciously raising human issues that transcend gender specificity (Baer, 2010). At the same time, they will achieve the fullest development of each individual's freedom through mutual promotion (Marx & Engels, 2018).

Therefore, this uniqueness is established through feminism's challenge to the traditional patriarchal binary structure. Although it is not a unique expression spoken only by women, the feminist view of equality—formed by combining general discourse with the perspective of particular narratives—constitutes a rebellion against essentialism from the very moment it is proposed. Perhaps each of us can boldly claim to be a feminist in the pursuit of “becoming a better person” (Adichie, 2019).

CONCLUSION

From a feminist perspective, the concept of equality is a deconstruction of the essentialist view of equality under the patriarchal social structure. This deconstruction is achieved by thoroughly analyzing the fallacies of the essentialist view of equality across the dimensions of time and space.

In terms of the temporal dimension, the theories of innate inequality between the sexes and acquired inequality argue against the essentialist view of equality under the patriarchal social structure by highlighting two aspects: the institutionalization of women's unequal experiences and the value alienation of the factual differences between the genders. These arguments expose the subjective biases and logical contradictions inherent in the essentialist perspective.

In terms of the spatial dimension, the devaluation of women's labor in the material realm and the diminishment of women's subjectivity in the spiritual realm both demonstrate that the affirmation of the essentialist view of equality under the patriarchal social structure is neither based on objective empirical facts nor on the analysis of the differences in value claims between the genders across different cognitive domains. Instead, it consistently relies on male standards to subjectively conjecture the universal value of social equality.

Thus, the feminist perspective on equality is born out of a reflection and critique of modern concepts of equality through a gender lens. However, the feminist perspective on equality does not merely remain at the stage of deconstructing the essentialist view of equality under the patriarchal social structure. In the process of reflection and critique, it also constructs its own distinctive concept of equality. Specifically, the feminist view of equality manifests in three forms: the formalist view of equality, which emphasizes sameness and equality; the substantive view of equality, which recognizes difference and equality; and the dynamic view of equality, which is built upon the continual reflection on differences. In summary, the emergence of these three types of equality reflects feminism's effort to break through the essentialist view of equality under the patriarchal social structure. In the process of deconstructing the essentialist view of equality, feminism is also continually deconstructing its own established concepts of equality, striving to pursue a set of equal values characterized by sharing, diversity, and inclusiveness.

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