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Chapter 2

Feminisms: Controversy, Contestation and Challenge

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Introduction

Social work and feminism have always had a somewhat mixed relationship. There are clear influences, but also elements of contestation, with those working in the fields of social work and social care being as susceptible to interpretations and trends in popular culture as the rest of the population. In this chapter, I examine the development, impact and tensions of various feminisms. We explore the place of experience and the schisms brought about by attempts to incorporate the very different experiences of Black women as well as those from disadvantaged backgrounds into 'second wave' feminism. We consider the contribution made by postmodern feminism and investigate the influence of what has been termed 'choice' feminism on so called third and fourth wave movements. We also appraise what is sometimes and controversially called, Islamic feminism to consider the connections and disconnections between Islam, culture and patriarchy. Finally, we look at the effects of these various influences on social work in terms of current practice and future directions.

At the outset, it is important to highlight that there has never been one single form of feminism, there have always been many and accordingly, it is the term 'feminisms' that can be seen to best encapsulate the wide-ranging nature of women's movements. Similarly, although feminisms have been described in terms of 'waves', with the numbering implying a linear historical progression, ideas and understandings cannot be viewed in such a clear-cut manner and there are ongoing circularities, identifications and interpretations. Throughout, we find that in relation to

popular representation, particular aspects have been highlighted and other facets either downplayed or ignored. An example can be taken from what has been referred to as ‘first wave’ feminism(s). This is largely regarded as a fight of predominantly middle-class women for the vote. Walby (1997), Lorber (2012) and Matos (2015) contest this and maintain that it was far broader and more nuanced. Although the emphasis was on white women, Matos (2015) argues, that like second wave feminism(s), there were both liberal and radical versions with a multifaceted range of participants and demands. These included campaigns for access to basic and higher education and training, for employment opportunities, for equal property rights for married women and for measures to control violence against women. At this time, women were also active in labour and union movements and campaigned for public provision for health care as well as for basic human rights across the board.

‘Second wave’ Feminism(s)

The political challenge mounted by what has become known as ‘second wave’ feminism(s) is associated primarily with the political movements taking place in the 1960s and 1970s. Many women, involved in political activity such as the Civil Rights Movement and Anti-Vietnam War campaigns, became increasingly frustrated with the male dominated nature of these groups. As Rogan and Budgeon (2018) highlight, when women tried to name their oppression, they tended to be dismissed and called to account for introducing personal matters into the public arena. Women, at this time were also challenging centuries of being denied rights and equal status on the basis of arguments emanating from assertions of the ‘natural order’ and patriarchal religious ideology. A primary justification related to the separation of political power in the public sphere, which was the domain of men, from the family sphere, which was private and women orientated, but also subject to male patriarchic hegemony. Free will was the preserve of men, whilst, as a result of

assertions about ‘female nature’, dating back to Greek and Roman times, women were regarded as requiring control, management and supervision. Second wave feminism(s) politicised the private sphere in a range of groundbreaking and integrally compelling ways and demanded equal rights and recognition. As a result, second wave feminism(s) was based around the pithy and powerful slogan ‘the personal is political’ (Rogan and Budgeon, 2018; Mendes, 2011; Crook and Gutnick Allen, 2014).

A key aspect of second wave feminism(s), drawing from the influential work of Simone de Beavoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), was the recognition and assertion that masculinity and femininity were not natural or predetermined in any way but were socially constructed, fashioned by religion, culture, socialization processes and by education or the lack of it. This drew attention to masculinity and femininity not being fixed but rather being fluid and open to re-interpretation. This understanding enabled enduring notions of women as emotional, irrational, non-competitive and dependent and those of men as rational, emotionally controlled, competitive, autonomous and decisive, to be challenged. It also opened the door for established roles for women, such as that of ‘housewife’, to be resisted (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Risman, 2004).

Second wave feminism(s) has often been depicted as a unitary movement, with critics drawing attention to the lack of attention paid to difference and diversity. However, within second wave feminism(s) there were Marxist, socialist, liberal, standpoint and radical strands, all adhering to the central political slogan, but diverging in terms of the accompanying messages. Ramazanoglu (1989), for example, highlights that socialist and Marxist feminisms were particularly influential in Europe with radical feminism(s) being more prominent in the USA. She asserts that the former, identified class and economic distinctions between women as key

areas and challenged capitalism as well as patriarchy. Radical feminism(s), in contrast, although recognizing differential power relations, focused on viewing all women as being subject to a common form of oppression, namely male patriarchy. Within this, there was a tendency to concentrate on the oppression of all women by all men and on the linking of private and public spheres. Doude and Tapp (2014) assert that radical feminism(s) generally challenged the patriarchal ideal of the private sphere for women as being about childrearing, marriage, and the maintenance of the household. They also took issue with its political patriarchal equivalent which they associated with the harming of women through rape, domestic violence, and prostitution. Standpoint feminism(s), shaped by the work of Smith, and Hartsock (1983) amongst many others, has clear links with both Marxist and radical feminism(s). It is based on women's experiences of the workings and oppressions of patriarchy producing a different world view and knowledge framework. It is this experiential standpoint which becomes the basis for challenge and change. Liberal feminism(s) had a strong rights basis and was primarily concerned with rights for women and equality in relation to voting, economic independence, education and the entitlements of citizenship. Ascribed roles were challenged on the basis that they were imbued with inequality, but the emphasis was very much on rights in the public sphere rather than on politicising issues from the private realm (Saulnier, 1996; Lay and Daley, 2007).

Although second wave feminism(s) is associated with the era of the 1960s and 1970s, identifications, ideas and indeed actions continue to permeate and inform. An example relates to the ongoing campaigns against rape which draw from all feminisms. It is not so long ago, for example, that rape was viewed as a biological predisposition amongst men. The various feminisms have ensured that the objectification of women has been foregrounded and subjected to continual

challenges, although overt sexist practices, have always to be continually contested and named as abusive manipulation, exploitation and rape. The #MeToo movement which gained prominence in 2019 illustrated that engagement is ongoing and battles have to be continually re-fought, More covert forms of discrimination, relating to gender roles and workplace disparities, associated with pay, promotion and the constructive tackling of career breaks and reproductive rights, also remain on the agenda for many feminisms. However, second wave feminism(s) provided a platform for action by women, for women and despite political circularity and recidivism, has made a historical difference and substantially altered understandings about 'women's place', 'women's position' and women's agency. Although there have been many different strands (which also continue to be further developed), the strong and clear message encapsulated in the slogan 'the personal is political' has been very successfully utilized. It has served to effectively foreground women's oppression, change attitudes and promote action.

All political movements have to have a central unifying message in order to be effective. However, a consequence of this is an accompanying assumption of unity and shared experiences. Second wave feminism(s) has been criticised for these universalising tendencies and for assuming a similarity of experiences of oppression. In the USA particularly, second wave feminism focused attention on white middle class women and whilst in Europe, socialist and Marxist feminisms took account of the influence of class and economic deprivation within capitalism, it was these universalizing tendencies which resulted in the increasing alienation of Black feminists, those from economically impoverished backgrounds and lesbian feminists who took issue with heteronormative assumptions.

Lesbian Feminism(s) and Standpoint

Lesbian activists played a major role in nuancing and developing the messages of second wave feminism(s). Feminist lesbian politics added a deeper dimension in terms of critical perspectives and cultural orientation. They focused, not just on politising power imbalances between men and women, but on exploring women's sexuality outside of both heterosexual and male influenced gay liberation orientations. Feminist standpoint was generally used to demonstrate how injustice and oppression could be better analysed and understood from the position of those who were marginalized (Harsock,1983; Harding, 2004), However, lesbian activists used it to explore how sexuality is also historically, culturally and socially situated. They turned sexual marginalization into a standpoint of epistemic privilege, a springboard for both critique and collective action within and outside second wave feminism(s).

Black Feminism(s)

The Feminine Mystique, by Betty Friedan published in 1963 is viewed as ground-breaking in relation to the development of second wave feminism(s). However, as Smith (2013) points out, Friedan's suggestion that women go out to work and hire domestic workers to perform their daily household chores failed to resonate with those Black women and women from economically pressurised backgrounds who would be undertaking the relinquished domestic tasks. Ironically, Black women at this time were also being criticised for going out to work and the 'Black matriarchy' as it was called, were blamed for a range of social problems precisely because of their apparent economic independence (for example in the Moynihan Report of 1965). Accordingly, Black women were charged with: emasculating Black men, whilst at the same time releasing them to be sexual predators; for promoting juvenile delinquency amongst young Black people by not being full time homemakers; and for holding

back the economic success of the Black population generally as a result of their deviation from prevailing American values (Smith 2013).

Black women's history of slavery, exploitation, enforced sterilisation and entrenched racism clearly differed markedly from that of the women Freidan (1963) was referring to. However, Budgeon et al (2018) argue that whilst second wave feminism(s)' assumed homogeneity appeared to ignore the individual and collective experiences of Black women, its central slogan 'the personal is political', paradoxically proved to be central to the genesis of Black feminist politics. Budgeon et al (2018) maintain that second wave feminism(s) was the first radical movement to both base and create its politics on personal experience and, as a result, to extend critical understandings of the ways in which power operates. If, for example, politics is seen to be about power being exercised, not only at macro levels but also at micro levels in everyday life, then the range of activities contributing to a broader political movement expands exponentially. Budgeon et al (2018) contend that, as part of this process, activities such as consciousness raising not only facilitated the collectivising of social experiences but also made connections to prevailing political forces. Accordingly, Black women could theorise from their own experiences and develop forms of Black feminism which not only confronted their experiences of sexism within their own communities but also challenged the racism they experienced within white second wave feminism(s) (Phipps 2016; Budgeon et al, 2018).

Budgeon et al's (2018) argument supports the formation and politicisation of Black feminism(s), but Black women in the USA highlight that their struggle has a long history. Barbara Smith (1984), Alice Walker (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990), amongst many others, stress that Black women's knowledge relates to enduring multifactorial oppressions. Collins (1990) contends that this collective wisdom has

resulted in the development of Black feminist thought as critical social theory. Smith (2013) points out that the influential Combahee River Collective, which originated in 1974, was made up of women who had been involved with the Black Panther Party and other antiracist organizations. They established a tradition that rejected the prioritisation of women's oppression over racism and racism over women's oppression. They rebuffed middle-class feminisms that failed to take account of the centrality of class and economic deprivation in poor and working-class women's lives. In 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw first used the term 'intersectionality' to refer to the ways in which multiple oppressions are simultaneously experienced by Black women (Crenshaw, 1989; Smith, 2013). She made it clear that discrimination and oppression are not a series of add ons in terms of sexism, plus racism, plus ageism, plus disablism, but multiply experienced subjugations and repressions. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) went on to adapt Crenshaw's theory on intersectionality to the social sciences. Similarly with regard to sexual identities, Black first or lesbian first became linked by 'both and' rather than 'either or', with context playing a part in the sexual identity expressed. It is notable that, over the past thirty years, the concept of intersectionality has become both a means of understanding power dynamics and also a focus for action that applies to all women. As such it has become central to understanding and naming oppressive forces. Reni Eddo-Lodge (2020) notably asserted that to be an intersectional feminist, one had to speak up when confronted with an injustice and with regard to Black Lives Matter and injustice globally, this has become a prime intersectional activist statement.

Postmodern Feminism(s)

Concepts which incorporate the intersectionality of gendered power dynamics, as well as the importance of context, can be seen to be central to postmodern feminism(s). Postmodern perspectives have generally been viewed as elitist and

pretentious, containing a form of relativism which makes it possible to support almost anything and to criticise nothing (Brodrib, 1992; Jackson, 1992). However, the work of Barrett (1987, 1992); Weedon, (1987); Sawicki, (1991); Flax, (1992); Fraser and Nicholson, (1993); and Fraser, (1993); Fawcett, (2000) amongst others, highlight how postmodern feminism(s) can embrace difference and diversity whilst also recognising and addressing intersectional power imbalances and the effects of these in different contexts. Rather than examining differences between groupings, such as between men and women, there is an emphasis on how differences have been constructed and how categories are created through difference.

Postmodern analysis is concerned with deconstruction, and there is a concomitant recognition that there is no such thing as ‘the truth’ or ‘real’ knowledge. There is an embracing of antifoundationalism and an acceptance of pragmatism, variety, contingency and most of all, uncertainty. Accordingly, nothing is ‘fixed’ or certain or is seen to have any foundation in truth, logic or facts. The grand, progressive narratives of the modern era such as Marxism, liberalism and second wave feminism(s) are rejected as foundationalist stories. There is an understanding that power and knowledge are intricately interwoven and play out in discursive contexts, with discourse defined as a critical analysis of the everyday or the ‘taken for granted’. Within discourse analysis there is an exploration of apparent accepted ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ with an examination of how these came to be viewed in this way together with an exploration of the resulting implications.

Feminist postmodern perspectives are wide ranging and have variously focused on deconstructions of language, culture, and power/knowledge dynamics. Judith Butler, for example early on deconstructed gender, sexuality and identity, maintaining that all are culturally and social constructed and fluid. As Featherstone and Green (2013)

point out, her emphasis has been more on the ‘undoing’ rather than the ‘doing’ of gender (Featherstone and Green (2013), Butler (1990), Butler (1994). However, despite the many variations, feminist postmodern orientations can be seen to have subtly changed postmodern conceptualisations. Postmodern feminism(s) promotes deconstructive analyses of prevailing power/knowledge frameworks, as well as explorations of the ways in which power circulates in different social relations. However, it also emphases the important of context and draws attention to how positions can be fixed, weighted and responded to in different contexts. As a result, although essentialist, foundational ‘truths’ or ‘facts’, are rejected, the emphasis on the importance of context and of ‘fixing’ positions in context, means that pertinent criteria can be evaluated, decisions made and action taken. So, for example, in a particular situation it becomes possible to cite exploitation and to exercise agency when covert pressure is placed on a woman to do something that is clearly in that context, not in her interest (Fawcett, 2016).

‘Third’ and ‘Fourth’ Wave and ‘Choice’ Feminisms

In many respects, postmodern feminism(s) stands outside what has controversially been referred to as ‘third’ and ‘fourth’ wave feminisms. These remain contested labels with both emphasising individualism and celebrating difference. They are generally seen as spanning the period from the mid 1990s until the present day. ‘Third wave’ feminism(s), has been characterized by an emphasis on multiplicity and difference and on the fluidity of sexuality with the foregrounding of queer theory and bisexual and trans identities. There has also been a focus on cultural production, on micro politics and on individual emancipation (Gillis, Howie and Munford, 2007). Contradiction and paradox feature significantly with regard to both areas of exploration as well as to the ways in sexual identities are either constructed or deconstructed (Matos, 2015). ‘Fourth wave’ feminism(s) is very much associated

with social media and the internet. Munro (2013) calls it the ‘call out’ culture, where misogynist or sexist views can be called to account. It is characterized by ‘privilege checking’ or looking at where an individual is coming from, ideologically and epistemologically. However, it also features ‘doxing’ where personal files are accessed and distributed and cyberbullying. It has fostered internet inclusion and action as well as exclusion and fragmentation (Munro 2013; Kearney, 2012) ‘Third’ and ‘fourth’ wave feminisms have been associated with what have been called ‘post feminism(s)’, postfeminist sensibility and ‘choice’ feminism(s) (Braithwaite, 2002; Gill et al, 2017)), although some, such as Evans (2015; 2018),particularly in relation to ‘third wave’ feminism(s), strongly contest this. Shared key features include a belief in individual personal autonomy, the achievement of personal goals through unilateral action, self expression through bodily image and an acceptance that it is the responsibility of the individual to make things happen. (Piepmeier, 2006; Budgeon, 2015; Gill et al, 2017). Prominence is given to individual experiences, but unlike second wave and postmodern feminism(s) the purpose is not to collectivise and theorise, but to make personal statements. Full attention is paid to difference and diversity, but without the emphasis on contributing towards a coherent and cohesive narrative as with the Combah River Collective (Smith, 2013). All stress the importance of personal choice and it is this overarching aspect which can be seen as the determining feature of these forms of feminisms.

According to Snyder-Hall (2010) ‘choice’ feminism(s) enables women to map out their own courses of action through the many contradictory discourses they encounter. It addresses false universalism, embraces difference and takes issue with prescriptions of what ‘feminism’ should be about. Budgeon (2015) counters these arguments by drawing from Hirshman (2010) and asserting that ‘choice’ feminism(s), rather than forming a new kind of feminist politics actually demonstrates a ‘fear of

politics' by its refusal to make critical judgements. This can result in further limiting the participation of women in changing the conditions which define the choices they have available to them.

Gill et al (2017) use the term 'postfeminist sensibility' to refer to the practices and the consequences of 'choice' feminism(s). They maintain that a contemporary emphasis on individualism and personal choice goes hand in hand with a concomitant disregard or lack of understanding of structural inequality and a general downplaying of the operation of prevailing and pervasive sexist forces. Budgeon (2015) contends that 'choice' feminism(s) can be used to justify a range of behaviours, including women's participation in sexualized cultures, in pornography, in the adoption of a gendered division of labour and in the exploitative celebration of beauty and the body, on the basis of the belief that a personal and unfettered choice is being made.

'Choice' feminism(s) can be seen to represent an 'anything goes provided it is my choice' stance and whilst this promotes freedom of expression (within prevailing laws) it also can be seen to ignore history and negate the persistent and insidious themes which have particularly affected women. As a result, there is no analysis about how 'free' choice may be constrained and restrained by the operation of overt and covert power relations, by entrenched and unacknowledged patriarchal values and by enduring gendered limitations and restrictions. In terms of the media, it opens the door to standard and stereotypical female images being reshaped and redefined and presented as what women want. The setting is contemporary, but the underlying gendered messages present old style exploitation repackaged as women's free choice. There can be seen to be something akin here to Black feminism(s)' charges against what they perceived as white middle class second wave feminism, namely a complete disregard of unequal power relations and intersectional subjugations. It is

also the paradox of critically analytical forms of feminism(s) being directed towards manifestations of feminism(s) which embrace old style constraints on the basis of new style, personalized justifications. We now turn to look at forms of feminism(s) which have additional issues to address.

Islamic Feminism(s)

Islamic feminism(s), although influenced by the various feminisms, has to take on board matters of faith as well as women's relationship to Islam. At the centre of ongoing discussion and debate is the view that the range of feminisms generally are secularly orientated and have their basis in Western political movements. This has led to feminist analyses being regarded as representing Western values and, for some, being seen as a betrayal of Islam. Accordingly, there are those who see feminism and Islam as incompatible in terms of the different views of equality posed. However, there are others who make associations between the two or use feminism as a point of critique and there are many who want to create space for feminist orientated conversations and challenges within Islam itself. McGinty (2007), for example, argues that Islamic feminism has becoming a global movement and that a religious identity as a Muslim can also serve to create a space where resistance to patriarchal ideas can take form.

Moghadam (2001) distinguishes between Islamism, as a political movement and Islam, the religion and between Islam as a set of religious beliefs, varyingly practiced in different countries, to fundamental Islamism, which again varies in its precepts, but not in the force with which these are applied. She maintains that Islam cannot be isolated as an example of extreme patriarchy and that as a set of religious beliefs it is no more or less patriarchal than Judaism or Christianity. She highlights the

tensions in Islamic feminism(s) and maintains that these contribute to the contemporary heady mix.

Seedat (2013) points out that a widely held normative view is that Islam, as a religion, corrected pre-Islamic gender bias and as a result, affirmed women's spiritual equality with men. Equality is therefore enshrined in complementary difference, with men and women being regarded as ideally suited to their divinely ordained, but very different roles. Adherence to these roles is seen as both empowering and also inherently necessary to being a Muslim woman.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, this normative understanding has been contested by a questioning of the historical legacy of the patriarchy of early Islamic society as well as by contemporary Islamic practices. Ahmed (1993), for example, distinguishes between two distinct trends within Islam. On the one hand, embedded pragmatic social regulations serve to preserve male hierarchies and patriarchy, whilst equally entrenched social morality has a more egalitarian emphasis, carrying with it the potential for transformational change.

Within current discussion and debate the notion of 'Islamic feminism(s)' remains controversial. Cooke (2001) used this term to call for greater Islamic feminist analysis of the Qur'an without the interjection of male religious scholarship and authority, emphasising the Qur'an's potential for the achievement of social justice. Cook (2001) does not view Islamic feminism(s) as a coherent entity, rather she refers to "a strategy of multiple- critique……. where parallel commitments to multiple ideological frameworks are possible, even when they appear to be contradictory" (Cooke (2001) quoted in Seedat 2013: 409-410).

However, the term Islamic feminism has been rejected by others as being too secular and confrontational (for example, Wadud (1992) and Barlas (2002)). Najmabadi (2000) draws attention to the utility of adopting a progressive and non-confrontational approach, so that pragmatic social relations and pre-ordained roles are questioned within a space within Islam (Najmabadi, 2000). Seedat (2013) also points to a widely held school of thought which stresses that, despite being subverted in a variety of ways, in a range of context by patriarchy, the 'divine truth' of Islam is anti-patriarchal and is therefore open to different interpretations and practices.

Overall, with regard to the various feminisms, the contemporary picture is mixed, with different forms of feminism coming into the frame both simultaneously as well as at different points. Many men also identify as pro feminist, but as with many women, when asked what they mean by this, responses are varied and wide ranging. There are also male movements which cite sexist discrimination as rallying calls. The #MeToo movement, highlights that collective action is still a powerful tool, although the key focus can be seen to be largely personalized with emphasis being placed on rooting out individual 'perpetrators' rather than upon consistent critical and deconstructive analysis. Nonetheless, the wide-ranging feminisms have proved influential for social work and we will now turn to consider their current and ongoing legacy.

Feminism(s) and Social Work

The many feminisms continue to inform social work in a variety of ways. As highlighted, in terms of feminist ideas, there is not a steady march of progress, but rather circularity, change and adaptation. Liberal feminism(s), which informed the suffragette movement or 'first wave' feminism(s) with the emphasis on rights and

changing the law, still carries considerable weight, as does the making public and politicising what takes place in private domains. The considerable work that has taken place in addressing violence against women, is testimony to this. Other areas where there is a distinct resonance relates to valuing experience. The understanding that women and men can be experts through experience is a valuable part of social work practice as is the importance of collectivising experiences and theorising through experience. Drawing particularly from postmodern feminism(s), there is also the imperative of a commitment to ongoing analysis and critical reflection. This relates to questioning 'taken for granted' assumptions, and exploring how a situation has developed and how, working with those central to it, it can be most usefully responded to and addressed. However, three conceptual areas which deserve particular attention at this point are 'choice', intersectionality and uncertainty.

'Choice' as we have seen is a tricky concept. It can be foregrounded as an empowering force, but can also serve to mask enduring structural restrictions and oppressions. It can be used to sanction inequality in relation to position and in the use and the deployment of resources. It can also be employed to justify exploitation and the continued operation of unequal and pervasive power dynamics. Within social work, justifying cuts to direct payments or personal budgets on the basis of personal choice or citing the exercise of personal choice when there are no alternatives available, serve as pertinent examples. 'Choice' is important, but as a free rolling, non-rooted, unanalysed driver for action, it carries with it caustic and contrary elements. The ongoing critical appraisal of terms such as 'choice' are a key aspect of what social work can take from the various feminisms and usefully utilise on an everyday basis.

Intersectionality is another aspect which has permeated anti oppressive practice within social work. The 'Black Lives Matter' movement, which draws global attention to systemic abuses, highlights the importance of coalescing challenge and resistance around a centralising message, whilst also appreciating that experiences differ, power imbalances intersect and context varies. Within social work, an appreciation that categories, such as for example, 'older people', comprise a range of very different individuals with varied experiences, interconnections and intersections, is an important anti oppressive element. Similarly, recognising individual diversity whilst also being cognisant of enduring forms of discrimination and oppression which require collective action, are crucial in the commitment made by social work to achieving social justice. Social work's values and principles relating to anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice, taking on board the importance of intersectionality can all be seen to have been influenced by the various feminisms. However, as with the various feminisms, these also can play out in diverse ways with processes and consequences sometimes diverging from initial principles and underpinning ethics.

Another area which comes into the frame draws from postmodern feminism(s) in particular and relates to an appreciation and understanding of uncertainty. Social work has evolved as a modernist project with a belief that risk and uncertainty can be broken down into component parts and managed effectively. This belief has been challenged by authors such as Featherstone et al (2009) and White (2009), but remains embedded in many operating procedures and practices within social work agencies. COVID-19 has served to further erode confidence in a 'certain' world. Care homes in the United Kingdom, for example, were supposed to be protected and to protect vulnerable people, yet up to half of the deaths attributed to COVID-19 in England by June 12th 2020 took place in care homes (Savage, 2020; Laing, 2020).

This was largely because care homes were placed under pressure to accept frail older people discharged from hospital without individuals being tested for COVID-19. Social workers were largely caught between government policy to 'support the NHS' which meant in some cases that 'guidelines' were interpreted as regulations with regard to transferring older people from hospital, and supporting older people and their families through restrictions caused by social distancing measures. Everything became very uncertain and those social workers who were able to make a difference had to work with uncertainty and use it proactively to achieve results.

The various feminisms have influenced theory, values and practice in social work, but ironically social work's relationship with gender inequality and the theoretical perspectives drawn from feminism(s) have often been insufficiently acknowledged. Given social work's emphasis on social justice, the lack of greater overt recognition and the naming of key influencing factors drawn from specific feminisms is perhaps surprising. The reasons for this can be seen to be many and varied and include 'professionalisation' and 'managerialism' as well as the emphasis placed on political viability. Nevertheless, social work has managed to retain a critical edge and although at times this does appear to be a little blunted, as highlighted in this chapter, its retention is due in no small measure to feminism(s) influence.

Concluding Remarks

The many forms of feminism have served to challenge, to bring about change, to identify and name oppression and discrimination and to fight for social justice. They have challenged prevailing attitudes, ways of operating and entrenched behaviours and have brought about significant transformations. However, gains can be reversed and re-interpretation can provide space for enduring inequalities, inequities and

discrimination to continue under the guise of a different name. The celebration of individual choice, without recognition of how choices can be constrained and reframed to serve very different agendas, serves as a prime example here. Social work can be seen to carry similar tensions, contradictions and challenges. There is a strong commitment to social justice and tackling oppression and discrimination which sit side by side with increasingly rigid and constraining procedures and forms of micro management. The taking of risks and protection from risks are enduring aspects of the human condition, however, a preponderant emphasis on risk management within social work can stifle flexibility, innovation and productive working partnerships. Nonetheless, there remain many connections with the strongest being the emphasis which social work places on deconstructive analysis and critical reflection. These crucial aspects can be sidelined, but are embedded in the fabric of social work and are indispensable in continuing to do what social workers do.

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