
UNIT 17 FEMINIST APPROACH*

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- Get an insight into the Feminist Perspective of public administration;
- Understand the basic components of Feminist Approach;
- Evaluate the concepts of gender and gender equality in public administration;
- Assess if public institutions are gendered or not;
- Appreciate the relevance of Feminist Approach to public administration; and
- Appraise the administrative concepts of ethics, expertise and leadership from Feminist Perspective.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

The last decade of the 20th century, which was marked by a great transformation in various fields of science and social sciences such as sociology, economics, demography and anthropology seemed to have found a new direction with social equality issues of men and women as the centre of attention. Likewise, public administration too has come to be redefined in the light of feminist exploration of the subject resulting in expansions of its boundaries and reassessment of its norms.

Feminism is a methodology of investigation. It is more likely a theoretical method trying to explain/ re-describe the reality. When we talk of feminist perspective of public administration, three factors become pertinent: *first*, inclusion of women-friendly policies in governance; *second*, participation of women in public administration and

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third, a change of attitude to the issue of gender in administration. The third factor is most crucial and is thus the central theme of this Unit.

This Unit would explain the Feminist Approach to public administration. It would deal with issues concerning the role of gender in governance by highlighting the parameters of gender analysis in governance. Finally, the Unit would look into the direction in which the allegedly 'hostile Administrative State' must head so as to be equally hospitable to both men and women.

17.2 UNDERSTANDING THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

The Management Approach to public administration with its prescription of 'reinventing government' made an elaborate case for transforming the bureaucratic government into an entrepreneurial one. The reinvention project is significant in that it challenges the Weberian model of bureaucratic organisation as the taken-for-granted reality of administrative life. It further suggests that administrative structures, practices, principles and values are neither permanent nor unalterable. However, what is amazingly even more significant is the fact that feminist scholars have long imagined alternatives to bureaucratic model, much before the 're-invention project' became fashionable with the publication of the Report of the National Performance Review in 1993 under Clinton administration.

Unfortunately, feminist theorising did not have a hospitable environment. Alternative theories of power, virtue, nature of organisation, and of leadership and professionalism based on feminist research and women's organisational experiences failed to capture the attention of policy makers and citizens. Few of these ideas made their way into conversations in public administration which continued to be rooted in an ostensibly neutral, but overtly male, upper class, white mentality.

Feminists note that thus far the project to reinvent government ignores the gender dimensions of administrative life and feel that women's experiences are no more a part of the new entrepreneurial government than were a part of the old bureaucratic government. These scholars seek to render women's experiences visible and argue for a development of Feminist Perspective on public administration, which constructs the administrative reality in gender-inclusive rather than gender-neutral terms.

There are several dimensions to the Feminist reappraisal of public administration. While supporting the cause of a gender-inclusive public administration, this Unit would first define Feminist Theory and try to investigate the concept of 'gender of governance', i.e., explore the extent of how administrative power, institutions and policies are organised around femininity and masculinity, male dominance and female subordination. Attempt will also be made to investigate the 'governance of gender' concept i.e., see the extent to which administrative policies set the rules and circumstances that not only regard and reward, but also produce and position women and men as different and unequal. The crux of the argument is that gender relations cannot be understood apart from the Administrative State; Administrative States influence gender relations and are in turn influenced by gender relations.

17.3 FEMINIST APPROACH

A 'feminist' is someone who identifies with gender as a crucially useful category of analysis, who takes a critical perspective on women's current status and prospects,

to use Gerda Lerner's words "believes in a system of ideas and practices, which assumes that men and women must share equally in the work, in the privileges, in defining and dreaming of the world".

Feminism is not one unitary concept, but instead a diverse and multifaceted grouping of ideas and actions. Despite the fact that the feminist movement encompasses different and even contradictory political viewpoints – Liberal, Marxist, Socialist, Radical, Post-modern to name a few, nevertheless all have a firm faith in the equality of men and women and are committed to the elimination of 'gender-based injustice'. Gender is a part of the organisational fabric of society based on perceived differences in accordance with one's biological sex and socio-economic identity. The focus of gender is not on women per se but on power relations between men and women, their access to resources and decision-making power.

Feminism is all about creating a space for heterogeneous gendered perspective; about perceiving and working to change gendered power relations. It is like using a 'gender lens' to view things. Anyone who wears glasses knows that a lens provides a powerful corrective and can completely change the way you view things. Given the fact that both the theory and practice of public administration have long been notoriously masculine, corrective endeavours to change it are vital. Therefore, using a gender lens means 'working to make gender visible in social phenomena, asking if, how and why social processes, standards and opportunities differ systematically for women and men'.

17.3.1 Gender of Governance

A mere glance at the history of social sciences would reveal that all over the world, the public political domain has been, and continues to be defined and controlled by men. Male dominance/ patriarchy is considered to be normal, neutral and universal. Women have been as Sheila Rowbotham (1973) has put it, 'hidden from history'. Concerned about the absence of women from established political structures, feminist scholars have tried to account for this phenomenon. Many believe the "macho" tradition of conceptualising politics to be responsible for the exclusion of women from politics.

The central mechanism by which this exclusion is realised is the assumption of a natural separation between the public and the private (Squires, 1999). It is assumed that the political is public and that the private realm of the domestic, of familial and sexual relations lies outside the proper concern of the study of politics. In other words, with politics restricted to the public sphere of human life and perceived as an arena of male activity, the private or personal realm, by contrast, has come to be seen as a sphere reserved for women. Women are, by and large, being excluded from defining their activities as political.

Feminist theory in the latter half of the 20th century began to realise how potent this duality was for the ways in which male and female roles are constructed and the means by which women, from the very understanding of what is 'political' may be excluded or simply made invisible.

Thus, began a re-evaluation of many male-created theories, principles, concepts and institutions including those of politics and administration. By claiming that 'the personal is the political' they challenged the traditional views on family and personal life as outside the remit of 'politics' and argued that the private sphere was in fact a primary site of power relations and of gendered inequality. They emphasised the

way in which personal circumstances are structured by public factors. Women's lives are regulated, and conditioned for example, by the legal status of wives by government policies on child care, by the allocation of welfare benefits, by labour laws and the sexual division of labour, and by laws on rape, abortion, sexual harassment. 'Personal' problems can thus be solved only through political means.

The essence of their argument is that gender is about power. Through gender relations, people recreate and reinforce the distinction between masculinity and femininity. Gender also organises power at the level of complex institutions. It saturates different spaces – even the Administrative State. In simple words, the gender lens reveals how male dominance organises/ constitutes the Administrative State.

17.3.2 Governance of Gender

The Feminist writers not only expose the male bias of the Administrative State; they also assess the effect of such an Administrative State and its policies on men and women. They try to show that an Administrative State, which is a gendered hierarchy produces inequality and assigns different life chances to men and women and reinforces material realities that oppress women. A Feminist Approach to public administration includes calling those shaded boundaries into question that differentiate capabilities/ potential qualities on the basis of gender, giving preference to males over females. It also means exploring the implications of these attitudes in governance.

This becomes apparent when we see that the conventional understanding of public administration is rooted in the images of expertise, leadership and a form of virtue which can be identified as culturally masculine (although, of course this masculinity is not overtly acknowledged). This peculiar nature of the public – organisational reality where links are drawn between ideas of masculinity and public administration norms of professionalism, leadership and neutrality; where working women bear the double burden of housework and paid employment; are relegated to lower bureaucratic ranks; and a glass ceiling blocks their access to the position of greatest power and monetary reward are declared misfit with organisational expectations about professional and managerial behaviour, harms women and restricts their political and social freedom. Such a culturally dominant masculine modes of thought and action privilege men and their interests by establishing boundaries that exclude all but a few exceptional women from positions of authority. A Feminist Approach to public administration theory entails questioning of these boundaries.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1) What do you understand by Feminist Perspective?

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2) Bring out the difference between the terms ‘gender of governance’ and ‘governance of gender’.

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17.4 PARAMETERS OF UNDERSTANDING GENDER IN ADMINISTRATION

The analysis of the extent to which gender is embedded in the very structures of organisation (gender of governance) and the extent to which it figures in the world view/ policies of administrators (governance of gender), has exposed the exclusion of women from the political world. The feminists, however, argue that true equality cannot be achieved by just ‘adding in’ women to traditional theories, but that the very basis of the theories must be challenged. Accordingly, they examine and analyse several issue areas in public administration that call for a new configuration and offer a new version of the spectrum of the feminist opinion, which promises to be fruitful in shaping administrative theory and practice.

17.4.1 Ethic of Justice

Public realm, of late, has been systematically denuded of public moral values and the public morality of justice has been overtaken by the forces of power, coercion and violence. Politics has come to be understood as power politics – conflictual rather than consensual. Not surprisingly ethics has emerged as a significant research concern for public administration scholars. Their response is to reassert the integral relation between politics and ethics in creating an ethical polity. The ethical discourse within public administration, however, would be both broader and deeper if ethics from a Feminist perspective were to be included.

Ethical reasoning usually equated with an ‘ethic of justice’/ idea of impartiality or a universalistic morality is considered impersonal, gendered and limited. The feminists argue in favour of extending the range of moral reasoning so as to include another form of reasoning called an ‘ethic of care’, which ought also to be recognised. It is said that women are more likely to adopt this ethic of care than men and that to privilege only the ethic of justice is to silence women’s distinctive moral voice. It is claimed that women’s experiences as mothers within private spheres provide them with certain insights and concerns, which are valuable to the public sphere of the Administrative State, but are currently absent from it.

In Carol Gilligan’s (1982) view, women have a different conception of morality, a morality of responsibility, whereas men have a morality of rights. Very early in life, men’s individualism and separation from the feminine gives them an ethic of justice, while women’s affiliation with mothers and others teaches them an ethic of care (White, 1999).

Feminist scholars like Gilligan nowhere endorse the rejection of the ethic of justice in the favour of an ethic of care. Rather they want the ethic of justice to be tempered

by an ethic of care. Their belief is based on the conviction that the recognition and acceptance of 'a different voice' is crucial to the transformation of public bureaucracies.

17.4.2 Expertise

Feminist theorists have drawn upon and contributed to the debates about the image of expertise in public administration. Historically, the need for expertise has been the central tenet of the Wilsonian–Weberian paradigm of public administration. Classical public administration grounded in politics–administration dichotomy was based on the assumption that public administration was legitimate because it was manned by expert professionals. The Wilsonian -Weberian model of professional expertise with an implicit emphasis on objectivity, assertion of autonomy and hierarchy is considered inconsistent with the widely accepted notions of womanhood.

Feminists regret that generally speaking, there has been a tendency to banish norms, which are culturally recognised as 'feminine'– such as passivity, compliance and vulnerability – from public life, thus creating an approach wherein public administrators, both men and women, seek ways to appear technically expert, tough and heroic; in other words, to project a more masculine 'competent image'.

The conventional idea of expertise also privileges a notion of autonomy over and above the public servant's obligation to be politically responsive. From the Feminist Perspective, such ideas of expertise block connectivity and affiliation of the administrator with the world around him. They not only separate the individual from the field, but they also raise the administrator above the field. Professional competence reduces those over whom authority is exercised.

The recognition that the perspectives of all the parties to the situation – clients, citizens, and workers are important in ascertaining genuine public interest, made the feminists campaign for a form of professional competence that is non- hierarchical. They also argue for a form of competence in public administration that moves beyond the myth of heroic male professional who sacrifices 'selfish' family concerns in a single-minded fashion to his career. The central theme of Stivers' account also is her assertion that not only do most women find it difficult or impossible to live upto such an ideal, but that the ideal itself is flawed, in that it compartmentalises life and the men and women who live it, relegating the family to lesser status and the performance of its responsibilities to lesser people. From the Feminist Perspective, the legitimate public administrator will be a whole person, one who is understood to have developed in and to be a continuing member of a family; the work of agencies will be seen as supporting and supported by the wider dimensions of its member's lives, and agency personnel policies will reflect this understanding. Policies such as parental leave and on-site day-care facilities will be seen as in the public interest because they promote the development and the nurturing of children; they will not be viewed solely as meeting the needs of individual employees.

Although the feminists are disturbed by the fact that only a very small percentage of top jobs in business and public administration are held by women in most countries, they are not sure, if simply adding women in key positions will be enough to bring about so fundamental a change. They also want to raise another pertinent question; whether we need leaders at all. Conventional administrative theory sees hierarchy as the inevitable 'given'. Feminists like Stivers, however, see the perceived need for leadership as a function of hierarchy, which socialises those in lower ranks to believe that they are incapable of taking decisions. Widespread dissatisfaction with hierarchy

and control, led women organisations to experiment with non- hierarchical forms of organising, which is a more participatory, flexible, group-oriented style of management. The feminists are not arguing that all women are interactive leaders or that it excludes men. The feminists simply want a shift in the norms of leadership such that feminist leadership is viewed as a compliment, not as a replacement to traditional leadership forms.

The feminist position on the above mentioned themes raises questions that bear directly on organisation theory. The feminists are developing alternative models of organisation, based primarily on their experience in the women’s movement. They are experimenting with new patterns of group activity, which substantially depart from the rational model of administration. They also challenge domination by superior through hierarchical patterns on the grounds that it restricts the growth of individual members. They propose the adoption of fluid, temporary, more flexible and egalitarian forms of organisation. The potential impact of the feminist critique of the key concepts in public administration prompted Robert Denhardt and Jan Powell to predict the demise of ‘the administrative man’ and urge the adoption of an alternative model based on the organisational values of women’s movement.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1) Distinguish between ‘Ethic of Justice’ and ‘Ethic of Care’.

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2) Discuss the parametres of understanding ‘gender’ in administration.

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17.5 CONCLUSION

In this Unit, we have made an attempt to explore the Feminist Approach to the specific aspects of administration. Feminist Perspective of public administration till today remains shamefully neglected and has not received the enthusiasm it warrants. Providing insights into the issues of gender equality, Feminists ask provocative questions such as what it means to be a man or a woman in various cultures, economic or social systems. They believe, women have always been at the receiving end and subjected to various negative stereotypes, also that women have not got a fair share in governance. They challenge the prevalent paradigm of bureaucratic culture and

Administrative State. They describe the Administrative State as patriarchal and gendered. They systematically explain the manner in which the Administrative State reinforces women's subordination and marginalisation.

Feminist scholars seek to overcome this masculinist bureaucratic culture which had been technicist in orientation. Based on their experience, they have developed an alternative perspective of public administration and provided a re-appraisal of administrative concepts such as ethics, expertise, and leadership etc. It has been observed that the objective of Feminist scholarship is to reshape dominant paradigm to give greater priority to women's needs and concerns as well as to sensitive methodologies.

The idea of Feminist ethic, expertise, leadership styles of women, organisation theory and their impact on the way administration have been examined. This is by no means an exhaustive list of avenues of Feminist theorising on public administration. The effort has been very simply to build a persuasive case for a Feminist Perspective to public administration.

17.6 GLOSSARY

Feminism	: Advocacy of women's rights for their equality, empowerment and upliftment.
Gender	: State of being male or female with reference to social and cultural ambience rather than biological being.
Glass Ceiling	: An unseen barrier in the form of overt or covert discrimination against women which blocks their career advancement.
Patriarchy	: A system where descent is through male line. A system where men hold the portion of power and control, excluding women completely.

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17.8 ANSWER TO CHECKYOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1) Your answers should include the following points:

- A Feminist Approach to public administration includes calling those shaded boundaries into question that differentiate capabilities/ potential qualities on the basis of gender, giving preference to males over females. It also means exploring the implications of these attitudes in governance.
- Feminists note that thus far the project to reinvent government ignores the gender dimensions of administrative life and feel that women's experiences are no more a part of the new entrepreneurial government than were a part of the old bureaucratic government.
- These scholars of Feminist Perspective seek to render women's experiences visible and argue for a development of feminist perspective on public administration, which constructs the administrative reality in gender-inclusive rather than gender-neutral terms.
- Feminists campaign for a form of professional competence that is non-hierarchical and does not compartmentalise life. Leadership skills have a masculine sub-text.
- Feminists reject stereo-types and attack glass ceilings.
- The Feminist Perspective campaigns for new integrative model of leadership with interactive and indirect leadership.
- It attempts to construct administrative reality in gender- neutral terms.

- 2) Your answer should include the following points:
- Many believe the “macho” tradition of conceptualising politics to be responsible for the exclusion of women from politics.
 - The State bestows political and economic privileges on the culturally masculine qualities at the expense of feminine ones.
 - Gender is a part of organisational fabric of social economy.
 - It is a socially imposed division of sexes.
 - Gender identities are constituted differently according to social and historical context.
 - Differences between men and women are socially produced and are therefore changeable.
 - Administrative State is insensitive to gender.
 - Its features are commonly associated with masculinity.
 - The Feminist writers not only expose the male bias of the Administrative State.
 - They also assessed the effect of such an Administrative State and its policies on men and women.
 - They try to show that an Administrative State, which is a gendered hierarchy produces inequality and assigns different life chances to men and women and reinforces material realities that oppress women.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should include the following points:
- Ethic of justice is associated with the idea of impartiality or universalistic morality.
 - It means taking a detached and dispassionate view.
 - Feminists consider it a product of male psyche, and hence gendered and limited.
 - Ethic of care is the alternative moral orientation centred on emotional relationships.
- 2) Your answer should include the following points:
- Parameters include ethics, governance and expertise.
 - Feminists are experimenting with new patterns of group activity, which substantially depart from the rational model of administration.
 - They also challenge domination by superior through hierarchical patterns on the grounds that it restricts the growth of individual members.
 - They propose the adoption of fluid, temporary, more flexible and egalitarian forms of organisation.

- Feminists project needs to take its rightful place among theorists and practitioners of public administration.
- Gender is a useful category of analysis.
- Need to take a critical perspective on women's current status.
- Feminists make persuasive arguments in their re-appraisal of administrative concepts such as ethics, expertise and leadership.



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