

Marxist Feminism

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 1, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Marxist Feminism*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=32169>

Marxist Feminism

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Sociology, Political Theory, Gender Studies, Economics, Philosophy

1. Core Definition and Theoretical Foundations

Marxist feminism represents a distinct and powerful theoretical framework that emerges from the critical intersection of two foundational socio-political analyses: Marxism and feminism. This theoretical synthesis fundamentally aims to understand and ultimately dismantle the systemic oppression of women by locating its roots within the broader economic and class structures of society, particularly under capitalism. Unlike other feminist theories that might prioritize cultural, psychological, or purely patriarchal explanations, Marxist feminism posits that women's subordinate status is inextricably linked to the capitalist mode of production and its associated social relations. It argues that gender inequality is not an isolated phenomenon but rather an inherent outcome of an economic system that relies on and perpetuates specific forms of exploitation and alienation.

The central tenet of Marxist feminism is the belief that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from a radical transformation of the economic system. It extends Karl Marx's analysis of class struggle, applying it to the gendered division of labor and the role of women in both productive and reproductive spheres. This perspective highlights how capitalism benefits from women's unpaid labor in the home, their subjugation in the workplace, and their role in reproducing the labor force, all of which contribute to the accumulation of capital. Consequently, Marxist feminists contend that any meaningful struggle for women's rights must simultaneously be a struggle against capitalism, as the economic system is seen as the primary material condition enabling and sustaining gender-based oppression.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The origins of Marxist feminism can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emerging from socialist movements and the nascent first wave of feminism. Early socialist thinkers, including Friedrich Engels in his seminal work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), laid some groundwork by linking women's oppression to the rise of private property and the patriarchal family unit within class society. He argued that the transition from communal societies to class societies, marked by private ownership and inheritance, led to the subjugation of women as a means of controlling property and ensuring legitimate heirs. This early analysis, while not fully a feminist theory in the modern sense, provided a historical materialist basis for understanding gender relations.

In the early 20th century, figures like Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai were prominent in

integrating feminist concerns within socialist revolutionary movements. They advocated for the recognition of women's economic contributions, the socialization of domestic labor, and equal participation in the workforce, viewing these as essential components of a broader socialist transformation. However, it was during the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s that Marxist feminism truly solidified as a distinct theoretical current. Many feminists became disillusioned with mainstream Marxist movements that often sidelined women's issues, seeing them as secondary to class struggle. Conversely, some feminists felt that radical and liberal feminisms did not adequately address the economic roots of women's oppression. This led to a conscious effort to integrate Marxist economic analysis with feminist critiques of patriarchy, giving rise to robust theoretical debates and new conceptualizations.

The development of Marxist feminism in the late 20th century saw significant internal debates, particularly concerning the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. Some theorists, like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, were central to the "wages for housework" movement, directly challenging the devaluation of reproductive labor. Others, like Christine Delphy, developed a "materialist feminism" that sought to understand patriarchy as a distinct but interconnected system of exploitation, particularly within the domestic sphere. These discussions led to various strands within Marxist feminism, including "dual systems theory," which posits that capitalism and patriarchy are distinct but interacting systems of oppression, and "unitary theory," which argues that patriarchy is largely subsumed within or fundamentally shaped by capitalism.

3. Key Concepts and Analytical Frameworks

A cornerstone of Marxist feminist analysis is the critical examination of the division between **productive labor** and **reproductive labor**. Productive labor refers to work that directly generates commodities for sale in the market, typically associated with paid employment outside the home. Reproductive labor, conversely, encompasses the unpaid work necessary to sustain human life and reproduce the labor force--such as childcare, cooking, cleaning, and emotional care. Marxist feminists argue that capitalism systematically devalues and exploits reproductive labor, predominantly performed by women, by rendering it invisible and unpaid. This allows capitalists to pay workers lower wages, as the cost of reproducing the labor force (i.e., feeding, housing, raising families) is externalized onto individual households and, disproportionately, onto women.

The **Social Reproduction Theory** is a highly influential framework within Marxist feminism. It posits that the reproduction of society, including the daily and generational reproduction of the labor force, is not a separate sphere from economic production but is deeply integrated into and foundational for the capitalist system. Social reproduction theory emphasizes that the ability of workers to show up to their jobs each day, physically and emotionally ready to labor, is dependent on the often-unseen and uncompensated work performed in the home and community. This theory highlights how gender, race, and class intersect in organizing this reproductive labor, often relying

on the exploitation of marginalized groups to sustain the dominant economic order. Without this constant replenishment and maintenance of the labor force, the capitalist system of production would collapse.

Another critical concept is the **domestic labor debate**, which emerged robustly in the 1970s. This debate centered on whether domestic labor performed by women in the home creates value and, if so, how that value should be understood within a Marxist framework. Some argued that domestic labor directly produces surplus value for capital by maintaining workers at a low cost, while others suggested it produces use-values (things consumed directly, not sold for profit) that indirectly support capitalist accumulation. The call for "wages for housework" by groups like the International Feminist Collective was a direct political articulation of this debate, seeking to make visible and compensate the vast amount of unpaid labor that underpins the economy, thereby challenging the economic basis of women's subordination.

4. Practical Applications and Advocacies

The theoretical insights of Marxist feminism translate into a range of practical advocacies aimed at transforming the material conditions of women's oppression. A central advocacy, as highlighted in the domestic labor debate, is the demand for the recognition and compensation of domestic work. Marxist feminists argue that if women's work in the home--child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, caregiving--were financially valued and compensated, it would not only provide economic independence for women but also fundamentally challenge the capitalist system's reliance on unpaid labor. This compensation could take various forms, from direct government salaries for caregivers to universal basic income schemes that acknowledge all forms of labor. Such measures aim to dismantle the economic rationale for women's exclusion from the formal productive sphere and elevate the social status of care work.

Beyond direct compensation, Marxist feminists advocate for the socialization of care services. This includes government-funded universal childcare services, elderly care, and publicly funded healthcare, which would collectivize the burden of reproductive labor traditionally placed on individual women. By transforming these private responsibilities into public provisions, women would be liberated from their disproportionate share of caregiving duties, enabling greater participation in education, political life, and the paid workforce. These advocacies are not merely about achieving gender equality within the existing system but are seen as steps toward a more equitable society where the needs of people are prioritized over the accumulation of capital.

Furthermore, Marxist feminism extends its critique to the broader implications of capitalism on women, advocating for the protection, healthcare, and acceptance of marginalized groups, including sex workers. From a Marxist feminist perspective, sex work often represents an extreme form of economic exploitation driven by poverty and lack of opportunities within a capitalist system,

particularly for women from marginalized communities. Rather than moralizing or criminalizing sex workers, the focus is on addressing the underlying economic conditions that push individuals into such work and ensuring their safety, rights, and access to social support. Ultimately, the comprehensive goal is to fight capitalism itself, recognizing that true liberation for women, and indeed for all exploited groups, requires a systemic overhaul of the economic order that perpetually generates inequality and oppression.

5. Debates, Criticisms, and Internal Divisions

Despite its profound contributions, Marxist feminism has faced significant debates and criticisms, both from within and outside feminist and Marxist circles. One of the most common critiques is that of **economic determinism** or **class reductionism**. Critics argue that by primarily focusing on economic structures and class relations, Marxist feminism risks reducing all forms of women's oppression to economic causes, thereby neglecting the independent existence and impact of patriarchy, culture, ideology, and other forms of oppression that may not be directly reducible to economic factors. This perspective suggests that patriarchy can exist independently of capitalism and that merely overthrowing capitalism might not automatically lead to women's liberation if patriarchal structures and ideologies remain unchallenged.

Another major point of contention has been the relationship between Marxist feminism and intersectionality. Early Marxist feminist analyses were sometimes criticized for a perceived lack of attention to how gender oppression intersects with race, class, sexuality, and disability to create unique and compounded experiences of marginalization. While Marxist feminism inherently emphasizes class, critics argue that it did not always adequately address how women of color, working-class women, or women in the Global South experience capitalism and patriarchy differently from privileged white women. Contemporary Marxist feminist thought has largely evolved to incorporate intersectional analyses, recognizing that women's experiences are not monolithic and that capitalism exploits and oppresses differently based on one's position within multiple hierarchies of power.

Internal divisions have also shaped the trajectory of Marxist feminism. Debates over the precise nature of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy--whether they are two distinct systems (dual systems theory) or whether patriarchy is largely subsumed within capitalism (unitary theory)--have led to different strategic and political implications. These theoretical disagreements highlight the ongoing struggle to develop a comprehensive framework that can account for both the economic exploitation inherent in capitalism and the pervasive gendered power dynamics of patriarchy without collapsing one into the other. Despite these criticisms and internal debates, Marxist feminism remains a vital and evolving framework for understanding and challenging the systemic roots of women's oppression in the modern world.

6. Further Reading

[Marxist feminism - Wikipedia](#)

[Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.*](#)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Feminist Perspectives on Marx](#)

[Jacobin Magazine: What Is Social Reproduction Theory?](#)

[Dalla Costa, Mariarosa. *Women and the Subversion of the Community* \(1971\).](#)

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM