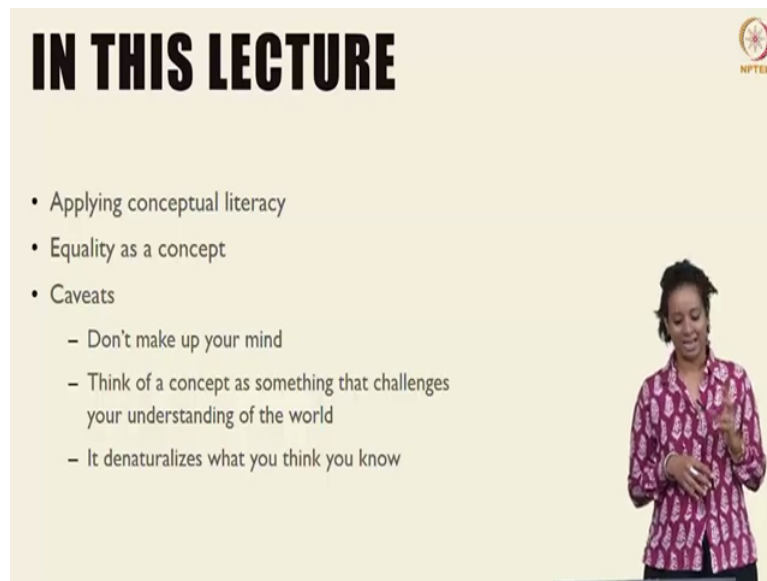


**Feminism: Concepts and Theories**  
**Dr. Mathangi Krishnamurthy**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Key Concepts: Equality**

Welcome back to “Feminism: Concepts and Theories” and let us soldier on in our attempt to address conceptual clarity. So this lecture onwards, we are going to start taking on individual concepts within the next few weeks.

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- Applying conceptual literacy
- Equality as a concept
- Caveats
  - Don't make up your mind
  - Think of a concept as something that challenges your understanding of the world
  - It denaturalizes what you think you know

So, we are on lecture six and in this lecture we are going to apply the idea of conceptual literacy to this concept; what I am talking about is equality. Now, I know that equality as a concept is generally understood, it is not something that you would suppose we would have to spend time upon. But perhaps this is the specificity of feminist theory.

In feminist theory, we are going to take terms that we know otherwise and ostensibly understand and try and apply a feminist lens to it. What does this mean? A feminist lens means that we are going to look at it differently, primarily in relation to gender, but also ask and interrogate the concept and say that what are the multiple ways in which this concept has been applied, these are the ways and the question of gender rights.

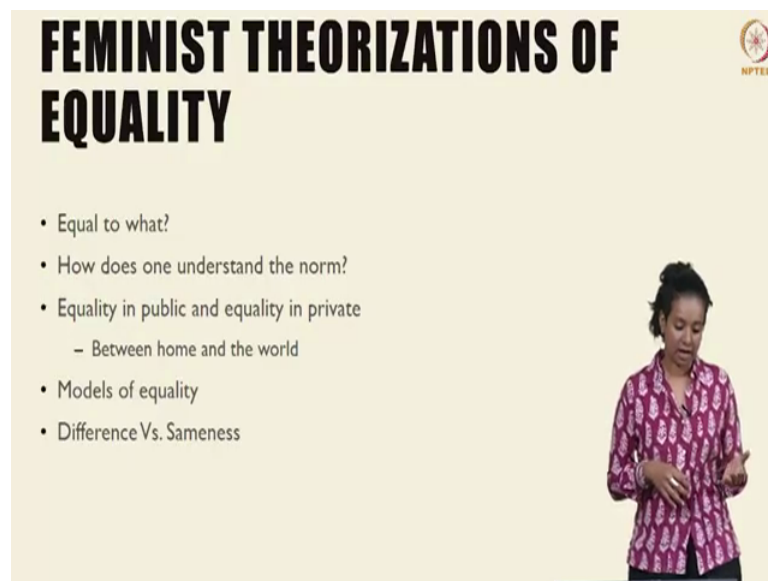
Couple of caveats; we are discussing concepts, so keep an open mind. Let us start with the understanding that we are going to disturb the boundaries of some of these concepts to begin with. Two; think of a concept as something that challenges your understanding of the world.

A concept is not given in stone, it is a lens for you to understand the world. So when I say feminist theorizations of equality, let us start with assuming that actually we are just beginning to explore the concept and try and not bring your pre-organized assumptions to the table.

Three, think of it as necessarily denaturalizing what you know; what do I mean by denaturalization? The same that a lot of theory means, which is that we think of concepts as things in the world. Equality is something that we understand; you and I are equal, humans are supposed to be equal to each other, all humanity is considered to be equal.

But when you sit with it, and then begin to examine the reasons why that does not seem to play out in actual consequences, then you will have to also make a conceptual adjustment, which is part of what we are trying to do today.

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Without further ado, equality is our concept for today's lecture. Under feminist theorizations of equality, here are a couple of concerns and questions. When we say equality the common understanding is of course we know what equal means; the same. However, in feminist theory, we ask very specifically in relation to men and women, equal to what?

And this might seem a perfectly banal question, but let us sit with it for just a second. When we say men and women are equal, what do we mean? Do we mean men and women are equal in capacity, in opportunities, in strength, in ability? What do we mean by equal? What are the parameters on the basis of which we understand such equality?

This is specifically important in relation to feminist theory, because ostensibly the goal of feminism is to achieve equality for men and women and every other kind of identity function in the world. Therefore, you have to ask, what is the norm that equality seeks to achieve?

Therefore, is this norm pre-decided? Is this something we have to come up with? Are there ways in which we have to imagine it, in a way that does not exist? Or do assumptions of equality always give the masculine then? Therefore, we consider what are called models of equality in the world and these models are important because they teach us how to think of equality differently, depending on the situation, context and consequence.


We also have to really take into account the question of equality in public and equality in private. Now, why are these two important? Because very often, a lot of struggles for equality have tried to achieve such terms in one or the other and often it is considered difficult to achieve in both because the questions for each realm are different.

Feminist theory encourages you to ask all of these questions: What does it take to achieve equality in public? What does it take to achieve equality in private? And how is it that these two are not bridged, so that they begin to mean the same?

Then we take into account this question of difference and sameness. So, this might be difficult to wrap your head around, so pause for a second, what do we mean by difference as a model of equality? Do we form equality on the basis of how men and women are different?


That is what we mean by difference' or do we form models of equality based on their ostensible sameness —men and women are human, we are all participants in the human race, and therefore, each of us should be allowed the same kinds of rights in the world. Hang on to those thoughts, we will explore all of them as we go along through this lecture.

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## FORMS OF EQUALITY

- Feminism of “uncritical equality”
  - 1960s and 1970s in the US and the Global North
  - Gender-neutral, but masculine models of humanity and culture
    - Vote, property rights, and access to education



We begin by considering a particular form of equality that came up in the 1960s and 1970s, but actually has its provenance much earlier in liberal feminism in the late 19th century, which we will speak about in just a minute or so. But, let us start with this model itself, so that you understand broadly how the landscape is configured.

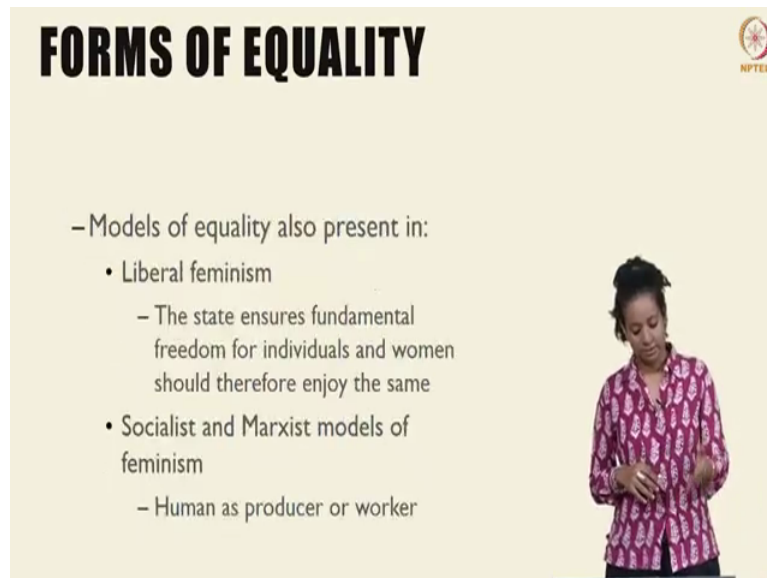
This we call the feminism of uncritical equality. Why uncritical? And this is a bad word over here? Not necessarily; by uncritical equality, we mean that the term equality is not interrogated, it is assumed that everybody knows what it means and therefore the fight for feminism is very much to measure up to that.

Now such uncritically equality as a concept comes about mainly in the US and the global north in the 1960s and 1970s, but also much earlier on, like I said in the late 19th century, early 20th century, with the fight for voting rights for women, as we will see in a bit. Such a feminism of uncritical equality focuses on what many have considered to be a masculine model of humanity and culture, meaning equality is considered to be enough if guaranteed through votes, access to education, sometimes access to employment, in other words, public rights, seemingly anything that anybody has access to, in public space.

So, it is considered gender neutral, because you do not want to refuse such rights. Of course, it is important that women have the right to vote, that they have rights and access to education, that they can own property. So, these are very important rights and there is nothing here to suggest that such a masculine model of equality is problematic in itself. But it does

mean that it is not enough and the reason why this is not enough is something we will get into over the course of time.

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**FORMS OF EQUALITY**

– Models of equality also present in:

- Liberal feminism
  - The state ensures fundamental freedom for individuals and women should therefore enjoy the same
- Socialist and Marxist models of feminism
  - Human as producer or worker

The slide features a presenter, a woman in a pink patterned shirt, standing on the right side. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner.

Such a model of equality or such models of equality are also present in forms of thought known as liberal feminism and socialist and Marxist models of feminism. Now, when I say they are present, it means that in many ways we are trying to trace the history of a concept; concepts are not properties of people or of times or of location.

And therefore, often in the early part of this course, you will notice a slant towards a global north or theory that was birthed in the US or the UK. It does not mean that such conceptualizations were absent in our part of the world, but they were shaped by very, very different circumstances.

I am focusing on these merely to draw out the various nuances and contours of the concept and not to suggest that conceptually only the global north is capable of producing theory. With that caveat, let us examine, what we mean by liberal feminism?

In liberal feminism, the state ensures fundamental freedom for individuals and therefore commonsensically women should also enjoy the same. So it derives from liberalism itself in thinking about the state as guaranteeing rights to all citizens. Since women are citizens, they should enjoy those same rights. Therefore, it is a left hand side equals the right hand side kind of logic and that is the platform on the basis of which feminism makes its case to the world.

In socialist and Marxist models of feminism, again these derived from socialism and Marxism, that think about the human as a primarily productive entity or guarantees, actually does not guarantee, it analyzes the human as a producer or a worker and therefore bearing that kind of value in a capitalist economy and then suggests that, if women are also part of that polity, their rights should also emerge from their capacities as a producer or a worker as owner of property or as bearing the same kind of class consciousness and consequences as men.

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**THE LIBERAL LEGACY**

- Assumption – Men and Women have equal natures
  - The only differences lie on socialization and treatment
  - With equal treatment comes equal outcome
- What happens when this does not happen?
- Such a set of assumptions elides the question of who is that is the universal human subject that women and men are equal to? Is it closer to what we understand of men or closer to what we understand of women?
- The Universal Pronoun

NPTTEL

A woman in a pink patterned shirt is speaking on the right side of the slide.

The liberal legacy comes from the assumption that men and women have equal natures and the only differences arise from socialization and treatment. In other words, all else being equal, men and women will have similar lives in the world. Now, you might begin to understand what I mean by the equality model of sameness, which is men and women are the same, of course they are the same, they are just socialized differently, to behave differently, to live in the world differently.

And therefore, if we cancel those out, then each of their lives will begin to look the same and this is the way in which feminism can achieve its goals. Therefore, the assumption also follows with this idea that with equal treatment comes equal outcome.

I want you to pause to think about why this has not been the case. In many countries of the world, we have women bearing equal rights to property, to vote, to be able to work, all of the above and yet, we continue to see enduring forms of marginality and differentiation that have not disappeared with such a set of actions.

And therefore think about what happens when this does not happen. Do we go to other concepts, we interrogate these conceptual boundaries, what are the ways in which we think about the set of assumptions themselves as faulty and not faulty in the completely mistaken sense of the term, but faulty in the sense of not being enough.

Often, concepts have to be asked if they are enough, whether they are all-encompassing and the answer is mostly no. But you need to have a sense of what their particular boundaries and constraints are, in order to develop other kinds of concepts that will help these problems. Such a set of assumptions elides the question of, who is it, that is the universal human subject? That women and men are equal?

I had asked you to keep in mind this idea of the universal human subject, because in political philosophy and theory, this is a question that is important when we discuss equality; equal to who? What does this universal human subject feel like, look like, seem like and bear properties of? And often the answer tends to be, a white upper-class man. Hold on to that thought, we'll come back to it. Therefore, ask the question, is the universal human subject closer to what we understand of men or closer to what we understand of women?

In this regard, seemingly trivial pursuits, like making sure that when we use pronouns of a neutral nature, we do not say he, we do not say chairman, we say chairperson, we do not use a sentence in which we say, every time that somebody is accosted on the streets, he fears for his life, it is not always he, it could be he, she, they, in order to include all manner of universal subjects in our understanding of the world. And often if one changes language, one also changes the perception of the world that language forms. So, just a little aside for you to keep in mind, every time this question of the universal pronoun comes up.

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**THE LIBERAL LEGACY**

- 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century political and philosophical liberal theory
- Liberal theory contested the divine right of monarchs to rule
  - Men of propertied class should have equal rights to citizenship
  - Liberal feminism extends upon this logic
  - Equal rights feminism or formal equality
  - Primarily through legislative means

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To continue, the liberal legacy comes from seventh and eighteenth century political and philosophical liberal theory, which contested the divine right of monarchs to rule and argued that men of propertied class should have equal rights to citizenship. Now this, of course is very much within the context of the enlightenment or modernity, wherein divine rights are questioned, wherein thanks to developments like the Industrial Revolution, you suddenly have a world where the divine right of Kings is not a given way, where God does not dictate the world, where the natural capacities of humans are considered to be slightly more exalted in the world.

And therefore rights are meant to be determined on the basis of equality, all men, and we would argue women are born equal in the world and therefore should have access to everything. Now, clearly early liberalism was very much about a revolutionary fervor against feudalism or the divine right of kings. However, liberal feminism borrowed and expanded upon this very notion to argue that if all men are equal, then therefore so are women. We are also humans in the world and therefore should have equal rights to citizenship.

This is where this is important because, the rights that feminism argues for remain within the realm of public rights, which is where liberal feminism finds itself to be most effective. Equal rights feminism or formal equality has therefore been very, very successful primarily through legislative means.

Now, this is what we call a set of formal rights and formality does not have the same meaning as you would normally understand; formal rights means on paper and often, things on paper



make sense, things on paper are important and they are not necessarily trivial, therefore, one should not dismiss the liberal legacy as saying it only brought about public rights, no, on the contrary it brought about public rights.

But then you begin to examine the limits of this and then say, well, why is it that women still suffer? Why is it that minorities still suffer? Why is it that we still think about the world as existing and operating primarily through inequality? And this is where you interrogate the question of limits in the liberal legacy.

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The slide features a title 'THE LIBERAL LEGACY' in bold black letters at the top left. Below the title is a list of five bullet points: 'Fundamental equality', 'Equality of opportunity', 'Equality of condition (of life)', 'Equality of outcome', and 'Choice feminism'. Under the last bullet point is a sub-point: '- VOGUE Empower "My Choice"'. In the top right corner, there is a small circular logo with the text 'NPTEL' below it. On the right side of the slide, there is a photograph of a woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a pink and white patterned button-down shirt, looking down at her hands.

What does the liberal legacy guarantee? Fundamentally equality, equality of opportunity, equality of condition of life, equality of outcome. These again, I repeat, are on paper. So, one has to ask the question, why is it that this does not happen beyond that point?

An example I would quote to you is a recent video, not so recent anymore, that was put out by the magazine Vogue, called Vogue Empower - my choice, which is a very, very interesting example of what is called choice feminism and choice feminism is very much within the liberal legacy, that given that on paper women are guaranteed rights of all kinds within such an edifice, it is a woman's choice to do whatever she wants. So, I will have you look at the video for just a few minutes, and then we will come back and discuss, how that is an exemplar of liberal feminism.

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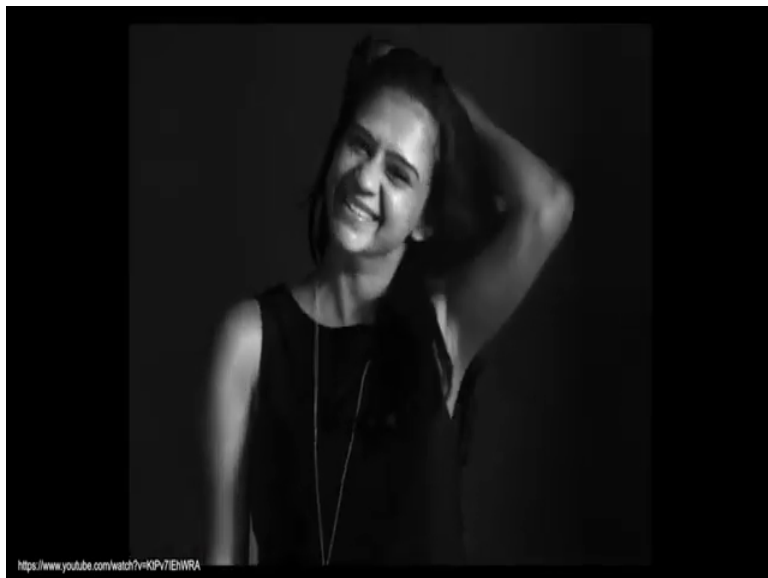
















## THE LIBERAL LEGACY

- Fundamental equality
- Equality of opportunity
- Equality of condition (of life)
- Equality of outcome
  
- “Choice feminism”  
– VOGUE Empower “My Choice”



My body, my mind, my choice, to wear the clothes I like even as my spirit roams naked, my choice to be a size 0 or a size 15, they do not have a size for my spirit and never will.

Now, as you saw in that video, you have a set of very, very striking looking women making an important case in a very assertive fashion for my choice, saying that I have a right to live in this world and act as I please. Why is it that this is both interesting, empowering, but also problematic, well, I will go into the capitalism part of it at a much later time, but let us stick to the content itself.

The assumptions that undergird something like this are that, all other things being equal, women can act as they want, and there are no consequences and if there are consequences, then the state will attend to the perpetrators of these consequences, and women can rest. But

we know this is not the case. If you have lived as a woman in any part of the world, you are simultaneously aware of your rights by also knowing that those rights are not equally applicable at all points of time and one has to take care.

And it is this matter of care, or this question that all women do not have the same choices no matter what; you are restricted by race, caste, class, in many other ways as much as you are restricted by gender is also part of this play. These are the kinds of constraints one has to keep in mind when examining the limits of the liberal legacy.

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**SOCIALIST AND MARXIST MODELS OF FEMINISM**

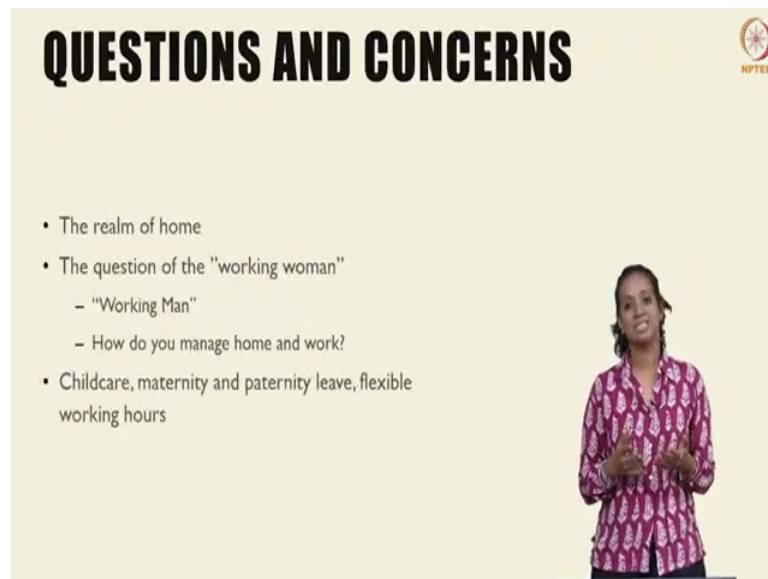
- Material Inequality
- Rights to economic as well as political equality
- Class as well as gender consciousness

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We turn then to the second model of sameness—inequality, which is the socialist and Marxist model of feminism, which focuses on material inequality. And similarly expands upon socialism and Marxism as forms of thought, where women argue for rights to economic as well as political equality and bring attention to class as well as gender consciousness, which is, I am a gendered being but also belong to a certain class and when all the classes are liberated in many ways, as Marxism argues for, along with it will come gender liberation.

So a lot of leeway is given to this idea that class trumps gender in many ways, and this is contested, but Marxist feminism argues that economic conditions are very important for being able to understand bids for equality and this has been ignored in liberal feminism. So, also think about each of these models as having a dialogue with each other, rather than completely critiquing it and dismissing it. So, if we can think about liberal and Marxist models together to form a more complex picture of what it takes to ensure equality for all genders.

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**QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS**

- The realm of home
- The question of the "working woman"
  - "Working Man"
  - How do you manage home and work?
- Childcare, maternity and paternity leave, flexible working hours

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Questions and concerns with both these models also rest upon the realm of home and this question of why is it that in homes you are not able to figure out the same conditions for equality, that the traditional division of labor remains undisturbed very often, and exceptions are exceptions rather than the rule.

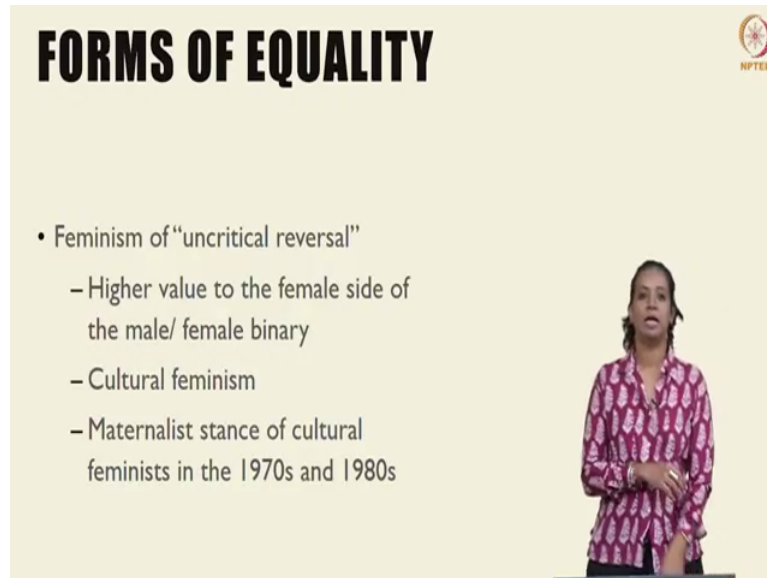
So, think then of this question of the working woman. Why is it that we never ask anybody if he is a working man? How is that not a subject position in the world? There are two aspects to this question, which is men are expected to work and therefore there is no working man, there is only a man, and women who work are also expected to take care of the home. So, questions to them are always about how do you manage home and work?

Now, let me also interject over here that this is very much a class-specific question, lower class women have been working since time immemorial, and they are considered to be not similar kinds of subjects as middle or upper class women who are considered to be class privileged enough to not have to work if they do not need to, but in many ways classed as it may be the question of the working woman across classes means that women have to take care of home as well as work and therefore they are doubling the amount of labor but being paid the same amount as a man.

The result of this has been an ongoing sort of campaign for childcare, maternity, paternity leave, flexible working hours, in formal work; we still have not tackled the question of informal labor, but we will talk about that in the week on feminism and labor. Keep in mind,

therefore, that this earlier quandary that I brought up of the realm of home versus the realm of the public remains an enduring concern for feminist theorization of equality.

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## FORMS OF EQUALITY

- Feminism of "uncritical reversal"
  - Higher value to the female side of the male/ female binary
  - Cultural feminism
  - Maternalist stance of cultural feminists in the 1970s and 1980s

Let us turn then to another form of equality or a model of equality that is different than the models based on sameness. These are the models based on difference, which is the understanding that men and women are different, let us just get with that fact. Such a feminism we dub as uncritical reversal. Earlier, it was uncritically equality, now it is uncritical reversal, which is the opposite of that, where a higher value is given to the female side of the male or female binary.

Not only is such theory suggesting that men and women are different, it goes on to argue that women should be placed higher on this hierarchy. This is often seen under the rubric of cultural feminism, where there is a cultural understanding of women as exalted beings. A lot of this can be seen in the Maternalist stance of the 1970s and 1980s, where the primary value for women was based in motherhood.

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**CULTURAL FEMINISM**

- Women's ways as being revered
- Motherhood as a primary differentiating function
- Essentialism
- Biological determinism Vs. Social constructionism

The slide features a woman in a pink patterned shirt standing on the right side, looking down at a device in her hands. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner.

In cultural feminism, women's ways are not only considered to be different than men, but also respected and revered. Where motherhood is considered to be the primary differentiating function. Women can give birth, men cannot and therefore women should have higher value in humanity.

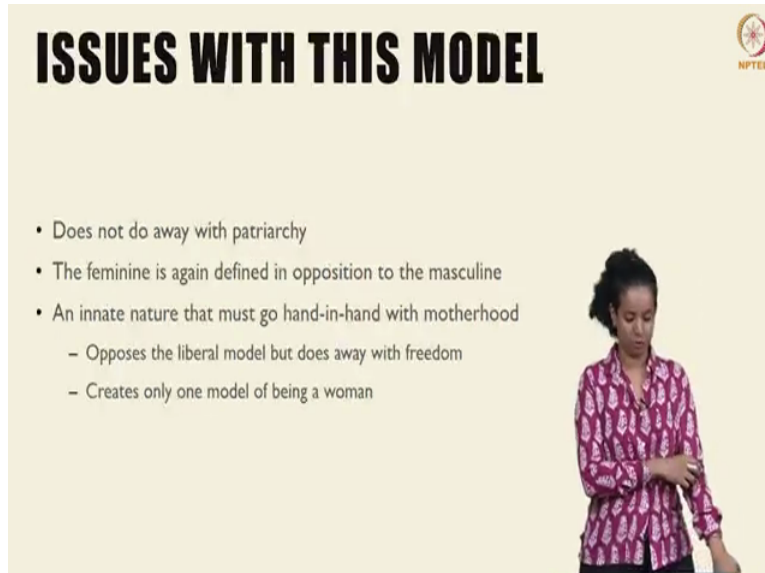
There is an essentialism to these stances, there is this understanding and what do we mean by essentialism? That there is a certain quality of women that is essential to the very act of being a woman, to the very state of being a woman, and that cannot be changed no matter what. Since it cannot be changed, it is therefore essential to our understanding of women in the world.

Here we also come up with a slightly important struggle and fight, which is between biological determinism and social constructionism. Let us, spend a quick minute on what these terms mean. What do we mean by biological determinism? That biology is the determining factor, biology is composed of hard differences that cannot be overcome. Therefore, a man is a man, therefore woman is a woman and therefore within woman reside differentiating biological characteristics such as motherhood.

The social constructionist view argues that, men and women are kinds of biological matter in the world sure, but they become man and woman through social processes. It is social processes that guarantee certain kinds of respect for motherhood and exalt mothers and confine women to those spaces.

Now, as you can see, there is really no meeting point between the two in many ways. What we are arguing for is not to say, one is better than the other, but again to look at the limits of each of these, and also, which of these is more capable of being able to dismantle patriarchy as we know it, is our concern, rather than figuring out, how to solve this fight?

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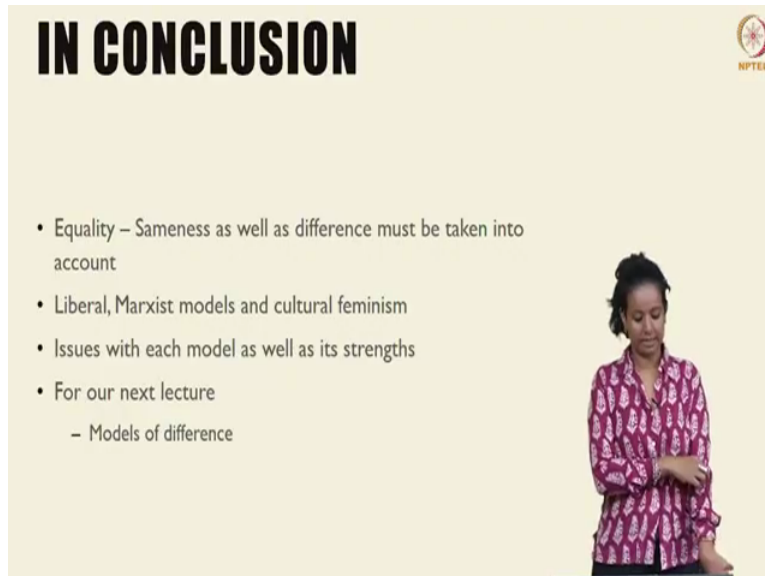
The slide features a light yellow background. At the top left, the title "ISSUES WITH THIS MODEL" is written in bold, black, uppercase letters. In the top right corner, there is a small circular logo with a red and white design and the text "NPTEL" below it. On the right side of the slide, there is a photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a pink and white patterned shirt, looking down at her hands. To the left of the photograph, there is a bulleted list of issues:

- Does not do away with patriarchy
- The feminine is again defined in opposition to the masculine
- An innate nature that must go hand-in-hand with motherhood
  - Opposes the liberal model but does away with freedom
  - Creates only one model of being a woman

So, as I said, the issue with cultural feminism is that it does not do away with patriarchy. Just because women are respected does not mean that they are liberated. The feminine is defined in opposition to the masculine, there is no way to have a more imaginative understanding of gender. And essentialism for motherhood means that, you can only have a particular type of woman in the world, one who is both capable and willing to birth children.

It does not accommodate a large set of bodies that might have constraints in relation to motherhood, in relation to reproduction, in relation to having children and therefore it creates only one model of being a woman, which is one that is capable of conforming to a very specific definition of the feminine. This might oppose the liberal model, this might oppose it in a way that says that equality cannot just be about the masculine, it has to do also with the feminine, but again, there are no more multiple feminines, only one feminine.

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**IN CONCLUSION**

- Equality – Sameness as well as difference must be taken into account
- Liberal, Marxist models and cultural feminism
- Issues with each model as well as its strengths
- For our next lecture
  - Models of difference

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In conclusion, in today's lecture, we have looked at equality as sameness as well as difference, taking into account multiple models of each. We have examined liberal, Marxist and cultural feminist models of these, we have looked at issues with each model, as well as its strengths. For our next lecture, we will do the same thing but models of, different models of difference; models of differences are far more varied, so, keep these in mind as we go along, until next lecture.