

# Chapter 10

## Equality and Differences: Some Feminist Thoughts

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper addresses the implications of equality and differences between women and men. The principle of equality is an abstract principle which is difficult to actualize in practical field. On the other hand, it has been argued in the paper that differences that exist between women and men are social constructs. In order to achieve equality it is necessary to re-conceptualize differences as “oppression or subordination”. Regarding the equality and difference issue this paper gives importance on the views of Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. All these philosophers believe that equality can be achieved by minimizing differences. Minimizing can be done by proving capabilities of women through their performances. Education plays utmost role to prove the capabilities that women possess. Finally, it is pointed out that social conditioning is responsible for making gap between women and men and we need to break social conditioning to create new mind set and social attitude.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The debate between equality and difference is central to feminism. For the last two centuries feminist writings and political struggle are centered around equality and difference principles. In our study of women we see that gender, equality and difference play important role. ‘Women’ gives us the biological or sex picture whereas

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gender is the social construct. Social construct sense determines women's stereotype position in the society, culture and in state power also. On the other hand, equality and difference are the two concepts fundamental to feminism throughout. Equality and difference regarding women take different shapes in different culture. There grows writings and ideas which focus on gender questions. This paper consists of three parts. The first part consists of discussion concerning equality and difference; the second part is about the views of three exponents regarding the equality principle. The discussion of the third part follows from the second one and it is about social conditioning, i.e., how change can be brought in the society regarding the equality principle.

### **PART I: EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE**

Equality and difference as a well known debate exists from the beginning of the feminist discourse. By equality-difference controversy we understand from commonsense knowledge the similarity to and dissimilarity from men. But the deep-rooted meaning refers to equality of rights and opportunities of women. Biological differences make a woman different from a man which is not a concern of feminism. Feminism stands 'to insist on women's human rights and dignities, to expose the injustices and harm done to women, to assert in a multitude of ways that women are human beings deserving of respect.' (Thompson, 2001: 13).

In society there exist different views regarding the biological or natural differences. There are immense differences correct or incorrect dominating the society (Mary Holmes, 2009: 21-30). Men-women differences matter a lot. Biological or sex difference engender many other differences particularly oppression on women or counting women as inferior. It is said that sex differences are social construct as class differences are, so that power can be controlled by one sex or class. Feminist critiques are engaged in refuting this social construct. This difference is also known as gender difference. Society uses biological phenomenon as a social phenomenon, i.e., gender to abuse women continuously. We find that women are disadvantaged due to the gender construct. No doubt that gender has been considered as biological also which refers to physical body of women. During the 1960s and 1970s, a new way of thinking about gender began to emerge that critiqued the earlier frameworks and introduced a paradigm shift of gender from biologically based analysis of gender to social analysis (Mahtab, 2012: 120). Social analysis focuses on the fact how gender divides human beings into superior and inferior, into categories between male the superior and female the inferior. Gender is related to cultural or social construction of sex; thus, gender cannot be taken simply as man and woman but rather a set of meanings that sexes assume in particular societies (Mahtab, 2012: 121).

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