

Feminist Research and Methodology: A Crucial Requisite

Swati Rajan

*Associate Professor in History
TikaramJagnnath Arts, Commerce and Science College,
Khadkee, Pune-411003.
swatirajan65@gmail.com*

Abstract

The argument put forward in this paper is that there is a need for Feminist Research Methodology to be a separate branch in the social sciences. Feminist research is research which is carried out by women who identify as feminists, and which has a particular purpose for knowing particular kinds of questions, topics and issues to be known about and an identifiable method of knowing which distinctly draw on women's experience of living in a world in which women are subordinate to men. Feminist research is expected to adopt critical perspectives toward dominant intellectual traditions that have in the past ignored and/or justified women's oppression. It is intended to bring to the surface voices that are often excluded from knowledge production and policy making, and critically reflect upon how it can all be done better. Feminist research is seen as being concerned with issues of broader social change and social justice and committed to changing the condition of women (Acker J. and others, 1983). It is concerned with asymmetrical power relationships including hierarchical power relationships in the research process and the relationship between researchers and researched. The role of the researcher is thus to produce useful knowledge which contributes to global gender justice, to changing women's subordination and to stopping all forms of social inequalities.

Keywords: *feminist research, feminist research methodology, feminist historiography, intellectual tradition*

1. Introduction

To analyze and evaluate arguments in expert life and general life, research methods have always been a matter of great concern in today's situation. Women's self-experience and perspectives are considered in feminist research as a basis for research. This paper seeks to establish and demonstrate the relevance of feminist research methods in the field of academy research. In the feminist study process, it is important to take planned steps to seriously consider women's self-experience, deep awareness of the patriarchal structure, and the value of equality. The beginning of feminist research is emerging from the perspective of women's experience, needs, and perceptions of the social world. The goal of feminist research is also to eliminate gender inequality in the world and to transform society in stages.

“Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . . For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.” [Simone de Beauvoir, 1952, xviii, xxiii]

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. . . . she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all?” We can no longer ignore within women that voice that says: “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.” [Betty Friedan, 1963, 15, 32]

Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan, speaking many decades later, expresses their deep feelings of exclusion from the dominant avenues of knowledge building, seeing their own experiences, concerns, and worth diminished and invalidated by the dominant powers of their society.

2. Hypothesis

The argument put forward in this paper is that there is a need for Feminist Research Methodology to be a separate branch in the social sciences. Feminist research is research which is carried out by women who identify as feminists, and which has a particular purpose for knowing particular kinds of questions, topics and issues to be known about and an identifiable method of knowing which distinctly draw on women's experience of living in a world in which women are subordinate to men.

Feminist research is expected to adopt critical perspectives toward dominant intellectual traditions that have in the past ignored and/or justified women's oppression [Acker J., and others, 1983, 423-435]. It is intended to bring to the surface voices that are often excluded from knowledge production and policy making, and critically reflect upon how it can all be done better. Feminist research is seen as being concerned with issues of broader social change and social justice and committed to changing the condition of women [Acker J. and others, 1983, 693-707]. It is concerned with asymmetrical power relationships including hierarchical power relationships in the research process and the relationship between researchers and researched. The role of the researcher is thus to produce useful knowledge which contributes to global gender justice, to changing women's subordination and to stopping all forms of social inequalities. Feminist approaches can lead to a restructuring of research and study and open up new thinking.

3. Theoretical Perspective on Feminism

'The most central and common belief shared by all feminists, whatever our "type" is the presupposition that women are oppressed. It is from this common acceptance that there is indeed a problem, that there is something amiss in the treatment of women in society that feminism arises.' [Stanley and Wise, 1983]

Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies which share a common stated aim: to define, establish, and defend equal political, economic, cultural, and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A feminist generally self-defines as advocating for or supporting the rights and equality of women. Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender.

Charles Fourier, a Utopian Socialist and French philosopher, is credited with having coined the word "feminism" in 1837. [Goldstein, 1982, 92] The words "feminism" and "feminist" first appeared in France and the Netherlands in 1872, Great Britain in the 1890s, and the United States in 1910. [Mina Kruseman, 1994, 31]

If there is a central reason why feminists do feminist research it revolves around the need to know and understand better the nature of the hurt we sustain as a group - a group which is subordinated on the grounds of our female gender. This is not 'knowledge for its own sake' but rather is knowledge explicitly dedicated to bringing about change and improvement in our situation as women. Although Bernice Carroll's quote is detailed, it is important to clarify the content of this article. Carroll underscores the importance of rewriting history by re-examining historical records, quoting John Higham,

"Descriptive monographs and narrative texts are still the mainstays of historical writing. Though not averse to "illuminating analysis" of "man in his social conditions," historians are generally unwilling "to pre-suppose an all-embracing framework for history" or to venture far outside "the specific physiognomy of concrete human situations." 1 Those who do so, are likely to encounter echoes of James Harvey Robinson's rebuff to the philosophers of history for imagining that they could "discover the therefore of man's past without the trouble of learning much about it." It is therefore not at all surprising that there has not been much theoretical work in the fledgling field of women's history." [Bernice A. Carroll, ed. 1976, Introduction - ix]

Partisan historiography based on poor study does not provide accurate records of women's contributions. As a result female uniqueness is obscured. The emergence of separate branches of feminist research and methodology is urgently needed by developing countries.

4. Various Perceptions of 'the Problem'

There are many different views amongst women who identify themselves as feminists about what our oppression entails, what are its sources and what should be done about it. Women may call themselves radical feminists, socialist feminists, humanist feminists, separatist feminists, democrats, liberal feminists and so on, to express in shorthand form their different positions on 'the problem'.

All of these different 'feminisms' lead to women's differing interests in topics for research, differing preference for techniques, differing theories for interpreting what they see as going on, and differing conclusions about what new actions to take.

One of the most distinctive features of feminist qualitative research is the emphasis placed on reflexivity or engaging in reflection about the research process [Ackerly & True, 2008]. Scholars recognize the importance of being reflexive about how we interpret our data, our role in the analytic process, and the pre-conceived ideas and assumptions we bring to our analysis [Devine & Heath, 1999]. After all, the 'voices' of respondents do not speak on their own. Rather, it is the researcher who makes choices about how to interpret these voices and which transcript extracts to present as evidence. Researchers are thus encouraged to reflect and locate themselves in social structures in order to understand themselves and others.

5. Study of the Feminist Theory

Feminist research starts from the personal experience of unease about a difference between the way things are and the way we might prefer them to be, whether in our 'private' lives at home or at work.

Our history and cultural heritage over the centuries and millennia, of our childhoods, our teenage years, our young adulthood, of being wives and mothers, of being single women, of getting educations and jobs, of being in the paid and unpaid workforces, of institutions we find ourselves in.

Feminist perspectives also carry messages of empowerment that challenge the encircling of knowledge claims by those who occupy privileged positions. Feminist thinking and practice require taking steps from the 'margins to the centre' while eliminating boundaries that privilege dominant forms of knowledge building, boundaries that mark who can be a knower and what can be known. For Virginia Woolf, it is the demarcation between the "turf" and the "path"; for Simone de Beauvoir, it is the line between the 'inessential' and the 'essential'; and for Dorothy Smith, it is the path that encircles dominant knowledge, where women's lived experiences lie outside its circumference or huddled at the margins and women's everyday lives.

Feminists engage both the theory and practice of research—beginning with the formulation of the research question and ending with the reporting of research findings.

“Feminist research encompasses the full range of knowledge building that includes epistemology, methodology, and method. An epistemology is ‘a theory of knowledge’”, [Sandra Harding, ed., 1987, 3] that delineates a set of assumptions about the social world—who can be a knower and what can be known. These assumptions influence the decisions a researcher makes, including what to study (based on what can be studied) and how to conduct a study. A methodology is “a theory of how research is done or should proceed”. (Sandra Harding, ed., 1987, p. 3) A method is “a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence”. [Sandra Harding, ed., 1987,2].

6. Feminist Research Methodology

In their book, “Questionnements féministes et méthodologie de la recherche”, on feminist methodologies, Michel Olivier and Manon Tremblay (2000) identify three defining principles of feminist research. First, as opposed to traditional research, its objectives include both the construction of new knowledge and the production of social change. Historically, feminist research has been informed by women's struggles against the multiple forms of their oppression. Second, feminist research is grounded in feminist values and beliefs. It seeks to include feminism within the process, to focus on the meanings women give to their world. Feminist principles inform all stages of the research, from choice of topic to presentation of data. Third, feminist research is characterized by its diversity. It is interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, it uses different methodologies, and it is constantly being redefined by the concerns of women coming from very different perspectives. Feminist research thus requires that such issues as antiracism and diversity, democratic decision making, and the empowerment of women—including traditionally marginalised women—are addressed.

Feminist researchers, depending on their definition of ‘feminism’, will develop methods and preferences for techniques that they see as yielding the best results for women. Some women may use standard surveys, collect numerical information, and perform statistical computations, in order to establish matters of extent or amount regarding women's position vis-a-vis men's. Others will undertake secondary analysis of documentary material and policy papers or research and develop new policy and assess its impact on the position of women. Other women will concentrate on directly hearing the stories of women - perhaps using more or less in-depth interviews or ethnographies, recording verbal information, and writing them up and publishing.

At the commencement of ‘second wave feminism’ in the 1960s and 1970s, women gathered in self-study groups (called consciousness-raising or ‘cr’ groups) in their suburban family homes and in student households. These were very similar to third world study circles where people gathered to discuss matters troubling them, and to seek to transform personal experience of the world into collective understanding of how the world was operating to oppress some to the benefit of others.

Still others will work more as members of groups of women doing their own self-directed research; much as did the CR groups of early ‘second wave’ feminism. All of these techniques and methods continue to be subjected to healthy internal debate about whether or

not, and in what ways, they may further perpetuate or alternatively contribute to interrupting patterns of oppression of women.

Methodologically, feminist research differs from traditional research. It actively seeks to remove the power imbalance between research and subject; it is politically motivated in that it seeks to change social inequality; and it begins with the standpoints and experiences of women. A wide range of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, are available to feminist researchers. "Instead of focussing on which type of research is better, it makes more sense to allow the context and purpose of the research to guide the choice of research tools and techniques. The particular situation or context should guide the methodological choices, instead of having a trust in the method as appropriate for every context and situation." [Greaves and others, 1995, 334].

7. Criteria for feminist research

It is crucial to adopt new criteria and methods in feminist research. It is inevitable to consider the criteria discussed here for feminist research. Feminist research methods need to be introduced to achieve the effectiveness of such research and to address women's issues.

- The research process is value-based, and innovations or new methods are always established. Also, new facts are brought to light.
- The infiltration of women due to the structure of interests in the patriarchal system is a source of inspiration for feminist research, just like the problem of women or the problematic situation that women have to face.
- It is expected to radically change the traditional methods and directions of studying archaeology and develop the feminist approach of historians. The possibility of changing the order of analysis arises from this type of research.
- Emphasis should be placed on the interests of the women's group involved in the women's issue or problem, with less emphasis on the consideration of the researcher's benefits derived from the research.
- The usefulness of women should be recognized by respectfully recording their experiences, stories, and detailed information about women and it is important to create a new culture in the academy field.
- Such disciplines or feminist study circles not only study but also highlight the nature of oppression of women in a powerful and privileged field. For example, researches politics, business places, bureaucracy, television, radio, media, magazines, etc.
- Theoretical and conceptual language is used to give the exact term to the decline. For example - 'domestic crime or unlawful assault' instead of 'domestic' or 'domestic' violence; 'Beating the wife' instead of 'abusing the spouse'; Or 'Opposition / Resistance Against Separation Women' instead of 'Mental Disorders')
- The various assertive claims, writings, or statements, which are traditionally regarded as an 'inescapable truth', should be referenced and substantiated with sufficient evidence so that other women can reach a certain conclusion.

- Such research contributes to enabling women to identify new or improved ways to understand their situation; As a result, women are more likely to be introduced to ways to adapt and change their situation.
- Exploring historical documents from a feminist perspective creates new possibilities.

8. Conclusion

While feminist researchers can strive for the ideal feminist research process, there often exists a large gap between the reality and ideal goals of doing so. While the desire may be to promote equality in the research process through the validation of women's experiences and to enact social change and transformation, many barriers confront these researchers from achieving these aims. While feminist beliefs and concerns will help guide and direct the decision making process, outside forces also play a key role. Diana Ralph constructed “a power pyramid that illustrates how power informs the decision making process; where the feminist researcher is on the bottom of the structure, she has more difficulty in controlling the choices being made” [Ralph D., 1988, 140]. Marianne Weston sees all research as existing on a fluid scale between traditional research and ideal feminist research. She argues that one can evaluate to what degree a research project is feminist by looking at the choices being made by the researcher. Feminist research cannot claim to speak for all women, but can provide new knowledge grounded in the realities of women's experiences and actively enact structural changes in the social world.

According to Carroll's argument, “At the most obvious level, the reluctance to accept work in women’s history for its own sake is a reflection of the low esteem and stereotypic images in which women themselves are held.”

The above argument makes it clear that there is an urgent need for such independent historiography of women. There is a definite need for separate subjects to underline the importance of women's studies in developing countries which would help shed light on the seriousness of the women's issues and its solution. “Women can break the framework of traditional learning methods and gain self-confidence by embracing equality for themselves through new fields.” [Bernice A. Carroll, ed. 1976, Introduction, p. xi]

References

1. Acker J., Barry K., Esseveld J, 1983, 'Objectivity and truth: Problems in doing feminist research', In 'Women's Studies International Forum', 6(4), 423-435.
2. Ackerly Brooke, True Jacqui, 2008, 'Reflexivity in Practice: Power and Ethics in Feminist Research on International Relations', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No.4, pp. 693–707.
3. Devine F. and S. Heath, 1999, 'Sociological Research Methods in Context', Basingstoke, Macmillan.

4. de Beauvoir, Simone, 1952, *'The second Sex'*, New York: Vintage Books.
5. Friedan Betty, 1963, *'The Feminine Mystique'*, New York: W. W. Norton.
6. Goldstein L., 1982, *'Early Feminist Themes in French Utopian Socialism: The St.-Simonians and Fourier'*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol.43, No. 1.
7. Greaves L., Wylie A., and the Staff of the Battered Women's Advocacy Centre: C. Champagne, L. Karch, R. Lapp, J. Lee & B. Osthoff, 1995, *'Women and Violence: Feminist Practice and Quantitative Method'*, In *'Changing Methods: Feminists Transforming Practice'*, edited by Sandra Burt and Lorraine Code, 301-326, Ontario: Broadview Press.
8. Harding Sandra, (Ed.), 1987, *'Feminism and methodology'*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
9. Mina Kruseman, (Dutch feminist pioneer) in a letter to Alexandre Dumas– in: Maria Grever, *Strijdtegen de stilte, Johanna Naber (1859–1941), en de vrouwenstem in geschiedenis (Hilversum, 1994) ISBN 90-6550-395-1, page 31.*
10. Bernice A. Carroll, ed., *'Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays'*, 1976, University of Illinois Press, United States of America, Introduction p. ix.
11. Ollivier Michel and Manon Tremblay, 2000, *'Questionnements féministes et méthodologie de la recherche'*, Montréal et Paris, L'Harmattan, in *'Introduction to Feminist Research'*, written by Jennifer Brayton, Michele Ollivier, and Wendy Robbins.
12. Ralph Diana, 1988, *'Researching from the Bottom: Lesson of Participatory Research for Feminists'*, in *'From the Margins to the Centre: Selected Essays in Women's Studies Research'*, edited by Dawn Currie, 134-141, Saskatchewan: The Women's Studies Research Unit, University of Saskatchewan.
13. Stanley Liz, Wise Sue, 1983, *'Breaking out: Feminist consciousness and feminist research'*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
14. Weston Marianne, 1988, *'Can Academic Research Be Truly Feminist?'*, In *'From the Margins to the Centre: Selected Essays in Women's Studies Research'*, edited by Dawn Currie, 142-150. Saskatchewan: The Women's Studies Research Unit, University of Saskatchewan.
15. Woolf Virginia, 1929, *'A room of one's own'*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
16. Bernice A. Carroll, ed., *'Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays'*, 1976, University of Illinois Press, United States of America, Introduction p. xi.
