

Introduction

I WAS PARTLY inspired (or, more accurately, provoked) to write this book by Theresa May, the first prime minister of the UK to identify publicly as a feminist. Thinking about this apparent success story for feminism left me angry and dismayed. Angry that the description had been appropriated by someone whose party's policies have done so much damage to so many women. And dismayed that once again feminism was being reduced to its narrowest, tamest, most establishment-friendly version: a version that too often prioritises the needs of the most privileged women and promotes a simplistic version of gender equality that ignores its broader context and risks bringing feminism as a whole into disrepute. Yes, such feminism may endorse campaigns against sexual harassment, domestic violence or online misogyny, and it supports greater political and workplace equality; it may even call for men to play a greater role in family life. However, it readily steps back if campaigners seem in danger of going 'too far', and it fails to make connections between these issues, let alone directing resources to their solution. All too often, it acts as a safety valve rather than a route to meaningful change.

May will now probably be remembered as the prime minister who failed to deliver Brexit, not for her claim to be a feminist. However, the taming of feminism seemed to be confirmed in 2019, when all but one of the six candidates (all male) to replace her as leader of the Conservative Party, including Boris Johnson, declared that they, too, were feminists (Mason, 2019).

Despite these introductory comments, my intention in this book is not to attack those with whom I disagree or to try to establish some form of ‘true’ or ‘real’ feminism. Such an intention would be pointless, for feminism has never been a united movement or body of thought; indeed it has always been fiercely argumentative, often self-contradictory and riven by both ideological and personal conflicts (a bit like men’s politics, perhaps, but with much less bloodshed). Instead, my aim is to step back and see contemporary issues in a wider perspective, drawing on the long heritage of feminist ideas and political engagement to recover understandings that have been lost; I also hope to move debates forward by identifying points of agreement as well as dispute, and showing the logical implications of particular feminist positions.

This task has become especially urgent, given the increasingly virulent nature of some public feminist disagreements, which are exaggerated and encouraged by both mainstream and social media. Disputes are often also presented as if they reflect the conflicting claims, needs and perspectives of different groups of women, setting old against young, black against white, rich against poor, and trans women against cis women (the term ‘cis women’, discussed in Chapter 4, refers to women who were legally registered as female at birth). Such simplistic classifications ignore commonalities, complexities and cross-cutting identities, and they shut down attempts at dialogue and reconciliation. In contrast, I hope to disentangle genuine, deep-seated disagreements and/or conflicts of interest from questions of priority or style, to look beyond easy certainties, soundbites and rallying cries, and to identify sources of unity rather than division (in this spirit, I concede that I do not oppose *everything* that Theresa May has said or done). I am not saying that feminists should never be angry (indeed they should, for there is much in the world to be angry about), but that anger should be constructive rather than destructive, and that it should not be diverted onto easy targets or allowed to degenerate into the kind of abuse that, far from winning arguments or support, deters potential allies. What we need is not some ideologically pure feminism, but a feminism that is open, generous and inclusive.

As a feminist, I would like there to be no need for feminism, for feminism is premised on the ongoing existence of patterns of exploitation, inequality, injustice or oppression that particularly harm women but also damage society as a whole. In this Introduction, I set the scene for later discussion by providing a brief, generalised overview of these patterns, before introducing the different feminist perspectives that underpin competing claims about how we can understand our world and develop effective strategies for change. I then outline some of the ways that feminist activism has developed in the twenty-first century. These sections are necessarily largely descriptive, but I conclude by identifying my key arguments through an overview of the book's themes.

Our gendered world

The focus of this book is on the UK and other western democracies. This limited scope reflects my own areas of competence, and I am in no way implying that western countries are somehow more important than the rest of the world. At the same time, western experiences need to be understood in their wider context. This section therefore begins with a brief overview of well documented global inequalities; here it is important to note that these statistics cannot capture either the less tangible and measurable aspects of our gendered world or the complicated ways in which gender interacts with other structural inequalities; they also obscure the experiences of trans people. At this stage, I am provisionally using the term 'gender' to discuss differences between 'women' and 'men'. However, these terms are all contested, and I will discuss them in Chapters 1 and 4.

The global picture

If an alien were to land on Earth, it would probably notice two basic patterns in all human societies: women and men usually play different roles, and the roles associated with men are generally better rewarded. It might well sum up these differences in terms of two rough rules: the more

powerful, highly paid and prestigious a position or occupation, the more likely it is to be held by a man, while the lower its status and the greater its association with poverty, the greater the concentration of women. In observing these general patterns, the visiting alien might puzzle as to why financial speculation and the production of material and cultural goods are treated as so much more important than giving birth and nurturing the next generation. It would probably also observe that all forms of violence, from domestic abuse through online intimidation and gang fighting to organised warfare, are disproportionately employed by men, that women are often its target and that many women are denied the right to decide who can have sexual access to their bodies and whether they should bear children. If the alien were on a return visit, it would find that some of these patterns have been modified, in some parts of the world, for some groups of women, but that any changes have been decidedly erratic and uneven, and that the gains of some women often involve the exploitation of others.

Until quite recently, these features of human societies went largely unremarked by (male-dominated) official bodies. However, they have become increasingly recognised and documented, with a wide range of international and national organisations tracking ongoing patterns and providing a basis for comparisons. This monitoring is bound up with an official assumption that greater gender equality is desirable, that discrimination on the grounds of gender is wrong and that women should be able to act independently, make their own reproductive and sexual decisions and compete with men on a level playing field. This marks a major, global shift in dominant assumptions since the mid-twentieth century, and in some ways it is a sign of progress and feminist success. However, it treats women as an undifferentiated group, ignoring the vast socio-economic, political and cultural differences that often divide them. It also reflects a belief that women represent an untapped resource that can be used to produce economic growth and development, and it represents a narrow form of feminism that does not question the exploitative logic of the underlying economic system or the sexual division of labour.

With these caveats in mind, the patterns are clear. Since 2006, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has tracked gender-based inequalities

around the world in relation to ‘economic participation and opportunity’, education, health and politics, and found that these have all been gradually reducing. However, the rate of change is uneven and increasingly slow: at the end of 2019 it reported that if current trends continued it would take, on average, nearly a hundred years to close the overall global gender gap, and 257 years to close the gap in ‘economic participation and opportunity’ (World Economic Forum, 2019:6). In 2020, ongoing inequalities in all these four areas meant that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was highly gendered, with policy decisions in most countries made largely by men, and the specific needs of women often overlooked.

The most significant progress has been made in education, although the gap remains high in some developing countries, and women are generally less likely than men to have the skills needed for professional success. Many countries actively encourage women into the paid workforce, and many support them through maternity or family leave provision and by state-subsidised or state-provided childcare. Despite this, women throughout the world remain less likely than men to be in paid work, to work in well paid sectors of the economy or to be in senior positions. It is therefore unsurprising that women’s average earnings in all countries are significantly lower than men’s and that women everywhere are more likely than men to live in poverty. In many countries, women have also been disproportionately affected by the austerity policies that have been adopted in response to global financial crises, with the poorest women suffering most. Further economic problems are faced by those women who are international migrants or refugees (nearly fifty per cent of international migrants and about half of all refugees are women: UN Women, 2018).

The lack of women in top jobs extends to their under-representation in the management of large multinational corporations and in the most powerful international political and financial organisations (the appointments of Christine Lagarde and then Kristalina Georgieva as Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund in 2011 and 2019 are notable exceptions). Major gaps in positions of political power remain, particularly at the highest levels; women are also under-represented at senior levels in the judiciary, the executive branch of government and the news media.

Meanwhile, we are seeing what António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, describes as a 'global pandemic' of violence against women (UN News, 2018), and in 2017 the World Health Organization reported that around one in three women in the world experience physical and/or sexual violence at some time in their life, often from an intimate partner. By April 2020 this figure had risen sharply as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns, and Guterres called on governments around the world to make addressing the problem a key part of their response to the crisis (Neuman, 2020). As new forms of religious and ethnic conflict have emerged or got worse, women and children are often deliberately targeted, and sexual violence has become an increasingly visible weapon of war. Violence can also take the form of female genital mutilation and the trafficking of women into the sex industry, while developments in digital technology are enabling new forms of global pornography and new ways of controlling intimate partners.

Women's reproductive choices are often restricted or under threat. Many women have no access to contraception or abortion, many others are on the receiving end of population control policies that have a decidedly 'coercive edge' (Watkins, 2018:52), and around 830 women and adolescent girls die every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth (UN Population Fund, 2018).

Changes have been highly variable and uneven both between and within countries and, in general, the most privileged groups of white, western women have gained the most. The WEF's annual reports rank countries according to how gender equal or unequal they are. At the end of 2019, it found that Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden were the most equal countries and Syria, Pakistan, Iraq and Yemen were the most unequal out of the 153 countries for which it had adequate data. Perhaps more surprisingly, Nicaragua and Rwanda were in fifth and ninth place respectively, well ahead of the UK, which came at twenty-first, and the US at fifty-third. These results reflect the relatively low number of women in the US Congress, which at just under 25 per cent overall compared badly with the 61 per cent of female parliamentarians in Rwanda (the highest in the world) and nearly 46 per cent in Nicaragua. While these

figures remind us that western countries do not necessarily lead the way in progress, it is also important to note that greater gender equality in poorer countries may mean only equality in deprivation, and that parliamentary representation does not necessarily translate into meaningful political power.

Developments in the UK

In relation to other western nations, the UK is often seen as a hybrid or mid-way point between Scandinavian social democracy and American liberalism or neo-liberalism in terms of its economic system, welfare provision and political culture (for the classic statement of this view, see Esping-Anderson, 1990). As the WEF's ranking indicates, the UK also occupies an intermediate position among western nations in terms of measurable progress towards gender equality. This makes it a useful starting-point for discussing western feminism, and it is the focus for much discussion in this book.

The last half century has seen enormous changes in the legal and political situation of women in the UK. In 1970, average hourly wages for full-time women workers were at least a third lower than for men, with the gap rising to nearly fifty per cent for women working part-time. Before 1975 it was perfectly legal to pay a woman less than a man doing exactly the same work as a man, or to refuse to employ a woman simply because she was a woman. It was also legal to sack a woman if she became pregnant; if she were allowed to continue at work she had no legal entitlement to maternity leave; and it was up to her to sort out and pay for her own childcare arrangements. Rape in marriage was not recognised as a crime in England and Wales until 1991. When Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, 97 per cent of MPs were men. And the idea that one woman could marry another or that people could change their legal gender identity was not on the mainstream political agenda until late in the twentieth century.

The most blatant forms of discrimination and inequality are now generally a thing of the past. However, obvious and measurable inequalities and

problems remain, including the gender gap in employment opportunities and pay, and widespread sexual violence.

In 2019, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that, for full-time workers, the average gap between the hourly pay of women and men was slightly under 9 per cent, and for those aged under forty it was approaching zero. However, largely because of their family responsibilities, women were more likely to be in part-time employment, where pay and conditions are generally worse; this produced an overall gender gap of more than 17 per cent in average hourly pay. Women are also less likely to work overtime, and their employment is concentrated in low-paying sectors, especially health, social care and leisure (ONS, 2019). These patterns meant that from early 2020, when the COVID-19 crisis took hold in the UK, women were particularly likely to experience acute economic hardship and to be working in jobs that put them at high risk of catching the virus (Women's Budget Group, 2020a; 2020b; Booth, 2020).

Since 2018, it has been possible to see what is happening to the gender pay gap within large organisations, which are now legally required to submit annual figures. Although published figures have shown women earning almost as much or even more than men in a few organisations, 80 per cent of large companies and public sector organisations pay men more than women, with a gap of over forty per cent in some cases (Topping, 2018). This generally reflects the lack of women in well paid senior positions and their over-representation at lower levels, and much attention has focused on the so-called 'glass ceiling': the invisible barrier compounded of discrimination, old-fashioned sexism and unthinkingly male-centred assumptions around 'merit' that seems to stop so many women from reaching the very top of their career ladder. Even those women who reach high positions may face unequal treatment, and TUC research has found that the gender pay gap is highest amongst the very well paid, reaching 54.9 per cent amongst the top 2 per cent of earners (TUC, 2015).

Meanwhile, the economic situation of women who are badly paid or not in paid employment has become increasingly dire, and 'while a small number of extremely privileged women worry about the glass ceiling, the cellar is filling up with water' (Penny, 2014:6). Since 2010, when a

Conservative-led coalition headed by David Cameron took office, inequality between rich and poor has increased, accompanied by a steep rise in poverty. This poverty is concentrated amongst women and their children, who have borne the brunt of austerity measures and regressive changes to the tax and benefits system: figures from the House of Commons library show that, by 2020, over eighty per cent of the cumulative negative impact of tax changes and cuts in social security spending will have fallen on women, who have also been disproportionately affected by cuts to public services and the introduction of Universal Credit. The increase in poverty includes many women in employment; it is particularly acute amongst black and minority ethnic women (Women's Budget Group, 2016; Women's Budget Group and the Runnymede Trust, 2017). Again, these patterns meant that the COVID-19 crisis had a disproportionately damaging economic effect on the poorest women (Women's Budget Group, 2020).

In theory, women in the UK have legal protection against domestic and/or sexual violence. In practice, violence against women remains endemic. On average, two women a week are killed by their partner or ex-partner. Using figures for England and Wales, an estimated 1.3 million women experienced some form of domestic abuse in the year ending March 2018, one in five women over the age of 16 has at some time been sexually assaulted, and 26 per cent of women have experienced some form of domestic abuse. The vast majority of sexual offences are not reported to the police. Of the rapes reported to the police, fewer than 4 per cent result in a conviction. Surveys consistently suggest that sexual harassment in the workplace has been experienced by at least forty per cent of women, and there is evidence that harassment and violence against girls are widespread in schools (TUC, 2016; Women and Equalities Select Committee, 2016; ONS, 2018a, 2018b). Since 2012, Laura Bates's online 'Everyday Sexism' project has documented the constant barrage of unpleasant incidents and remarks experienced by many women that can appear trivial in isolation, but which build up into a generally threatening environment (<https://everydaysexism.com>; Bates, 2014). Politicians and authorities routinely condemn all forms of violence against women; however, the resources

that might help address it have not been forthcoming; indeed in many cases they have been reduced, often because central government funding to local authorities has been drastically cut since 2010. For many women, the situation became dramatically worse in the spring of 2020, when the lockdown imposed by the government to combat the COVID-19 virus meant that they were effectively incarcerated with their abusers. Although Priti Patel, the Home Secretary, said that women could leave home to escape their abusers or seek help (Oppenheim, 2020), support services were already overstretched and many women were already being turned away from refuges (Reis, 2018): help was simply not there on the scale required.

Meanwhile, the internet makes it easier than ever before to access pornography, including very violent and disturbing material; even mild forms of online pornography generally show women in subordinate roles and it is, increasingly, the primary source of sex education for many children (Laws, 2013). New forms of extreme abuse and intimidation are now widespread across social media, with threats of rape or murder used as a way of deterring women from speaking out in public; digital technology is also facilitating increased 'surveillance abuse', whereby men can watch and control every move their partner makes (Krotoski, 2020).

Underlying problems

The evidence I have provided in this section is intended only as an indicative overview of the more measurable aspects of our gendered world, and it is important to remember that women are not a uniform group, that their experiences and interests are not only highly diverse but also at times conflicting, and that they may sometimes have more in common with men in their own community, group or society than with other women. Other critically important but less tangible issues also lurk below the surface of official reports. In particular, the newly dominant global agreement that women should be able to compete equally with men forgets that equality is being granted on terms that men have already set; these terms simply assume that the rewards attracted to male patterns

of behaviour are justified. From this perspective, women's entry into the paid workforce is seen as a sign of progress that will benefit both individual women and the economy as a whole, but the ways in which the gains of some women involve the direct and/or indirect exploitation of others are ignored, along with the big questions of who will do domestic and caring work if women are no longer available and why this work is so undervalued. These questions became particularly acute in 2020, as the global pandemic revealed the strategic social and economic importance of badly paid, often migrant, health and social care workers who were magically transformed into valuable (but still badly rewarded) 'key workers' (Norman, 2020).

A more radical approach would extend the idea of 'progress' to include recognising and rewarding the qualities and roles traditionally associated with women. It would also challenge the underlying logic of a competitive and highly unequal system in which only a few people, men or women, can win. These are complex issues, which I will discuss throughout the book.

Theories, politics, themes and chapters

There are no easy or definitive answers to why women throughout the world continue to face discrimination and ill-treatment and what, if anything, we can do about it. However, good feminist theory can shed some light by joining the dots to make sense of wider patterns, identifying potential causal relationships and helping to develop effective political strategies. Good theory should also help us to think more clearly about our own ideas, and to recognise and address inconsistencies in our thinking. And it can help unpack arguments amongst feminists, disentangling transitory issues, differences in emphasis and clashes of style or personality from more fundamental disagreements. Such theory is inevitably sometimes difficult, but it should not be needlessly so. Its aim should be not to create a cosy club of people who have mastered philosophical jargon but to help us understand our world in the hope of changing it for the better.

A brief outline of competing feminist theories

Feminist theory has a long history in the west. This history is not one of steady progress and cumulative insights, for feminist ideas are rooted in a range of competing and sometimes conflicting ideological traditions, while women have always struggled to get their voices heard and their writing published. Even when they have been successful in their lifetime, women have often been written out of the history books and their work largely forgotten, leaving successive generations to start from scratch rather than learning from their feminist foremothers. This is particularly true of working-class women and women of colour, whose history of ideas and activism has often been sidelined in favour of more educated, middle-class white women, who have found it easier to get a public voice. The chronological account that I provide here and in the opening chapters traces developments in the historically dominant forms of white feminist theory, before turning to the development of the black feminist theory that has become central to feminist analysis today. I draw on these ideas throughout this book to help cast light on contemporary issues and debates (I provide a much more detailed discussion of feminist theories and their history in Bryson, 2016).

Much public discussion of inequalities between the sexes remains framed by the liberal language of equal rights that developed in Europe from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Early feminist writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, insisted that women were as capable of rational thought as men, and that they should therefore have the same rights. This argument provided the basis for campaigns for women's right to education, employment, property ownership and the vote. During the twentieth century, campaigns were extended to claim equal treatment in the workplace and to bodily integrity. Once radical and fiercely opposed, these ideas have become widely accepted as 'common sense': you no longer need to label yourself a feminist to say that women should be able to vote or go to university, or that they should be paid the same as men if they do the same work, or that they have a right to refuse sex.

Liberal, equal-rights feminism has clearly provided an effective force for progressive change. Today, it sends a message to women and girls that they should cast off outdated expectations around female submissiveness or appropriate career choice and simply ‘go for it’, and that they should complain – loudly – if their views are dismissed or men behave inappropriately towards them. Such a sense of entitlement can be highly empowering. At the same time, this kind of feminism is in many respects profoundly inadequate as a way of improving the lives of most women in the world. It tends to stress women’s rights as individuals within existing societies, rather than asking society as a whole to change. It wants women to be able to compete on an equal basis with men, but it does not question either the man-made rules that regulate competition or the highly unequal distribution of rewards in a system in which most people can only be losers. It is often elite-oriented, treating the concerns of the most privileged women as central issues: for example, it seems to be more interested in the sexual harassment of Hollywood stars or the lower bonuses awarded to very well paid women than in the sexual and economic exploitation of those who are most vulnerable. And it is bound up with liberal and neoliberal economic theories that, as I hope to show in later chapters, are unable to see women’s needs and contributions or to allow for the kind of state intervention that is needed to mitigate inequalities and ensure general social welfare.

Although liberal and neoliberal theories reflect the particular perspectives of privileged men, they are presented as if they were universal truths, and they are so dominant that it is difficult for anyone, including feminist women, to avoid getting sucked into terms of debate that they would not otherwise choose. Identifying and challenging such partiality is important, and for many feminists it requires a shift to more women-centred thinking, as advocated by the so-called ‘radical feminism’ that developed from the 1970s. Some of radical feminism’s ideas may now seem dated, simplistic or rooted in white, middle-class privilege. However, its central arguments – that men should not be treated as the automatic standard against which all people are measured, and that gendered power relations extend beyond the public worlds of politics and employment and into the private domain of the family and personal relationships – provide

systematically articulated insights that earlier feminists had generally been aware of only patchily. Such feminism also introduced the key concept of 'patriarchy' (discussed in Chapter 2) into feminist vocabulary.

Many feminists have also drawn on socialist ideas to argue that equality within highly unequal societies is of little relevance to most women, and that meaningful change requires a fundamental shift from a society based on individualism, exploitation and the pursuit of profit to one in which both work and rewards are much more equally shared. This critique shifts the focus of analysis from the behaviour and ambitions of individual women towards more inclusive thinking that acknowledges the needs of other people and of society as a whole. It also refocuses the ideas of socialist men, who have tended to treat 'women's issues' as something that can be properly addressed only after more 'important' problems have been resolved. I further argue in later chapters that, while Karl Marx was certainly not a feminist, his methods can help analyse the interconnections between capitalism and patriarchy.

Feminist ideas have always spilled over national boundaries: even in medieval times there were European-wide debates around the status and situation of women, and by the time of the American and French revolutions in the late eighteenth century there was an intercontinental exchange of ideas. During the nineteenth century, some African American women were developing their own perspective, and some working-class women, black and white, were gradually able to gain a voice through socialist parties or trade unions. However, the most widely heard feminist views in the west have always been those of educated white women who have at times expressed direct class and race prejudice and, more often, simply assumed the centrality and universality of their own, particularly situated, interests and needs. When such feminism has addressed the situation of women in non-western societies, it has tended to assume that they are victims of 'backward' or even 'barbaric' cultures from which western feminists can rescue them.

Since the late twentieth century, such assumptions have been systematically challenged by black and postcolonial feminist writers, who have exposed the unreflective and ignorant arrogance of much white feminism,

and its failure to understand that many women are exploited by their more privileged ‘sisters’. Although public debates around feminist issues often continue to prioritise the views of the most privileged women, there has been some shift towards more inclusive debate and a sense that the west has no monopoly on ‘progressive’ ideas. In particular, the black feminist concept of ‘intersectionality’ (the focus of Chapter 3), which highlights the extent to which people are differently privileged or oppressed on multiple dimensions of structural inequality, has become increasingly central to much white feminist analysis. My arguments in later chapters are underpinned by an intersectional approach.

Black feminist perspectives were largely derived from women’s own experiences. However, their theoretical articulation has sometimes drawn on post-structuralist and postmodernist ideas about the provisional and situated nature of ostensibly objective knowledge and the malleable and fluid nature of any identity, including gender identity. This perspective rejects both the view that we can generalise about ‘women’ and ‘men’ and the binary either/or thinking that underpins such generalisation and that is built into modern western thought. Postmodernism also addresses the ways in which meaning and identity are created and linked to power, and suggests ways in which dominant understandings can be contested. While this may sound very abstract, the impact of postmodernism has trickled down into public debate, and some of its ideas have taken an increasingly visible and tangible form in arguments around the growing transgender movement, discussed in Chapter 4.

The ideas identified in this brief run-through of feminist theoretical approaches will be developed and clarified throughout the book. Its chapters will also investigate the complex and sometimes contradictory relationships between feminist theories and the different kinds of feminist politics outlined in the following subsection.

Feminist politics in the twenty-first century

An extraordinarily wide range of feminist activism emerged, erupted or developed in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (for global

overviews, see Enloe, 2017; Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2018; Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2018; Watkins, 2018). Some of this has been local, small-scale and informal, often based on a single issue such as police failure to investigate a sexual assault, and often short-lived. However, some such protests have developed into national movements which in turn have fed into and drawn strength from campaigns in other countries; here the most obvious example is the way that apparently separate protests against sexual violence in Argentina, India and elsewhere have become linked into the #MeToo movement that began in the US. Developments in social media have of course provided unprecedented opportunities for making connections and giving a voice to a much wider range of women than in the past (although it should be remembered that many women in poor countries lack internet access: Dreyfus, 2018); these developments also mean that much feminist activism is taking place online as well as in the ‘real world’.

In many countries, feminists have campaigned against austerity measures and the damage these have done to many women’s lives. In the UK, this campaigning includes both ‘respectable’ groups such as the Women’s Budget Group, through which feminist economists are analysing and publicising the damaging impact of economic policies on women, and more radical, direct-action groups such as Feminist Fightback and Sisters Uncut, which link austerity to wider issues of power, class, race, violence and misogyny. Feminist demonstrations such as ‘reclaim the night’ marches have been revived in many countries, sometimes taking new forms such as ‘slut walks’ (see Chapter 2), while feminist rallies against Donald Trump’s inauguration as US president took place from Antarctica to Fiji, Tel Aviv to Tokyo, and London to Nairobi (Enloe, 2017).

Feminists often work through trade unions, which, thanks to the work of women in the past, are often far more feminist-friendly than they used to be; some low-paid and predominantly migrant women workers are gaining a voice through a new union, United Voices of the World, which is specifically aimed at the most vulnerable and precariously situated workers and is encouraging the active participation of women. There has also been a new international feminist strike movement, which began

in Poland in 2016, when women staged walkouts and protests against a ban on abortion, followed later in the year by Argentina, where women were protesting against sexual violence. The idea of a women's strike rapidly spread to other South American countries, to some European countries and to the US; it became a truly transnational movement the following year when strikes were organised in many countries on 8 March (International Women's Day), with women withholding not only their paid labour but also 'housework, sex and smiles' (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2018; 2019:8; <https://womensglobalstrike.com>).

As in earlier periods, many new feminist groups are deliberately non-hierarchical, and some are self-consciously intersectional (see Chapter 3), taking the most disadvantaged women as the starting point for their campaigns (Bassel and Emejula, 2017, 2019). Such feminism rejects the assumption that a few well-placed women (usually white, western and relatively well-off) can speak for the whole of their sex, and it insists on the need to address differences amongst women. Some are also drawing on the idea of 'prefiguration', which has been used in some feminist circles since the 1960s. This says that the means used to pursue social change cannot be separated from its goals, and that making changes in the here and now, both in our personal lives and in our political activities, is an important part of making changes in the future (Wainwright, 2015; Ishkanian and Saavedra, 2019). In practical terms, this means that socialist men cannot say they will deal with gender issues 'after the revolution' while expecting women to take care of their domestic needs until then; likewise, educated and/or relatively well-off women need to address their own role in excluding or exploiting 'other' women (including by outsourcing domestic work to them for little pay, or by the overuse of alienating feminist 'jargon', such as 'intersectionality' or 'prefiguration').

In addition to collective activism, a number of individual high-profile women have been able to use their position to promote feminism in various ways. For example, the best-selling Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie frequently speaks out as a feminist to condemn the gender stereotyping that damages the lives of boys as well as girls. Her book *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) is aimed at men as well as women,

and it has been distributed to all 16-year-olds in Sweden. The actor Emma Watson, appointed UN Goodwill ambassador for women in 2014, helped launch the UN Women campaign 'HeForShe' in the same year, and she has actively campaigned on issues around sexual violence against women. And Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg (see Chapter 6) has set up the Lean In Foundation, which acts to support ambitious women from all walks of life. By early 2020, this had established 'lean-in circles' in over 170 countries; these self-help groups meet monthly, and the foundation campaigns to improve workplace opportunities for women in ways that range from paid family leave to combating sexual harassment (<https://leanin.org>). Many 'ordinary' individual feminists are also taking small-scale action in their daily lives, from challenging sexist comments in everyday conversation and encouraging other women in their workplace to trying to raise their children in gender-neutral ways. And by 2019 one teenage girl, Greta Thunberg, was both inspiring new forms of climate activism and calling the world's leaders to account for their failure to address the climate emergency.

While many feminists prefer to campaign mainly with other women, many also work with men in anti-racist movements such as Black Lives Matter, anti-poverty activism, LGBTQ+ groups, peace and environmental organisations, and left-leaning think tanks and pressure groups, such as the Runnymede Trust, Compass and the New Economics Foundation in the UK. Others work through conventional political parties, pushing for what they see as 'women's interests' across all policy areas. Many also actively campaign for women to be better represented, both in elected positions and at all levels of their party's organisation. Action here can be highly visible, as with the Conservative Party's Women2Win group (see Chapter 6), but it can also be very low-key – for example rearranging the chairs into a circle at a local party meeting, so that all those present can be part of the discussion. Many other feminists are networking across nations to lobby international organisations including the EU and the UN, and working in NGOs to monitor whether national commitments on women's rights and gender equality are being met (Enloe, 2017).

In the twenty-first century, feminist women are no longer simply political outsiders. Increasing numbers have at least a foothold in national and international decision-making bodies, and many successful female politicians have close links with feminist groups and organisations. In 2020, this meant that, when policy-makers in the UK initially failed to take women's gender-specific needs into account when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, feminists were in a position to take them to task, and to produce evidence-based arguments to support their demands: in particular, they could show the extent to which badly paid women workers were risking their health in hospitals, care homes and supermarkets, and to highlight the urgent need to address the often catastrophic financial impact of the lockdown on the poorest women, the predictable rise in domestic abuse and the increased stress on mothers and other unpaid carers. As a joint call to the government by an extensive and diverse range of UK feminist organisations concluded:

hundreds of billions of pounds of taxpayers' money is being spent without considering the specific challenges women are facing. Women and girls in all their diversity must be seen, have their voices heard and their needs met. (Fawcett, 2020)

Nevertheless, governments in many countries were slow to respond to feminist pressure, and although some problems, such as the rise in domestic violence, have been recognised, the resources needed to address them have in general been inadequate.

Chapters and themes

Throughout the book, I develop a number of overarching arguments around the themes of interconnection and complexity, the inability of man-made theories and concepts to provide an adequate understanding of the world, the need to recognise differences amongst women, the incompatibility between the values of free-market capitalism and the pursuit of

feminist goals, and the consequent need for feminist politics to develop in a socialist direction.

In the first two chapters, I provide a critical exploration of some key terms and concepts that western feminists have introduced since the late 1960s. Focusing on arguments around the sex/gender distinction, the changing language around sexual violence, the identification of ‘sexism’ and the concept of patriarchy, I argue that these all contributed to new ways of seeing and understanding the world that had not been available before and that remain important today. However, these understandings also tended to reflect the inequalities of white-dominated western societies, expressing the experiences of relatively privileged white women, and paying insufficient attention to the diversity of women’s experiences. I therefore argue in Chapter 3 that feminist analysis should also be based in the wider understanding provided by the newer concept of ‘intersectionality’, initially introduced into feminist vocabulary by black US-based feminists in the late 1980s. I argue that it is essential to retain intersectionality as a radical political concept that addresses collective, structural issues rather than simply individual experiences, and that it must include the analysis of class.

In Chapter 4, I turn to what has become perhaps the most fiercely contested issue in feminist politics today: between those trans women and their supporters who say that trans women simply ‘are women’ and should be treated as such, and those feminists who say that someone born with a male body should not be able to define themselves as a woman or enter ‘women-only’ spaces. I draw on feminist critiques of binary, oppositional thinking to explore some of the complexities of trans politics and to identify the commonalities as well as the differences between apparently opposing groups. I argue that both ‘sides’ have interests and problems in common and that feminists, cis and trans, should focus their energies on these. I end the chapter with a suggestion for moving beyond the current impasse over the legal status of trans women.

My arguments in early chapters indicate that the analysis of gender cannot be isolated from that of class or race, that patriarchy is entangled with capitalism and that the needs of women (including trans women) will

not be met in an economy based on the pursuit of profit. I address these issues in more detail in Chapter 5, which focuses on the capitalist economic system and the liberal and neoliberal theories that support it. I show how women-centred feminist perspectives can both challenge the assumptions and limitations of conventional, male-stream economic theory and expose the often exploitative nature of corporate initiatives that promise new opportunities for women and girls in the global south.

These arguments feed into discussion in Chapter 6, in which I look at feminist politics in the west today. Here I assess some feminists' claims that neoliberal ideology is taking over feminism and using it to legitimise new forms of exploitation. I find that, although 'neoliberal feminism' is influential, feminist activities and ideas are much more diverse than this claim suggests. I also argue that neoliberal feminism is full of contradictions, and that this helps explain why Theresa May failed to deliver on her feminist promises to women. In contrast, Chapter 7 asks whether feminists today can find any answers in Marxist theory. I argue that this has been limited by its male-stream assumptions, but that recent feminist work on 'social reproduction' provides some important insights into women's economic contributions that can help reframe key issues, challenge neoliberal assumptions and expose a looming capitalist crisis as the needs of the 'productive' and 'reproductive' economies are increasingly in conflict.

In different ways, the arguments developed in Chapters 1–7 all seem to point to socialist rather than free-market solutions to gender inequalities and injustices. This is the focus of Chapter 8, in which I explore the affinities between feminism and socialism, and provide a brief history of their relationship before assessing the practical implications for feminist politics and policies today. Here my starting-point is a pragmatic, minimalist approach that sees socialism as a form of society closer to the Nordic social democracies than to the more market-driven economy of the United States, while also acknowledging that there is no 'Nordic nirvana' for feminists, and that serious problems remain in all countries. In this context, I suggest a range of policy options that western feminists might explore.

I conclude that there is clearly no single or simple solution to the complex and interconnected problems that any form of inclusive feminism or socialism will want to address. This need not be a cause for pessimism, for these interconnections also indicate that progress in one area can have knock-on effects on others, while diverse forms of progressive political and economic engagement can help reinforce each other. This means that, although our individual priorities and political choices will, inevitably, often reflect our particular situation, they can feed into a wider movement for change. At the same time, however, the need to address the man-made climate crisis is becoming increasingly urgent, while the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the limitations of male-stream thinking into sharp relief. Neither crisis can be solved without co-operation, regulation and attention to values other than the pursuit of profit – ideas that seem beyond the ken of most conventional economic theory, but which are central to much socialist feminist thought today.