

# Feminisms in Canadian Educational Contexts: A Literature Review

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*Abstract: Feminism is a theory used to explain the phenomenon of gender inequality, and is particularly useful for researchers working in education, since gender inequity continues to be a pressing issue in educational contexts. The aim of this literature review is to clarify four feminist conceptualizations of gender inequality (liberal feminist, socialist feminist, radical feminist, and queer theory) to show how these are operationalized differently in educational contexts. These four conceptualizations of gender inequality are situated within three epistemological categories of feminist theorizing: a) feminist empiricism, b) feminist standpoint, and c) postmodern feminism. By understanding the distinctions between various feminist theories on gender inequality, researchers and practitioners can use these distinctions to interpret historical and current educational efforts towards gender equity.<sup>1</sup> Further, educators and policymakers can also use these understandings to develop more nuanced approaches to gender equity.*

*Keywords: Canada, Education, Feminism, Feminist Theories, Gender*

## Introduction

Gender inequality persists in educational settings (Dillabough, 2006; Edgerton, Roberts, & Peter, 2013). Schools perpetuate gender inequality in a number of ways. For example, many women in leadership are marginalized to assistant and vice roles, female and gender non-conforming academics may have their ideas devalued compared to their cis-male counterparts (Wallace, Wallin, Viczko, & Anderson, 2014), and criticisms have been raised over the feminization of teaching and its purported consequences for male students (Hodgetts & Lecouteur, 2010). Since the release of the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women* (1970), Canadian educators have attended to gender equity concerns, from the add-women-and-stir model of educational leadership to growing moral panics over boys' literacy practices. This article presents a way of interpreting such historical and current approaches to gender equity in education. Beginning with an overview of feminist epistemologies, the article then reviews four feminist conceptualizations of gender inequality that have had traction in Canadian educational contexts (liberal feminist, socialist feminist, radical feminist, and queer theory). By understanding the distinctions between various feminist theories on gender inequality, we can clarify the ways that gender inequality has been conceptualized historically and continues to be conceptualized within education. With such critical reflection, scholars, educators, and policy makers can better understand the gains many types of feminisms have made in the Canadian educational context, as well as the challenges that remain.

## Feminist Theory

There is no overarching unified "Feminist theory," but there are central tendencies that run through multiple feminist theories. These tendencies include using gender as a central category of analysis, and applying praxis to improve the lived experiences and social circumstances of varied genders, but particularly women. Harding's (1987a) three feminist epistemological categories, a) feminist empiricism, b) feminist standpoint, and c) postmodern feminism, act as a way to structure and organize the various feminist theories. Each of these categories offers a different explanation of the phenomenon of gender inequality. By recognizing central tendencies within feminist empiricist, feminist standpoint, and postmodern feminist theories, I attempt to situate these feminisms within a continuum of possible epistemological and ontological orientations. I do this in recognition of the numerous contestations and disagreements among feminists about how feminisms fall within various typologies.

Martin (2002) outlined the agenda of feminist theory succinctly by stating that feminist theory shares two objectives: a) to expose subtle and overt gender inequalities by describing them, and b) to reduce or eradicate those inequalities through social change. There are epistemological and ontological differences in why and how gender inequality exists. Feminist empiricists, for example, believe that women and men are equal and therefore should be treated the same socially, politically, and economically (Hackett & Haslanger,

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms equity and equality synonymously. This is in keeping with Espinoza's (2007) research, which suggested that equity and equality are commonly used as synonyms in education.

2006). Feminist standpoint theorists believe that women's lives, perspectives and experiences in the social world, in economics, in politics, and in education, are different from men's experiences, and these differences are what provides for the unique and privileged standpoint of women (Tanesini, 1999). Postmodern feminists believe that the binary division of gender into men and women serves to create an inequitable social order wherein those binary categories are privileged and other genders are ignored (Lorber, 2001). These distinctions tend to define the various types of feminisms including liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, and queer theory. Liberal feminism argues for equal opportunities between men and women (Coulter, 1996); socialist feminism addresses economic imbalances between women and men; radical feminism is concerned with structural issues, such as the absence of women's perspectives in science and politics (Intemann, 2010); while queer theory works to expand the binary categories of gender into a spectra of genders (Jagose, 2009). By understanding the central tendencies present in each type of feminism, scholars and practitioners can more accurately interpret gender issues and feminist theories that are being adopted in various educational contexts.

### **Feminist Empiricism**

For many, being considered a feminist and an empiricist is a challenge, as empiricism purports to be value-neutral while feminism focuses on the ways that society devalues women and other gender non-conforming individuals. The rendition of feminist empiricism presented here is removed from the positivist, value-neutral, and objectivist historical renditions of empiricism. From this perspective, feminist empiricism is a revised, updated, and feminized version of empiricism (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Hundleby, 2012; Intemann, 2010). Scholars approaching feminist theories through this rendition of feminist empiricism accept knowledge as value-laden and reject single truths (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006). Feminist empiricists locate their experiences in the natural world as sources for investigation (Hundleby, 2012). Harding (2013) refers to this refreshed understanding as philosophical feminist empiricism, and she attributes the development of these philosophies to Longino and Hankinson Nelson. Feminist empiricists tend to accept philosophical realism and the primacy of sensory knowing (Harding, 1987b). Feminist empiricists also tend to view all knowledge as being influenced through values, and therefore Doucet and Maunther (2006) link it to post-positivism. This link to post-positivism matters because it underscores that *feminist* empiricism supports the view that value-free knowledge cannot exist, including within an empirical context. In other words, feminist empiricism does not hold to the traditional empiricist standards of neutrality, objectivity, and truth. Instead, feminist empiricism accepts multiple truths that emerge from value-laden and subjective methods and subjects.

Feminist empiricists have attempted to achieve an unbiased knowledge base through a disciplined application of methodologies and by controlling subjectivity through "neutral" procedures (Harding, 1987b). Some of the approaches to neutral procedures such as randomization suggests "increasing the objectivity of scientific communities and preventing or minimizing individual biases" (Intemann, 2010, p. 782). These procedures are perceived as neutral by empiricists as they increase a sense of objectivity. Liberal feminist approaches tend to access such strategic changes with the aim of increasing equitable outcomes for women. Socialist feminism is also situated within feminist empiricism because of the ways these theorists tend to examine social arrangements, with a conclusion that one of the primary sources of gender inequality exists in women's work in the home, which remains largely unpaid (Lorber, 2001).

### **Feminist Standpoint Theories**

While feminist empiricists believe women and men should have the same rights and treatment because they are fundamentally the same, standpoint feminists believe that women are fundamentally different from men. Feminist standpoint theorists, in contrast with feminist empiricists, suggest that the knower's position mediates knowing. Specifically, this means that women's position as being oppressed grants them unique claims to knowing (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006), which in turn establishes a unique feminist epistemology. A critique of this feminist epistemological category is that it is premised on a common and undiversified position of women. It ignores the specific intersectional matrices of oppression that exist with being a woman of colour, and/or of varied ability, and/or of sexual diversity, to name only a few. According to Hawkesworth (1989), feminist standpoint theorists believe that they know the world differently by virtue of their standpoint. Knowledge begins in the everyday world of the knower (Smith, 1987, 1990) for feminist

standpoint theorists. These theorists tend to resist the notion of equality as existing within the assumption that women are “as equal to men,” which is implicit in some feminist empiricist theorizing such as with liberal and socialist feminist theory. In contrast, standpoint feminists think of women’s inequality as the result of the oppression and exploitation of women, which in turn creates an inequitable social order. For standpoint feminists, the approach to gender equality is not gender neutrality; instead, it is to expose the insidiousness of patriarchy wherein men control women’s lives<sup>2</sup> (Lorber, 2002). Overall, standpoint feminists emphasize the unique standpoint of women and women’s experiences. They see the social construction of women’s differences from men as requiring specific attention.

Standpoint feminists strive to reorient research so that women and their everyday experiences become central categories. Standpoint feminism arises from dissatisfaction with, and a critique of, mainstream social science and the sciences in general (Lorber, 2001). Smith’s (1987, 1990) work in sociology is influential for standpoint feminism as it presents “a sociology that integrates neo-Marxian concerns with the structures of domination and phenomenological insights into the variety of subjective and micro-interactive worlds” (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2004, p. 329). In other words, Smith’s work helps to draw attention to the everyday experiences of women within the context of capitalism as it is experienced in daily and nightly interactions. Evidence of standpoint feminism in the Canadian context exists in the sciences and social sciences, where women’s ways of knowing began receiving recognition and validation. For example, there is a proliferation of women’s studies programs across post-secondary institutions as well as the widespread inclusion of gender as an important category of analysis in social science research. Radical feminism is an example of a feminist standpoint theory.

### **Postmodern Feminism**

Postmodern feminist theorists reject any claim to a truth by drawing attention to situated knowledge and knowing in all contexts (Hawkesworth, 1988). In other words, all claims to knowledge are situated in particular and unique contexts making it impossible for there to be a common knowing, such as the kind supported by feminist standpoint theorists and feminist empiricists. Postmodern feminists reject a common feminist position and support a plurality of perspectives on knowing and truth. From these perspectives of plurality, postmodern feminist theorists critique notions of uniform subjects and categories. Specifically, this group of feminist theorists critique essentialized notions of women as a unified category and the grand narratives that emerge from such categories (Lorber, 2001). Theorists that use these conceptualizations of gender inequality argue against what they see as feminist standpoint theorists’ essentialized notions of women as a category of knowers. From that position, these theorists propose conceptualizations of gender intended to deconstruct other essentialized notions.

One central tendency of postmodern feminism is the destabilization of what is considered normal or natural in relation to gender (Alcoff, 1997). Postmodern feminists view gender inequality as stemming from the division of gender into a dichotomy. Calling for an end to gender inequality, postmodern feminists believe in challenging the gendered social order, which is the basis of gender division. Their foci tend to be on deconstructing symbols and processes, which structure and maintain the unequal gender order (Lorber, 2001, p. 10). These theorists deconstruct the gendered social order by increasing the categories and obscuring the boundaries between previously taken-for-granted divisions such as men/women and homosexual/heterosexual as unified categories. Queer theory aligns with postmodern feminist conceptualizations of gender inequality because of the ways this theory focuses on gender as a social category, and expands that category to be a spectra of genders. Queer theory aims to deconstruct and “trouble” (Butler, 1990) the arbitrary lines that define binary genders. Jagose (2009) summarized the alignment of postmodern feminism and queer theory nicely when she stated, “feminist theory and queer theory together have a stake in both desiring and articulating the complexities of the traffic between gender and sexuality” (p. 172). It is the complexities of that traffic that situate queer theory as a postmodern feminist theory.

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<sup>2</sup> Radical feminism as presented here focuses on women as a central category, and does not include gender non-conforming individuals, such as transfolk. Given the developments within feminist theory and queer theory, transfolk would be included in postmodern feminism, which focuses specific attention to non-binary genders.

## Four Feminist Conceptualizations of Gender Inequality

In the section that follows, the central tendencies and common characterizations of four feminist conceptualizations of gender inequality are reviewed.

### Liberal Feminism

Foundationally, liberal feminists believe women and men are the same, and should be, therefore, afforded equal status and opportunity (Hackett & Haslanger, 2006). Implicitly, liberal feminists conceptualize gender inequality based on the idea that women's participation in public and social life should be equal to men. This means ensuring equal opportunities for women in the workplace, higher education, and government. As Tong noted, "we owe to liberal feminists many, if not most, of the educational and legal reforms that have improved the quality of life for women" (1989, p. 38). These reforms included, for example, women's access to higher education, equal pay for equal work, voting rights and ability to run for public office, as well as comprehensive maternity leave, among others. Much of the social movement work of liberal feminists happened throughout the first wave of feminism when they secured voting rights for women and rights to property. Liberal feminists believe that by creating public opportunities for women, they will see a revised socialization that replaces women's unequal public and social participation with equal participation. Holmes (2007) observed that liberal feminists are criticized for their assumption that women will gain equality by becoming more like men, and that this change can happen within the current system. Bryson (2007) also critiqued liberal feminism, as "the focus on individuals' right to compete equally abstracts people from their society and does not consider the gendered starting-point of the competitive marketplace" (p. 41). For Bryson, individual, public, and social participation, no matter how equitable, is insufficient at addressing many of the root causes of women's inequality such as patriarchy and the under valuing of women's social, political, and labour contributions. Gaskell, McLaren, and Novogrodsky (1989) lodged the critique that the idea of "equality of opportunity" is an example of a liberal slogan with little efficacy to do more than add women into existing social structures, such as hiring them as managers and principals. Adding women and stirring (Harding, 1995; Noddings, 2001), as the literature suggests, is insufficient for ending gender inequalities as liberal feminism fails to address the structural inequalities such as the devaluing of women's work, the absence of women's perspectives in science, the exclusion of women and other genders from governance and decision making that are embedded in the polity, economy, and society. All of these issues play out in the educational field as evidenced in the absence of curricular content that details women's contributions to science and history, as well as the absence of women promoted into senior leadership.

According to Acker (1987), liberal feminists who write about education "use concepts of equal opportunities, socialization, sex roles and discrimination," and "[t]heir strategies involve altering socialization practices, changing attitudes, and making use of relevant legislation" (p. 419). For example, liberal feminists may seek to increase the representation of women in textbooks and in the sciences. Coulter's research (1996) demonstrated the application of liberal feminist approaches to gender equity policy work across Canada, while Gaskell and Eyre (2004) found evidence of liberal feminist approaches to gender equity at work in British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Ontario. These included the promotion of women to leadership positions, with the expectation that their addition alone would alleviate the inequalities.

In the 1970s-1980s, liberal feminists in Canada made significant headway in law, government, and national representation (Adamson, Briskin, & McPhail, 1988). These included the rights entrenched in the 1982 *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, of which Section 28(b) stated, "notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons". While this Charter right was helpful for encouraging women's equality, the narrow definition of gender as binary categories ignored the inequities faced by gender non-conforming individuals. By the 1980s, equality feminism, premised on liberal notions of women as free and equal in the state, gained traction on the Canadian political scene (Siltanen & Doucet, 2008). For example, certain ministries of education—such as in Manitoba and British Columbia—created women's studies liaisons or gender equity consultant positions. While liberal feminists' efforts to improve the lives of women must be applauded, a critique of

this work is that it left firmly in place the structural facets that supported women's inequality largely because it neglects the hegemonic system, which perpetuates gender inequality (Bryson, 2007). Indeed, liberal feminism added women to politics, the economy, and to the field of education, but these approaches were insufficient in addressing the structural roots of women's inequality.

### **Socialist Feminism**

Socialist feminist conceptualizations of gender inequality share the foundational belief that the economic structure and material expressions of that economic structure are the primary sources of gender inequality (Lorber, 2001). This approach to feminism is often characterized as stemming from dual systems theory, wherein the combined effects of patriarchy and capitalism account for women's oppression (Wharton, 1991). Socialist feminism tends to examine social and structural arrangements. Women's work in the home, which remains largely unpaid, is considered one of the primary sources of gender inequality. Socialist feminists contend that by addressing both capitalism and patriarchy they can secure a redistribution of capital and power for women's equality.

Coulter (1996) noted that, "to the extent that [socialist feminists] consider education at all, they are concerned with how the schools work to replicate the social relations of gender, race, and class" (p. 448). According to Acker (1987), socialist feminists "analyze the role of the school in the perpetuation of the gender division under capitalism...[including] sociocultural reproduction, and to a lesser extent acceptance of and resistance to gender-based patterns of behaviour" (p. 419). Socialist feminism is concerned with how schooling processes reproduce class divisions that play out in the work force (Acker, 1987). Socialist feminists view schools as places where the inequitable division of labour is learned and reified. Problematically, much of the work of socialist feminism tends to be theoretical rather than practical (Acker, 1987), and primarily the creation of white, privileged women (Gunew, 2013).

Evidence of the influence of socialist feminism within Canadian social history exists throughout the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (1970). In chapter two of the report, women's roles in the Canadian economy are discussed. The chapter takes aim at capitalist, patriarchal structures, and recommends changes to minimum wage, working hours, and paid maternity leave, among others, all of which are evidence of practical applications of socialist feminism theories. Other examples from the Canadian context are the equal pay campaigns, day-care campaigns, and the creation of groups like Organized Working Women (Adamson et al., 1988). While socialist feminists made significant contributions to labour policy and relations, their contributions to the field of education remained somewhat limited.

### **Radical Feminism**

Radical feminists suggest that patriarchy, or men's systemic oppression of women, is the primary concept useful for explaining gender inequality. By drawing attention to violence against women, sexual exploitation, and the objectification of women, radical feminists continue to raise awareness about equity issues related to women. Radical feminism is commonly associated with the second wave of feminism. Radical feminists conceptualize the categories of women and men as distinctly different, and argue that it is these differences that require attention. The manifestation of these differences in equality is articulated in the micro, everyday experiences of women, including date rape, and sexual harassment in the workplace. It is also manifested in the overvaluing of "men's" traits such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, and emotional distance (Lorber, 2001). For radical feminists, the personal is political (Jagger, 1983). In this sense, personal matters such as abortion and sexual consent came to the forefront of radical feminists' advocacy.

Radical feminists call for an overhaul of the appraisal of values so that "women's" values, (e.g. compassion, care, and intimacy) become valued. Such essentialist conceptualizations of the categories of men and women have been helpful for drawing political and legal attention to women's inequalities. Radical feminists believe that all social institutions reflect sexism, and that because social institutions are so intertwined, sexism is insurmountable (Lindsay, 2005). In short, Calas and Smircich (1996) noted that what makes radical feminism "radical" is it being women-centred. Coulter (1996) suggested that the

concerns of radical feminists are centred on structural issues and the role of the school in reproducing power relations such as patriarchy. To overcome these structural issues and the reproduction of patriarchy, radical feminists tend to adopt strategies that put the concerns of women and girls at the forefront of educational matters (Acker, 1987), such as the inclusion of women's perspectives in all disciplines and insisting on sexual harassment policies in the workplace. An example of the unfolding of radical feminism in educational arenas is seen with regard to the development of the Women's Studies movement in higher education (Rowland & Klein, 2013). In the Canadian context, this was often evidenced by the creation of women's studies centres at the post-secondary level as well as the creation of classroom materials aimed at ending violence against women.

Some of the contributions of radical feminism to the Canadian social context have been securing abortion laws for women, countering anti-abortion movements, creating women's studies programs, and establishing rape crisis centres and women shelters. Part of the success of these programs and centres came from raising awareness of the often-private sexual struggles of women in violent relationships. These examples underscore that ways that the personal became the political. Radical feminists also insist on unique health care better suited to the unique character of cisfemale bodies. Adamson et al. (1988) noted how by the late 1970s, violence against women became a main issue, such as the creation of the radical feminist organization, Women Against Violence Against Women, which formed across Canada in the 1970s. It was also during the late 1970s that the Feminist Party of Canada, which spanned from 1979-1982, appeared and died on the Canadian political scene (Adamson et al., 1988). In 1989, the Montreal Massacre took place at École Polytechnique, where 14 women were killed and another 10 were shot by an angry male student. The Montreal Massacre highlighted violence against women in Canada and in Canadian public policy. Women's groups, many of whom identified as radical feminists, who had been pressuring government to address violence against women, banded together to insist on the creation of a separate commission on violence against women. While a separate commission was not created, the Canadian government established the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women in 1991, which published the report *Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence - Achieving Equality* in 1993 (Agnew, 2000). Radical feminists worked tirelessly to have the perspectives and standpoints of women become central to social, political, and economic interpretations of the world. A central critique of these perspectives is that they primarily represented heterosexual white women and did not account for the myriad and complex matrices of oppression (Collins, 1990) experienced by lesbian women, women of colour, or gender non-conforming individuals.

### **Queer Theory**

Before characterizing queer theory, I need to address the uneasy fit that exists between feminism and queer theory. While some theorists, such as Lorber (2001), consider queer theory as a feminist theory, others such as Halley (2006) do not because of the ways that queer theory is more critical of power structures than feminist theory. I want to acknowledge those contentions so as to justify why I am using queer theory as an example of a postmodern feminist epistemology. Richardson, McLaughlin, and Casey (2006) noted that feminist theorists were among the first to challenge the social frameworks for understanding gender and sexuality, and that these social relations must be examined together. Hollinger (1999) noted that queer theory emerges from postmodern ideas surrounding subjectivity and identity, and it focuses centrally on issues relating to gender and sexual orientation. In these ways, then, queer theory can fit within the epistemological tradition of postmodern feminism given its expansion and deconstruction of gender and sexual categories. Because queer theory maintains a focus on gender, it aligns with feminist concerns. I am not suggesting that queer theory is exclusively feminist. Instead, I suggest that queer theory provides a way to operationalize a postmodern feminist epistemology within educational contexts given the ways in which queer theory has expanded the categories of sex, sexual orientation, and gender. A Canadian example helps to support the operationalization of queer theory as a postmodern feminist theory. Within the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE), Queer Studies in Education and Culture is a special interest group of the Canadian Association for the Study of Women and Education. While queer theory may have an uneasy fit within feminisms, it can be considered as reflective of a postmodern feminist epistemology.

For queer theorists, the binary divisions of sex and gender serve to divide the world into privileged and unprivileged categories. That binary also privileges heterosexuality as the natural or assumed premise

in gendered interactions (Lorber, 2001). Queer theorists frame gender inequality as bound by the privilege and power granted to heterosexual males and females. An end to gender inequality could be achieved by intentionally blurring gender and sexual boundaries so that gender and sexuality are seen as spectra instead of male-female binaries. Queer theorists aim to explode the taken for granted binary categories of male/female, men/women, heterosexual/homosexual. From a queer perspective, gender equality will exist when the recognition of dynamic categories of sexes, genders and sexualities is commonplace. These dynamic categories include, and are not limited to, gay, straight, bisexual, lesbian, transsexual, two-spirited, asexual, queer, questioning, male, female, masculine, feminine, female to male, female to neutral, male to female, and male to neutral. In this conception, “equality will come, they say, when there are so many recognized sexes, sexualities, and genders that one cannot be played against the other” (Lorber, 2001, p. 196).

Queer theorists argue that all genders are performatively produced, and thereby binary conceptualizations of fixed genders should not exist. Instead, queer theorists suggest genders are shifting and fluid. Butler’s (2004) work in the area of gender performativity is instrumental for informing many of the foundational concepts in queer theory. One of Butler’s (2004) main contentions is with the feminist category of women as a unified category, which Butler and others argue is an essentialist category that ignores the myriad differences that exist within the category of women and gender non-conforming individuals. For Butler, the subject identities of genders are performatively produced through discourse, without the existence of a pre-discursive subject (Butler, 1990). A pre-discursive subject refers to the language used to identify gender together with the enactment or performance of gendered expectations, which are what create the gendered identity. Butler argues that the gendered subject isn’t static; instead, it is performed. Queer theorists also set out to disrupt heteronormativity—the perception that heterosexuality is the assumed and default sexuality (Ingraham, 1994). In education, queer conceptualizations of gender inequality may take on the form of anti-homophobia and anti-bullying legislation and school-based anti-homophobia policy in educational settings (Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2008). While these policy approaches are seemingly liberal, they exemplify a queer conceptualization of sex and gender given their attention to non-heterosexual identities.

Evidence of the application of a queer theory conceptualization of gender inequality in the Canadian context began in the 1980s and 1990s. Campey, McCaskell, Miller, and Russell (1994) traced the Toronto Board of Education’s challenge during the 1980s and 1990s with homophobia and securing the rights for gay and lesbian people wherein they note the difficulties in “queering” education. These difficulties included making gays and lesbians visible in schools, and convincing school board trustees to approve programming on inclusive understandings of human sexuality.

Queer conceptualizations of gender in Canada were also evident in the 1990s when significant legal changes afforded to queer people (lesbians and gays, in particular) the same rights as non-queer people regarding adoption and relationship recognition in many jurisdictions (EGALE, n.d., p. 13). Mule (2006) reviews three strategic movements within the Canadian queer movement, and notes that the public consultations on Bill C-2: *An Act to Amend the Criminal Code and to Make Consequential Amendments to Other Acts*, and Bill C-38: *The Civil Marriage Act* (same sex marriage and sex laws) underscored the continued marginalization of queer people. After years of queer advocacy and activism, the *Civil Marriage Act* was passed in 2005, which enshrined same-sex marriage into federal law. A critique suggested by Lugg (2003) of these legislatively-based approaches to queer gender equity is that queer is still effectively rendered “deviant” because these groups require special protective services.

The initiation of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in schools is one application of queer theory in educational contexts. In the early 2010s, the “issue” of GSAs in schools in Altona, Manitoba and in Mississauga, Ontario became the focus of much public attention. Ontario passed legislation (2012) that afforded all students in the province the right to organize a GSA if desired, and Manitoba followed by passing similar legislation (Manitoba, 2013). GSAs and issues of sexuality, particularly those related to homosexuality and diverse gender identities, are not new to many school boards across Canada. By expanding the conceptualizations of gender to include a much broader spectrum, queer theorists have contributed to safer school environments for LGBTTQ youth.

## Concluding Thoughts

This literature review presents an overview of four feminist conceptualizations of gender inequality so as to situate the distinctions between various ways to operationalize feminist theory in educational contexts. These distinctions were situated within three feminist epistemologies: a) feminist empiricism, b) feminist standpoint, and c) postmodern feminism. As a means to operationalize those feminist epistemologies, the central tendencies of four feminist theories within those three epistemological categories were highlighted. Liberal and socialist feminism were provided as examples of a feminist empiricist epistemology, radical feminism was an example of a feminist standpoint epistemology, and queer theory was an example of a postmodern feminist epistemology. By focusing on the epistemological distinctions between these feminist theories, researchers and practitioners can understand better the differences within feminist conceptualizations of gender inequality. These differences matter because of the ways that various conceptualizations of gender inequality direct attention towards certain issues, such as women's representations in textbooks, while minimizing others, such as the absence of queer and gender non-conforming individuals in leadership positions. A liberal feminist conceptualization, for example, might highlight issues related to adding women to leadership positions, while a socialist feminist conceptualization might highlight equal pay for women. A radical feminist conceptualization might highlight violence against women, while a queer conceptualization might highlight the exclusion of LGBTTTQ content in classrooms. Through an understanding of how gender equity has been conceptualized in educational contexts, researchers and practitioners can reflect on the historical and current conceptualizations of gender equity. These reflections also allow for consideration of the utility of feminist conceptualizations in terms of securing gender equity in educational contexts.

Specific feminist conceptualizations of gender equity must also be understood to delimit the ways gender equity is enacted in educational settings. It is essential, then, for educators and educational policy makers to reflect critically on *how* gender equity is being conceptualized and enacted across educational contexts because without this critical reflection, the field of education stands to reify these gendered inequalities in schools and societies going forward.

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