The influence of feminist ideologies on the development of victimology

Introduction

Feminism can be broadly defined as a movement striving for equality of men and women in social, economic and political spheres (Gouws, Louw, Meyer & Plug 1979:84). More specifically, the movement consists of various organisations, liberation groups and ideologies such as socialist feminists, radical feminists, liberal feminists and metaphysical feminism (Eisenstein 1986:126–145; Thorne 1982:13–14). All these approaches focus their attention on the woman as a victim of male domination in all spheres of life.

The feminist movement is based upon three streams of political and social theory: political rights, as defined in 18th- and 19th-century liberal idealism; economic rights, as defined in 19th- and 20th-century socialist theory; and sexual rights, as defined in 20th-century theories of sexual liberation (Eisenstein 1986:139).

Nineteenth-century feminists were alarmed at the high incidence of male violence against women (Hanmer & Stanko 1985:361). As early as 1885 the Chicago Women’s Club offered legal aid to women who were sexually molested, raped or beaten. (The women’s movement re-emerged in the mid-1960s, which brought about an influential cultural renewal in the western world (Leuw 1982:2661; Fagan 1988:160).)

In 1970 Kate Millett published her classic work Sexual politics. She used the word patriarchy which, in Greek, literally means the rule of the father (Eisenstein 1986:5). According to Kate Millet, a major problem of patriarchy was what she called ‘sexual politics’, meaning a system of interpersonal power whereby men dominate women.

The Women’s Liberation Movement contributed to renewed efforts to combat male violence against women. In their struggle against male chauvinism, supremacy and domination, the women’s liberation movements focused their attention on rape victims and battered women. This resulted in numerous studies and publications on rape and family violence from a feminist perspective. Women’s movements have also been instrumental in establishing rape crisis centres and shelters for battered women (Fattah 1979:199).

Radical feminists were most influential in calling attention to rape, wife battering, the sexual objectification of women, enforced sterilisation and men’s control of women’s access to birth control and abortion (Thorne 1982:14). Socialist feminists emphasised men’s control of women’s labour within and outside
the family such as lower wages, secondary positions in the paid economy and dead-end women’s jobs. According to Jill Goodman (Russell 1984:280) the power disparity between the sexes, both at work and in society at large, increases women’s vulnerability to sexual harassment at work.

The feminist view of sexual victimisation is based on three central assumptions:

• Sexual victimisation of a woman emanates directly from her subordinate position in the patriarchal culture.
• Her sexual victimisation is stimulated and legitimated by a false cultural image of femininity. Pornography and advertising play an important role in this regard.
• Sexual victimisation constitutes one of the most important means of social control whereby men establish and maintain power over women at all levels.

In accordance with the above-mentioned assumptions, the main aims of the various women’s movements are:

• to expose the existence of social and cultural processes through which females become victimised;
• to reveal the processes emanating from the inequality between the sexes (Leuw 1982:275).

Feminist writers have succeeded in unveiling wife abuse, rape and sexual harassment at work as serious social problems.

Against this broad background and overview of feminist ideologies, the movement’s contribution towards the development of victimology since the 1970s will subsequently be discussed in more detail.

Wife battering as a social problem

Prior to 1970 the problem of battered women received scant attention (Loseke & Cahill 1984:303). To a large extent the ‘discovery’ of wife abuse was due to the work of feminist organisation who documented and publicised the issue. In 1971 a group of feminists established a women’s centre in Chiswick, London, where women could come to discuss their problems and were given emotional support (Pizzey 1974: 9–10). They provided battered women with a reasonably secure refuge from their violent husbands. This led to a further development, namely the establishment of the National Women’s Aid Federation (NWAF) during 1974/75. The first international meeting of groups dealing with the problem of battered women was held in April 1978 in Amsterdam (Dobash & Dobash 1979:223–224).

Women’s aid federations condemn men’s violence against women and provide meaningful and tangible assistance as well as sympathetic support to women attacked by their husbands (Dobash & Dobash 1979:234).

British feminists established about 150 refuges for battered women and organised their local women’s aid groups into three international organisations: The National Women’s Aid Federation (England); Scottish Women’s Aid; and Welsh Women’s Aid (Dobash & Dobash 1981:563).

North America followed suit in providing shelters for battered women. In Philadelphia a women’s group also started a voluntary programme of legal counselling in the District Attorney’s office, to inform victims of their rights and options (Fagan 1988:162).

In addition to providing shelters, women’s aid groups struggled against the indifference, inaction and antagonistic responses of the police, judiciary, social and medical institutions. In the past, social and legal agencies treated wife abuse as unimportant and insignificant. Owing to the efforts of the various feminist groups, an increased awareness of marital violence evolved in society. Recognition of the seriousness and prevalence of family violence has led to significant changes in criminal justice policy and practice (Fagan 1988:160).

Feminists attribute wife battering to men’s striving for control and dominance, coupled with a need to demonstrate power and privilege. The patriarchal structure makes this possible (Russell 1988:198). Violence is considered to be deeply embedded in the patriarchal system (Pellauer 1983:211).

Feminist counsellors advise battered women to seek out feminist therapists (Martin 1976:158). In feminist therapy the client is viewed as the only ‘expert’ regarding her problems, experiences of violence, feelings and needs (Ball & Wyman 1977–78:545). Battered women are encouraged to be more self-centred, to acknowledge their own strength and capabilities and to become aware of the options open to them. According to Martin (1976:158) feminist therapy offers a pathway to womanhood, personhood and self-respect. Clients also learn to become self-nurturing and self-loving (Loseke & Cahill 1984:296).

Rape as the ultimate crime against women

With regard to rape, feminists are very outspoken and articulate. They consider rape as much as an expression of the need to illustrate power as it is an expression of the desire for sexual gratification. They believe that this power of men over women is condoned and encouraged by existing attitudes and practices (Clark & Lewis 1977:27).

Susan Griffin (MacKinnon 1979:218) defines rape as an act of oppression in which the victim is denied her self-determinism. It is seen as an act of violence...
and the ultimate weapon which men use to exercise power over women and to exhibit domination which they consider as their birthright.

In her publication Against our will: men, women and rape (1975) Brownmiller offers a highly speculative view of the origin of rape. Brownmiller (Eisenstein 1986:218) suggested that the meaning of rape was connected to the concept of women as property. According to her, men consider rape as an inevitable accomplishment of conquest. She also considers rape as the major agency in the social control and domination of women. In accordance with this view, Susan Griffin argues that rape is a crime carried out by a few men on behalf of many. Rape is portrayed as a symptom of the universal war of men against women (Eisenstein 1986:31). It is a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.

Women are portrayed as feeling helpless and, sensing the omnipresent threat of male anger, brutality and rape, retreating into passivity to avoid potential violence all around them (Gager & Schurr 1976:209–210). Therefore, the only way to fight rape in future is to increase the power of women until it equalises that of men (Eisenstein 1986:32).

Feminists see rape as an ‘inevitable part of the entire social matrix which denigrates women – psychologically, physically, economically and politically – and which still tends to regard females as male “property” ’ (Gager & Schurr 1976:280). According to them the social institutions responsible for handling and reducing rape, such as the police, hospitals and courts, did not perform adequately in treating rape victims and in arresting, prosecuting and rehabilitating sex criminals (Gager & Schurr 1976:279). They also considered the legal definition of rape to be narrow because it did not include the vast majority of sexual assaults against women and young girls. In this regard feminists have launched bitter attacks at the judicial system for refusing to acknowledge rape within marriage as a crime. The identity of the rapist does not alter the fact of his act, or lessen the traumatic effect upon the victim. Rape is rape (Martin 1976:181).

Feminist writers managed to draw the attention of society to the role played by rape, the fear thereof and the power that men exerted over women’s lives.

During the early 1970s rape relief or crisis centres were established on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, with the purpose of providing support to rape victims and pressurising governmental and other public agencies for changes in order to lessen the traumatic impact of the crime on victims who report the offence (Clark & Lewis 1977:25). However, the necessity of turning to shelters and crisis centres for assistance has evoked anger and disgust among female victims because the criminal justice system had failed to protect them against violent men. In New York City and Oakland, California, female victims of intimate violence sued police departments for failure to enforce the criminal jurisprudence to protect them (Hammer & Stanko 1983:363).

Sexual harassment at work

In her authoritative publication Sexual harassment of working women, Catharine MacKinnon defines sexual harassment as the ‘unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power’ (MacKinnon 1979:1). Men who harass women in the working place use their hierarchically superordinate role to demand sexual compliance from their female subordinates. According to Farley (Heming 1985:68), sexual harassment is unsolicited, non-reciprocal male behaviour that asserts a woman’s sex role over her function as worker. More specifically, it includes behaviour such as staring at, commenting upon, or touching a woman’s body, requests for dates, and demands for sexual intercourse. Farley considers sexual harassment as an expression of male power which serves to keep women in subordinate positions. However, she does not take into account that men can also be sexually harassed by women.

Jill Goodman (Russell 1984:280) argues that sexual harassment is the inevitable result of women’s historical economically inferior position. The power disparity, both at work and in society, increases her vulnerability to sexual harassment at work. Cultural views that encourage men to sexually harass women are: the belief that a woman’s place is at home, and sex discrimination.

Feminists do not consider sexual harassment to be an individual and personal problem, but an issue integral and crucial to a social context in which women have a disproportionately small share of wealth, power and advantages compared with men as a group. They typically occupy low-paid jobs, with lack of opportunity for personal satisfaction (MacKinnon 1979:235).

Evaluation of feminists’ contribution to victimology

Undoubtedly, feminist ideologies and the Women’s Liberation Movement have had an enormous impact on the development of victimology as a scientific discipline in the past two decades. The movement has raised the level of consciousness of society regarding the high incidence of violence against women, child abuse, unfair discrimination and inequality of power in society. Feminist ideas contributed to changes in public attitude towards rape victims and battered women. Owing to feminists’ involvement in the plight
of the female victim, an impressive volume of publications have seen the light since the early seventies. As a result of detailed reports of female victim's experience of being violated, the tremendous impact of rape and battering upon the victims came to light. Professionals started to realise the urgent need for special services to these type of victims.

Feminists took the initiative in establishing rape crisis centres and shelters for battered women in various countries. They have experienced that as soon as the victims knew there was somebody who would listen and could do something to help them, women of all areas, classes and races were crying out for help (Pizzey 1974:23).

As a result of feminists' pressure on the criminal justice system to treat violence towards women as a serious crime, discriminatory laws and procedures traumatizing rape victims in the witness box have been changed. Policemen have become more tactful and cautious when investigating domestic violence. There is more sympathy and understanding for the battered woman. Special police units exist for rape victims and children who have been sexually abused.

Because feminists have concentrated on the female victim of violent crime, specifically marital violence and rape, there is at present an imbalance in knowledge regarding crime victims. The literature on victimology is flooded with publications on wife battering, rape, child abuse and child sexual abuse, leaving an almost complete void regarding victims of other types of crime, for instance property crime and fraud.

Victimologists are now facing the enormous task of catching up with research on all the other types of crime victims. For the researcher, it is a vast field waiting to be explored.

Despite their invaluable contribution to the development of victimology, serious criticism can be levelled at the women's movement. Feminists have really rocked the boat regarding traditional, rigid sex-role orientation. However, they have alienated ordinary women by attacking normal heterosexual relationships in the family, which gave rise to a conservative reaction (Eisenstein 1986:137). They have been one-sided in focusing only on the female victim in the family instead of studying the family unit as a whole.

The feminist portrayal of women in general as passive, fearful, easily intimidated and manipulated is very subjective. This subjectivity is particularly obvious when female victims are depicted as pure, frightened, innocent and helpless creatures while men are violent beasts, obsessed with hatred towards women and fantasies of raping them. By emphasising patterns of inequality of power and conflict between men and women, the feminists have polarised the sexes, and this contributed to much hostility towards them. It also contributed to marital discord.

In their quest for equal rights for women, feminists have negated the inherent biological and psychological differences between the sexes. They have ignored women's needs for intimacy, motherhood and nurturance. The fact that women are different from men, however, is no excuse for treating the fairer sex as inferior human beings.

It is true that training a girl to be docile, humble, cooperative, meek and submissive is no winning recipe but, on the contrary, increases her susceptibility to victimisation. However, women can learn to be self-assertive and competitive. They do not have to be aggressive the way men are. Generally women are not so passive but often resist men's control. They have developed their own forms of power and means of struggle.

Feminist ideologies have blamed the patriarchal system for all the violence and injustice towards women. This is a simplistic explanation for particularly complex crimes such as rape and assault. These ideologies did not take into consideration other environmental and individual factors contributing to these crimes or victim-offender interaction during the victimisation process. Such a perspective is limited indeed.

With regard to sexual harassment, the definition thereof is not satisfactory because the victimisation can also be verbal or take the form of a gesture. This proves to be problematic in the sense that what one person perceives as harassing another may perceive as a compliment (Van der Merwe 1982:101). Owing to their subjective approach, feminists have lost sight of the fact that it is quite normal for most women to dress deliberately in such a way as to appear attractive to the opposite sex. Under normal conditions, most women would not experience it as such a disgusting act should a man show his appreciation by staring or complimenting them, even in the workplace.

Because literature on sexual harassment in South Africa is minimal, the extent of serious sexual harassment at work cannot be estimated. Research in this field is urgently needed.

According to Leonore van der Merwe (1982:103) the South African law has as yet not made any specific provision in favour of sexual harassment. In other countries, the courts accept the view that sexual harassment can be illegal sex discrimination prohibited by the Civil Rights Act as a condition of employment (Van der Merwe 1982:101).

To date, few companies have official policies on sexual harassment, and they generally feel uncomfortable about the issue. Greater progress in this field could have been made were the problem approached in a more objective and factual way. Supporters of the women's movement could have been more effective in bringing about social changes and rendering aid to victims of crime if they were more realistic, factual
and scientific in their approach. Especially feminist writers on rape victims got carried away and made it a very emotional issue.

As a result of feminists' aggressive attitude towards men in general, they became associated with lesbianism. For this reason, police departments were not very willing and enthusiastic to co-operate with rape relief centres. The South African Law Commission (1985:147–148) criticises the following regarding rape crisis centres in South Africa:

- the loose structure of the majority of the services;
- lack of formal training on a standardised basis of those involved in rendering aid to rape victims;
- the radical feminist and anti-male point of departure reflected in some services which render these services unacceptable to the average South African woman;
- the fact that some organisations actively discouraged rape victims from reporting the crime to the police, depicting the judicial system in a negative light and influencing the victim to believe that it will only aggravate her traumatic experience.

**Conclusion**

Despite obvious shortcomings in their approach, the women's movement and other feminist organisations have made an ineffaceable impression on victimology and have contributed tremendously to its development. Feminists' involvement in victimology can in future be even more valuable, should their approach become more realistic and objective.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


