

# Feminist Standpoint: Probing the Epistemological Roots and Social Location

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## Abstract

Feminist standpoint theory is one of the practical approaches to feminist epistemology. Emerged as a result of feminist consciousness-raising standpoint approaches inquired experiences of multiple arenas. The feminist standpoint is based on two significant concepts: situated knowledge and the concept of epistemic advantage. Situated learning claims that social location influences human experience. Wherein epistemic advantage asserts that some standpoints are epistemically privileged. In this light, the researcher tries to analyse the epistemological roots of feminist standpoint theory and also inquire about the concept of the social location of the advantaged perspective. To fulfil the study's objectives, the researcher outlines the grounds of standpoint and traces the roots of the feminist standpoint. Finally, the researcher discusses the concept of social location.

## Keywords

Feminist Standpoint Theory, Epistemology, Social Location, Marginalization, Gender, Women

## Introduction

Epistemology was entered into feminist analysis and critique very belated. The sex of the knower is epistemologically valid and helps to formulate questions on knowledge and subjectivity, which are integral concepts of feminist inquiry. (Code, 2014). Anderson (2017) observed that the dominant knowledge practices denied the epistemic authority of women and other marginalised. Feminist epistemologists Nancy Hartsock (1983), Dorothy Smith (1987; 1990), Hilary Rose (1983; 1994), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and Sandra Harding (1991) trace these issues and offer various accounts to defeat the problems. Within the context of feminist epistemology, the thinkers are particularly interested in socially situated knowledge. Harding (2004) pinpoints that the conditions of the oppressed group are entirely different from that of the dominant. The prevailing situation of the oppressed

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enabled them to produce distinctive kinds of knowledge. This experience-based knowledge is further for other social conditions. The oppressed group tries to identify how the dominant groups are structured. An epistemological, scientific, and political advantage has been enabled through social situatedness.

Feminist philosophers examine the interconnection between gender situatedness and knowing subjects. They have proposed three major approaches to this intersection, such as feminist standpoint theory, feminist postmodernism, and feminist empiricism, and these are converged over time (Anderson, 2017). Harding (1986) inquired about the theoretical division between feminist epistemological inquiries. Harding analysed feminist empiricism and standpoint epistemological inquiry. In contrast to the empiricist analysis standpoint, theorists investigate the historical–material positioning of women's practices and experiences. Brooks (2006) states, "Feminist standpoint epistemology is an innovative approach to knowledge building that breaks down boundaries between academia and activism, theory and practice. Feminist standpoint scholars seek to give voice to members of oppressed groups—namely, women—and to uncover the hidden knowledge that women have cultivated from living life 'on the margins.'" A feminist standpoint is a hard-won product of consciousness-raising and social-political engagement. The knowledge that enables the oppressed to survive under oppression becomes a resource for social transformation (Code, 2014).

In this light, the researcher tries to analyse the epistemological roots of feminist standpoint theory and inquire about the concept of the social location of the advantaged perspective. The researcher finds it critical that the study should begin with an analysis of standpoint theory in general. The researcher then inquires about the epistemological roots of the feminist standpoint. In the final section, the study elaborates on the concept of the social location of the advantaged perspective.

### **The Grounds of Standpoint Theory**

Standpoint theory is a method to analyse the interconnection of power and knowledge. Its primary objective is to challenge the hegemony and neutrality of philosophies of science, gendered epistemic authority, and methodologies (Krishna & Chadha, 2017). Epistemic advantage and socially situated perspective are the significant aspects of standpoint. Harding (2004) points out that Standpoint theorists and critics have different views on articulating standpoint theory. For Harding (1992), "Standpoint theories argue for "starting off thought" from the lives of marginalised peoples; beginning in those determinate, objective locations in any social order will generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives." Anderson (2017) suggested that a standpoint theory should specify the social location, aspect of social location, and epistemic superiority. Anderson leveraged Sandra Harding's arguments, and they

elaborated that the perspectives of marginalised social groups have an epistemic advantage in terms of the socio-political aspects of their marginalisation. The marginalised have an advantage in exposing the fundamental social regularities. Through epistemic privilege, they can reveal the social arrangements and represent the society on behalf of the universal human interests. Regarding dominant group interests, they represent only surface social regularities and misrepresent them as universally advantageous.

Jaggar (1983) put forth a similar opinion; the standpoint is epistemologically advantageous as similar to the ruling class. The fundamental Reality provided through the oppressed is unbiased and more comprehensive. Jaggar added that the standpoint of the marginalised is impartial because it represents the society as a whole, and the dominant groups' perception is based only on one section of the population. The ruling class has a dim vision of the conditions of the oppressed group, but the oppressed have a clear vision of the ruled and the rulers and their interconnection. So, the standpoint of the oppressed can elaborate standpoint of the dominant group.

In the introductory part of *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, published in 2004, Sandra Harding mentioned the appearance of the standpoint theme "logic of a standpoint," which did not uphold the Marxian thoughts, standpoint terminology, or feminism. Harding points out that these pro-democratic social movements leveraged race, ethnicity-based, anti-imperial, and Queer social justice movements as the standpoint themes. This argument suggests that standpoint is organic, and whenever the oppressed raise their consciousness, an epistemology, methodology, philosophy of science, and social theory arises. Thus, the explicit and implicit history of the standpoint is revealed. In the modern west, philosophy and science are always located against the "folk history" of standpoint theory (Harding, 2004).

Hooks (1981) in the book *'Ain't I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism'* discuss the marginalization of women of colour and highlight the oppression they experienced within white liberal feminism. Being a critic of capitalist patriarchy Bell Hooks investigated the oppression and marginalization of black communities. Hooks argued that the dominant group adopted a framework that is androcentric and heteronormative. Instead of the dominant narrative, there must be a social and world order that inscribes the experiences of blacks whose social locations are powerful spaces of social struggle. Hooks (1989) believed that marginality is a 'space of resistance'. Collins (1990) argued that oppression is a converged system of race, gender, class oppression and privilege from which African American women recognize their marginalized position. Collins elaborated on the economic exploitation through the labour system, violation of human rights, and stereotyping

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of African American women and suggested their contribution to the feminist inquiry. Collins demanded an inclusive knowledge system that disapproves of the dehumanization of the oppressed.

Crasnow (2009) elaborate on Sandra Harding's arguments on standpoint theory as a logic of inquiry. "Starts from the lives" of the oppressed is the critical strategy of standpoint theory, and the differences in those lives generate differences in standpoint projects. The divergence characteristics in standpoints urge important questions for feminists regarding the political and epistemological issues, and it demands a convergence of standpoint projects. Standpoint provides a framework across different disciplines with distinctive histories and concerns and challenges the disciplinary complicity operated by established social powers.

#### **Feminist Standpoint Theory: The Roots and Interventions**

According to the standpoint theory's feminist interpretation, a person's knowledge is determined by their social positions, such as gender, caste, class, religion, and race. Nancy Hartsock (1983), Dorothy Smith (1987; 1990), Hilary Rose (1983; 1994), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and Sandra Harding (1991) were the foremost proponents of feminist standpoint epistemology in the 1980s and 1990s. They inquired about the marginalisation of women and other unprivileged in knowledge production. They suggested uncovering the oppressed knowledge that the marginalised experienced from living life "on the margins." In the realm of feminist knowledge, the production standpoint is considered both a theory of knowledge and a research method. This approach has merged knowledge and practice and interconnects research and activism. Collins (1990) put forth, "when making knowledge claims about women, we must always remember that it is women's "concrete experience" that provides the ultimate "criterion for credibility" of these knowledge claims." Thus, the feminist standpoint positioned women at the centre of the knowledge production process. The scholar of feminist standpoint epistemology argues that knowledge must build from women's actual life experiences. Hekman (1997) notes that there are various standpoint theories, and these theories must be analysed as a counterhegemonic discourse; also, their central concern should be political. Hekman prefers to speak about knowledge and epistemology rather than power structure.

Feminist philosophers have been exploring how gender situates knowing subjects. Feminist standpoint theory, feminist postmodernism, and feminist empiricism are three approaches to inquire about the relationship between gender situatedness and knowing subject (Anderson, 2017). Langton (2000) analysed the status of feminist inquiry in the early twenty-first century. Langton observed that in normative perspective of knowledge denied women to claim epistemological authority, credibility, and acknowledgment. In the spectrum of knowledge production, women

get left out or have been hurt. "Objectification is a process of projection supplemented by force, whose result is that women are made subordinate, women come to have at least some of the qualities that are projected onto them" (Langton, 2000). Ortner (1972) proposed that since the years of enlightenment, western thinking assumed that men owned a kind of rational thought while women are naturally vulnerable and supposed to have an emotional thinking capacity. Like Ortner, Flax (1983) put forth an observation that accepts feminist object relations theory and explains that female caregivers have a significant role in the development of gender identity. The early infantile experience and the oppression of women are linked by the fact that male child acquires masculine identity by comparing themselves to their mother, and the female child compares and identifies them with their mother. Thus, males and females adapted for different cognitive styles in which the masculine cognitive style is supposed to be logical, whereas the feminine is emotional. Flax added that while women's experience of subordination puts them in a position to reinterpret reality, it also imposes specific psychological challenges that must be the subject of "self-conscious struggle." Smith (1989) observed that "the sociological theories and methods being taught did not apply to 'what was happening as the female students 'experienced it.'" Sociology has rejected women's experiences and objectified them. Smith claimed that historically Women had been treated as caregivers of society; on the other hand, men are considered logical individuals whose views and values are most important. To overcome this position, sociologists must start to inquire from a feminist perspective

As a result of feminist consciousness-raising in the 1960s and 1970s, women began actively participating in politics, public policy, law, medicine, and various disciplines. Women's awareness of their experiences and differences from dominant frameworks inspired them to formulate new methods of inquiry. These "alternative ways of thinking" enable them to think outside the dominant knowledge building. In the introductory part of 'Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies, published in 2006, Davis et al. mentioned that thirty-five years ago, the concept of women's studies was radically a new invention in the academic spectra where white western men were considered generalised 'human.' Now, gender studies and studies of men and masculinities have been added to complement women's studies. Marxism offers the classic model of standpoint theory. Inspired by the Marxist insight standpoint, epistemologists began to inquire about the power hierarchy in knowledge production (Anderson, 2017). Hartsock (1983) adapted the feminist standpoint as a methodological base provided by Marxian theory and developed it as an essential epistemological tool for analysing and resisting all forms of domination. Hartsock argued that Marx's understanding of the world from the standpoint of the proletariat helped him to access bourgeois ideology, so from a feminist standpoint, it is possible to analyse the patriarchal notions and social relations. There is a relation between the feminist standpoint formulated through an inquiry of women's

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experiences and the proletarian standpoint. Women and proletarians believe in quality rather than quantity.

Harding (1991) states that a methodological standpoint provided valuable insights for social movements. The capacity to explore social relations enables social activism. Through the standpoint method, it is possible to generate oppositional and shared consciousness, to create marginalized as collective subjects rather than objects of research. Harding pinpoints that the experiences of the oppressed are not truth claims by believing all knowledge is a socially situated standpoint and accepts that all experiences are partial. Therefore, starting with the Reality of the object's life experiences and invoking a comparison within those experiences is a technique to obtain "less false" accounts.

### **Social Location in Standpoint**

Anderson (2017) argued that feminist epistemology focuses on the social location of the knowledge producer affects what they inquire. Individuals' social location is their attributed social relations and social identities, including but not limited to gender, race, sexual orientation, caste, class, and caste. Wylie (2004) argued that "it could be the social location of women or other oppressed groups that could be the source of illuminating knowledge claims not only about themselves, but also the rest of nature and social relations has remained an arrogant, outrageous, and threatening proposal for conventionalists." Social location is a significant feature of standpoint theory. It postulates that the oppressed who share a common placement in the power structure also share common experiences. Those in a similar social location can trace those experiences, and they can comparably analyse the experiences. Wylie put forth an important observation that social location is structurally defined, and the experience of individuals is shaped by the social location, which is positioned in a dominant system of power relations.

Harding (1991) observed that a standpoint emerged when people shared similar subordinate social locations. The situated knowledge thesis rejects the concept of universal knowledge, and the knowledge is produced based on the knower's social context and location. The social location of the knower shapes and controls their perspectives. Collins (2004) argues that the oppressed groups shared a common history based on their shared location in relation to the power structure. The location of the shared history is the space where hierarchical power relations unite and affect the oppressed. Every individual in this group gets affected by it. (Anderson, 2017). The intersection of several social elements like gender, race, and class determined the social location of the knower. Thus, the knower and the knowledge produced by the knower are socially located. Within members of a particular social group, the ways that social location shapes experience might not be identical (Intemann 2010). Crasnow (2013) remarks critically that feminist standpoint theory should not take

only a socially located perspective. Standpoint should be analysed critically, and the interconnection of the power structure, social location, and knowledge production must be considered. Positionality is particularly crucial when researching specific subjects and locations. However, the significance and effects of the knower's social position are likely to differ significantly depending on the research circumstance, location, resources, and inquiry.

## **Conclusion**

The feminist standpoint has expanded, intersectional, and evolved by the counter-theory of dominant knowledge production. Apart from the universal view of experience, feminist standpoint scholars no longer consider the life experiences of women as a single oppressed group. They identified the scope of intersectionality and considered heterogeneity in terms of class, caste, culture, spatial orientations, racial backgrounds, and many other social realities. The method of inquiry from a feminist standpoint is evolving. To capture distinctive experiences, scholars have been adopting a wide variety of cutting-edge methods. Different standpoints emphasize the need for dialogue, support, and alliance.

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