The concept women empowerment did not originate all of a sudden. By the mid 1960s some economists began to realise that development was not taking place as easily as they hoped, particularly in regard to women. Actually many development projects, rather than improving the lives of third world women had deprived them of economic opportunities and status. From the above realisation emerged the new approach Women In Development (WID).

The WID approach sought greater equity between women and men. But western gender stereotypes went largely unchallenged. Women’s development was seen as a logistical problem, rather than something that required a fundamental reassessment of gender relations and ideology.

In the 1980s, some scholars and activists exhorted for a new approach to women’s development. The series of international conferences that celebrated the UN decade for women (1976-85) highlighted the women specific problems of the south and
encouraged the development of organisations to foster research and writing by third world scholars.

The resulting dialogue which was known as Gender and Development (GAD), focused on gender rather than women, particularly the social construction of gender roles and relations. Gender was seen as the process by which individuals who were born into biological categories of male or female became the social categories of male or female through the acquisition of locally defined attributes of masculinity and femininity. The possibility of transforming gender roles was thus established and power was revealed as a constructed rather than natural part of life.

This approach had considerable influence on academic development discourse, which ended in the emergence of the concept of women empowerment.

To make all the implicit factors of women empowerment clear, the researcher has probed into the details of the journey towards women empowerment. The journey starts with feminism because feminism is considered to be the first organised effort to analyse the subordinate status of women. Feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with the society's treatment of women. St is convinced of the oppression of women, attempts to find out the reasons for oppression, and analyses means to achieve women's liberation. Different schools of thought on feminism such as Liberal,
Marxist, Radical and Socialist have substantially contributed to the emergence of the concept of empowerment. Therefore, a brief discussion of these different schools of thoughts on feminism is attempted in the following sections.

2.1.1 Liberal feminism

The most prominent name in the liberal feminist school of thought is Wollstonecraft (1792) who in her studies sharply focused on the liberation of women. She asserted that a middle class lady had to sacrifice health, liberty and virtue for whatever prestige, pleasure and power a husband could provide. She reasoned out that if men were confined to the same cages women find themselves locked in, they would develop the same characteristics as women. She wanted women to be treated and to act as autonomous decision makers. According to Wollstonecraft truth is hidden from women and they are made to assume an artificial character before their faculties have acquired any strength.

Wollstonecraft valued reason at the expense of emotion. An ideal woman for her is not the one who achieves self-fulfillment but has self-control. Proper education should make women rational by making them ‘observant daughters’, ‘affectionate sisters’, ‘faithful wives’ and ‘reasonable mothers’.
The thoughts of Wollstonecraft were further refined by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony (1881). Stanton’s central liberal thesis was that women as individuals were in need of rights in order to stand on their own. She asserted that Government should allow the individual woman to function freely, to enjoy her natural rights. Two moving expressions of Stanton’s individualism were found in a letter to the 1851 convention, in which she urged to educate daughters an ‘courage ‘and ‘self dependence.’ In her final address ‘the solitude to self she stated her conviction that because every person was isolated, a woman must learn to take responsibility of herself.

Anthony further elaborated the doctrine of fundamental natural rights in other statements she issued. Her statements summarised the basic grievances of nineteenth century liberal feminists. Donovan (1998) gives a discussion on Stanton’s views. Stanton asserted that one half of the people of nation were powerless and subjected to an unjust law. They were also unable to write a new and just one. She emphasised on the total dissatisfaction of women with the Government that enforced taxation without representation and compelled them to obey laws to which they had never given their consent. She contented that women were robbed in marriage. Women who constituted half of the population were left wholly at the mercy of the other half. She also argued that the situation of woman was in direct violation of the principle of equal rights to all (Donovan: 69).
Another important contribution to liberal theory was that of Taylor (1851) and Mill (1869), the English philosophers. They engaged in a twenty-seven year intellectual and personal liaison. It is widely accepted that Taylor wrote the book, *The enfranchisement of women* (1851). Taylor echoed the more radical analysis developed by earlier theorists when she considered the reason for female subjugation. She explored the reasons for the existence of one half of the species merely ancillary to that of the other. She also raised the question why each woman was a mere appendage to a man, why she was not allowed to have no interest of her own, why there was nothing in her mind to compete with man’s interest and pleasure. The only reason Taylor could find was man liked it.

Mill (1869) made substantial contribution to the arousal of feminism. His work, *The subjection of women* was the most controversial one. In this work he concentrated on the abilities of women and made a vigorous plea for their right to vote. Mill held the view that women’s position was not natural but the result of political oppression by men. He maintained the revolutionary idea that the masculine domination of the family was a corrupting influence making boys selfish and girls submissive.

According to Friedan (1963) the idea that women can find satisfaction exclusively in the traditional roles of wife and mother has left women feeling empty and miserable. Patriarchal society thinks
women are ideally suited for certain occupations namely teaching, nursing and clerking and largely incapable of doing other tasks as ruling, preaching and investing, in a patriarchal society some traits are associated with female personality and some other traits like self-confidence are considered as masculine.

The basic concepts of liberalism are freedom, choice, rights, equality, rationality and control. According to Zalewski (2000) two of the main goals of liberal feminism have been to expose old-fashioned ideas about what women are and what they should do. Moreover liberal feminism wants to allow and encourage women to do same things as men for the same status and rewards.

Liberal feminist ideology based on 'individualism' upholds the legal rights of women. Liberals believe that what distinguishes human beings from other animals is a set of practices such as religion, art, science and a set of attitudes and behavioural patterns such as competitiveness and the tendency to put self over the other. Liberals believe in equality of sexes and they plan to achieve it by attaining legal rights of women.

The liberal tradition offers the basis on which our ideas of freedom and equality might be developed. St conceives that women can enjoy the individual rights to which all men have been thought to be entitled.
2.1.2 Marxist feminism

The views about women’s issues hold by Marxist feminists are different from liberal feminists. They believe that what makes us human is that we produce as a means of subsistence. There is much common in Marx’s and Engels’s ideas, and in subsequent Marxist theory, that is of central importance in the development of feminist theory. Indeed, important aspect of contemporary feminist theory, such as the notion of “consciousness raising” are rooted in Marxist premises (Tong 1994).

One of Marx’s central theses is that culture and society are rooted in material or economic conditions. The idea is clearly stated by Engels (1848) in preface to the communist manifesto.

Marx stated this more explicitly in the preface to his *Critique of political Economy* (1859). He asserted that the mode of production of material life conditioned the social, political and intellectual life process in general. Marx further believed that the governing ideology in a society was determined by the economic interests of the ruling class, the capitalists.

In the *German ideology* (1846) and later in *Capital* (1867) Marx discussed the division of labour in the family which was highlighted by the feminists as the ‘gender division of labour’. According to McLellan (1971), Marx said that one of the primary divisions of labour
occurred in the family. Sn The German ideology Marx had argued that this family created the first form of ownership of one person by another. He saw the enslavement of the wife and children by the husband as the first form of private property.

Engels’s Origin of the Family, Private property and the state (1884) remains as the only sustained piece of feminist theory produced during the ‘first wave’ of feminism. The researcher’s interest in Engels’s theory lies in his analysis of family and women’s role in it.

Engels’s central thesis was that the prehistoric, communistic matriarchate was overturned or superseded at a particular moment by the patriarchate. Engels associated this transition with economic development, in particular, with the establishment of private property and the emergence of commodities to be used for exchange and profit. Before the change, however, society was organised in matriarchal fashion into matriarchal gens or extended families that revolved around the mother. While there was division of labour between the sexes (the man hunts, the woman tends the house), within those spheres they held equal power. They were masters in their own spheres. Actually woman appeared to be a little more equal, because the material base of that society was centered in the woman controlled gens.
The first great change in the mode of production that led to patriarchal takeover and to the development of alienation was the taming of animals. It was the male who benefited from this transition. Woman’s labour counted less in comparison with the wealth men accumulated.

Since men had property to bequeath, they became more concerned with ensuring paternity. For this reason and because of the economic shift in power, the man took command in home. Woman became the slave of man’s lust and a mere instrument of production of children. The family was thus transformed into a monogamous male dominated nuclear unit. With the development of the nuclear family came the privatization and the denigration of household labour.

Engels’s solution to the problem of women’s oppression was to urge women to fully enter into the public work force. This could eliminate women’s confinement to private domestic labour.

Engels’s view has not lost its importance even now. The contemporary feminists highlight the problem of women’s confinement to private domestic labour as a barrier to the empowerment process.

In order to facilitate women’s entry into public industry, Marxists uphold socialisation of housework and child rearing. Women’s mere entry into public industry may not be leading to liberation. Rather, it
may result in dual career, women work outside as well as carry out their responsibility in the family. Hence there is need to socialise the jobs cooking, cleaning and child care. Such a socialisation will make everyone realise how difficult domestic work is and will no longer oppress women.

2.1.3 Radical feminism

Compared to Liberal feminism and Marxist feminism, Radical feminism is a recent attempt to create a new conceptual model for understanding many different forms of social oppression in terms of the basic concept of sexual oppression.

*Dialectic of sex* (Firestone 1970) is one of the prominent writings promoting radical feminism. Firestone believes with Freud that “the crucial problem of modern life is sexuality” *(p.209)*. Women’s liberation also necessitates children’s liberation. Firestone explains that this is because “the heart of women’s oppression is her child bearing and child rearing roles. And in turn children are defined in relation to this role and are psychologically formed by it: what they become as adults and the sorts of relationships they are able to form determine the society they will ultimately build” *(p.72)*

Radical feminists believe that women are the largest oppressed group in the world. They also allege that women’s oppression is the deepest and hardest form of oppression and the roots of women’s
oppression are biological. So they concluded that women’s liberation requires a biological revolution. Women must seize the control of the means of reproduction in order to eliminate their oppression. According to Tong (1994) this biological revolution is a real possibility through technology.

With the use of the reproductive controlling technologies, the woman who begets a child need not bear it, and a woman who bears a child need not rear it. A woman’s role is not different from a man’s in the reproductive process. Ovum will be donated by the women to egg banks and sperm by men to sperm banks. After the union of ovum and sperm in an artificial environment outside the living body, the resulting embryo will be gestated outside the womb in an artificial placenta. When the fetus reaches the full term, any male or female will be able to take care of the child.

Reproduction controlling technologies are expected to create an androgynous culture by eliminating all contradictions. The androgynous culture will combine the best complementary qualities of men and women (Millet 1970). Thus the Radical feminists uphold technology as the solution to women’s problems. Socialist feminists’ views are very different from those of Radical feminists and they are discussed in the next section.
2.1.4 Socialist feminism

Socialist feminism is based on division of labour. Vogel (1995) states that one of the main questions raised by socialist feminist theorists is concerned with the sources of women’s subordination. Women’s activity in the family and household constituted the material basis for female oppression. By the late 1970s the predominant view among socialist feminists was that women were trapped within two coordinate systems of oppressions, capitalism and patriarchy (ibid:49).

The emancipation of women will be possible only when women can take part in production on large social scale and domestic work claims only an insignificant amount of her time.

According to Tong (1994) Socialist feminism is based on two theories viz. dual system theory and unified system theory. Dual system theorists maintain that patriarchy and capitalism are distinct forms of social relation and distinct sets of interests, which when intersect oppress women. So to understand feminism both patriarchy and capitalism must be analysed.

Some socialist feminists uphold Unified System Theory. They suggest gender division of labour as a unifying concept, which is powerful enough to accommodate the insights of the Marxist and Radical feminists. The division of labour can better explain why
women usually take the orders, do the drudgery work, work the undesirable shift and get paid less while men usually give the orders, work the desirable shift and get paid more (Ibid: 177)

Six of the central features of socialist feminism have been identified as class/capitalism, revolution, patriarchy, psychoanalysis, subjectivity and difference, it was Marxist theories of class and capitalism that initially inspired socialist feminists. However, their concern with women’s specific experiences within capitalism led them in a variety of directions (Sally Alexander 1990).

According to Holstorm (2003) socialist feminist is one, who understands women’s subordination in a coherent and systematic way; who integrates class and sex as well as other aspects of identity such as race ethnicity or sexual orientation with the aim of using this analysis to help liberate women. Feminism that speaks of women’s oppression but fails to address capitalism will be of little help in ending women’s oppression.

In the mid 1970s many women within the women’s liberation movement found themselves dissatisfied with the prevailing analysis of women’s oppression. Liberalism was not radical enough and Radical feminism ignored economic realities. Marxism was tainted by the fear that class would erase gender once again, asserts Holstorm.
The above discussion on different theories of feminism has provided insights into the factors leading to the subordinate status of women. But the perceptions of feminists were severely criticised. For instance Swami Ranganatharsanda (1997) has stated that the experiences of feminists like Betty Friedan within feminist liberation movement, has been one of total disillusionment. Her disillusionment has been so acute that she has brought out a second book wherein she has discussed the question in depth.

Friedan (1981) makes an assessment of the twenty years of the women’s liberation struggle and breathes a good deal of disappointment for not attaining the goals she had kept in view in her first book The feminine mystique. Some social and economic freedom has come but woman’s dignity, honour, her own identity as a person, these have not been achieved. The author has come to the conclusion that women cannot have liberation apart from men, that there is no separate liberation for man and woman.

Friedan’s Second Stage is a narrative in a coherent way of the failure of feminist movements. Feminism advanced despite male oppression and the general hostility. Women indeed returned to college and careers and made massive occupational and financial gains. Steps towards the aim of The Feminine Mystique, then, had been made. Equally feminism had made considerable headway, in its
own terms. But with the gains had come costs for the women involved, leading to Friedan’s reappraisal of the feminism.

The debate on gender versus sex helped to have a less controversial and more convincing explanation to women's subordination. Hence an understanding of the distinction between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ becomes essential in developing the concept of women empowerment.

2.2 Gender versus sex

Beauvoir (1949) in her book *The Second Sex* has argued that women are not born, but made. But if women are made, how they are made? What are the cultural processes and contexts, which produce masculinity and feminity as social forms? The answer to this question demanded a way of separating the bodies of human beings from their social fates. This was how the idea of ‘gender’ as a cultural product became an essential tool of modern feminist analysis. ‘Gender’ performs an invaluable function in analysing how men and women are made rather than born. So differentiating gender and sex becomes essential in analysing the subordinate status of women.

The author clearly defines what sex is. Males and females are two types of individuals, which are differentiated within a species for the function of reproduction. This biological difference is known as sex. It is natural. But the secondary position of women is not the
outcome of necessity by natural feminine characteristics. It is the outcome of strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men. St follows that women sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature in itself, but as man defines her.

Beauvoir tells us the influence of gender which makes women occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men. This is substantiated by the works of several other authors.

*Understanding Gender* (Bhasine 2000) is a study on gender and sex. The author distinguishes sex and gender as follows. Sex is constant while gender is variable. Sex is natural and biological. But gender is cultural. Gender refers to masculine and feminine qualities and behaviour patterns.

There is nothing in a girl’s body, which stops her from climbing trees or riding bicycle, and there is nothing in a boy’s body, which stops him from nurturing and caring. Since variable cannot be explained by constants, the subordination of women cannot be explained biologically (Ibid 20).

Bhasine brings out the importance of identifying cultural barriers which hinder women’s progress. The response of women to cultural codes is an important area to be explored further.
For centuries it was believed that the different characteristics that women and men exhibited were natural and smmutable-determined by biological differences or divinely ordained. These characteristics included both ideas and values about what was masculine and what was feminine.

Long before the women’s decade, cross cultural research showed that, rather than being predetermined or natural, almost all such perceived characteristics have been shaped and constructed by society. The word gender can be used to describe socially determined characteristics and sex to refer to those, which are biologically determined.

It is people who define certain characteristics as masculine or feminine, certain activities as appropriate for men and women, and certain norms for relationships between men and women. The conditions of women’s and men’s daily lives and their relative position within their societies are embedded in social, cultural political and economic frameworks and institutions (Canadian Council for International Cooperation 1991:30-35).

The impact of gender is everywhere. When we dress a girl child in soft colours and frilly clothes, buy a male child a gun, when we admonish girls for behaving like boys or tease boys for being timid like girls we are promoting ‘gender’. We are allocating to the male and female sex specific and distinctive attributes and roles. Likewise we
also impose different sets of expectations on them. More important we seem to imply that these attributes and roles may not be easily changed. The author says that spaces are sharply divided into masculine and feminine. The space of home is identified with women and the outside world is considered as an exclusively male sphere (Geetha 2002).

The above gender division of space links women’s identity to their roles as wives, mothers as home makers where as male identity is linked to production work, public visibility and power. Even the most powerful women are primarily viewed as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters. They are seldom viewed as persons in their own right and very few women see themselves as autonomous beings. The participation of women in public domain is obstructed due to their female identities created by gender.

Gender is a social construct and therefore observed gender differences are the product of social relations. This problematising of gender is of great significance in analysing women’s status. There is a marked tendency for women to participate less than men in formal politics (Waylen 1996).

There are several explanations of this pattern of participation in conventional politics. Many women are constrained by their roles in the private sphere, which prevent them from participating in the
public sphere on the same terms as men and gaining the experience deemed necessary for career in politics.

Siann (1994) takes us through the most significant theoretical approaches to gender. The author looks at the way in which gender identifies, develops and influences perspectives on the self, others, relationships and society. While taking into consideration the possibility of biological determinants of gender differences in abilities and behaviour, the author upholds the subsidiary nature of biological influences compared to the overwhelming impact of social expectations and social traditions.

It is still mainly women who do most of the unpaid work performed in any home, which goes towards meeting the needs of others. Women are exploited in the family because of its asymmetrical hierarchical structure. Women as wives (but also cohabits or daughters) find themselves in a subordinate position within the structure. While men as the heads of households have, by virtue of position, the power to control the activities of all members of the household, women’s subordinate position implies that their time is not theirs (Bubeck 1995:114)

Women’s unpaid work in the domestic sphere, and also a lot of women’s paid work is best understood not as production, as in the materialist tradition, but as care. Care is an activity or practice aimed
at meeting of needs of others. It is not considered as the part of productive work, which results in exploitation of women.

What is presented above highlights the role played by ‘gender’ in defining the status of women in the society. If the determinants of the subordinate status were biological, only a technological revolution would have saved women. But a rational analysis indicates that cultural factors contribute to the subordinate status. Man made status can be altered through man made strategies. Here comes the importance of empowerment. An analysis of empowerment definitely requires assessing the ability of women in altering the subordinate status attributed by gender.

Power relation existing in the family is the outcome of gender. An understanding of power and power relations will help the analysis of women empowerment more focused towards the research question.

2.3 Power and power relations

According to Max Weber’s (1968) classic definition, power is “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will, even against his resistance”. This power is being used against women in our society. It is explained through a sociological model. There are three possible faces that power wears.
The first face of power is visible in direct actions, where force or might is used in public decisions. The second face of power can be seen in attempts to redefine or reshape an issue into something less threatening. The power in the third face is used to manipulate people’s perceptions so that they are unaware of having a grievance.

The above three faces of power work against women in the contemporary world. These power relations are the creations of ‘gender’. Since the power relations are defined by the society there is possibility of redefining them. In the attempt to redefine power relations ‘power’ is given different interpretation.

Power is the key word in the concept of women empowerment. Till recently we had wrong notions about power, in the 1970s and 1980s feminists developed the term ‘patriarchy’ to refer to the systemic nature of men’s power. Patriarchy has been defined as a set of social relations between men, which establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women (Oakley 1997).

Oxaal (1997) explains what is meant by power in the context of empowerment. Power operates in four different ways. Power over is the conventional view of power. Certain groups benefit at the expense of others and compromise a relation where one individual or group is dominant and the other subordinated. The second view is power to which refers to power as enabling in the sense of solving problems.
and being creative. *Power with* is another view, which involves people organising for a collective aim with a comprehension of how to reach collective goals. The fourth view is *power within* is to have self-confidence and an awareness of oneself, it also involves a consciousness about the power relations in everyday life and how these effects one's own life.

In the context of empowerment we think of the constructive part of power which is given by power to, power with and power within. We have to resist ‘power over’ creatively.

**Concluding observations**

In this chapter the researcher has made a quick survey of the various strands of feminist thought with a view to get a proper understanding of the emergence, growth and development of the concept empowerment. The Liberal, Marxist, Radical and Socialist feminist literature substantially contributed towards the genesis of empowerment theory and praxis. The discussion on gender versus sex and power and power relations within gender is sharply focused on the subordinate status of women and thus empowerment was conceptualised as ability of women in altering existing power relations. Within the above theoretical framework, empowerment of Kerala women is assessed in the following chapters.
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