In this chapter, we provide a closer examination of feminism and its relevance and application to community engagement (CE). Feminism is not new to CE. The “disciplining” of feminism (Butin, 2010) in the academy, having taken root in women’s studies, actually preceded the CE movement (Costa & Leong, 2012b). That feminist work has, over time, only occasionally intersected with scholarly conversations of CE speaks to the deep suspicion many feminists hold of the charitable orientation of most CE work (Naples & Bojar, 2002). To date, feminist approaches to and conversations about CE have remained largely within the field of women’s studies where political action is a shared aim. In this volume, we ask the question, “What might be gained by bringing a feminist lens to the work of CE?” Our aim is to move this feminist perspective beyond the disciplinary bounds of women’s studies and illustrate the transformative potential for merging feminist theory with social action (Bubriski & Semaan, 2009).

This chapter provides an overview of perspectives on feminism and community engagement, so that readers will have a conceptual orientation for the chapters that follow. Readers with a more sophisticated understanding of community engagement and/or feminism will likely find this chapter review of familiar ground. We begin with a discussion of feminism, inclusive of an examination of why some feminists adopt approaches seemingly outside the
CE movement. Next, we offer an elaboration and critique of community engagement; and finally, we explicate how feminism can serve as a theoretical strategy for combining activist engagement with democratic concerns for social justice and equality (Gilbert, 2010; Holt, 2000; Rhoads, 1997).

**Feminism(s)**

Feminism is a movement striving for the political, social, and educational equality of women with men. Much confusion seems to exist around who or what or when to credit for feminism’s origins (Kaminer, 1993). Yet, its basic assumptions are that gender is central to the structure and organization of society; gender inequality exists; and gender inequality should be eliminated (Allan, 2008).

Feminism, while often treated as a unitary category, is not a monolithic ideology. Numerous branches of feminist thought each offer a distinctive view and explanations for women’s oppression (Flax, 1990; Tong, 1998). Here, we discuss a few perspectives in order to illustrate distinctions and theoretical tensions (for a comprehensive review, see Tong, 1998), and how they may impact approaches to conceptions of community engagement.

**Liberal Feminism**

Grounded in the values of individual autonomy and self-fulfillment, the main thrust of liberal feminism is that “female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints blocking women’s entrance to and success in the so-called public world” (Tong, 1998, p. 2). Liberal feminists, who “do not see hierarchy and bureaucracy as intrinsically antifeminist” (Martin, 1990, p. 184), have fought in the legal and political arenas for not only access but equity, and to obtain the same opportunities and benefits that are given to men. Evidence of twentieth-century liberal feminist action can be seen in the passage of the Equal Pay Act and Title IX, among other legislative milestones (Tong, 1998).

Liberal feminism has been criticized for focusing more on the needs of the White, middle-class woman, paying no substantive attention to race, ethnicity, or class differences among women (Tisdell, 1998). An example—of both a liberal feminist civic engagement and the critiques levied—can be found in the battered women’s movement. Liberal feminist activists in the battered women’s movement tend to align with legal and political systems—at times, as Kendrick (1998) notes, “in response to pressures by funding agencies… and law enforcement” (p. 152). Reliance on government