Beyond the Seam: Rethinking Women's Clothing and the Politics of Pockets through Feminist Materialism

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Abstract: This paper explores the historical and contemporary significance and evolution of pockets from a feminist theoretical perspective. The issue is analysed through the lens of fashion, patriarchy, and capitalism. Despite their practical importance in everyday life, 'pockets' have long been absent in women's attire, symbolising broader societal norms and patriarchal control over women's bodies and autonomy. The paper begins by tracing the historical background of the pocket system for both men and women and how this evolved to reinforce gender norms and societal roles. This is then contextualised using various feminist theoretical frameworks—namely radical, liberal, and Marxist. The intersectional dimensions of this issue are also examined, focusing on the compounded marginalisation experienced by women from oppressed communities within the "pocket politics." The patriarchal and capitalist commodification of women's basic needs is both criticised and analysed. The findings point to a growing resistance against pocketless designs, led by feminist movements that advocate for practicality and autonomy in women's fashion. By analysing the dynamics of pockets in women's clothing, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on gendered fashion practices, division of labour, and the persistence of gender inequality in contemporary society.

***Keywords*:** Autonomy, Capitalism, Division of Labour, Fashion, Gender Inequality, Patriarchy, Privacy

Introduction

Anthropologist Morton H. Levine defines privacy as "the maintenance of a personal life-space within which the individual has a chance to be an individual, to exercise and experience his own uniqueness." Pockets were "key to women's experience of privacy." The appearance and disappearance of pockets in women's clothing have often been overlooked in history as a minor detail in garment design, but this oversight hides the larger demand for gender equality. Pockets have symbolised economic independence; denying women

functional pockets reflects societal control over their autonomy and mobility within a patriarchal system. There also exists a gender-specific relationship between pockets and the bodily gestures and postures they enable. In times when people commonly shared living spaces and furniture, pockets often provided the only private, secure space for personal belongings.

Charlotte P. Gilman wrote in the *New York Times* in 1905: "Women have from time to time carried bags, sometimes sewn in, sometimes tied on, sometimes brandished in the hand, but a bag is not a pocket." Pockets have a long association with the oppressive systems of patriarchy and are a clear example of how fashion has perpetuated gender roles over time. The old phrase "I wonder who wears the pants in that family?" highlights who holds the power and decision-making authority - traditionally, the one wearing pants with pockets: men. Historically, women were not expected to carry anything of value—except for the family's honour, symbolically located in their "purity." There is a clear correlation between the size of pockets and access to basic rights. Women have long criticised the inadequacy and impracticality of pocket design. From the Rational Dress Movement to today's campaigns, women have resisted restrictions on their freedom and clothing choices. The absence of pockets intersects with race and class, especially disadvantaging working-class women and women of colour. From Victorian-era restrictions to present-day impractical fashion, these constraints reinforce dependence. Feminist theory—especially radical, liberal, and materialist strands—shows how material culture sustains patriarchal norms.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore the positioning of pockets in women's clothing, with attention to historical, cultural, and economic contexts. A wide range of academic and non-academic sources were analysed, including scholarly articles, magazines, and existing socio-economic research on the exclusion of pockets in women's

fashion. Feminist theoretical frameworks inform the analysis. Surveys and studies from academics, business practitioners, gender scholars, and sustainability researchers were also examined. Movements such as the Rational Dress Society campaign and the contemporary #WeWantPockets initiative were studied to understand current real-world feminist resistance and advocacy for pocket-inclusive clothing, challenging traditional and impractical fashion norms.

Historical Context of Pockets

The earliest form of a pocket dates back to 3275 BCE. In Ancient Egypt, people carried small tools or valuables in pouches tied to their waists. Ötzi, the 'Iceman,' was found with such a pouch. In the medieval period, both men and women wore pockets as belt-attached pouches, but rising fears of theft led people to hide them under their clothing. Jackets and petticoats had slits to access pockets. Early women's pockets were larger than men's, often decorated and functional. By the 17th century, however, gendered differences began to emerge. Women's pockets were increasingly separate from their garments and hidden beneath layers of clothing. As fashion evolved, skirts became form-fitting and left no space for bulky pockets. These were replaced with reticules—small handbags that could hold only a coin or a handkerchief. Indian women used similar accessories called *potlis* to compensate for the lack of pockets in ethnic wear.

The 20th century saw resistance in the form of instructions on how to sew pockets into skirts. Pockets would disappear and reappear with fashion trends, but often in impractical forms. Societal obsession with women's bodies further restricted functional clothing. Women were perceived as having no need for pockets because they supposedly had no access to money or property. During the French Revolution, pockets in women's clothing were banned, fearing that women might conceal revolutionary material. This connects pockets to political activism. During the World Wars, women wore trousers with large pockets, but post-war

fashion returned to hyper-feminised styles, with slim dresses and pocketless designs. The rise of the handbag industry cemented this trend. Christian Dior infamously stated in 1954: "Men have pockets to keep things in, women for decoration." Pockets were also mythologised—seen as witchcraft tools or associated with sexuality and secrecy. This gendered suspicion further justified their erasure from women's fashion.

A Cross Study

A functional divide in the design of men's and women's pockets became increasingly clear. Men's pockets were practical; women's were seen as unnecessary or aesthetically undesirable. A popular quote stated that women already had "four external bulges"—breasts and hips—and adding a pocket would create an "ungainly fifth." The assumption was that women didn't need money or space because they were financially dependent on male figures. Fashion designers, often male, dismissed functional needs in favour of visual appeal. Loose-fitting clothes for women were labelled as "mom jeans" or "boyfriend jeans," stripping them of desirability.

Commodification and Capitalism in Fashion

Pockets contribute directly to the gender divide. Audrey Robbins notes that "the controversy surrounding women's pockets may soon be a thing of the past" as fashion trends toward gender-neutral designs—but the current reality still reflects women's independence being undermined. According to Marxist feminist theory, capitalism thrives by commodifying every aspect of life. The absence of pockets pushes women to rely on handbags, driving a $47 billion industry. Handbags are marketed as luxury items symbolising femininity and status, compelling women to spend on accessories that compensate for basic functionality.

A *Badger Herald* survey found that 58.3% of female students wished their pants had more pockets, and only 41.7% owned a dress with pockets. A study by *The Pudding* revealed that women's pockets are 48% shorter and 6.5% narrower than men's in skinny jeans, and 46%

shorter and 10% narrower in straight-cut jeans. Fashion thus turns women's needs into endless consumption loops, reinforcing gender roles while maintaining industry profits. Women remain trapped in a cycle of buying to "keep up," feeding an economy that benefits from their subjugation.

Patriarchal Regime Over Fashion

The erasure of pockets is not only capitalist but deeply patriarchal. Sylvia Walby notes that clothing reflects a dual system of oppression—material and symbolic. Women's bodies are commodified, and fashion reinforces their social and economic dependence. Tie-on pockets were common in the 17th and 18th centuries, associated with housewifery and domesticity. Literature like *Grandmamma's Pockets* links them with gendered labour. Their placement near the pelvic region sexualised them; visual culture portrayed pockets as covert spaces associated with extramarital secrecy.

Men's dress prioritised utility—deep pockets and practical features symbolised their active public roles. Women's fashion, prioritising aesthetics, relegated them to decorative beings. As fashion mandates visual appeal over practicality, women are rendered dependent, modest, and submissive. Even today, many women face daily inconvenience due to the lack of functional clothing. The social conditioning surrounding beauty, delicacy, and body image reinforces patriarchal expectations. The lack of pockets becomes symbolic of their denied autonomy and restricted agency—psychologically internalised as part of their identity.

Feminist Theoretical Critique

The absence of pockets in women's clothing serves as an amalgamation of issues of gender inequality, bodily autonomy, and systemic control within patriarchal and capitalist societies. This issue has always been central to feminist critiques centering on the themes of equality and privacy mainly, along with socio-economic and political independence. Women from diverse socio-economic conditions experience this issue differently. The issue related to

the absence of pockets, and compulsion to adapt to other means, is subjective to women according to their race, class, region, and economic situation. Women of colour, disability, and identities might find it difficult to adapt to mainstream fashion notions, since they won't align with their needs and plan of utility. The economic burden of purchasing additional accessories like handbags affects women in different ways, perpetuating economic inequality within.

Radical feminists termed pockets as a tool to impose patriarchal control. They argued that, analysing the issue historically, it clearly shows how it functioned as a means to control women's bodies and objectify them, along with creating unnecessary body standards. Men always thought women are supposed to carry around their bodies and present themselves how men would like to see. The impractical dress designs promote the same male gaze notions, prioritising aesthetics and beautification, while overlooking or ignoring practicality and comfort. It limits their mobility and autonomy by restricting their area of movement in society, in all ways. Thus, it subtly keeps the downgraded position of women intact by making them dependent on men, even for their personal daily needs. Radical feminists see this as a form of 'imposed dependence,' denying the space for being self-sufficient.

Liberal feminists argued for equality through the medium of functional fashion. They demanded more practicality and autonomy in women's clothing. So, along with advocating for equal rights and opportunities, they demanded the right to dress according to their needs and comfort without hindering their mobility. As it exists as a resistance to women's utilitarian demands, the absence of pockets is clearly a violation of liberty to participate in public and private life equally. So, liberal feminists have always been at the forefront of the demand for practical dressing practices, prioritising functionality over beautification.

Marxist feminists, on the other hand, analysed how the impracticality of pockets in women's clothing is a reflection of patriarchal control along with a very evident capitalist

strategy aimed at profit maximisation. They argue that the fashion industry, just like any other, commodifies women's needs for their gain. They also note that this is a form of economic exploitation where their needs are deliberately ignored. It is quite evident that here the same notion of restricting women into the sole tagline of consumers, rather than producers, is exercised. It also enforces economic dependence and reflects gendered division of labour through related clothing practices. Men's clothing is designed according to their accommodation in the public realm as workers and producers; but women's clothing clearly resonates with her confinement in private, domestic spaces, keeping them away from other productive workspaces, thus reinforcing capitalist and patriarchal norms. Also, 'the absence of pockets is seen as a strategy, forcing women to buy handbags and other accessories to make up for their clothing's lack of functionality.'

Resistances and Rise of Voices

Women's pockets were seen as their private spaces they took out into the public with freedom, and during revolutionary times, this freedom was very frightening. The Rational Dress Society, founded in 1891, called for women to dress considering their health, to give up corsets, wear loose trousers, and adopt clothing that allowed movement. The initiative critiqued the restrictive and impractical clothing imposed upon women during the Victorian era. They urged for a more practical and healthier way of clothing that allows movement and utility, similar to men. Side by side with the Rational Dress Society was the idea of a 'new woman,' who believed that they should have equal political and financial existence as men.

Around the same time women's suffrage was on the rise, and the demand for pockets was in full swing, depicting that the demand for practical pockets went hand-in-hand with women's rights. In 1910, the 'Suffragette suit,' which had almost six pockets, became popular; "Plenty of Pockets in Suffragette Suit" reported a 1910 *New York Times* headline. The suffrage movement saw pockets becoming a symbol of women's freedom and reflected

their growing political power, with women wearing jackets and skirts with pamphlets and personal belongings in their pockets. Amelia Bloomer popularised the 'Bloomer suit' in the 1850s, resembling today's pants and trousers. These garments had pockets and were designed aiming at women's mobility and financial freedom. The 1940s wartime fashion is also a highlight in this case, when women were encouraged to take up the roles traditionally controlled by men, also adapting more suitable pants and trousers with pockets, to carry tools and other essentials.

Second-wave feminism, along with the broad ideas it handled, critiqued impractical fashion notions. Authors like Betty Friedan criticised how fashion became a tool of patriarchy to limit women's freedom of movement and self-sufficiency and thus reinforce traditional gender roles. Women started demanding and wearing more androgynous or functional clothing with pockets, titling them as symbols of autonomy and freedom in all aspects. As women started engaging in the professional workforce, the demand for pockets became even stronger, extending it to the call for equality at the workplace. Following the new path of digital activism, the recent social media movements such as the #WeWantPockets campaign amplified the conversation in the modern community. The digital campaigns urged designers to focus more on inclusive dressing practices, prioritising practicality and comfort. Intersectional feminists argue for marginalised women's rights in this concern, where they find it difficult to meet society's beauty and aesthetic conventions. They urge activists to focus on meeting the practical needs of women of all sections, not just the privileged groups.

Conclusion

"The history of pockets isn't just sexist, it's political." The whole trajectory screams the fact that fashion thrives on sexism. It is quite evident that differences in the design of pockets reinforce sexist ideas of gender. Pockets, seemingly an ignorable part of clothes, represent wider demands for women's autonomy, mobility, and equality. The appearance and

reappearance of pockets in discussions reveal how it functions in establishing patriarchy, along with rigorous capitalist profit-gaining strategies. Feminist theories reveal the social, economic, and psychological impacts of fashion, and how gendered clothing practices reinforce inequality in society. Pockets have always been a part of feminist scholarly attention because they indicate the absence or presence of privileges and power. Burman and Fennetaux argue that pockets "open new and arresting ways of looking at women's lives in the past." Movements from the Rational Dress Movement to the contemporary #WeWantPockets campaign are proof of the consistent call for practical, functional clothing as a means of bringing the demands of women into the public realm.

The inclusion of pockets, more than a matter of convenience, is a symbol of women's ongoing fight for the right to full participation and freedom in all aspects of life. Women's clothing is currently evolving, with some designers prioritising functionality over form. A few fashion brands, focused on sustainability and gender-neutral values, have begun incorporating functional pockets into their designs. In India, kurtis and palazzos with pockets, and even pocketed sarees, are becoming more popular, adopting functional yet traditional options. As women start adapting more practical and functional clothing designs, pockets serve as both a literal and symbolic presence of independence. But still the question arises—how many can afford to purchase these products from independent designer firms? Until the intersectional plight of women is not addressed in this aspect, pockets are forever going to remain a barrier to women achieving a normalised public-private life similar to men.

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