

# Philosophy of Gender

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## ABSTRACT

In the recent past years, the underrepresentation of women in academic philosophy and in daily life and almost around the whole world has been expressed as a great concern. If we are to focus our attention on this troubling phenomenon, we will come to know that there are a lot of factors (which vary from region to region and people to people) that have a notable contribution to the gender disparity. A full explanation of this troubling phenomenon is likely to be quite complex since there are, almost certainly, many factors that contribute to the gender disparity. Our most basic goals in this paper are to discuss feminism, and to compare the facts stated by the feminist theorists and the biological determinists and to reach a result on the basis of these arguments.

**Keywords:** Feminist theorists, biological determinism, Sex/Gender distinction.

Feminism can be understood as a movement that is meant to bring an end to women's oppression in any aspect of human life. Now most basic question that should arise in one's mind is to understand the term woman. One of many possible ways to understand "woman" in this claim is to take it as a sex term. "Woman" picks out human females and being a human female depends on various biological and anatomical features for instance 'genitalia'. But there are many cases in which many feminists have understood "woman" differently and not solely as a sex term, but considering the gender term that is dependent upon social and cultural factors such as social position. In so doing, they distinguished sex (being female or male) from gender (being a woman or a man), although most ordinary language users appear to treat the two interchangeably.

## The Gender Distinction

The term 'gender' is neither easy nor straightforward to characterize and it can mean different things to different feminist theorists. In order to understand the terminology of 'gender', following two most basic and important points can be discussed.

## Biological Determination

Talking about the ordinary people, according to which it seems the words gender and sex are coextensive: that women are female human and men are male human. Unlike this opinion of most of the people, history tells that many of the feminist theorists disagree to this and they highly endorse the gender/sex distinction. According to the opinion of those theorists, the term 'sex' denotes males and females of the homo sapiens on the basis of the biological features for instance chromosomes, hormones, sex organs and other physical features, however, the term 'gender' denotes men and women on

the basis of their social features such as behavior towards different stimulus, position in society, social role or even identity. The basic motivation of the feminists to make this distinction was to make them able to counter biological determinism or to show the view: biology is destiny.

The most important and typical example that can be discussed here is that of Geddes and Thompson whose research work in the 1880's discussed that traits such as social, behavior and psychology are caused and controlled by the metabolic

rate of the body. Women being anabolic are supposed to conserve energy due to which they are passive, sluggish, stable and uninterested in politics and social matters. Contrary to this, men being katabolic are more eager, energetic, passionate and hence more interested in socialism and politics. These biological facts of metabolic rates not only stated and explained the behavior differences between men and women but also justified that what social and political behavior is suitable and for whom. Now this study results in withholding women in exercising their social and political rights which is highly inappropriate. In order to counter this kind of biological determinism, feminist theorists argue that differences based on behavior and psychology are caused due to social reasons, instead of biological. For example, Simone de Beauvoir has claimed that one is not born woman, but rather becomes a woman and gender social discrimination leads to moral and intellectual effects in women which then seem to be natural. So, the most common observed traits that are associated with men and women are learned or culturally acquired instead of being caused by anatomy or chromosomes.

Although this type of biological determinism presented by Geddes and Thompson is not very common nowadays, but still this idea of behavioral and psychological differences between men and women has not totally disappeared. For example, in the 1970s it was argued that women should not be airline pilots due to the fact that they are hormonally unstable once a month, hence, not performing their duties as well as men. More recently, a research shows that the differences in male and female brains have been explained on the basis of the anatomy of corpus callosum (a bundle of nerves that connects the right and left cerebral hemispheres which is thought to be responsible for various psychological and behavioral differences). This study claims that the corpus callosum is thicker in case of women due to which women's ability to perform some specialized visual-spatial skills, like reading maps gets impaired.

### **Terminology of Gender**

For the purpose of distinguishing biological differences from social or psychological ones and in order to discuss the latter, feminists appropriated the term 'gender', especially when we talk about the psychologists that write on transsexuality, who are first to employ the term gender in this sense. Until the 1960s, the term 'gender' was used solely to refer to masculine and feminine words, for example le and la in French. However, there has been introduced a new situation according to which some people felt that they were trapped inside the wrong bodies. In 1968, psychologist Robert Stoller began using the term 'sex' to pick out biological traits and 'gender' to pick out the amount of femininity and masculinity a person exhibited. Although (by and large) a person's sex and gender complemented each other, separating out these terms seemed to make theoretical sense allowing Stoller to explain the phenomenon of transsexuality: transsexuals' sex and gender simply don't match.

Most of the feminist theorists found this difference fact useful and appreciated it. The major reason for that is that this definition by Stoller enabled them to argue that most of the differences between man and women are caused socially and therefore can be changed. For instance, Gayle Rubin used the phrase 'sex/gender system' in order to describe "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention" and she further employed this system to articulate that "part of social life which is the locus of the oppression of women" describing gender as the "socially imposed division of the sexes". According to his thoughts, even the biological differences are fixed, gender differences resulted from social interventions that dictate a society that men and women should behave. Now as gender is declared as social, it is considered to be alterable by the help of social and political reforms and thus bring an end to the era of women subordination. Thus the most basic aim of feminism is the creation of such a society which is genderless (though not sexless) and in which the sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what

one does and with whom one makes love.

## **PROBLEMS FACED IN SEX/GENDER DISTINCTION**

### **Is Gender Uniform?**

When women are considered as a group, it is assumed that this group as a whole share some characteristics features, experience, common condition or criterion and on the basis of these possessions their group is defined, as opposed to, let's say, men. So every individual in the group of women is different from men in the above stated respects. According to the thinking of MacKinnon the method of sexually objectifying ways is the common condition that defines women's gender and what women as women share. All women differ from all men in this respect.

Further, pointing out females who are not sexually objectified does not provide a counterexample to MacKinnon's view. Being sexually objectified is constitutive of being a woman; a female who escapes sexual objectification, then, would not count as a woman.

### **Is Sex classification solely a matter of biology?**

Most of the people, which also includes many feminists accept that the sex ascriptions are totally a matter of biology and does not include any social or cultural dimension. It is quite easy to understand that there are only two sexes and classifying biological sex is totally unproblematic. On the other hand there exist a group of people who believes that sex classifications are not unproblematic and declaring this matter solely related to biology is not right. For the purpose of explaining and making more sense of this, it is helpful to distinguish object- and idea-construction: certain kind of objects can be constructed by the social forces (such as sexed bodies or gendered individuals) and similarly certain kinds of ideas can also be constructed (such as sex or gender concepts). First, take the object- construction of sexed bodies. Secondary sex characteristics, or the physiological and biological features commonly associated with males and females, are affected by social practices. For example, in some societies, smaller size of women can directly show that they are fed less due to their low social status. Biological factors cannot be solely considered for uniformity in muscle shape, size and strength within sex categories, so it can be considered that it depends heavily on exercise opportunities: if males and females were allowed the same exercise opportunities and equal encouragement to exercise, it is thought that bodily dimorphism would diminish. A number of medical phenomena involving bones (like osteoporosis) have social causes directly related to expectations about gender, women's diet and their exercise opportunities. In the light of these examples it can be suggested that physiological features which are thought to be sex-specific traits and not affected by social and cultural factors are, after all, to some extent products of social conditioning. Social conditioning, then, shapes our biology.

Second, taking the idea-construction of sex concepts it can be said that sex is the product of social forces in the sense that what we are counting as sex is shaped by social meaning. Scientifically speaking, those with XX-chromosomes, large egg cells that are produced by ovaries (female genitalia) have a relatively higher proportion of female hormones and other secondary sex traits such as small body, less body hair etc. counting it as a biological female. On the other hand those with XY-chromosomes, small sperm cells produced by testes (male genitalia) have a relatively higher proportion of male hormones and other secondary sex characteristics such as a relatively large body size and significant amount of hair on the body counting it as male. But this understanding on the basis of science and research is fairly recent. If we have a look on the view of the Ancient Greeks we come to know that, until the end of 18th century they did not consider male and female to be from distinct sex categories and with specific characteristics, instead, they used 'one-sex model' to make an understanding of this concept. According to this model males and females were considered the members of the same sex category. Female genitals were considered to be same as men with a difference that they were simply directed inside the body. So basically according to them there was no difference between the ovaries and the testes. It was not until the late 1700s that scientists began to drift away from the 'one-sex model' towards the 'two-sex model' and started thinking of female and male anatomies as radically different.

### Is there a distinction between Sex and Gender?

Along with the arguments against identity politics and for gender performativity, Butler is of the opinion that it is totally unintelligible to hold the distinction between the biological sex and social gender because according to her both are socially constructed. She states that:

*If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (Butler 1999, 10–11)*

(It is quite notable that Butler is not alone in this claim that there are no tenable distinctions between nature/culture, biology/construction and sex/ gender and Antony 1998; Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994; Prokhovnik 1999 can also be regarded in this matter). In the passage cited above Butler makes two different and important claims: according to first one, sex is totally a social construction, and that sex itself is gender. In order to unpack her view, consider the two claims in turn. First, the idea that sex is a social construct, for Butler, boils down to the view that our sexed bodies are also per formative. Prima facie, this implausibly implies that female and male bodies do not have independent existence

and that if gendering activities ceased, so would physical bodies. This is not Butler's claim; rather, her position is that bodies viewed as the material foundations on which gender is constructed, are themselves constructed as if they provide such material foundations.

So according to Butler, there is no existence of sexed bodies outside social meanings. According to her there is nothing like emptied sexed bodies on which the gender is constructed and sex categories are not picked out on the basis of objective features of the world. Instead, our sexed bodies are themselves discursively constructed: they are the way they are, at least to a substantial extent, because of what is attributed to sexed bodies and how they are classified. Butler states that sex assignment (calling someone female or male) is normative, for example, when the doctor calls a newly born infant a girl or a boy, she/he makes a normative claim and not a descriptive one. In reality, the doctor performs an illocutionary speech act and the doctor's utterance makes infants into boys or girls. People then engage themselves in activities which narrates as if sexes naturally come in two and that being female or male is an objective feature of the world, rather than being a consequence of certain constitutive acts. This is what Butler is trying to state that there is no existence of physical bodies out the social and cultural means and that the sex is the social construction resulting into gender.

### Is the Sex/Gender distinction useful?

In accordance with the opinion of some feminists this sex/gender distinction is not useful at all. The basic reason for this opinion is because this type of thinking undercuts the basic feminist aims: the distinction is taken to reflect and replicate androcentric oppositions between (for instance) mind/body, culture/nature and reason/emotion that have been used to justify women's oppression. Due to these types of oppositions, one part becomes superior to the other and the devalued portion is usually women. In order to understand this consider the example of human subjectivity and agency which are identified with the mind but most of the times, as women are usually identified with their bodies, they are devalued as human subjects and agents. This opposition between mind and body further leads to some other differences such as reason/emotion, culture/nature, rational/ irrational, where one side of each distinction is devalued (one's bodily features are usually valued less than one's mind, rationality is usually valued more than irrationality) and women are associated with the devalued terms: they are thought to be closer to bodily features and nature than men, to be irrational, emotional and so on. The example of which can be seen in job interviews. When men are being interviewed, they are considered as gender-neutral persons and they are not asked something in which the basic intention is to seek information whether they are planning to take some time off for family or home but on the other hand women are usually asked about such queries. This opposition between mind and body, is then, considered to be

mapped onto the opposition between men and women.

This dualism in mind and body is also said to map on sex and gender distinction. The main idea is that gender maps on the mind and sex on the body. Although not used by those endorsing this view, the basic idea can also be summed by the slogan “Gender is between the ears, sex is between the legs”: the implication is that, while sex is immutable, gender is something individuals have control over – it is something we can alter and change through individual choices. However, since women are said to be more closely associated with biological features and men are treated as gender-neutral persons, the implication is that “man equals gender, which is associated with mind and choice, freedom from body, autonomy, and with the public real; while woman equals sex, associated with the body, reproduction, ‘natural’ rhythms and the private realm”.

### Women as a group

Many critiques of the sex/gender distinction have called into question the viability of the category women. Feminism is the movement to end the oppression women as a group face. But according to the above given arguments which reflect that gender construction is not uniform then how can the category of women be understood? And then it becomes quite evident that the sharp distinction between biological sex and social gender is false or (at least) not useful, and that various features associated with women play a role in what it is to be a woman, none of which are individually necessary and jointly sufficient (like a variety of social roles, positions, behaviors, traits, bodily features and experiences)? It is also necessary that the feminists must be able to address cultural and social differences in gender construction if feminism is to be a genuinely inclusive movement and be careful not to posit commonalities that mask important ways in which women qua women differ. On the basis of these concerns (among many others) generate a situation where the feminist theorists directly aim to speak and make political demands in the name of women, hence at the same time rejecting the idea of women as a group i.e. unified category of women.

### CONCLUSION

The above given work first looked and analyzed the arguments of feminist theorists in comparison to the biological determinism and the claim that gender is socially constructed. In the next part it looked into the work of critiques of feminism and of prevalent understandings of gender and sex, and the distinction itself. In response to all of the above stated concerns, the last portion that how the unified women’s category is usually articulated for political purposes of feminists. It also gives us the idea that how the name of women rights is being used to gain power in the name of equality and social justice. This work has also included an illustration of two basic things. First, that gender – or what it is to be a woman

or a man – is still very much a live issue. Second, that it is not entirely cleared by the feminists that gender is about social factors and that it is (in some sense) distinct from biological sex. This work tries out its best to make evident that what is true and useful and clarifies the correct definition of gender and there are contemporary feminists who still find that there is a value of the original 1960s sex/gender distinction.

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