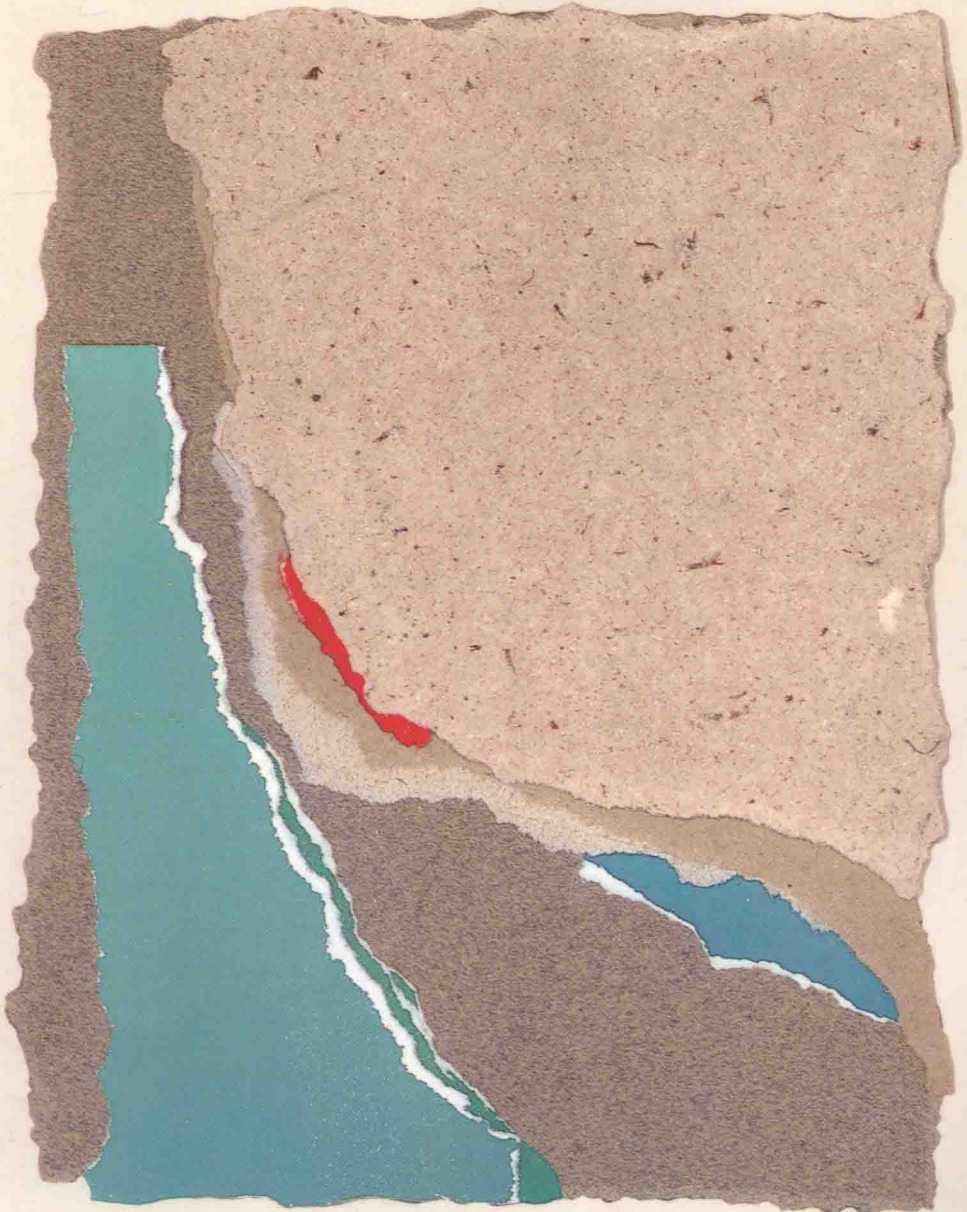


# **GENDER BASICS**

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN AND MEN



**ANNE MINAS**

# GENDER BASICS

Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men

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# Preface

THIS COLLECTION GREW GRADUALLY out of my course “Philosophy of Women and Men” (originally “Philosophy of Women”), a first-year course in philosophy and women’s studies that has run continuously at the University of Waterloo since 1976. My original intention had been to teach a course in feminism, which I saw as a cluster of positions focusing on the oppression of women. Student response, however, rechanneled the currents of the course around gender issues (these being issues in human life where gender is a factor). Theory seemed of interest to these students only as it served to clarify and sort out elements of an issue and illuminate a path toward its resolution. In addition, once feminism had brought gender into focus, many students wanted perspectives on the issues from both genders. This did not disturb my plan of restricting perspectives on these issues to feminist perspectives, since feminism is a moral position while male, like female, is a gender. Refusal to discuss an issue from a male perspective began to seem much like claiming that heterosexuality or some other mainstream perspective had a monopoly on good insights, good feminist insights in particular.

Because of the confusion and lack of settlement in this area, I have tried to include as many points of view as space allowed. Usually there are more facets to a gender issue than those where women’s oppression is integral, and I have included writings that address some of these other facets as well. Instructors who use this as a text should find that it contains something to satisfy almost every student mentality. As final insurance on this matter, I have included bibliographies that are longer than usual in a text for a first course.

After seventeen years I now think my class deserves a text to meet its needs. This collection is thus dedicated to these students, past, present, and future, and their counterparts everywhere. They embody our hopes for a future of better gender relations.

Several people helped me take this project forward. James Horne and Rolf George, as chairs of the philosophy department, allowed me to mount and run my course during a time when many considered feminism too lightweight to be included in a scholarly curriculum. Jan Narveson also came forward rather quickly with the perception that feminism spoke to genuine moral and social issues, thus providing a sturdy backboard off which I could bounce my ideas. (More recently, he guided me through the rather bewildering maze of book production.)

Christopher Knapper introduced me to new teaching methods. Instead of filling class time with long, boring lectures, he suggested short introductions to the material,

followed by study questions on overhead transparencies. Students may thus address the material on their own, or in small discussion groups, guided by the questions. My introductions and overhead transparencies quickly became, at the insistence of the students, bound materials distributed at the beginning of the term for students to use on their own time.

Because these introductions and questions have been cut in around the readings in this collection, an instructor who uses it as a text will probably have an experience something like mine, of finding her students less dependent upon her. I suggest a bright side to this situation. (1) Dependency in adults is an outmoded patriarchal idea, damaging to the human spirit; (2) as instructors, we have an obligation to send independent thinkers back into their communities; (3) when students miss class, it is a distinct advantage if they can get an understanding of the material on their own, instead of spending long, darkening afternoons in our offices doing so; and (4) when not all relevant material needs to be covered in class, a student has more options for assignment topics. As instructors, we are still useful as resource persons, as validation for students' ideas, and as restraints for keeping these ideas within acceptable limits.

One cold February night in 1991, a summary of my teaching materials fell into the hands of Ken King, Wadsworth's philosophy editor. This gave him a rather formidable option of bringing a new idea into a still turbulent area.

I thank and salute these men in feminism. I do not believe, however, that I could have accepted their help and support had they not been preceded by my father, Alexander P. Humphrey. He conveyed to me a generic sense of "man" that applied to me, him, and all others of our genders. He also warned against any hasty segmentation of the human world into "good" and "bad" (since everyone turns out to be a mixture of both).

Production editor Ruth Cottrell did a very nice job with the (rather badly needed) final polish. Susan Babbitt (Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario) inundated me with helpful last-minute suggestions, and Rosemarie Tong (Davidson College) and Christine Pierce (North Carolina State University) got the project off to a good start at the proposal stage. Other Wadsworth reviewers I should thank for their efforts are Gloria Cowan, California State University, San Bernardino; Alison Jaggard, University of Colorado, Boulder; Sharon M. Meagher, University of Scranton; Lani Roberts, Oregon State University; and Barbara E. Wall, Villanova University. Thanks are also due to the behind-the-scenes production team at Wadsworth (Peggy Mehan, Robert Kauser, and the many whose names I don't know). My mini-production team here (Debbie Dietrich, Anne Wagland, Derik Hawley, William Dolan, and Kelly Colucci) put marathon efforts into the many send-offs to Wadsworth.

Thanks, finally, to the writers who gave me permission to reprint their work, persons who in many cases have devoted not only their writing but also other parts of their lives to pushing back the frontiers in this important area.

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# *Introduction*

**W**E LIVE OUR LIVES as gendered human beings. As children, we are either boys or girls. As adults, we are either men or women. The fact that we are gendered means that we are called upon to think about certain issues and make decisions about them. Many of these issues are very important to us on a continuing basis.

A film is only a film. We see the film, it is over, we leave the theater and, if we read the reviews at all, we agree or disagree with them. The film may furnish material for interesting conversations with friends, but otherwise, once we have seen it, it is over for us.

Gender issues are not like films. As women and men we confront choices such as whether we should pair up with a particular person, whether we should marry or remain single, whether we should have children, whether we should be productive members of the work force in a particular type of position, and whether we will be happy doing the kind of work the position requires. Despite the fact that we reach and implement decisions about such matters, the issues involved often continue to linger afterwards. We married and had children, but was that really the best decision? We entered a certain line of work, but did we choose the one that was best for us? We decided to remain neutral about the issue of pornography, but should we have taken a position one way or another? Even irrevocable decisions have a tendency to come back and haunt us as issues, real or hypothetical dilemmas with no obvious solutions. Much as we are pleased with the three children we decided to have, they now seem to be at very difficult ages. This may lead us to wonder whether any two of them would have been more than enough.

Since such matters touch us directly, any reader must have already put thought into at least some of them. Thus, the subjects addressed by the writers in this collection should not be totally new to anyone. These writers have only, perhaps, put more thought into the topics than has the average person. In addition, many of the writers have interesting or unusual perspectives on their chosen subjects.

Many issues involving gender arise in what is sometimes called one's "personal life." This is comprised of the activities a person decides upon taking no one into account except herself plus those where she also considers other people to whom she is related by personal ties. One's relation to a doctor is not usually personal because interest in her is limited to the quality of medical care she offers. Any other doctor offering care of similar quality would do just as well. A spouse, child, or friend, by contrast, is not so interchangeable with someone else. For this reason, we think of our ties to them as personal. In personal relations, gender can make a difference. Our choice of spouse

depends on gender, and also on the qualities we think valuable (or productive of a valuable relationship with us) and we often see these qualities as gender related.

Gender issues are not, however, confined to private plots of life that can be cordoned off from the rest of human activity. We take our gender with us into the workplace and the rest of public life. Gender affects our perspectives on others and their perspectives on us, even when our relations with them cannot be classified as personal.

Very early in life we learn whether we are girls or boys and, accordingly, what we are expected to do or not do. Gender expectations for children (e.g., what types of clothing are appropriate for which gender) are relatively simple, however, compared to what is expected of adult women and men. Expectations for adults can be confining; also a particular sort of behavior can exact a much heavier price for one gender than for the other. For example, a certain posture that passes as “normal” for a man may precipitate unwelcome sexual attention if taken by a woman. Career paths in the work force are laid out according to gender; it is much easier for one gender than the other to enter particular careers and to remain and progress in them. All told, it is difficult to find any segment of human life where gender fails to make a difference.

Accordingly, the topics selected for this collection are drawn from both private and public life. I tried to select subjects where gender clearly plays a major role and where the writers locate and explain this role for the reader.

Most of the writers acknowledge, in one way or another, an important problem in gendered life, the oppression of women. Even though some writers note it only in passing as they focus their discussion on other matters, it is the one problem that infuses the collection as a whole. Society is, in a word, sexist. It systematically favors men over women, and it engineers and maintains structures to ensure that men receive better treatment and have more options available to them. These structures are robust and effective in both private and public life. Feminism, the movement that has brought this matter to our attention, is discussed after a brief discussion of the two title words of the collection, “basics” and “gender.”

## Basics

What are “basics”? Insofar as a subject is based on experience, its basics are those elements that are as close to experience as the subject allows. Despite their proximity to experience, these elements are always beliefs, or experience that has been structured by thought. Because we are thinking beings, we bring thought to all experience; thought serves to make sense of the experience and to incorporate it into the structure of beliefs we already have. Incorporation of a new experiential belief may strengthen this structure by giving us more confidence in it. Or it may require us to make changes in the existing structure because the new belief, which conflicts with some old ones in the structure, is more compelling.

As we know, people vary in important ways in what they believe. Since pre-existing beliefs always structure experience, it is not surprising that people who bring different

beliefs to the same situation receive different experiential messages. People may disagree, perhaps argumentatively, about what actually happened. They have developed an issue at the most basic (experiential) level, having arrived at points of view at this level that are initially incompatible.

Not everything that matters in life is intellectually important. Whether the flower garden would look better if it included petunias may turn into a very emotional matter, but the subject has little theoretical interest to recommend it. Philosophy focuses on more interesting issues—ones that furnish material for thought—such as world hunger, punishment, and future generations. Moral philosophy focuses on what is right, wrong, allowable, mandatory, forbidden, etc. When moral philosophy is directed to social issues, such as those just mentioned, it becomes social philosophy as well. Social philosophy works out moral positions on social institutions—those structures in which human beings live as members of society.

This volume deals with issues in social philosophy because the writings concern institutions that have been shaped by social forces. For example, both prostitution and marriage assume their present form because of their social histories and their places in a wider social context. Even though we may feel that our choice of whom and whether to marry is more under our control than, say, whether and how to end world hunger, the alternatives we choose among in matters like marriage are socially formed entities. We may take steps to change these entities into something more suited and more valuable to us, but the socially formed structures we inherit are what we must begin with.

Gender issues are any controversies in which gender figures in a central way. Like other social and moral issues, gender issues can arise through conflict in our experiential beliefs about gendered human life. One perception of pornography is that it is simply one form of sexual material which can meet a particular sexual need or interest; it is relatively harmless unless it is misused, or contains depictions of persons being harmed as judged by standards external to sexuality. A quite different perception of pornography is that it portrays persons, women in particular, as sexual items that can be bought and sold. Thus, the same situation—marketing sexually explicit material—can generate different experiences because these experiences have been structured by different beliefs. The very contents of the experienced situation may thus become a matter of dispute.

The criterion for whether an issue is experientially basic is whether it can be described in terms that a lay thinker can comprehend. These terms would not be the property of any special theory that only particular groups of philosophers, sociologists, or scientists can understand. Instead they would belong to the large societywide vocabulary that we expect most educated persons to find intelligible. Persons acquainted with some subject matter, but lacking technical expertise in it, can then draw on this common vocabulary to think and converse with others about the subject. I have tried to select writings that can be understood without mastery of special theories. In these writings, thought, analysis and argumentation are usually confined to concepts and terminology that do not rise above the level of conceptualization which any thoughtful person can understand. This is as close to experience as well-developed perspectives on gender issues can get.