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What is Gender?

Sociological Approaches

Mary Holmes



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What is Gender?

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Introduction to the sociology of gender

Chris got up and went to the bathroom. Leaving pyjamas on the floor and turning on the shower, Chris stepped into the water. It was not a hair-washing day, so after a quick rub with the soap it was time to get out and dry off. After towelling and applying hair putty to the new short haircut, Chris dabbed on some moisturising lotion and went to get dressed. Nothing special was happening today so jeans and a T-shirt would be fine. The only choice really to be made was between basketball boots or sandals.

This is a paragraph I made up. When you read it I imagine that you assumed either that Chris was a woman, or that Chris was a man. Yet Chris is a shortened name which both Christophers and Christines use and I have not used any pronouns to indicate sex. There is nothing in this description that definitively identifies masculinity or femininity. You may protest that 'real' men do not use moisturiser, or that women are less likely to have short hair. Nevertheless, most people know of men who are into face creams and other such products and women who have short hair. Your decision is not defensible, but the point is that you made a decision. We do not know how to think about people as neutral; we always think about them as women or as men and we interact with them accordingly. If you decided Chris was a woman, go back and read the paragraph again and imagine Chris is a man. Does that change how you read it or what you think about Chris? Do you think it 'typical' of a man just to leave his pyjamas on the floor; do you feel a little titillated by imagining a naked man in the shower? Try to continue describing Chris's day without giving away whether Chris is a man or a woman. It is very difficult to do.

We live in a world which is organized around the idea that women and men have different bodies, different capabilities, and different needs and desires. This book examines these assumptions, drawing on sociological and related approaches to understand how and why the social world

is arranged around such gender distinctions. This introduction begins that task by defining key terms, then looking briefly at the history of gender within sociology. In some senses the rest of this chapter outlines what the book is not about – or, to put it more positively, why I focus on the issues that appear in the book and not on facts about inequalities or on media images of gender. I want to explain why I say so little about these things because long experience of teaching this topic tells me that people come to it with a strong sense of what is important. Many assume that women and men are equal now and that the media are most crucial in how we now behave as women and men. I want to establish some of the bare facts about inequalities and discuss why the media may not be as all powerful as they initially appear. I will then be able to turn to my central project of explaining the cultural turn within sociological and feminist approaches to gender. When the sociology of gender emerged, inequalities between women and men were the focus. Discussion of women's relative lack of access to wealth and other resources was gradually overtaken by concerns with language and meaning. The promise and problems of this shift within ideas about gender are the subject of following chapters. Those chapters will make more sense if the key terms used are clearly understood.

Defining terms

Key words are highlighted throughout the text in bold.

The sociology of gender and related knowledge sometimes uses language that may be unfamiliar or have different meanings to those used in everyday life. Terminology and jargon are the same thing depending on whether you understand them or not. Having specific terms with specific meanings is useful as a shorthand way of dealing with ideas that can otherwise take some time to explain. Defining the most crucial terms can serve as a way to introduce the kinds of things with which this book is concerned. The first thing to deal with is the distinction sociologists have made since the 1970s between **sex** (biological differences between males and females) and **gender** (socially produced differences between being feminine and being masculine). Later the book will return to the question of how distinct gender is from sex. However, it is generally agreed that gender differences are to be understood as a central feature of **patriarchy**, a social system in which men have come to be dominant in relation to women. There are, as we shall see, questions around to what extent gender is imposed on individuals as a result of the material conditions and social structures in which they live. Within sociology, '**material**' has meant various things. Karl Marx, whose thought forms a good deal of the foundations of sociology, was

particularly concerned with how societies were organized, or structured, around meeting material needs, such as the need for food and shelter. He argues that people's lives were determined by how a society organized the production of the things needed to survive. This was an emphasis on the **economic**, meaning the producing, managing and distributing of resources within society. Marx argued that industrialization instituted a new economic system called **capitalism** based on employers exploiting workers' labour (only paying a wage not a share of the profits) and accumulating for themselves the wealth resulting from selling things. However, material is a term that has taken on broader meanings in more recent years, especially with regard to gender. Now it is maintained that the **material** may include a wider range of things, not just the things we need to survive but our bodies as things (Rahman and Witz, 2003). Yet widening what is meant by material has been only part of the story of developing understandings of gender. For sociologists the key has been to see gender as a **social construction** (something created by the social environment). An appreciation of how material conditions produce gender will be discussed but this book also looks at the importance of **discourses** (systematized ways of talking and thinking) in how gender operates. Medical and scientific discourses, for example, have been important in constructing gender. It is important to understand the part that ideas and meanings play in the social construction of femininity and masculinity. There are of course sociological discourses on gender and our discussion begins with a history of these ideas.

The history of gender

Classic sociology and other social theory contain little attention to the social differences between women and men. Marx, Weber and Durkheim are not noted for their insights into 'sex' inequality (the word gender was not known to them in its present usage) and in fact tended mostly to consider women's subordinate social role as a natural 'given' (Sydie, 1987). Durkheim thought of modernity's greater distinction between 'sex roles' as a functional, biologically based evolution resulting from the progressive forces of a shift to organic solidarity. To translate, he argued that as society became more complex, more distinct differences in body and mind emerged between women and men; they specialized in their roles and this made the division of labour more efficient and society stronger. Weber also saw women's dependent social position as fundamentally determined by 'the normal superiority of the physical and intellectual energies of the male' (Weber cited in Sydie, 1987: 59). This marred an otherwise interesting analysis of traditional power as patriarchal – in the pre-feminist sense of older males exercising traditional

domination through the family (Sydie, 1987: 51–87). It seems slightly odd that these thinkers should view ‘sex roles’ as naturally determined, given that they were busy stressing how social forces affected everything else. It also seems a little odd given that Weber’s wife Marianne was a notable German feminist and Marx’s daughter Eleanor was involved in feminist politics. Nevertheless these thinkers failed to examine ‘sex’ as an important social division and this view was long dominant within sociology (Oakley, 1974). However, this does not mean that inequalities between women and men were entirely ignored. Marx recognized inequality between the sexes as a problem, albeit a problem of secondary importance to capitalist exploitation of workers. Marx’s friend and collaborator Frederick Engels did attempt a Marxist explanation of women’s subordination (see Chapter 4). There was also a tradition of women writing about women’s social position. There was Mary Wollstonecraft (1789/1792) in the eighteenth century (see Chapter 4), and Harriet Martineau, in the nineteenth century, who also produced the first book on sociological methods (see Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale, 2001). In addition the highly influential Chicago School of sociology contained at least a dozen women from its establishment in the 1890s, including the well-known sociologist Jane Addams. These women were professional sociologists actively researching and writing on a range of issues, including many relating to women’s place in society (Delamont, 1990: 139–159). Yet little or no reference is made to these women and more recent understandings of gender are often seen as beginning with Simone de Beauvoir’s (1988/1949) philosophically based treatise, *The Second Sex*. In her famous statement that ‘[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ (de Beauvoir, 1988/1949: 295), she established a core principle of most subsequent efforts to understand gender inequalities. It was not nature but society or ‘culture’ that made women (and men) what they were.

In the 1950s and early 1960s **Functionalism** was largely dominant within sociology and it contributed to sociological understandings of differences between women and men as socially constructed. While **social construction** involves structures such as class systems and institutions, the term principally refers to the processes by which ideas about how things should work are made into social reality. Before the concept of ‘gender’ came into sociological usage in the 1970s, mid-century functionalists talked about ‘sex role differences’. Their argument could be summarized as claiming that sex role differences continue to exist because they function to promote social stability. Whether this was an intended (manifest) or unintended (latent) function of sex role differences did not seem to be of major interest to functionalists.

The focus of functionalist work was on understanding the ‘complementary roles’ performed by women and men as they function to keep society

running smoothly. American sociologist Talcott Parsons is the major figure within twentieth century functionalism. It is Parsons's (see Parsons and Bales, 1956) views of women and men's 'complementary roles' that are taken as the key statement of functionalist ideas about gender. Writing in the 1950s, Parsons argues that modern social life, and in particular the modern organization of work as separate from home, means that someone needs to stay home to care for young children and perform the important early socialization of human infants. For highly complex and not entirely clear reasons associated with the workings of social groups, this emotional 'expressive' role is assigned to women and the rational and 'instrumental' (goal-focused) role of paid work is associated with men. These different 'sex roles' become the social norms and Parsons carefully describes how children become socialized into them. Therefore, Parsons's theory is very much sociological in looking not to nature but to social groups and social processes such as socialization to explain women's and men's different social positions. In the 1950s and 1960s, others using his work to understand sex roles tended to ignore this sociological position and assume that the expressive/instrumental dichotomy was in some form an expression of natural differences (Connell, 2002: 123). Though Parsons may have gone beyond this, his work offered more of a description of current gender expectations than an explication of the inequalities accompanying the differing sex roles. Parsons describes the ideal American family of the 1950s and does so in a way that justifies, rather than is critical of, this very historically and culturally specific example of gender roles. Parsons implies that this is the best way of organizing family life in response to modern social conditions, but for whom is it best? Since Parsons, much sociology of the family has focused more on how the breadwinner/housewife model of family life has been restrictive for many women. For others, it has remained a luxury they cannot afford because only those families where the men earn high wages could afford for the wife to stay at home. Other alternatives to the nuclear family are similarly ignored or devalued. Although Parsons himself does not discuss other cultures in any detail, he draws on the work of fellow contributors to the book to back his claim that a nuclear-style family still seems to function well and maintain social stability within many other societies (Parsons and Bales, 1956). The fact that the content of sex roles is different in other cultures does not necessarily challenge Parsons's overall argument that it is complementarity – the fact that one sex is assigned opposite tasks to the other – which is functional. However, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, anthropological research can illustrate that in some other cultures women's and men's roles are similar not opposite (for example both women and men may contribute to child rearing), and such an arrangement can also support stability. Parsons's focus on the way in which the sexes complement each

other also fails to consider how and why the different roles have come to be valued differently. Functionalism does not explain why instrumental roles are more highly regarded within modern western society. The need for social stability was seen as justification of the continuance of such sex roles, and though changes in those roles were explored they were often construed as threatening that stability. The idea that 'stability' may not be beneficial to women constrained within traditional roles did not seem to occur to the functionalists. The importance attached to social stability prevented functionalists from developing a real analysis of how some social actors and groups might not benefit from the continuance of the sharply defined roles identified. Various feminist sociologists began systematically to examine differences between women and men as socially produced. It is from this key departure point in the 1970s that this book begins its travels.

It is hard for today's students of gender, faced with mountains of relevant books, to imagine the paucity of decent literature about women thirty to forty years ago. Into this void the new 'wave' of feminists began to launch their considerations of the causes and state of inequalities between women and men (see Chapter 4 and Chapter 6). It is also often difficult to comprehend how many changes have taken place for women even since the 1960s. Equal Pay legislation has been passed, women have more control over if and when they reproduce, a university education is more than a way for middle class women to meet a husband, job opportunities have improved, and so on. But are women and men equal now?

Material inequalities: are women and men equal now?

If you are a young woman you may feel that you have a lot of choice about what you do with your life. It probably seems like you will have more or less the same opportunities in life as your brothers and/or male friends. Young men reading this might feel that women can do whatever they want to these days and that talking about inequalities is out of date. Certainly the world has changed. Read some history or talk to your mothers and grandmothers and you will quickly appreciate that young women today are likely to have more education, better job opportunities and more independence than young women did forty or fifty years ago. Young women may be partly right in suggesting that they have much the same opportunities as men their age.

In terms of education young women are likely to have completed secondary school and probably did better than the boys. At university or college you are likely to see as many undergraduate women on campus as men, with women continuing to do slightly better. In the United

Kingdom, for example, six times more women enrolled in higher education in 2003/04 than in 1970/71, so that around 59 per cent of undergraduates are now women (Office for National Statistics, 2006: 38). While girls in wealthier nations are able to take advantage of at least a good basic education, in other areas of the world educational opportunity for girls can be limited. Non-formal, local and traditional forms of learning may exist in many places but formal westernized types of education are likely to bring greater status and social rewards. The amount of formal education varies greatly between different regions of Africa. Southern Africa has for some time demonstrated little difference between boys and girls in length of schooling. Early twenty-first century figures show boys getting 10.9 years and girls 10.4 years at school (African Development Bank, 2002: Table 1.8). However, in Western and Central Africa only 51 per cent of primary school age girls actually attend primary school compared to 59 per cent of boys. At secondary school this drops to just over one in five of secondary age girls attending, while one in four boys of secondary age attend (UNICEF, 2006: 121). India, on the whole, provides more education. Primary school is attended by 73 per cent of girls of primary school age, compared to 80 per cent for boys (UNICEF, 2006: 121). It has a strong formal educational tradition and, as with many western nations, women higher up the caste and class hierarchy tend to be well educated. In poorer families, however, girls will probably leave school fairly young, most likely to enter a marriage arranged for them. They will then become responsible for most of the domestic work in the home of their new parents-in-law. For such poorer families, manual work and the domestic support of that work may be crucial to survival and families need children to start bringing in money as soon as possible. But this does not explain why girls are expected to do the domestic work; that expectation is better understood in terms of a culture which values the welfare of the group and especially expects women to contribute to that group welfare rather than pursue individual goals. Thus caring roles at home are still promoted as the proper course for many less privileged women (Kodoth and Eapen, 2005; Mukhopadhyay and Seymour, 1994).

Among more privileged groups in the western world, university graduates of both sexes look forward to getting a 'good' job at the end of their degree. However, the subjects they take in doing their degrees are likely to differ and, therefore, their job options will differ. Have a look around a sociology class – I bet there are more women than men. Try visiting an English or history lecture and you will probably find fewer men there. Then go over to a physics lecture to see if the men outnumber the women, and finally pop in to the engineering department where you may be able to count the women on one hand (e.g. see Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005: 32; Equal

Employment Opportunities Commission, 2006: 8; National Science Board, 2006). These gender differences in choice of subject will affect what sorts of jobs graduates will be able to get. Although there are many good jobs that sociology and English graduates might end up with, it is not the same sort of direct route into high paying, high status work as studying engineering. The women who do engineering may not initially notice any difference between themselves and their male peers, but they may discover that the men in the class find it easier to get jobs than the women. Once in jobs it may become clear that the men are promoted ahead of women at a similar stage and with similar ability. Also women engineers may note that the men are not asked how they are going to combine a career with having a family. These are some of the factors in continuing pay gaps between women and men in science and engineering (Prokos and Padavic, 2005). Continuing beliefs about women's responsibility for their families play a part in determining to what extent women participate in paid work.

In most of South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, women's economic participation rate is only around 30 per cent, compared to around 45 per cent in OECD (high income) countries (World Bank, 2006). This means that in most cases women are less likely to have a paid job than men. Even where women now form a large portion of the workforce they continue to work in different jobs, under different conditions and generally receive less pay. Sociologists refer to the dividing up of work into jobs thought of as 'men's jobs' and those thought of as 'women's jobs' as the sexual division of labour or (the more recent term) the **gendered division of labour**. The vertical division of labour by gender means that women are rare in the higher positions within occupations. This is especially true of influential managerial positions. In the Fortune 500 (America's top 500 companies) in 2005 only 16.4 per cent of all corporate officer (top management) positions were held by women. Over half of these companies had less than three women corporate officers in 2005 (Catalyst, 2006: 6, 9). The invisible barriers that seem to prevent women being promoted to upper management are referred to as 'the glass ceiling' (see Hymowitz and Schellhardt, 1986). Yet addressing and overcoming such barriers would not necessarily bring equality for all women because of the horizontal gender division of labour, which means that work is divided in gendered ways across occupations. This has obvious implications for how wealth is distributed between women and men.

Evidence indicates that women are poorer than men. They do not earn as much and generally have less access to the material rewards available in society. At the beginning of the twenty-first century in Western Europe, North America and Australasia, women earn around 75 to 90 per cent of the average man's wage. World wide the figure drops so that

on a global level women earn around 60 per cent of the male average (Connell, 2002: 2; United Nations Statistics Division, 2005). Through a creative use of job titles, job descriptions and special 'bonuses' it is possible to evade equal pay legislation (where it exists) and to pay a man more than a woman who is, effectively, doing the same job. In poorer countries it is poverty rather than low pay that is the issue. The phrase '**feminization of poverty**' was conjured up by the United Nations to refer to an apparent trend in which an increasing number of those living in poverty are women, and that poverty is growing more severe. The reasons for such a trend are complex and debated. They may range from the costs of women's unpaid work, their related lack of educational and economic opportunities (including access to land and other resources), the rise of HIV/AIDS among women, and the ways in which globalization leads to new ways of exploiting women in developing countries (Barker, 2005).

Not everyone in developing countries is poor, and of course poverty exists in developed countries too. Women in developed and developing nations are more likely to be poor partly because of their caring responsibilities, which often make them reliant on social services. As these services are cut back women are often required to do more caring and yet there is less financial and other support available (Kehler, 2001). The feminization of poverty in wealthy nations may, however, be relative rather than absolute. **Absolute poverty** is about not being able to meet basic survival needs, for example not having enough food to eat. The most recent reliable statistics suggest that such poverty is still common in India, for example, where 36 per cent of women aged 15 to 49 were undernourished according to a 1998–99 survey (International Institute for Population Sciences and ORC Macro, 2000: 244). **Relative poverty** is more common in the West, where you may be able to eat, but do not have enough money to share in the other benefits your society has to offer. For example, you may not be able to afford a television or holidays; this makes you poor relative to those around you. And again it is mostly women who are poor, especially single mothers whether never married or divorced. When relationships break up it is usually the women who get custody of the children. Although welfare payments may offset some of the financial burdens women face after divorce, in most cases women are soon poorer than their ex-partners. Even where laws require a couple's assets to be halved and men to pay maintenance, men may fail to pay; never married and divorced women's earning opportunities are likely to be restricted by child care responsibilities, and their finances may be tight because they are bearing most of the cost of raising the children (for example, Uunk, 2004; Yamokoski and Keister, 2006).

The consequences of poverty for women range from the extreme case of starvation – or at very least severe ill health (Doyal, 2002) – to a

more general lack of control over their lives. Women's lack of financial independence makes them vulnerable to the demands of their husbands, or other men with authority over them. When women have to rely on men to get what they need to survive they often do not have the luxury of saying no. In many nations, including wealthy ones, women lacking job skills and experience may be heavily reliant on men's financial support. This may be a key reason why women feel unable to leave violent partners (Dobash and Dobash, 1992). Women's poverty connects not only to sex and violence but is highly likely to constrain their choices about everything from the quality of their housing to what they eat. Where poverty is relative, attempts to feed and clothe children in the 'best' way may be funded by credit. Women take on much of this debt and may even hide it from male partners (where they are present). If this is the case, then women bear the stress of coping with debt payment, or trying to evade it when there is no money (Bridges and Disney, 2004; Parker, 1992). In addition, women's responsibility within families often goes beyond dealing with a lack of finance.

The difficulties for women of trying to combine paid work with family responsibilities have been extensively documented (see for example, Hochschild, 2003). Women continue to do most of the work at home and face a number of other problems associated with family life. Even where families are relatively happy, women continue to do more than their share of household labour. By the 1970s women had considerable equality compared with their position in the nineteenth century. Men have become more involved in family life, but Young and Willmott's (1973) picture of the newly emerging '**symmetrical family**' in which husband and wife perform similar work within the household seems overly optimistic. Ann Oakley's groundbreaking (1974) research into housework contested the symmetrical family argument and she argued that both men and women still saw housework as women's work. Her data suggest that men in the early 1970s did very little child care and less housework, with only a minority of husbands (15 per cent) involved to a high extent in housework. More recent studies (e.g. Crompton, 2005; Sullivan, 2000) suggest that there has been a barely perceptible rise in men's involvement, and women still do around twice as much housework as men. This means that for women doing both paid and unpaid work, tiredness, ill health and depression are routine (Hochschild, 2003). Political rights have been seen as crucial for allowing women to make changes to this position.

The achievement of equal voting rights with men is taken to be one of the major indicators of advances towards equality for women. The first nation state in which women received the vote was New Zealand in 1893. The franchise was awarded to British women over 30 in 1918, though