



GENDER: A Feminist Perspective

SHAFIYA MOHI UD DIN
Assistant Professor Sociology
Govt. Degree College Ganderbal

Abstract:

Events during the first decade of millennium have profoundly affected gender roles. The study of gender emerged as one of the most important trends in the discipline of Sociology in the twentieth century. The research and theory associated with studying gender issues propelled the sociology of gender from the margins to become a central feature of the discipline. This paper documents how feminists have aided our understanding of the influence of gender in shaping our lives, our attitudes, and our behaviour. By calling attention to the powerful impact of gender in the social ordering of our relationships (micro level analysis) and our institutions (macro level analysis), the feminist theoretical perspective in sociology emerged as a major model that has significantly reshaped the discipline. By the research it spawned, feminist sociological theory is not only bridging the micro-macro gap, it has also illuminated the androcentric bias in sociology and in broader society. Disagreements remains on all elements that need to be included in feminist theory, but at a minimum, the consensus is that a theory is feminist if it can be used to challenge a status quo that is disadvantageous to women. The feminist perspective provides productive avenues of collaboration with sociologist who adopt other theoretical views, especially conflict theory and symbolic interaction. Feminists focus on women and their ability to amass resources from a variety of sources- in their individual lives (micro level) and through social and political means (macro level). This paper is based on secondary sources and highlights the feminists work through a number of avenues to increase women's empowerment- the ability for women to exert control over their own destinies.

1. Introduction

Gender was a largely neglected subject in sociology until a body of empirical and theoretical feminist studies from the 1960s onwards drew attention to gross inequalities between men and women, even in modern societies. Classical sociology has taken the existing, male-dominated gender order very much for granted, with functionalism, for instance, theorizing that gender differences were rooted in the functional needs of society, such as the 'expressive' roles played by women in the household compared to the 'instrumental' ones played by men in the formal economy. Feminist studies challenged this apparently natural inequality, showing that male dominance was much more akin to class domination. Nonetheless, some theorists used existing sociological concepts and theories to explain gender inequality, such as socialization and a version of conflict theory. In recent years the very concept of gender has been seen as too rigid, with some suggesting that 'gender' is a highly unstable concept that is always in the process of change.

As gender issues have now become more mainstreamed in scientific research and media reports, confusion associated with the terms sex and gender has decreased. In sociology, these terms are now fairly consistent to refer to different content areas. Sex refers to the biological characteristics distinguishing male and female. This definition emphasizes male and female differences in chromosomes, anatomy, hormones, reproductive system, and other physiological components. Gender refers to those social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts. Sex makes us male or female whereas gender makes us masculine and feminine. Sex is

an ascribed status because a person is born with it, but gender is an achieved status because it must be learned. This relatively simple distinction masks a number of problems associated with its usage. It implies that all people can be conveniently placed into unambiguous either-or categories. Certainly the ascribed status of sex is less likely to be altered than the achieved status of gender. Some people believe, however, that they were born with the wrong body and are willing to undergo major surgery to make their gender identity consistent with their biological sex. Sexual orientation, the preference for sexual partners of one gender (sex) or the other, also varies. People who experience sexual pleasure with members of their own sex are likely to be born with ambiguous sex characteristics and may be assigned one sex at birth but develop a different identity related to gender. Some cultures allow people to move freely between genders, regardless of their biological sex, while others stigmatize any difference from the heterosexual norm.

2. What is Gender?

The concept of gender, as we now use it came into common parlance during the early 1970s. It was used as an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviors and competencies, which are then assigned as either 'masculine' or 'feminine'. The purpose of affirming a sex/gender distinction was to argue that the actual physical or mental effects of biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that they were naturally better suited to 'domestic' roles. In a post-industrial society those physiological sex differences which do exist become arguably even less significant, and the handicap to women of childbirth is substantially lessened by the existence of effective contraception and pain relief in labor. Moreover, women are generally long outliving their reproductive functions, and so a much smaller proportion of their life is defined by this. Ann Oakley's path finding text, *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) lays the ground for further exploration of the construction of gender. She notes how Western cultures seem most prone to exaggeration of gender differences and argues that 'the "social efficiency" of our present gender roles centers round women's role as housewife and mother. There is also the more vaguely conceived belief that any tampering with these roles would diminish happiness, but this type of argument has a blatantly disreputable history and should have been discarded long ago' (Oakley 1972:192). This was not the first time that such distinctions had been made but, indeed they were very much the stuff of anthropology, psychoanalysis and medical research. Simone de Beauvoir also had explored this distinction in 'The Second Sex' that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. De Beauvoir's discussion makes clear the ways in which gender differences are set in hierarchical opposition, where the masculine principle is always the favored 'norm' and the feminine one becomes positioned as 'Other'. For de Beauvoir femininity can only be defined as lack – 'between male and eunuch'. As a result, civilization was masculine to its very depths, and women the continual outsiders (de Beauvoir 1972:295).

3. Feminist theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Gender

The majority of feminists in the 1970s seemed to embrace the notion of gender as 'construct' and popular youth culture seemed to endorse this in the 1970s' passion for 'unisex' clothing. However, Shulamith Firestone is one exception who suggested in 'The Dialectic of Sex' (1970) that patriarchy exploits women's biological capacity to reproduce as their essential weakness. She advocates that the only way for women to break away from the oppression is to use technological advances to free themselves from the burden of childbirth. Moreover, she advocates breaking down the biological bond between mothers and children and establishing communes where monogamy and the nuclear family are things of the past. Few feminists were ultimately sympathetic to Firestone's view of childbirth and the mother-child bond – not least because technology and its uses were and still are firmly in the hands of men. Those feminists, such as cultural feminists, who questioned whether all key differences are an effect of culture rather than biology, preferred to value and celebrate the mothering role as evidence of women's 'natural' disposition towards nurturance and pacifism, and would be loath

to relinquish it even if they could. As feminism matures, 'gender slips uneasily between being merely another word for sex and being a contested political term' Oakley argues that backlash writings return gender to a close association with the biological or natural, in order to suggest that much of feminist discourse was straining against forces that were, after all, ineluctable. For her the conceptualization of gender is the key cornerstone of second wave feminism and its major strength – attempts to discredit it are at the heart of backlash agendas precisely because of its success as an analytical term. In colloquial usage, however, there is a constant slippage between sex and gender so that, for example, people are generally asked to declare their 'gender' instead of sex on an application form (Oakley and Mitchell 1997:51).

Nancy Chodorow suggests that because women are usually the most important nurturer, all babies bond with them. As children grow older, boys realize that to be masculine means not being like their mother, so they have to make some sort of break with her in order to take on a masculine identity. Having to break this strong bond with the mother is difficult for boys and means they have to distance themselves emotionally. This emotional distance, according to Chodorow, is therefore part of being masculine and means men are not good at forming other close relationships. They achieve their identity through fragmentation and emphasizing discontinuity with others. Girls meanwhile realize they are like their mother and can continue to identify with her. As a result they have a much more continuous sense of identity, but they learn what it means to be feminine from their mother in her role as a mother. Other ways of being feminine tend to get ignored. Chodorow thinks that girls learn, most of all, that being feminine means nurturing and caring for others. Being feminine therefore becomes confused with being a mother and the only way girls really know how to be feminine is to act like a mother. This whole process means that effectively mothers are socializing their daughters into being mothers, and Chodorow calls this 'the reproduction of mothering'. The reproduction of mothering can disadvantage women in a world that continues to value competitiveness, which requires separation from others rather than the practices of caring that women learn to see as central to their identity. Chodorow challenges the idea that men are the standard to which women must be compared however, her explanation of gender differences still heavily relies on a rather simple story of how individuals learn to understand what it means to have a particular type of biological body.

In Friedan's (1965) iconic call to arms for feminism in "The Feminine Mystique", first published in 1963, she bears testimony to the embodiment of 'the problem with no name'. The problem was that educated married women were feeling dissatisfied with 'the feminine mystique', an ideal promoted by women's magazines in the 1950s proposing that women should find fulfillment as wives and mothers. Many did not, and yet had no name for what they were feeling. Friedan's account of the problem is mired in a liberal, dualistic, and ethnocentric view of a 'civilized' society as 'one in which instinct and environment are increasingly controlled and transformed by the human mind' (Friedan, 1965: 124). Yet there are interesting claims about what 'the feminine mystique' does to bodies. She also notes that the extreme tiredness many young housewives experiences not real fatigue, but a result of boredom (Friedan, 1965: 27–8). Nevertheless, such ideas were insightful and feminist sociology has continued to deal with 'material' ways in which women's bodies are made ill, starved and damaged, for example by sexual violence within patriarchy. Many of these taken for granted aspects of feminist thinking can be seen in fledgling form in Kate Millet's "Sexual Politics" (1972/1970). Millet's brilliant argument establishes that relations between women and men are socially constructed power relationships that oppress women, partly via myths about women's bodily weakness. She dismisses the idea that men's supposedly superior strength has produced male supremacy. Male muscles may have some biological basis, but have also been 'culturally encouraged, through breeding, diet, and exercise (Millet, 1972/1970: 27).

Both Friedan and Greer argue that women are encouraged, cajoled and sometimes coerced into making their bodies conform to male dictated ideals. Intrinsic to the feminine mystique is that women are

taught to find fulfillment through their bodies. They are encouraged to find themselves by dyeing their hair or having another baby (Friedan, 1965:55). They are taught to remove their body hair because it is associated with animalistic and aggressive sexuality; they learn to be ashamed of menstruating. Women become objects of display, showing the status of their men. And the frustration of this position manifests itself in bodily disorders, in wrinkles and excess weight, as women are forced to deny their sexuality and thus become female eunuchs (Greer, 1970). Women's embodiment is characterized as one of 'passivity and sexlessness'. However, unlike Simon de Beauvoir, Greer will not regard the female body as disgusting but instead is vituperative about men's loathing of women, which reduces women to despised bodies. She says a woman is regarded by men as 'a receptacle into which he has emptied his sperm, a kind of human spittoon' (Greer, 1970: 254).

Walby (1996) develops her dual-systems approach and further investigates the extent of changes in gender relations in the last half of the twentieth century. In 'Gender Transformations' she continues her earlier argument that western nations have moved from a system of private patriarchy to public patriarchy. What she means is that prior to the mid-twentieth century women's lives were more likely to be controlled and constrained by the men within their immediate family. Women were dependent on fathers and then husbands. As women entered the workforce in greater numbers from World War II onwards, this gradually changed. Now, Walby argues, patriarchal domination of women operates chiefly within the public world of work and politics. Many women have financial independence, and may not need to rely on individual men to survive, but collective decisions affecting their lives are usually made by men. Politicians, who are nearly all men, make laws affecting them like how much benefit single mothers can have; bosses who are mostly male adhere to policies that either intentionally or unintentionally discriminate against women. Both public and private patriarchy operates within contemporary society, but the dominant form is now public. The old domestic form excluded women from the public sphere, while the new 'public' form segregates them into particular jobs and into the lower levels of the hierarchy. Walby goes on to stress that young women's lives are more likely to be affected by public patriarchy. This is because younger women are more likely to have an education and to get jobs that allow a degree of independence from individual men. This may change as they get older and start families, though this depends on whether and how they continue to work. Many older women's lives still need to be understood in terms of the domestic system of patriarchy, which still operates for those who have not had the education, skills and work experience of the younger generation of women and who are still likely to be largely dependent upon husbands. Both types of patriarchy impact differently on different women depending on their class, age, position in the life course for example before or after having children and ethnicity. Walby's approach is helpful in portraying the complexities and shifts in contemporary gender relations.

4. Contemporary debate

Recent writings on sex and gender suggest that feminism has relied upon too great a polarization of the sex/gender distinctions, observing that the meanings attached to sex differences are themselves socially constructed and changeable, in that we understand them and attach different consequences to these biological facts within our own cultural historical contexts. More recent gene research also attempts to argue that biology does contribute to some behavioral characteristics and the example of research on transgendered individuals reinforces this. Moira Gatens makes the point that evidence 'that the male body and the female body have quite different social value and significance cannot help but have a marked effect on male and female consciousness' (1996: 9). She also makes the point that masculinity is not valued per se unless being 'performed' by a biological male. Hence the male body itself is imbued in our culture with the mythology of supremacy, of being the human 'norm'. Judith Butler's theorization about gender introduces this notion of performativity – the idea that gender is involuntarily 'performed' within the dominant discourses of heteroreality, which only deliberately subversive performances like drag can successfully undermine. Butler's conception of gender is perhaps the most radical of all, taking as she does a Foucauldian model, and asserting that all identity

categories 'are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin' (Butler 1990: 9). She argues further that 'the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of "men" will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that "women" will interpret only female bodies' (Butler 1990:6). This approach questions the whole way we make appeals to identity. The concept of gender as performance suggests a level of free play with gender categories that we enter into socially. The result is that individuals have the potential to create 'gender trouble' and challenge the way discourse establishes and reinforces certain meanings and 'institutions', such as that of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Butler's most radical deconstruction of the sex/gender distinction has been embraced in particular by queer theorists and third wave feminists. However, Butler has more recently denied that performativity allows the degree of 'free play' with gender that some of these theorists have suggested (Butler, 1997).

However, in the larger world, there remain constant shifts between conceptualizations of the human being as controlled by either predominantly biological or social forces. This is most marked by a return of popular science tracts which, using a quasi-Darwinian logic, suggest powerfully that our biology is once again our destiny. The substantial shifts in women's lives and expectations since the 1960s show just how malleable the category of femininity is, whether masculinity has shown itself to be quite so elastic is open to question. When the sociology of gender emerged as a specific field in the 1970s the concern was to show any differences that do exist between the sexes to be exaggerated or indeed socially constructed. The claim that men and women are simply 'naturally' different was called into question by examining how understandings of those differences vary across cultures and change throughout history. Indeed the interpretation of biology is something that is subject to social and historical change, as evidenced by the shift within Western science from a one- to a two-sex model of difference (Laqueur, 1990). However, there are bodies that cannot be definitively classified as either 'male' or 'female' and these intersex people throw light on the social aspects of sexual classifications. Any perceived differences in ways of using bodies and minds are heavily shaped by the way people live. A Chinese peasant woman used to carrying heavy loads, for example, is likely to be physically stronger than a young American man who spends all day in front of the television and his computer. And how a social meaning attached to sexual difference contributes to the formation of gender identities has been usefully explored (Sterling, 2002).

However, the way psychoanalysis characterizes feminine identity as precarious and subordinate, and based on understanding female biology as lack, is not always helpful in trying to imagine a more egalitarian gender order. The problem with many of the attempts of social scientists and humanities scholars to examine 'scientific' claims about 'sex' is that most have a limited understanding of biological and related sciences. Scientists are often criticized by social scientists for ignoring factors that are not measurable within their discipline. For example, geneticists, look at the potentials certain genes contain, but cannot measure the effects of social factors on whether or not these potentials develop. Of course, good social scientists are not suggesting that genetics or biology definitely have no importance, they are merely illustrating that social environment plays a major part in determining our actions. The ways in which physical bodies and their social environment is entwined are extremely complex. Nevertheless attempts to engage with natural science understandings of differences between women and men are crucial because of the way in which commonsense ideas are usually based on misinterpretations of that science. For sociologists it is crucial to clarify what kind of scientific information actually exists about how men and women differ, and to analyze the social factors affecting how that information is interpreted. Once we establish that men and women are not simply born, we can begin to examine how they are socially made and what part individuals play in that making.

References

1. Acker, Joan. 1990. "Hierarchies, Jobs, and Bodies: a Theory of Gendered Organizations." *Gender & Society* 4: 139–58.
2. Acker, Joan. 1992. "Gendered Institutions." *Contemporary Sociology* 21: 565–9.
3. Bernard, Jessie. 1973. "My Four Revolutions: An Autobiographical History of the ASA." *American Journal of Sociology* 78: 773–91.
4. CA: Sage.
5. Chafetz, Janet Saltzma (2006). *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*. Springer Science Business Media, LLC.
6. Chodorow, Nancy. 1978. *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
7. Collins, Patricia Hill. 1998. "On Book Exhibits and New Complexities: Reflections on Sociology as Science." *Contemporary Sociology* 27: 7–11.
8. Eagly, Alice H. 1995. "The Science and Politics of Comparing Women and Men." *American Psychologist* 50: 145–58.
9. Giddens, Anthony & Sutton, Philip W (2014) *Essential Concepts in Sociology*. Polity press.
10. Holmes, Mary(2007). *What is Gender? Sociological Approaches*. Sage publications.
11. Kessler, Suzanne J. 1998. *Lessons from the Intersexed*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
12. Linday, Linda L (2014). *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*. Routledge Publications.
13. Pilcher, Jane and Whelhan, Imelda (2004) *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. Sage publications London.
14. Ridgeway, Cecilia L. 1997. "Interaction and the Conservation of Gender Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 62: 218–35..
15. Smith, Dorothy. 1974. "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology." *Sociological Inquiry* 44: 7–13.
16. Stacey, Judith and Thorne, Barrie. 1985. "The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology." *Social Problems* 32: 301–16.
17. Udry, J. Richard. 2000. "Biological Limits of Gender Construction." *American Sociological Review* 65: 443–57.
18. West, Candace and Zimmerman, Don H. 1991. "Doing Gender." In Judith and Susan A. Farrell (eds.), *The Social Construction of Gender*. Newbury Park,
19. Wharton, Amy S. (2005) *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.