

# Introduction: The Concept of Gender

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This book presents an account of the major debates around and usages of the sociological concept of gender. Very generally, gender refers to the relations between women and men. Writing in 1996 I defined it in the following way, which I still find a useful starting point:

Gender refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organization of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labour and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity. (1996: 205)

However, as we shall see, gender is quite a hotly contested concept. It is also, as Glover and Kaplan aptly put it, ‘a busy term’ (2000: ix), meaning that it is very widely used, in many differing contexts, so that its usages are continually evolving and its meaning is quite slippery. Part of the ‘busyness’ and ‘slipperiness’ arises from the fact that this is a highly politically charged concept. Its use is inextricably bound up with the centuries-long struggles over power between men and women, sometimes referred to as ‘the sex war’.

One confusion, signalled by that latter phrase, is that the term gender is often used synonymously for sex, particularly in popular speech. We might speak, for example, of ‘both sexes’ to refer to men and women. But the word sex, of course, also refers to reproductive behaviour or sexuality. As

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we shall see in chapter 1, there is considerable debate over the relationship between gender, as I have defined it above, and sexuality or sexual identity and practices, with some claiming that there is no difference between them. However, I wish to retain this distinction. In an interesting recent text, Chris Beasley (2005) talks of the 'gender sexuality' field to show the link between the two. She then distinguishes three 'subfields' concerned with the analysis of gender and sexuality: feminist studies, masculinity studies and sexuality studies. Although these three are clearly linked, for reasons of space this book is focused on gender and draws predominantly on the subfields of feminist and masculinity studies.

Since the 1970s, gender has become both an important topic of academic study in its own right and a major category to be used in analysis within the social sciences and humanities. Many universities have offered courses and programmes in Gender Studies, which themselves developed from the Women's Studies courses that emerged under the influence of the 'second-wave' feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. Courses on gender have an appeal to many students because the issues they deal with are so relevant to the lives of young women and men. While the initial students and researchers were mainly women, increasingly men were drawn to this area of study, especially since Gender Studies' options now dealt with men and masculinity as well as women and femininity. More recently we have seen processes of *gender mainstreaming*, that is, incorporating gender broadly throughout disciplinary curricula rather than through special women's studies and gender studies centres or courses, although some of these still exist. This in turn reflects a more general acceptance of the importance of gender as an explanatory and analytic category and an acknowledgement of its relevance throughout the arts and social sciences.

In popular usage, the notion of gender is also common, especially in the mass media. Terms like the 'genderquake', the 'gender gap' (first used about the continuing pay differential between men and women, now increasingly in relation to girls' better performance than boys in school examinations) or 'gender-bending' were coined by journalists and used to highlight changes in existing relations between the sexes in the contemporary world. Most large organizations – from

corporations to universities to trade unions – have formal equal opportunities policies which outlaw discrimination on the basis of gender, as well as race, religion and sexual orientation. Various bodies monitor the impact of such policies, and publish regular reports highlighting disparities between the position of women and men, in areas such as academia (80 per cent of professors were men in 2011) or the judiciary.

Like many key social science concepts, the term ‘gender’ is both dense and contested. It has been written about and argued about exhaustively. Since Ann Oakley wrote her influential book *Sex, Gender and Society* in 1972, often taken to represent the first major feminist reutilization of the existing grammatical term, millions of pages have been written about it. It would not be possible in a short text like this to explore in detail the full history of the term’s usage and all the twists and turns of the debates around it that have occurred over the past three and a half decades. There are in existence a number of books on feminism which perform that task in a helpful and accessible fashion (see, for example, Tong 1989; Walby 1990; Bryson 1999; Freedman 2001; Beasley 2005). Here, rather, I have chosen to focus on how the term is currently utilized and to put my own particular spin on the meaning and importance of gender in our social world. As a sociologist, I have focused on sociological debates and literature. That is not to denigrate the excellent work on gender being carried out in other areas such as culture, literature, philosophy and politics. However, I think there it timely at this stage to reassert the need for a vigorous, creative sociology of gender, given the tendency since the 1990s for gender studies to drift into more abstract realms.

The book takes the form of a series of short chapters which set out key issues and dilemmas. The first three chapters deal with gender on a fairly abstract and general level. Chapter 1 looks at definitions and the attempts to conceptualize gender. Chapters 2 and 3 lay out the major theoretical perspectives within which the concept has been deployed, linking them to the two major contemporary competing frameworks of modernity and postmodernity. Since my own belief is that the most valuable way to explore any concept is by looking at specific social contexts in which it is seen to be operating,

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chapters 4, 5 and 6 look at gender relations in action in three different contemporary areas: production, reproduction and consumption. These three sociological terms can be taken to represent what we more popularly think of as work, family and leisure. The terms are taken from Marx, but this book is in no way confined to Marxist ideas. Rather, I have chosen these terms because they seem to me to provide a reasonably inclusive framework for thinking about the process of gendering *in everyday life*. Of course, they do not cover everything! Again, I have had to be selective, and regret all the good work I've had no space to explore. Finally, the Conclusion sets out a possible future for the analysis of gender relations, revolving especially round the concepts of 'power', 'intersectionality' and 'identity', and considers the prospects for a new politics of gender.

A number of propositions underpin the discussion in this book. First, gender is a social construct. It is a category used by human beings as a way of dividing up the world they perceive around them and making sense of it. Since the distinction between women and men is very basic to all societies, this way of categorizing social relations is one that has a very long history. However, being a social construct, gender is not something fixed, but something that varies according to time, place and culture. What it means to be a woman and a man is not the same now as it was in Ancient Egypt or in medieval Europe; nor are the relations today between the sexes the same in Britain, in Saudi Arabia or in India.

My second proposition is that gender as a construct is politically deployed. That is, the usage of the term has been persistently bound up with power relations between women and men. For example, I have pointed out above that the growth in interest in gender as an academic concept arose from the rebirth of feminism in the 1970s, which itself was a political movement that sought to help women achieve equality with men. Although the close link with feminist politics and activism has been broken, I shall argue that the way the term is employed still has political implications. Indeed, the first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed the re-emergence of feminism manifested as an upsurge of young activists, which in turn is likely to be feeding back into academic work.

Thirdly, gender must be seen as lived experience. Although the term 'gender' is indeed a construct, it refers to aspects of our lives that are all too real. It is important to state this, as there is a counter view of the world, espoused by some adherents of post-structuralism and postmodernism, which envisages the whole of social reality as a kind of fiction, created by human beings out of words. While, for the social realist, an object, such as a flower, a cat, a chair, a university, exists as a material entity to which different cultures give different names, for theorists of discourse, the words and constructs that human beings devise actually constitute and make up the world. The flower, cat, chair and university are as they are because that is how we have named them. This is an intricate philosophical debate which will be considered briefly in chapter 3. But since the dispute between these two positions is probably ultimately irresolvable (which came first, the chicken or the egg? the word or the thing?), I do not intend to waste too much time on it. The position I espouse in this book is one that I have set out in a series of other publications (Bradley 1996; 1999a and b; Bradley and Fenton 1999; Fenton and Bradley 2002): that gender is at the same time both a material and a cultural phenomenon. It refers both to the lived experiences of men and women in relation to each other and to the ideas we develop to make sense of these relations and to frame them. Material experiences inform cultural meanings, which in turn influence the way lived relations change and develop.

To say that gender has a material existence, however, is not to give it the status of a 'thing' (like, say, a chair or a university) to which we can fix a label and which has a stable physical existence. Gender is more than a fixed category or label for individuals. Thus a simple statement such as 'Harriet is a woman' or 'Stephen is a man' tells us nothing about their gender beyond a basic grammatical assignment or an identification of their accepted sex. Such a usage of gender is of limited utility except as a 'variable' in social analysis (where, for example, we may look at 'voting patterns broken down by age and gender/sex'). Gender only becomes a meaningful term when we consider the relationship *between* Harriet and Stephen and the broader relations in which they live. Gender is a social phenomenon, not merely an attribute of

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individuals. As I stated at the start of this Introduction, gender as explored in this book is a set of sociological relationships. However, like all sociological phenomena, gender impacts on the experience of each one of us as individuals. That is what I mean by lived experience.

Because I want to emphasize strongly that gender is lived experience, I have included in between the main chapters of this book a series of vignettes, or illustrative sketches, exploring the way that gender is lived out in people's lives. These vignettes are set in a different typeface from the main chapters, so can be easily identified. Some are narratives or personal stories of individuals, including myself: others illustrate a series of dilemmas and possibilities that individuals may face. This technique illustrates a fourth proposition, which is that 'the personal is political'. This was a favourite proposition of second-wave feminists as they sought to bring what had formerly been seen as private matters (such as housework or domestic violence) on to the political agenda. I use this proposition to show that the political relations of gender, disparities of power between women and men, affect us all in every aspect of our lives, *whether we realize it or not*. This is what the second-wave feminists tried to address by the process they called consciousness-raising: small groups of women, often friends or workmates, met together regularly to discuss what being a woman meant to them, to share the experiences and problems they faced in their everyday lives. This later became the model for similar men's groups.

Finally, I stress that gender is a very diffuse and all-embracing concept. Unlike some social science concepts (such as technology, democracy, deviance), gender does not relate to a single aspect or sphere of human activity. Gender affects every aspect of our personal lives. Whether we identify as a man or as woman determines how we look, how we talk, what we eat and drink, what we wear, our leisure activities, what jobs we do, how our time is deployed, how other people relate to us. Similarly, as I shall argue in the second half of this book, all the institutions which make up our society (marriage, families, schools, workplaces, clubs, pubs, political organizations) are themselves *gendered* and are locations in which the *gendering* of individuals and relationships takes place. Thus, while the study of class, for example, focuses on

the economic sphere (issues of occupation, income and resources), the study of gender is multifaceted, leading to the proliferation of research and writing mentioned above. One can conduct a study of gender in relation to virtually any social or cultural phenomenon. Ulrich Beck (1992) rightly described gender as 'omni-present'. As Jan Morris said in her autobiography, *Conundrum*, in which she described her experience as a transsexual crossing from male to female: 'There seems to be no aspect of existence, no moment of the day, no contact, no arrangement, no response, which is not different for men and women' (quoted in Abbott 2000: 140).

While writing the first edition of this book, I had the good fortune to visit India as a guest at a Women's Studies Network Conference convened by the British Council in Delhi. This gave me a chance to look at gender issues from a new perspective, listening to the concerns of women living in a very different cultural and socio-economic context. What I learned from them has informed the way I have written this book. Literally, a new window on the world was opened which affected my 'way of seeing' (Berger 1972). Thus, I have tried to incorporate material from India into the discussion as a counter to the ethnocentrism of which Anglo-American feminism has often been accused.

The points that I have made above are at play in considering how gender is experienced in India (and any other country we might discuss). Gender is a social construct and the rules of gender relations operate very differently in India from Europe (for example, all the time I was in Delhi, I never saw a woman driving a car; it is not against the law, as it is in Saudi Arabia, but it appears to be sanctioned by custom). Gender is politically shaped: the state in India currently has a key role in redefining gender rules pressured by a very active and focused feminist movement. A Women's Party was formed in 1987 and contested elections in the state of Maharashtra, although it did not win any seats (Omvedt 1987). Indian feminists also draw very strongly on CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, an internationally approved agreement on equal rights. CEDAW is used in India and in many other countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa to give legitimacy to feminist movements. In Britain and the US, where the climate

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of equality is more developed, feminists have not needed such a tool. Gender is lived experience and puts terrible constraints as well as opportunities in our way: Indian women spoke with passion about the ‘missing girls’ of India as manifested in the adverse sex ratio in many states, caused in part by female foeticide and infanticide. The personal is political: just as British and American feminists had done in the 1980s, Indian women were campaigning to raise awareness of the severe problems in their country of widespread violence against women and to break the silence around domestic violence.

As we have seen, the study of gender is well established in colleges and universities. Gender has been recognized as a respectable area for academic research. We can certainly say that we are living in a gender-aware society, in contrast to the position described to me by women in India. I have described this current situation as constituting ‘a climate of equality’ (Bradley 1999a). However, as this book is designed to show, that does not mean that battles around gender and its meanings are over. Since the publication of the first edition of this book, we have seen a change in government which has had a major impact on gender relations. While the previous New Labour government passed a number of policies designed to help women and open up opportunities for them, the erosion of the welfare state by the Coalition government elected in 2010 has shifted the balance of economic power back towards men and has made life very difficult for less advantaged groups of women. There is even a sense that the new political and economic climate may be ‘driving women back into the home’. Beneath the surface of the climate of equality still lie major divergences of gendered power.



# IN AND OUT OF THE FRAME: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF GENDER

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*Her voice was ever soft,  
Gentle and low – an excellent thing in woman.*  
(Shakespeare, *King Lear*)

*I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.*  
(Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)

*That's a woman's life – waitin' and waitin'.* (John Galsworthy, *Strife*)

*Although I have the body of a woman, I have the heart  
and stomach of a king.* (Queen Elizabeth I)

*Men's love is of men's life a thing apart  
'Tis woman's whole existence.* (Lord Byron, *Don Juan*)

I was brought up in the 1940s and 1950s, a time when the separation of women's and men's experience – social patterns of gender difference, though such terminology would not have been used at the time – was taken for granted and thus unquestioned. My father went out to work, running an office to support his wife and three children. My mother had been a schoolteacher until she gave birth to me – the oldest of the three. After that, she became a full-time domestic worker, doing the shopping, cleaning and washing and cooking elaborate meals for

the rest of us. When we were short of money, she would take in lodgers or 'night-stop visitors' for whom she provided bed and board. Most of my friends' families had similar arrangements; this was the heyday of the 'traditional' or male breadwinner family, at least among the middle classes.

I went to a single-sex grammar school, as did my brother and sister. In many ways my adolescence was comparable to that of middle-class girls in parts of Asia and the Middle East today; I grew up in a segregated world of girls and girl culture. Although I had a younger brother, boys of my own age seemed a different species. I knew that at school they did 'boy things', such as woodwork and metalwork, sports like rugby, soccer and cricket. I was scared of having to talk to one as I had no idea what went on in their minds: obviously they would not be interested in pets and ponies, romantic fiction and gorgeous pop singers like Cliff Richard, Adam Faith and Billy Fury! Later, when I went to university, I envied those whom I met who had had the luck to attend a mixed comprehensive school and had grown up at ease with the 'opposite sex'. That term, commonly used then (as in 'how to attract the opposite sex'), seemed perfectly to sum up the bipolar world which I inhabited. Boys were everything that girls were not. This was the frame for gender relations in the 1950s.

Like my girlfriends, I took it for granted that in the future I would get married and look after children, unless – horrid fate – I became a 'spinster' or 'old maid' getting 'left on the shelf'. The academically oriented school I attended made a big thing about 'careers for girls', and distinguished old girls would come to speech days to talk about their work as scientists, civil servants or politicians. But this all flowed over our heads. Some of our teachers were not married and we pitied them in a condescending sort of way. It was even whispered in the playground that two of them were lesbians, a cause of much giggling and speculation. Like many girls, I had fantasies of 'what I might do when I grew up': become an actress, a writer, even a teacher. But I did not think of these activities in terms of earning a living or supporting myself or having

a career. It was just that it seemed that as an adult you had to do something, at least until marriage. As Sylvia Walby writes in *Gender Transformations* (1997), women at the time were oriented towards a domestic future as an unquestioned fate.

As I grew older and teenage sexual angst set in, I became gradually convinced that I was so plain and shy that I would never find a boyfriend or husband: at this point it began to occur to me that my fate might indeed be to be left on the shelf and I began to imagine how it would be possible to be an adult woman and not to be a wife and mother. Being at the age of 16 deeply soaked in French literature – Balzac, Molière, Stendhal, Proust – I had become familiar with the idea of the ‘bluestocking’ and some vague vision of myself as an intellectual began to emerge, since, while not being pretty, athletic or artistic, I was normally top of the class. But even then my fantasies took gendered, if highly literary, forms: I would run off to Paris, starve in a garret (very romantic!) and struggle to become a novelist; if successful I would then set up a ‘salon’. Poets, musicians and philosophers would attend and I would gain reflected glory from their wit and wisdom. This was a fantasy that persisted into my adult life. Less acknowledged, but nevertheless present in my consciousness, was a version of the ‘ugly duckling’ theme very popular in children’s and romantic fiction: I would throw off my teenage pudge and gawkinsness and some man would recognize the beauty of my soul and sweep me off my feet!

What is strange looking back on that epoch is how completely unchallenged and taken for granted this bipolar world of the sexes seemed. Men had to work; women had babies. Nor did this difference manifest itself in any way as a form of ‘inequality’: the nearest I came to this was a vague sense of ‘unfairness’. Why did my sister and I have to help with the washing up, while my brother was excused as it was more important for him to do his homework? Why did I have to clear up the play-room? I would have liked to have been born a boy, especially when I was pre-teen. At that stage I was a tomboy, keen on climbing trees, scrambling up rocks and playing

at soldiers. Yet, having been born a girl, one's fate was determined. Anatomy was indeed destiny.

I went to university to study English in the late 1960s and there I discovered the more enjoyable sides of being a girl: sex, dancing and rock 'n' roll. Although absorbed in these activities and all the excitement and fervour of the student protest movement, some inkling of gendered inequality was beginning to dawn upon me. The lecturers always seemed to treat the male students as more serious and important than us girls. Young men had the freedom to ask us out, while we had to sit in the hall of residence desperately hoping the phone would ring for us on Fridays and Saturdays. Young men had the liberty to roam about, while we women were policed by hall wardens 'in loco parentis' (we could enter their rooms in the male halls, but they were not allowed to venture beyond the common room in ours!). The 'double standard' reigned strong. It was acceptable, indeed desirable, for a young man to gain some sexual experience, so he would be a skilful initiator of his wife. But girls who had 'sex before marriage' risked being labelled sluts or slags.

Fascinating research into the lives of female students in the post-war decades carried out by Carol Dyhouse (2006) reveals how girls who became pregnant (and this was not a rare occurrence) often had to leave university, abandoning their degrees. I remember going to see my doctor to ask to be prescribed the pill when I started my relationship with my future husband, only to be told that she could not condone such immorality. It was back to the Durex, then, until the Family Planning Association came to our rescue. It would be hard for present-day young women, perhaps, to understand all the stress and embarrassment this caused. We had to inhabit, then, a world of sexual secrecy, confiding only in our best friends. Was it fair that our hearts were so often broken, causing us to lie weeping on our narrow student beds while the men sauntered to the sports field, apparently impervious to Cupid's arrows, as Byron had noted?

These vague disquiets were, indeed, echoed in my engagement with literature, as exemplified in the quotations at the start of this section. Lear's comment on

Cordelia's quiet voice, often quoted approvingly by my grandfather, seemed the attitude of a patriarch proved foolish: on the other hand, the noble and wifely Cordelia was clearly the heroine, compared to her hateful but ambitious sisters Regan and Goneril. Lady Macbeth's acknowledgement of her femininity was followed by a rejection of softness as a challenge to her faltering husband. But one would not want to be Lady Macbeth. Elisabeth I, virgin queen of ambiguous sexuality, was an easier figure to identify with: like me, she had clearly wanted to be a boy, and she had embraced the masculine role of sovereign with voracity, stringing the men along and out-manoeuvring them all along the line. And what passion I breathed into Madge's line from Galsworthy's play about striking male factory workers, *Strife*, as a student actress: 'That's a woman's lot. Waitin' and waitin.'" Why were we doomed to passivity while men got all the drama?

These feelings of injustice and disadvantage, however, remained inchoate until, in 1978, I embarked on a second degree as a (not very) mature student. By then I had married, trained and worked as an English teacher, suffered health problems and held off from having a child because it didn't somehow feel right. I valued the freedom I had begun to attain and my marriage was beginning to falter. I was ripe for feminism to hit me, and it did! I was studying sociology because I had discovered Marxism during my PGCE year and had developed a passionate interest in work relations, class and politics. But by the end of my PhD period, gender had become just as strong a passion. Like so many women of that time, my active involvement in the Women's Liberation Movement evolved alongside an academic identification as a Marxist feminist. My marriage had collapsed and now I was going at last to develop that career commended to me on school speech days. There was a world to win! It was a time of crux, such as that described by Carol Gilligan in *The Birth of Pleasure*, her retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche: 'In moments of epiphany – moments of sudden, radical illuminations – we see through the categories that have blinded our vision. These are the

moments when we step out of the frame' (2002: 207). As Gilligan says, stepping out of the frame is a frightening experience as we lose our bearings, 'find ourselves without a map' (ibid.: 159). But it also offers us extraordinary freedom to make our own roads and step over boundaries. From now on, whatever might befall me, I owed it to womankind to turn my back on passivity. Feminism had taught me that we had 'the right to choose': the right to be an active human being and not merely a reflector of male glory. While this was a moment of personal epiphany, it is important to emphasize that this was the kind of experience shared by many women of my generation and similar educational backgrounds. Gender change, like gender identity, is a social phenomenon.

In Britain, we have moved on considerably from that segregated but naturalized gender order in which I grew up. But 'women's liberation' has not reached all women either in Britain or, more notably, across the globe. This is what a rural woman in India told a researcher about life for women in her village:

Men in our families are like the sun, they have a light of their own. Women are like satellites without any light of their own. They shine only if and when the sun's light touches them. This is why women have to constantly compete with each other for a bigger share of sunlight, because without this light, there is no life. (Bhasin 2000: 23)

One of the hopes for the study of gender has always been that, through voicing such insights, women (and men) will be able to move forward to a point where they, too, will be able to step outside their own frames of inequality and acceptance and take us forward to a new world of opportunity, understanding and respect.