

# The Question of Gender

## Recognizing gender

In the year 2000 the American people, with the aid of a number of lawyers, elected a President. The fortunate candidate was a man, George W. Bush. His unfortunate opponent, Al Gore, was also a man. So was Mr Bush's running-mate, who duly became Vice-President. So was Mr Gore's running-mate, who did not. So were seven of the nine Supreme Court justices who made the key decision about which of them would win. Messages of congratulation flooded in from the leaders of other world powers: from the Prime Minister of Great Britain, a man; the Prime Minister of Japan, a man; the Chancellor of Germany, a man; the Prime Minister of France, a man; the President of the Russian Federation, a man; the President of the People's Republic of China, a man. They are not exceptional. On the most recent count, 93 per cent of all cabinet ministers in the world's governments are men.

The year before, the American people were troubled by extraordinary violence in the country's schools. The Columbine high school massacre was the peak in a pattern of killings where one or two pupils take guns to the school they attend and shoot fellow pupils and teachers. Some of the dead were girls, but none of the killers were. It seems that an established pattern of violence among men has now appeared among teenage boys as well.

Multiple killings are not unique to the United States. In January 1996 there was a multiple murder in the state of Queensland in Australia.

Three children had been found shot to death in a car parked outside a house in which four adults were found dead. A wife, fearing her violent husband, had left him and was living in hiding with her parents. Apparently the husband extracted her address from the children while they were on a custody visit, then murdered them, murdered her, murdered her parents, and finally shot himself. This was one of twenty-eight multiple killings with guns in Australia from 1987 to 1996. All twenty-eight killers were men. Men are much more likely than women to own weapons – by a ratio of four to one, according to research on gun ownership in the USA.

Women do most of the housework, in most contemporary societies, and also most of the work of caring for young children. Women are much less likely to be present in the public realm than men, and when they are, usually have less in the way of resources. For instance, in almost all parts of the world men are more likely than women to have a paid job. The world ‘economic activity rate’ for women is just over two-thirds of the rate for men, according to 1997 figures. The main exceptions are former Soviet countries and parts of west Africa, where women’s economic participation rates are unusually high. But in Arab states women’s participation rates are as low as one-fifth the rate for men, and in south Asia and Latin America they are about half the rate for men.

When women do get jobs, their average wages are lower than men’s. And partly for this reason, women’s average incomes are much lower than men’s, though women do at least as many hours of work as men, and often more. It is a notable fact – in the light of claims that we live in a ‘post-feminist’ world where equality has been achieved – that women’s average incomes, world-wide, are 56 per cent of men’s average incomes. Accordingly, most women in the world, especially women with children, are economically dependent on men. And in many parts of the world some men believe that women who are dependent on them must be their property – to discard if they wish, to kill if need be.

Four decades after the Women’s Liberation movement criticized sexist stereotypes, Western media are still packed with images of female passivity. On my way to work I pass a newsagency which displays the posters for the week’s mass-circulation magazines. Almost every poster shows a young woman: usually blonde, always dangerously thin, heavily made up, pretty, and not doing anything. Girls are still taught by mass culture that they need above all to be desirable, as if their main task were to lie on silk cushions waiting for Prince Charming to come, checking the horoscope from week to week to learn if their star signs will be compatible when he arrives.

Boys are not generally taught to make themselves attractive. Rather they are taught the importance of appearing hard and dominant – whether they feel like it or not. At school and in the media boys are steered towards competitive sports, and are often put under heavy peer pressure to show their toughness. Not surprisingly, it is mainly young men who are recruited into jobs that require the use of force: police, the military, private security, and blue-collar crime. And it is mainly young women who are recruited into jobs that repair the consequences of violence: nursing, psychology, and social work.

Here we have diverse facts – about politics, about violence, about economics, about mass culture, about childhood and youth. Recognizing that they are all connected is the basis of modern thought about gender. These facts form a pattern, which we may call the gender arrangements or ‘gender order’ of contemporary society.

Recognizing the gender order is easy; understanding it is not. Creative thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Juliet Mitchell, and social movements such as Women’s Liberation, have pointed out the gender patterns and tried to change them. But their ideas have always been contested. A number of conflicting theories of gender now exist, and some issues about gender are still very difficult to resolve. At the same time, there is now a large volume of research on gender questions, some of it very good; and there is a growing fund of practical experience with gender reform.

## Understanding gender

In everyday life we normally take gender for granted. We instantly recognize a person as a man or woman, girl or boy. We arrange much of our everyday business around the distinction. Conventional marriages require one of each. Mixed doubles tennis requires two of each, but most sports require one kind at a time. The most popular television broadcast in the world is said to be the American Super Bowl, in which a hundred million people watch a strikingly gendered event: large armoured men crash into each other in pursuit of a leather ball, and thin women in short skirts dance and smile in the pauses. Most of us cannot crash or dance so well, but we do our best in other ways. As men or women we slip our feet into differently shaped shoes, button our shirts on opposite sides, get our heads clipped by different hairdressers, buy our pants in separate shops, and take them off in separate toilets.

These arrangements are so common, so familiar, that they can seem part of the order of nature. Belief that gender distinction is ‘natural’

makes it scandalous when people don't follow the pattern – for instance, when people of the same gender fall in love with each other. So homosexuality is declared 'unnatural' and bad. The same issue of the Australian newspaper that reported the multiple killing in 1996 also reported a new move by the government of the state of Tasmania. As part of its law-and-order package in the run-up to a state election, the penalty for men having sex with other men in their own homes was to be raised from twenty-one to twenty-five years in jail.

But if having sex with another man is unnatural, why have a law against it? We don't provide penalties for violating the third law of thermodynamics. The proposed Tasmanian law – like anti-gay ordinances in United States cities, like the criminalization of women's adultery in Islamic Sharia law – only makes sense because the matter is not fixed by nature. These laws are part of an enormous social effort to channel people's behaviour. Ideas about gender-appropriate behaviour are constantly being circulated, not only by legislators but also by priests, parents, teachers, advertisers, retail mall owners, talk-show hosts and disk jockeys. Events like the Super Bowl are not just consequences of our ideas about gender difference. They also help to create and disseminate gender difference, by displays of exemplary masculinities and femininities.

Being a man or a woman, then, is not a fixed state. It is a becoming, a condition actively under construction. The pioneering French feminist Simone de Beauvoir put this in a classic phrase: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. Though the positions of women and men are not simply parallel, the principle is also true for men: one is not born masculine, but acquires and enacts masculinity, and so becomes a man. As de Beauvoir further saw – following the pioneering psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud – this 'becoming' follows many different paths, involves many tensions and ambiguities, and may produce unstable results. Part of the mystery of gender is how a pattern that on the surface appears so stark and rigid, on close examination turns out so fluid, complex and uncertain.

So we cannot think of womanhood or manhood as fixed by nature. But neither should we think of them as simply imposed from outside, by social norms or pressure from authorities. People construct themselves as masculine or feminine. We claim a place in the gender order – or respond to the place we have been given – by the way we conduct ourselves in everyday life.

Most people do this willingly, and often enjoy the gender polarity. Wearing leather jacket and engineer boots, my body declares: I am

pleased to be masculine; I cultivate toughness, hard edges, assertiveness. Wearing lace collar and ruffled skirt, my body declares: I am pleased to be feminine; I cultivate softness, smooth and rounded forms, receptiveness. In Western culture, sexual pleasure is often organized around gender polarity. Most of us desire either men or women, but not both. What is gender-ambiguous is often an object of disgust or derision: 'You can't tell them apart nowadays . . .'

Yet gender ambiguities are not so rare. There are masculine women and feminine men. There are women in love with other women, and men in love with other men. There are people who enjoy both leather jackets and ruffled skirts. There are women who are heads of households, and men who bring up children. There are women who are soldiers and men who are nurses.

Psychological research suggests that the great majority of us combine masculine and feminine characteristics, in varying blends, rather than being all one or all the other. Gender ambiguity can be an object of fascination and desire, as well as disgust. Gender impersonations are familiar in both popular and high culture, from the cross-dressed actors of Shakespeare's stage to drag movies like *Tootsie* and *Priscilla*.

There is certainly enough gender blending to provoke heated reminders from fundamentalist preachers, conservative politicians and football coaches – categories which increasingly overlap – that we ought to be what we naturally are, dichotomous. There are whole social movements dedicated to re-establishing 'the traditional family', 'true femininity' or 'real masculinity'. These movements are themselves clear evidence that the boundaries they defend are none too stable.

But the effort to sustain the gender categories also sustains the relations between them – and therefore sustains the inequalities they produce, and the harm they do. The inequalities of income and political authority already mentioned are part of a larger pattern of inequalities between women and men. Most wealth is in the hands of men, most big institutions are run by men, most science and technology is controlled by men. In many countries, including big populations such as Bangladesh, India, Nigeria and Egypt, women are much less likely than men to have even been taught to read. On a world scale, two-thirds of illiterate people are women. In countries like the United States, Australia and Germany middle-class women have gained full access to higher education and have made inroads into middle management and professions. But as the US Congress's Glass Ceiling Commission recently showed, even in those countries many informal barriers operate to keep the top

levels of power and wealth still a world of men. Of the senior managers of major US corporations 95 to 97 per cent are men.

There is also unequal respect. In many situations, including the cheerleaders at the football game, women are treated as marginal to the main action, or as just the objects of men's desire. Whole genres of humour – bimbo jokes, woman-driver jokes, wife jokes, mother-in-law jokes, spinster jokes, dumb-whore jokes, rolling-pin jokes – are based on contempt for women's triviality and stupidity. A whole industry, ranging from heavy pornography and prostitution to soft-core advertising, markets women's bodies as objects of consumption by men. Equal-opportunity reforms in the workplace often run into a refusal by men to be under the authority of a woman. The same happens in many religions, among them Catholic Christianity, mainstream Islam, and some sects of Buddhism. All of these prevent women from holding major religious office, and often treat women symbolically as a source of defilement for men.

Though men in general benefit from the inequalities of the gender order, they do not benefit equally. Indeed, many pay a considerable price. Boys and men who depart from dominant definitions of masculinity because they are gay, effeminate, or simply wimpish, are often subject to verbal abuse and discrimination, and are sometimes the targets of violence. Men who conform to dominant definitions of masculinity may also pay a price. As research on men's health shows, men have a higher rate of industrial accidents than women, have a higher rate of death by violence, more alcohol abuse, and (not surprisingly) more sporting injuries. Men of marginalized ethnic groups may be targeted for racist abuse and are likely to have the poorest working conditions, health status and life expectancy.

Gender arrangements are thus, at the same time, sources of pleasure, recognition and identity, and sources of injustice and harm. This means that gender is inherently political – but it also means the politics can be complicated and difficult.

Inequality and oppression in the gender order have repeatedly led to demands for reform. Movements for change include the nineteenth-century campaigns for married women's property rights and votes for women, and twentieth-century campaigns for homosexual law reform, women's trade unionism, equal employment opportunity, women's reproductive rights, and the prevention of rape and domestic violence.

Political campaigns resisting some of these changes, or seeking counter-changes, have also arisen. The scene of gender politics currently

includes anti-gay campaigns, anti-abortion ('pro-life') campaigns, a spectrum of men's movements, and a complex international debate about links between Western feminism and Western cultural dominance in the world.

In this history, the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation movements of the 1960s–1970s were pivotal. They did not reach all their political goals, but they had a profound cultural impact. They called attention to a whole realm of human reality that was poorly understood, and thus created a demand for understanding as well as action. This is the historical take-off point of contemporary gender research. Political practice launched a deep change – which increasingly seems like a revolution – in human knowledge.

This book is an attempt to map this revolution. It will describe the terrain revealed by gender politics and gender research, introduce the debates about how to understand it and change it, and offer solutions to some of the problems these debates have run into. In chapter 2 I discuss four notable examples of recent gender research, to show how the broad issues just discussed take shape in specific investigations. Chapter 3 turns to the issue of 'difference', the extent of sex differences, and the way bodies and society interact. This requires an account of gender as a social structure, which I present in chapter 4, exploring the different dimensions of gender and the process of historical change. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss gender on the small scale, in personal life, and the rather different issues raised by gender on the large scale, in institutions and world society. Chapters 7 and 8 address gender theory and gender politics, mapping the growth of understanding, the conflicts of ideas, and what is at stake in movements for change. This raises questions both about the micro-politics of personal life, and the large-scale politics of institutions and movements, ending with a discussion of gender politics in world society.

## Defining gender

As a new awareness of issues developed, a new terminology was needed. Over the last thirty years the term 'gender' has become common in English-language discussions to describe the whole field (though it has never been universally accepted). The term was borrowed from grammar. Ultimately it comes from an ancient Indo-European word-root meaning 'to produce' (cf. 'generate'), which gave rise to words in many languages meaning 'kind' or 'class' (e.g. 'genus'). In grammar 'gender'

came to refer to the specific distinction between classes of nouns ‘corresponding more or less’ – as the nineteenth-century *Oxford English Dictionary* primly noted – ‘to distinctions of sex (and absence of sex) in the objects denoted’. Grammar suggests how widely such distinctions permeate human cultures. In many languages not only the words for people are gendered, but also the words for objects, concepts and states of mind.

Language is an important aspect of gender, but does not provide a consistent framework for understanding it. Languages engender concepts in different ways. For instance ‘terror’ is feminine in French (‘la terreur’), masculine in German (‘der Schrecken’), and neuter in English. Different languages make different distinctions. English is a relatively un-gendered language (among its few gender distinctions are the pronouns ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘it’). Yet English has both ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ where German has one word, ‘Geschlecht’. Japanese does not have a closely analogous word at all – so a Japanese text on gender transliterates the English word.

Many languages define a trichotomy of classes: masculine, feminine and neuter. Most contemporary discussions of gender in society, however, drop the third category and emphasize a dichotomy. Starting from a presumed biological divide between male and female, they define gender as the social or psychological difference that corresponds to that divide, elaborates it, or is caused by it.

In its most common usage, then, the term ‘gender’ means the cultural difference of women from men, based on the biological division between male and female. Dichotomy and difference are the substance of the idea. Men are from Mars, women are from Venus.

There are decisive objections to such a definition:

- Human life does not simply divide into two realms, nor does human character divide into two types. Our images of gender are often dichotomous, but the reality is not. Abundant evidence will be seen throughout this book.
- A definition in terms of difference means that where we cannot see difference, we cannot see gender. With such a definition we could not recognize the gendered character of lesbian or homosexual desire (based on gender similarity), nor the powerful gender dynamic of an all-male army. We would be thrown into confusion by research which found only small psychological differences between women and men, which would seem to imply that gender had evaporated. (See chapter 3.)

- A definition based on dichotomy excludes the patterns of difference *among* women, and among men, from the concept of gender. But there are such differences that are highly relevant to the pattern of relations between women and men. For instance, the difference between violent and non-violent masculinities matters a lot, and so does the difference between femininities which are oriented to heterosexual relations and those which are not. (See chapter 5.)
- A definition in terms of personal characteristics ignores processes which lie beyond the individual person. Large-scale social processes are based on the *shared* capacities of women and men more than on their differences. The creation of goods and services in a modern economy is a major example: it is the common capacities of women and men as workers that matters most to the productivity of industry. Yet the products of the process – the wealth generated, for instance – may be distributed in highly gendered ways.

The development of social science has provided a way past these difficulties. The key is to move from a focus on difference to a focus on *relations*. Gender is, above all, a matter of the social relations within which individuals and groups act.

Gender relations do include difference and dichotomy, but also include many other patterns. For instance, gender in the contemporary world involves massive hierarchies of power among men – as seen in multinational corporations, or armies – which can in no sense be reduced to ‘male/female differences’, however caused.

Enduring or extensive patterns among social relations are what social theory calls ‘structures’. In this sense, gender must be understood as a social structure. It is not an expression of biology, nor a fixed dichotomy in human life or character. It is a pattern in our social arrangements, and in the everyday activities or practices which those arrangements govern.

Gender is a social structure, but of a particular kind. Gender involves a specific relationship with bodies. This is recognized in the commonsense definition of gender as an expression of natural difference, the bodily difference of male from female. What is wrong with this formula is not the attention to bodies, nor the concern with sexual reproduction, but the idea that cultural patterns simply ‘express’ bodily difference.

Sometimes cultural patterns do express bodily difference. But often they do more than that, or less than that, or something else completely.

In relation to the distinction of male from female bodies, social practices sometimes exaggerate (e.g. maternity clothes), sometimes deny (many employment practices), sometimes mythologize (computer games), sometimes complicate ('third gender' customs). So we cannot say that social arrangements routinely 'express' biological difference.

But we can say that, in a variety of ways, society *addresses* bodies and puts reproductive difference into play. There is no fixed 'biological base' for the social process of gender. Rather, there is an arena in which bodies are brought into social processes, in which our social conduct does something with reproductive difference. I will call this the 'reproductive arena'.

This allows a definition of gender that escapes the paradoxes of 'difference'. *Gender is the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices (governed by this structure) that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes.* To put it informally, gender concerns the way human society deals with human bodies, and the many consequences of that 'dealing' in our personal lives and our collective fate. The terms used in this definition are explained more fully in chapters 3 and 4 below.

This definition has important consequences. Among them: Gender patterns may differ strikingly from one cultural context to another, but are still 'gender'. Gender arrangements are reproduced socially (not biologically) by the power of structures to constrain individual action, so they often appear unchanging. Yet gender arrangements are in fact always changing, as human practice creates new situations and as structures develop crisis tendencies. Finally, gender may have an end. Each of these points will be explored later in the book.

### Note on sources

Most of the statistics mentioned in this chapter, such as income, economic activity rates and literacy, can be found in United Nations Development Programme (1999; see list of references at back of book). Figures on parliamentary representation and numbers of ministers are from Inter-Parliamentary Union (1999), and on managers, from Glass Ceiling Commission (1995b). Sources of information on men's health can be found in Schofield et al. (2000). A report on the murder-suicide case referred to is in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 Jan. 1996, p. 1, and on the Tasmanian government anti-gay initiative, p. 3. For gun massacres

in Australia see Crook and Harding (1997), and for gun ownership in the USA see Smith and Smith (1994). The quotation on 'woman' is from de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949: 295). Definitions and etymology of the word 'gender' are in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 4, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1933, p. 100.