

Critiquing Gender

A paper delivered at the 'Women's Liberation 2024: Responding to the Challenges' conference, Brisbane, 8-10 March 2024

Abstract

In an article in *Quillette*, Michael Biggs, who is trans-critical and a feminist ally, argues that the denial of biological sex differences on the part of 'some feminists' (or 'mainstream feminism') is responsible for the rise of transgenderism, at least in part. (He did say that radical feminists were 'relatively immune' from this tendency 'because they had a much greater appreciation of sexual differences'). I think he does have a point, but it is the use of the word 'gender' that is the problem, not feminism. I argue that the use of the word 'gender' has had anti-feminist implications from the beginning. It was certainly used in feminist circles as a handy shorthand way of alluding to the argument that women's subordination was socially constructed, not biologically determined. But it didn't originate with feminism (mainstream or otherwise), but with the work of such luminaries as Harry Benjamin, Robert Stoller and John Money.

It became popular *despite* its use within feminism, not because of it. It was a way to euphemise what feminism had uncovered—calling it 'gender' instead of male domination or patriarchy. 'Gender' was an attempt to provide a shorthand way of signalling (part of) the feminist message. But because it was misguided from the beginning, it settled comfortably into malestream discourse, and now provides faithful service for the transgender agenda. It was not feminism properly understood that was responsible for the rise and rise of transgenderism, but the euphemising function of 'gender'.

Biggs was right to identify the denial of biology in the name of 'feminism' as a precursor to transgenderism. He didn't notice, however, that it is the term 'gender' that has been central to that process of denial. From the very beginning the 'gender' usage has been antithetical to the feminist project, both because of its denial of sex differences (e.g. 'gendered violence'), and because of its euphemistic denial of the real enemy, male domination.

The sex-gender distinction

Gender. n. a grammatical term only. To talk of persons or creatures of the masculine or feminine gender, meaning of the male or female sex, is either a jocularly (permissible or not according to context) or a blunder (Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, Oxford, 1940, quoted in Scott, 1986).

The popularity of the term 'gender' must bear some of the responsibility for the rise and rise of transgenderism. Based on the assumption that the sexed body (biology) is irrelevant to society ('gender'), it makes male encroachment into the category of 'female' thinkable. Coupled with the society-wide indifference to the needs and interests of women, 'gender's' deletion of the sexed body opens the way for men to colonise the last category from which they are excluded—'female'.

Feminism's fault?

Michael Biggs put this in terms of (some) feminists arguing that 'socialisation' is the only explanation for sex differences and hence that biology is irrelevant. In doing so, he said, feminists were 'sawing off the branch on which they perched':

By denying biological differences they inadvertently eroded the distinction between male and female, which now licenses a social movement that undermines the interests of women and girls ... If society denies biological differences and does not rigidly enforce gender roles, then the way is cleared for transgenderism. Being a man or woman—or neither—becomes a matter of subjective feeling (Biggs, 2019).

He said that radical feminists were 'relatively immune' from this tendency to deny the importance of biological differences, 'because they had a much greater appreciation of sexual differences'. It was what he called 'mainstream feminism' that was so focused on socialisation and so neglectful of biology. Anderson (2018: chapter 7) has a similar argument, this time alleging that it was 'radical feminism' that prepared the way for transgenderism by denying 'the biological basis for sex differences'.

Both are partly right, but it is the use of the word 'gender' that is the problem, not feminism. As I argue below, the use of the word 'gender' has had anti-feminist implications from the beginning. It was certainly used in feminist circles as a handy shorthand way of alluding to the argument that women's subordination was socially constructed, not biologically determined. But it didn't originate with feminism (mainstream or otherwise), but with the work of such luminaries as Harry Benjamin, Robert Stoller and John Money. Moreover, it became popular *despite* its use within feminism, not because of it. It was a way to euphemise what feminism had uncovered—calling it 'gender' instead of male domination or patriarchy ('the "system of power" called "patriarchy"', as Kate Millett put it).

But the crux of the feminist message is neither socialisation nor sex differences nor 'gender', but male supremacy. 'Gender' was an attempt to provide a shorthand way of signalling (part of) the feminist message, misguided though it turned out to be. And because it was misguided from the beginning, it settled comfortably into mainstream discourse, and now provides faithful service for the transgender agenda. But it was not feminism properly understood that was responsible for the rise and rise of transgenderism, but the euphemising function of 'gender'.

Feminism and 'gender'

The sex-gender distinction found favour with the feminism of the early 'second wave' (1970s and 1980s) because it suggested that invidious sex differences were not immutable (because they were not biological). They could be changed because they were a matter of culture, of meanings and values that had been learnt, that could be unlearned, and hence were a matter of choice. Kate Millett (1971), for example, said: 'I agree in general with Money and [his collaborators] the Hampsons who show in their large series of intersexed patients that gender role is determined by postnatal forces, regardless of the anatomy and physiology of the external genitals'. 'The categories "masculine" and "feminine"', she said, were 'arbitrary', imposed on human personality by the 'system of power' called 'patriarchy'. This system was 'thoroughly

in command', but 'when its workings are exposed and questioned, it becomes not only subject to discussion, but even to change' (Millett, 1971: 30-1, 58).

More recently, it was claimed that the sex-gender distinction is 'the single most important feminist theoretical contribution to social theory ... [and] the social structures and meanings attributable to sex difference' (Linda Gordon, quoted in Jensen, 2017: 24). Note, though, that this is not a *denial* of sex differences, but a focus on 'the social structures and meanings' attributed to them.

Nonetheless, despite its promise of choice where there traditionally had seemed to be none, the sex-gender distinction has done a disservice to feminism, or rather, 'gender' has. At the beginning, there were some warning voices pointing out that the distinction was not necessary and that it undermined the feminist project. But they were not heeded and the warnings dropped out of the feminist repertoire in favour of 'gender' here, 'gender' there, 'gender' 'gender' everywhere.

Early criticisms of the sex/gender distinction

The distinction was not necessary, it was said, because sex/biology was already constituted socially. We could only know it through our understanding of it, and understanding came from our shared social reality. As Genevieve Lloyd said, 'our bodies, as they figure in our self-consciousness, are always already socially constructed' (Lloyd, 1989: 20). Note that she didn't say that *bodies* are socially constructed. She said that it is the way we know and understand them, the meanings and values we place upon them, that are socially constructed.

Moira Gatens said that any notion of a body outside the ways in which we know it was meaningless. '[T]he human body is always lived in culture', she said, 'To speak of the body as somehow being outside of culture and its influence is nonsensical—already, to speak/write the body (even the biological body) is to subject it to language, itself a cultural product' (Gatens, 1989: 34-5, 43). But she didn't reject the term 'gender' despite her own criticism, but continued to use it uncritically. For example, she referred to 'the gendered relations between the sexes', although she could have refrained from using the word 'gendered' and the meaning would have remained the same. Indeed, it would have been clearer—what meaning is conveyed by 'the gendered relations between the sexes' that is not conveyed by 'the relations between the sexes'?

Here, 'gender' plays its usual obfuscating role. It implies that there is something other than sex at issue here. But if 'the human body is always lived in culture', if 'gender' is already included within 'sex' (because we can't know anything about sex/the body/biology unless we understand it), why use the word 'gender'? We've already said it all when we talk about sex. Gatens herself kept switching between the two. At one point she talked about 'the relations between the sexes' without any mention of 'gender'. She seems not to have taken her argument to its logical conclusion. If 'sex' and 'gender' are the same thing, both of them 'lived in culture', then just 'sex' will do. 'Gender' is superfluous—except of course it's not, because of the euphemistic purpose it serves in the interests of patriarchal recuperation.

Another writer who argued that our knowledge of sex was already socially constructed was Gayle Rubin, who originally suggested the notion of a sex-gender system (Rubin, 1975). She said, 'Sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product' (Rubin, 1975: 166). Note

that she said ‘sex as we know it’, so at least at that point, she was well within the feminist tradition. I hesitate to refer to Rubin’s writings as ‘feminist’, however. On the one hand, her 1975 essay, ‘The traffic in women’, was a mostly insightful account of women’s subordination with some examples of the ways in which it is justified among men.

On the other hand, she was later to espouse what she called ‘benign sexual variations’, which consisted of nothing but a series of male sexual fetishes, including prostitution—which she located with women (‘sex workers’) rather than the men who demanded it—and pornography: ‘transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries’ (i.e. paedophiles) (Rubin, 1984: 279). She held that no form of sexuality was to be morally condemned, not even paedophilia, which she defended as a set of ‘victims of a savage and undeserved witch-hunt’, referring to them euphemistically as ‘boy-lovers’ and ‘men who love underaged youth’ (Rubin, 1984: 272-3). (For an extended critique of this sexual libertarianism of Rubin among others, see: Thompson, 1991: chapters 10 to 14). Nonetheless, her earlier point that our knowledge of sex is already socially constructed is what feminism was arguing at the time.

Behind the ‘sex-gender’ distinction and the ‘gender’ terminology lies the denial that there are any differences between the sexes, or at least the denial that they are important. Often this denial was well-intentioned, an attempt to counter the sexist belief that women’s subordination was caused by their differences from men and that those differences were biological and hence unchangeable. (See Millett above).

Often, however, the denial of sex differences had a more sinister motive, in the sense that it was used as a backlash against a feminism struggling to verbalise the hitherto hidden and denied reality uncovered by the feminist insights. In this framework, feminist writings seen to be arguing that the sexes were different (by Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, etc.) were accused of ‘essentialism’ and ‘biologism’ and derided as ‘false universalism’ by a false ‘feminism’ busily white-anting feminism from within. (For an extended critique of this strategy, see: Thompson, 1991: chapter 10). If the sexes were not even different, or not in any important respects, it was impossible to identify the social problem responsible for women’s subordination (i.e. male domination), or even to acknowledge women’s oppression at all.

Rubin’s writing fits in with this latter framework, not surprisingly, given her anti-feminist sexual libertarianism. ‘Gender’, she said, ‘is a socially imposed division of the sexes’. So far so feminist (although she doesn’t mention that it is not just a division but a form of male domination). But then she goes on to tell us that it is this social imposition that is responsible for the differences between women and men because, ‘from the standpoint of nature, men and women are closer to each other than either is to anything else—for instance, mountains, kangaroos, or coconut palms’. She then goes on to say,

the idea that men and women are two mutually exclusive categories must arise out of something other than a nonexistent [sic] “natural” opposition. Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities ... The division of the sexes has the effect of repressing some of

the personality characteristics of virtually everyone, men and women. The same social system which oppresses women in its relations of exchange, oppresses everyone in its insistence upon a rigid division of personality (Rubin, 1975: 179-80).

This is the kind of postmodern argument that prepared the ground for the trans narrative (and it is not a feminist argument). If the sexes are more similar than they are different, it is quite feasible that men might be able to call themselves 'women'.

Unfortunately for her argument, it's fallacious: from the fact that human beings are different from other things, it does not follow that women and men are *not* different from each other. They are, and naturally different at that; and it is those differences that feminism is addressing, not, however, as mere differences. Feminism is challenging the ways in which sex differences are used as excuses and justifications for holding women in contempt; and feminism is struggling to assert a human status that is specific to women. To insist (as Ann Oakley also did in *Sex, Gender and Society*) that the sexes are so similar that the differences are 'superficial' and 'merely apparent', is to argue away the feminist project.

It is true that the sexes are similar in the sense that we're both human beings. But the male supremacist reality feminism is struggling against denies full human status to women *because* we are women, i.e. because of women's difference from men. Refusing to acknowledge that 'difference', which is not simply a difference but a matter of discrimination against and subordination and oppression of women, arrogant entitlement on the part of men, and dissociation for everyone but especially men, is to deny any need for feminism.

The depoliticising function of 'gender'

Not only was the sex-gender distinction unnecessary for conveying the feminist message, its denial of any important role for sex differences, undermined the feminist project. There were a few feminists who recognised this from the outset. For example, the editors of the *Australian Feminist Studies* journal noted that some of the articles in a 1987 issue of the journal *Daedalus* argued in favour of using the word 'gender' instead of 'women' or 'feminist'. The reasons were that 'women' was 'too specific' (presumably because it excluded men and we can't have that), and 'feminist' was 'too political' (and hence biased towards women, and we can't have that either). The *AFS* editors expressed disquiet at this preference for 'gender', commenting that

privileging "gender" over "women" or "feminist" is a strategy that can all too easily rebound against Women's Studies courses and feminist research ... A supposedly super-ordinate category is being introduced to de-fuse, indeed to eliminate, the political impetus from which feminist research and Women's Studies arise and draw their strength (AFS, 1989: iii).

Joan Scott also noted the depoliticising function of using the term 'gender', arguing that its usage on the part of feminist historians was an attempt to gain academic credibility:

In its simplest recent usage, "gender" is a synonym for "women." Any number of books and articles whose subject is women's history have, in the past few years, substituted "gender" for "women" in their titles. In some cases, this usage ... is actually

about the political acceptability of the field. In these instances, the use of “gender” is meant to denote the scholarly seriousness of a work, for “gender” has a more neutral and objective sound than does “women.” “Gender” seems to fit within the scientific terminology of social science and thus dissociates itself from the (supposedly strident) politics of feminism. In this usage, “gender” does not carry with it a necessary statement about inequality or power (Scott, 1986: 1056).

She did not, however, find this a reason to refrain from using ‘gender’. On the contrary, she accepted it as an accurate designation of the subject matter of feminism and went on to use it herself, e.g. ‘A way to conceive of “social reality” in terms of gender is lacking [in feminist psychoanalytic theory] ...’ (p.1064); ‘Concern with gender as an analytic category has emerged only in the late twentieth century’ (p. 1066), etc.

Moira Gatens (1983) also argued that the sex-gender distinction was depoliticising (despite her continued use of ‘gender’). It neutralised sex differences, she said, and in doing so, it neutralised sexual politics. It allowed sex differences to be ignored and gave priority to discourses other than feminism—“class”, “discourse”, “power” or some other “hobby-horse”—which co-opted or trivialised feminist struggles and feminist theory: ‘as if women’s *bodies* and the representation and control of women’s bodies were not a crucial stake in these struggles’ (Gatens, 1983: 156—original emphasis).

She pointed out that behaviours have quite different meanings depending on whether they are done by women or by men, and that those meanings are not neutral, but applied to sexed bodies. In other words, ‘gender’s’ function in separating bodies from their meanings and changing the meanings with no reference to the sex of the body, does not lead to neutrality (nor equality, it might be said). Rather, in a society where men are seen as the norm, it leads to ‘a “masculinization” or “normalization” of women—a making of “woman” into “man”’ (p.156). And of course a making of men into ‘women’, as the transgender project would have it, a logical consequence of the insistence that sex differences don’t matter.

The sex-gender distinction didn’t remain a distinction for very long. The ‘sex’ side of the dichotomy was quickly dropped in favour of ‘gender’ as the preferred designation of whatever we were talking about when it came to ‘women’ or ‘sex differences’ or ‘equality’ or ... (see, for example, Scott, 1986; SRG, 1987). The excuse for this avoidance of the ‘biology’ side of the distinction was the supposed need to avoid ‘essentialism’. (For a criticism of the use of the term ‘essentialism’ to describe so-called ‘cultural feminism’ (i.e. radical feminism), see: Thompson, 1991: chapter 10). As Moira Gatens put it: ‘In general, the favouring of the category “gender” over the category “sex” is defended in terms of the “dangers of biological reductionism”’ (Gatens, 1983: 144).

But perhaps a more honest reason is that biology made it impossible to argue sex differences away. If women were to be equal to men they had to be the same as men—on some essential level beyond the merely social? (Note the irony—those most eager to label others with the ‘essentialism’ accusation were the worst offenders). Acknowledging that the sexes were different was an impediment to arguing for women’s equality with men. If the sexes were different, how could women be equal?

Since biology couldn't be argued away, it was best to ignore it. Thus 'gender' became the sole referent of a 'feminism' bowdlerised and sanitised for everyday usage by being confined to pleas for 'equality'. To my knowledge, feminism has two responses to this. The first is the slogan, 'Women who seek to be equal to men lack ambition'; the second is the insight that men are not equal among themselves, so which men are women supposed to be equal to?

In its euphemising function 'gender' does sterling service for male supremacy's process of recuperation from the threat posed by feminism. The usual term for this euphemising process is 'depoliticisation', and it is true that the term 'gender' waters down the politics in what passes as 'feminism' in the malestream. But the way in which it does this is by using a term that serves the purposes of the male supremacist system of power that feminism is designed to challenge. Euphemising is still political. It does defuse feminist politics by gutting its terminology. But that ploy serves the political purposes of male domination by substituting something anodyne, even meaningless, for any term that might threaten to expose it.

'Gender' has worked well as this substitute. It replaces the word 'women'—a word that excludes men, the 'real' human beings, and hence brings into question the primal principle of male supremacy, that only men count as 'human'. It replaces the word 'sex' ('the gender of the foetus')—a word which still seems to cause some embarrassment when said aloud. It is a substitute for sex differences—we can't be all that different if we're equal, and guess who we're all the same as. And it is a substitute for the name of the real enemy.

My early critique

But despite the fact that using the word 'gender' took the politics out of feminism, no one, to my knowledge, has suggested dispensing with it. Except me:

I would like to see feminism dispense with the word "gender" (a vain hope, I suspect, given that it appears to have become thoroughly embedded within feminist discourse), in favour of the old, easily recognisable, ordinary English term, "sex" (Thompson, 1989: 23).

In fact, I was suspicious of 'gender' from the beginning, and I was never tempted to use the word within a feminist context (except to criticise it), despite decades of thinking, theorising and writing feminism. But I seemed to be the only one who recommended getting rid of the word 'gender' altogether.

Like the theorists quoted above, I too argued for dispensing with 'gender' because there was no need for it. 'Sex' was already socially constituted through language and meanings and values. 'Biology and bodies have meaning and political relevance', I said, 'only to the extent that they are already situated within discourse (or ideology, or the cultural, or the social, or language)' (Thompson, 1989: 25). Confining the social aspect of sex differences to 'gender' implied that 'sex' was somehow outside society.

I also argued that the way the sex-gender distinction dealt with the connection between 'biology' and sex differences was confused. Sometimes biology was appealed to in order to show that the differences between the sexes were not very marked after all. (Oakley, 1972, argued this in relation to sexual desire and activity).

Sometimes ‘biology’ was dragged in as a red herring to dismiss arguments by so-called ‘cultural feminists’. Alice Echols, for example, referred to a ‘growing tendency among some cultural feminists to invoke biological explanations of gender differences’ (Echols, 1984: 64). No one seemed to notice that accusing ‘cultural’ feminists of appealing to *biology*, was an oxymoron, given that ‘culture’ and biology (i.e. ‘nature’) are each other’s opposites.

And sometimes ‘biology’ was used to prove that there were so many differences that no one difference made any difference: ‘the multiplicity of bodily conformations and sexualities presented to us by concrete physicality—hermaphrodites, transsexuals, “freaks”, Siamese twins, etc.—[is] evidence that the grand dichotomy of sex is but one distinction among many’ (Thompson, 1989: 29. See, for example, Grosz, 1988. See also: Grosz, 1996).

The whole point of the exercise, the reason for the sex-gender distinction in the first place, was to deny that there were any significant differences between the sexes. If there is no real basis for sex differences, if sex differences are ‘superficial’ and ‘merely apparent’ (in Oakley’s words), simply a matter of ‘gender’, then there is no real reason why each sex can’t take the place traditionally reserved for the other. Women can take up men’s places in the workforce and the boardroom, men can take up women’s places in child-rearing and domestic activities. This fits neatly into the transgender agenda: if there is no real basis for sex differences, then men can be women. And women can be men, but because they are women, they can be ignored once they have served their purpose of tokenistic inclusion.

Conclusion

Biggs was right to identify the denial of biology in the name of ‘feminism’ as a precursor to transgenderism, as was Anderson (up to a point). Neither of them noticed, however, that it is the term ‘gender’ that has been central to that process of denial. From the very beginning the ‘gender’ usage has been antithetical to the feminist project, because of its denial of sex differences certainly (e.g. ‘gendered violence’), but also because of its euphemistic denial of the real enemy, male domination.

This is not a term they use, of course. Biggs referred to ‘a men’s rights movement’, an obvious instance of male domination, but Anderson rejects ‘patriarchy and male power’ as an explanation for socialised sex differences because ‘the most developed countries show the greatest gender differences in various measures of personality and disposition’. That’s because ‘the most developed countries’ have ‘prosperity and equality ... wealth, freedom and education’, and that ‘empower[s] men and women to be who they are’ (Anderson, 2018: chapter 7). Oh well, he is on the political Right, after all.

Nowadays, the term ‘gender’ is exposing its true colours as camouflage masking the real problem. It is central to male encroachment into the category of ‘female’, giving men permission to penetrate women’s spaces. ‘Gender’ rendered sexed bodies irrelevant. It is no wonder, then, that it has provided good service for the transgender agenda. Divorcing ‘gender’ from sexed bodies, and the popular enthusiasm with which it has become a euphemistic substitute for sex (and women, and the subject matter of feminism), eased the way for the transgender agenda.

The arrogance of the masculine entitlement to go wherever he pleases and do whatever he wants, and society's acquiescence in that entitlement, is so extreme that it overrides reality. But then, that is the nature of the male supremacist mindset, whose dissociation from any genuine humanity (Thompson, 2020) is rooted in the stubborn refusal to acknowledge the full humanity of women.

One of the conclusions to be drawn from what I have said above is that 'confusing sex and gender' is not one of the problematic aspects of the transgender agenda. I am not arguing that 'sex and gender identity are entirely distinct concepts' (e.g. Sullivan, 2020). The more basic problem is the use of the word 'gender' at all. Just as there is no such thing as a 'trans person', so there is no such thing as 'gender'. The solution, as I argued decades ago, is to drop the word 'gender' from the feminist lexicon altogether. The only feminist purpose it might have served is to get some of the more acceptable (to the malestream) feminist messages across. But the damage it's causing isn't worth it.

So the use of the word 'gender' serves to mask the unreality and misogyny of transgender's claims, just as its absurd neologisms do. Functioning as it does to euphemise the social problem exposed by feminism—male domination—'gender' allows anti-feminism to masquerade as 'feminism', and transgender is one of the more extreme examples. 'Gender' does sterling service for the transgender cause just because of its connotations of 'choice'. If sex is nothing but 'gender', then one can choose one's sex. Men can choose to be 'women' and, because they're 'women', they can claim feminist status. Feminism is, after all, for all women, including 'trans women'. Thus does transgender colonise feminism. The logic might be superficially plausible, but only by accepting its false premise that 'gender' is sex. One can almost admire transgender's ingenuity, if it wasn't so pernicious.

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