

Understanding Gender Beyond Sex: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives on Equality and Justice

Zichun Zhou^{1,a,*}

¹*Beijing National Day School, Beijing, China*

a. oliviazhou0801@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In a world where more diversified voices are being heard, people tend to mix up important concepts. Misunderstanding often cause problems: stereotypical impression, incorrect behaviors and reactions, discrimination and inequality, and even warfare and hatreds. As the term feminism getting a higher frequency of use, and as more and more women winning their power, people start to reflect on this social group. They fight for gender equality, pursuing their aims of social justice. But when referring to gender equality, it is often that people mistakenly link it to the equality between biological female and male. That is, separating gender from sex, and view social problems through the idea of gender instead of sex is still something in need of discussion. This essay tends to clarify such misunderstanding, discusses how gender is different from sex and why is gender important from both philosophical and historical perspectives. In these analysis, this essay also includes the discussion of femininity and masculinity, making a point on the proper use of these descriptive words. In the end, this essay also tries to give practical political and societal solutions to achieve a higher level of social equality and justice.

Keywords: Sex, gender, equality, social justice.

1. Introduction

Defines by the World Health Organization [1], gender refers to “the characteristic of men, women, boys and girls that are socially constructed.” It further explains that “as a social construct including associated norms, behaviors and roles, gender varies from society to society and change over time.” This definition might confuse a lot of people. Indeed, it is common to think gender as a nature of human being that we are born to be men or women. Seems to be misleading, this concept actually effectively distinguish the human-made social concept “gender” from another biological characteristics “sex”. Also defines by WHO, sex, on the other hand, refers to “the not mutually exclusive biological characteristic” distinguishing male and female. Primarily used as the short of sexual activity, sex is indeed the concept that physically differentiate people. Whatsoever, nowadays’s people tend to think of gender as sex, mixing up two concepts that are not even inconsistent with objectivity and subjectivity.

Misunderstanding gender as sex brings huge problem to both the people and the society. Prior to the invention of gender, male and female are just phrases to diversify people base on their natural biological characteristics, which is similar to categorizing animals into species base on their biological traits. However, with the emergence of gender, people started to take this concept as

something making one sex superior than the other, taking the difference between gender as that has been granted by the distinctions in sex. In other word, it is the existence of “gender” that assigns a group of people as “gender minorities” and brings them problem such as unable to access human right.

The main problem that this essay wants to discuss is how gender bounds the minority from accessing human rights and how we could break the limitations and reunite people. In order to discuss the problem cause by the misinterpreting gender as sex and gender minorities, this essay will focus on mainly three big perspectives to analyze the development and strengthening of the problematic understanding of gender. Starting on the philosophical perspective, this essay will explore the reason of creating “gender” and the pros and cons of generating any concept similar to that. Moving on to the second perspective, history and gender study, this essay will further elaborate on how our understandings of gender have bring limitations and inequality to certain group of people using historical evidences. Besides, this part will also bring up an associated discussion of masculinity and femininity to assist the analysis of gender. And at the very end, this essay will look from the view of politics and talk about the mutual effect between gender and political structure, political power, and policies. Finally after the analysis from three fields of study, this essay will try to provide efficient solutions to break limitations.

2. Philosophical Perspective: why we have the concept “gender”?

First and foremost, the discussion of how and why the concept gender was generated is important. From a philosophical point of view, this part will talk about the formation of this concept and the pros and cons of developing such categorical idea.

As Joan Scott [2], an historian with outstanding contributions in the fields of gender history and intellectual history, stated in her book *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*, back in 1986, feminists have adopted the term gender for differences in social sex construction, and at the same time theorists have applied gender as an analytic category similar to race. That is, gender in the field of academics has always been used as a term for distinguishing the different social roles of distinct sex.

Some may argue that since we already have differences in sexes, why we still generated the concept gender to further distinguish people? Harriet Bradley’s [3] analysis of three positions of gender in the society gives answers to this question. As he claimed, gender should be taken as a social construct, a politically deployed construct, and a live experience. As a social construct, gender, instead of being a fixed construct, “varies according to time, place, and culture”. Bradley also points out that gender has been serving as an indicative political implication for a long time, strengthening the political structure and social structure. Additionally, he claims that gender is something “formed” and “gained”, but not something natural. The above analysis clearly lay out why a related term gender should exist along with sex: unlike sex which is naturally fixed and given, gender could be generated according to time, space, and culture, and can be attain by people’s experiences and political believes, further push the social structure and atmosphere to form. It is a more comprehensive and subjective way to distinguish people, leaving spaces for the boundaries to not just form based on physical characteristics.

Whatsoever, the existence of gender is a debatable thing due to the pros and cons it brings. A positive influence that gender brings is that for people who’s not satisfied with their born sex, gender gives them an opportunity to redefine their social role. In fact, there are more than 80 genders in the world, leaving people spaces to explore their true self and help them to establish their values. On the other hand, gender is also strengthening some sort of stereotypes, limiting people’s behaviors. According to a research done by Madeline E. Heilman [4], both descriptive gender stereotypes and

prescriptive gender stereotypes give rise to biased judgements and decisions, impeding women's advancement.

3. Historical Perspective: Consequences of Limitations of Gender Inequality

For a better overview of how this concept has changed the world, this part will use historical evidences to further explain the consequences of limitations, and will also introduce a correspondent idea of masculinity and femininity from the field of gender study to widen the discussion of gender and its barriers.

As Kendall Oswald stated in his 2023 [5] published essay, "gender discrimination has been a significant issue throughout history. Women have been denied the right to education, employment, and political participation based solely on their gender." Many historical events support Oswald's claims. For example, in the novel *Life on a Mediaeval Barony, chapter XVI* [6] tells stories about peasants in ancient society. Something noticeable is that "every girl looks toward to her marriage as the climax of life", indicating the fact that women are surviving under a feudal society that their human rights are somewhat suppressed. Another important evidence is women's suffrage. At the very beginning when democracy first developed and used, women hold no suffrage. Take the U.S as an example, it was not until 1910 that states had extended the right to vote to women. Before that, women took a decade to fight for their human rights and voting rights. As stated in the essay *History of Women Suffrage* [7], the story of how women have formed their egotism throughout the process of fighting for suffrage is presented. The essay further justifies the truth that suffrage was a big barrier for women all around the world. Furthermore, the 2021 report published by the International Monetary Fund provides evidence for Oswald's [8] claim. In the report, IMF points out that "gender inequality in the context of structural transformation and rebalancing in China is an ongoing problem." They find out the unexpected declines in women's relative wages and labor force participation in China during the period when China had rapid growth in economics. Besides, they also point out that "labor market barriers for women have increased over time". All the above phenomena reveal the truth that gender, throughout in the long history, indeed creates barriers. The new category that it creates put certain groups of people, for example women, into the minority circle, bounding away them from those who are considered superior.

At the same time, gender is closely related to masculinity and femininity. Or in other words, masculinity and femininity seems to be aligned with gender, serving as the description of genders. This is somehow true since, according to a French intellectual Simone de Beauvoir [9], "one is not born but rather becomes, a woman." In these words he clearly expresses what kind of things femininity should describe: a state or a set of attributes closely related to women. Femininity, similar to gender, depicts the characteristic of the overall image of women. However, it is never the best to think of women and femininity, men and masculinity as the same thing. One significant example is the LGBTQs. Gays and lesbians, not always the case but, are the best examples of femininity on men and masculinity on women. In the movie *The Wedding Banquet* [10] produced by director Ang Lee, a gay couple Wei-tung and Simon encountered pressures from Wei-tung's family and decided to form a marriage of convenience with their tenant Wei-wei. While almost all the characters in the movie got more negative comments, Simon is widely praised by the audiences for his personality and behaviors. Simon, the feminine side in the relationship, is caring, graceful, thoughtful, kind. But it was always him making the sacrifices. He suggested Wei-tung to marry Wei-wei, and after Wei-wei accidentally got pregnant, he agreed to the birth of the child and eventually raised him. Besides, in *A Letter to My Nephew*, James Baldwin reveals the hardness of minority people. As a homosexual himself, Baldwin deeply understands how his trait as black and gay build huge barriers in front of him, delinking his connection to the rest of the world. As a man, he also encounters problems and limitations, suggesting that it is not simply gender that categorize people into different "levels", the

idea of masculinity superior than femininity is also an issue. That is, gender minority might not only be the barriers in front of women, instead, it limit people with great femininity.

The stereotypical ideas of women and femininity has been rooted in the society for too long that it's hard to make changes in a short period of time. It might not be effective for the government to make changes. Instead, the approaches of shortening the gender inequality should start from the public: public education. The society could erase the misunderstanding of gender by educating little kids of what gender really do and how we can treat the differences between masculinity and femininity properly. Education would be able to plant the correct thinking deep inside people's mind, and therefore changes, as much as possible, the social values about women and femininity.

4. Political Perspective: Political Influences on Gender Problems

It is never just the formation and widespread of the misunderstanding that lead to all these limitations, indeed, the political structure and political powers also play an important part in strengthening the misleading idea about gender.

Some ancient approaches of political structures were formed based on stereotypical understanding of gender and femininity. Democracy, the well-known political structure, was first generated in ancient Greece and republican Rome. As an approach that give right to human to decide how they want the country to be regulated, democracy is a praised political approach. However, it exclude women at the very beginning. In ancient Athena, all adult citizens were required to take an active part in the government. What they meant by all adult is only including white men. This is a valid example telling how the formation of political structure was based on gender inequality.

Then, those political structures, political powers, and related policies solidified the gender misconception at the same time. The exercising of those discriminated political approaches left no space for the minorities to stress their dissatisfaction. Without any other ways, the minority started their movements and rebellions. Rebellions put women on the position of minority because it's always the weak who has no control and can make changes only outside the regulation; worse, no response doesn't even give women the position of minority because they would never be the "adult citizens" who can have the right they should have.

5. Solutions

The formation of political structure and the solidification of political approaches mutually affect each other, making gender inequality a huge thing in the field of politics. To solve this problem, one necessary approach is to regulate political structure. For democratic countries, the government should pay effort in raising the proportion of minorities who are involved in democratic decision making, best avoiding the circumstance of minority group holding no right to vote; and for other government types such as authoritarianism, government should balance gender's political power as equal as they can when making decisions. By making changes from the origin, gender inequality would be able to alleviate.

6. Conclusions

Gender issue is never something easy to address: it has exists for a long time, and has been misunderstood by many people. It is important that we are able to recognize this misunderstanding between sex and gender, and it is also crucial that we put effort in correcting those misunderstandings and achieving higher equality. Identity should never be a frame that limit people from being powerful and thoughtful. By clarifying this concept and analyzing the negative influences of such misconception, the society would be able to achieve a higher level of justice.

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