Gender and Society

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Introduction
The term gender is a common one, but contested. It is generally taken to refer to the social arrangements between men and women, encompassing divisions of labor in the public, private and reproductive terrains, along with definitions and rules about what it means to be a man or a woman—that is, the meanings and practices of masculinity and femininity in any given time. It is immediately obvious that this is a broad and encompassing term, but some seek to widen it further by breaking down the distinction between gender and sex. This distinction was a prime methodological tool of many early texts, such as Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society*, which located gender in the realm of the social, distinct from biological sex, and thus capable of infinite change and variation. However, later theorists have argued that sexuality and sexualities are also social constructs, changing according to context and played out through bodily practices. Here I focus on the more restricted usage of gender, given the constraints of space.

The aim of this piece is to emphasize three main aspects relevant to a comparative approach. First, is the ubiquity of gender differences in all societies and the way gender ascriptions shape individual lives. In most societies this differentiation entails inequality and disadvantage. Second, a comparative approach to gender reveals the variability and cultural specificity of gender relations in different epochs, nations and contexts. This in turn points to a third key aspect of gender differences—their potential changeability and the consequent hope of feminists for increased equality. As Simone de Beauvoir famously put it, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1973, 301). Manhood, too, is not given but achieved.

Antecedents and Origins
There has long been debate over the social relationships between men and women and the divisions and inequalities associated with them: in his play *Lysistrata* Aristophanes portrayed the women of Athens deciding to withhold sexual favors from their husbands because they were so weary of the men’s immersion in warfare (the first women’s strike?). Shakespeare explored intimate and domestic conflicts between the sexes in many of his plays, including *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew*; the American anti-slavery campaigner, Sojourner Truth, deplored the mid-19th century portrayal of women as fragile and in need of protection; and Mao Zedong declared “women hold up half the sky”. The emergence of an activist feminist politics in the 19th century resulted in a number of pioneering studies, such as Ivy Pinchbeck’s *Women Workers in the Industrial Revolution* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Home: its Work and Influence*. However, the academic analysis of gender as we know it today originated in the postwar period of the 1960s, in tandem with the re-emergence of the feminist movement known popularly as the “Second Wave” (Banks 1981, Oakley 1981).

This arose because many young feminists in America and Europe were located in the universities, as students or newly hired teachers. These young women, as well as campaigning for women’s rights, turned their gaze to their own institutions, noting the lack of research and scholarship on women, indeed the invisibility of women in the curricula. The major concerns of this new academic movement were twofold: to uncover and render visible the lives and histories of “invisible” women (Spender 1982), incorporating them into the mainstream (often termed “malestream”) curricula of the social sciences and humanities, as well as exploring them within the interdisciplinary framework of Women’s Studies; and to develop new theoretical frameworks with which to analyze and explain the findings of these empirical researches.

The key concepts to emerge in this early phase were patriarchy and gender segregation. An influential study of patriarchy was Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1971). Millett argued that structures defending male dominance were pervasive throughout American society. Although the concept had been used earlier to describe systems of power within social institutions where the father figure held absolute authority, and where older men dominated younger men and all women (Weber 1964), Millett changed the meaning to refer to the more general social dominance of men, stating:
Our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, finances, in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is in male hands. (Millett 1971, 25)

While this might now seem too sweeping a statement, the exploration of patriarchy led to a wealth of studies revealing the ubiquity of gender segregation. Within the home men and women carry out different tasks (the domestic division of labor) and in the economy they are commonly found in different occupations, or within occupations performing different tasks (the workplace division of labor). Gender segregation in employment has two dimensions, vertical (concentration of men at the top of occupational hierarchies and women in the bottom tiers) and horizontal (men and women in different jobs).

Since those early explorations, there have been further academic developments. Criticisms of second wave feminism within and outside the academy came from women of color under the banner of Black feminism (for example Amos and Parmar 1984; Collins 1990). They were critical of feminist studies’ focus on the concerns of white (and often middle-class) women and the tendency to generalize these as applicable to all women. They emphasized the specificity of Black women’s gendered experience, for example, the matriarchal nature of African-American and Afro-Caribbean families, and the double oppression of race and gender. Thus Collins argued that a satisfactory account of gender inequality must show how gender, race and class interact, forming particular hierarchies and structures of oppression. In her words, “systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women” (2000, 299). We should add disability to her list.

Here Collins elaborates the approach known as intersectionality, a term generally credited to Harvard legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw (1989; 1990). Crenshaw advocated this to aid women of color in their search for social justice. Currently, it has become a popular framework for examining the complexities of inequalities and multiple identities. But there is still no definitive answer to the dilemma this approach poses: what should be the starting point for an intersectional analysis?

Collins’ own answer was to adopt a “Black standpoint” position. Standpoint theory is a methodological and epistemological approach positing that knowledge is not absolute but is constructed from a particular social location or point of view. Harding (1991) and Smith (1990), both associated with a feminist standpoint position, argue that it is advantageous to perceive the world from an oppressed or dominated position, which results in a more subtle and critical form of knowledge. Thus, for Collins, Black women are positioned to offer a different and unique world view, and the starting point for her intersectional analysis is the specific oppressions they experience.

The Black Women’s critique placed difference as central to the study of gender, and this was affirmed by three other developments. One was the Men’s Studies movement in America, spreading thence to Europe, and the consequent acknowledgement that an inclusive gender studies approach must deal with male roles and experiences. The second wavers were criticized for their monolithic approach to masculinity, while theorists such as Connell (1987; 1995) and Kimmel (1996) emphasized the plural nature of masculinities. Connell coined the term hegemonic masculinity to refer to the aggressive, competitive behavior of the “alpha male” or the “macho manager”: such types of masculinity were constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities (for example, homosexual or ethnic versions of masculine behavior) and against the stereotypical forms of passive and dominated female behavior described as emphasized femininity.

Allied to this was the development of Gay and Lesbian studies, subsequently incorporating bisexuality, transgender and intersex issues to become known as LGBTI. Early work in this area focused on the untold history of gays and lesbians and their contributions to literature, and opened up a space for a positive evaluation of homosexuality. Arguably, it took a more sociological and critical bent with the development of Queer Theory, a term particularly associated with Teresa de Lauretis (1991). This was a strand within gay and lesbian theory which challenged the idea of fixed sexual identities. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994) argued for the need for homosexual reinterpretations of all cultural objects and practices, herself identifying homoerotic elements in the works of writers such as Jane Austen and Henry James. The process of “queering” is to unsettle existing forms of