

A Superficial Equality?



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The debate about gender issues that is currently sweeping across Poland has served to illustrate how confusing the term “gender” is in our country, as well as revealing the vast resistance among Polish society to initiatives aiming to eliminate discrimination and improve equality between men and women

A lack of awareness of gender issues should not come as a surprise: for many years, public opinion polls have been showing that around half of the Polish population does associate them with the more popular term “feminism,” or even that they are something that concerns women. In 1997, as many as 56% respondents were unable to answer the carefully worded question “If one of your family or friends were to ask you what you understand feminism to be, what would you say?” Those answering “I don’t know” were still in the majority in 2000 (53%); the percentage has gone down since, although not significantly (2004 - 45%; 2013 - 48%).

Who fits what

Why was the term “gender” introduced into scientific discourse (first into English-speaking discourse in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the more recently into Polish discourse)? Two factors played a key role. The first was the need to describe something that had hitherto not had a clear-cut name even though it was discussed in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology and other social science:

cultural sex, as distinct from biological sex. An example of early writing on this previously unnamed phenomenon was Margaret Mead’s 1935 book *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*. The author wrote, “Each society has made sexual differences into one of the themes in their social lives, and each one develops this theme differently. The comparative material allows us to reveal those elements that are constructs irrelevant in terms of biological facts.” When she commenced her research, Mead did not expect to find such marked differences between the societies. She continues, “I had previously shared the general conviction that a natural temperament exists defined by biological sex.” Instead she discovered that the societies displayed different relationships between the sexes, and the concepts of “masculine” and “feminine” varied. This meant that “sexual differences between temperaments are a social construct.” At the time, the term “gender” was not yet used to describe real-world situations taking into account that biological differences between the sexes are steeped in other factors, such as beliefs into what constitutes “masculine” or “feminine” characteristics, roles or pursuits. These do not result from simple biology, even though most societies attribute them to it. The term “gender,” which first arose at the turn of the 1970s, has turned out to be extremely useful, and it was soon adopted by scholars as a shorthand description of social and cultural sex, making it easily distinguishable from biological sex.

The second reason the term became widely used in academia was the rapid development of new scientific disciplines of women’s studies, men’s studies and gender studies. The growing importance of women’s studies went hand in hand with high numbers of women entering academia for the first time. Previously, women were entirely or almost entirely absent from scientific circles, both as scholars and subjects; this frequently skewed research results, and



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Until as late as the 19th century, women were not permitted to study at a higher level (it was believed that it would hamper their physical development); they also did not have the vote and they were unable to hold any position of authority

meant that many scientific findings predating this can be regarded as invalid.

It's worth recalling that women were not able to enroll at Polish universities until the turn of the 20th century, and they had to wait considerably longer before they could start engaging in academic work. The first female assistant at the philosophy faculty of the University of Warsaw was Maria Niedźwiedzka in 1923 (later the great scholar Prof. Maria Ossowska). But women didn't really make their mark in academia - especially as professors - in Poland or elsewhere until after the Second World War, in particular the late 1960s. Women scholars took up studies analyzing the situation faced by members of their sex, as well as revealing that much previous research in sociology, psychology and even medicine cannot be used to describe society as a whole. One classic example was Piaget's theory of cognitive development, with a particular focus on morality, developed further by Kohlberg. Most studies were conducted exclusively on boys, and the

results were generalized and extrapolated as though they reflected society as a whole. Furthermore, when girls gave different answers to the same questions thus indicating that they do not "fit in" with the theories, Kohlberg concluded that they are unable to attain higher levels of moral development. The problem was approached rather differently by Carol Gilligan, once an assistant of Kohlberg. She noted that girls and boys answer questions differently not because one of the sexes is more advanced than the other, but rather because - most likely due to differences in socialization in their early years - they use different reasoning, appeal to different values, and have different ways of perceiving social relationships. Girls tend to be motivated by paying attention to interpersonal relationships rather than following accepted standards. Gilligan's widely discussed work *In a Different Voice* (1982) paved the way for further research and theories concerning the feminine ethic of care. In 1997, Gilligan was appointed Patricia Albjerg Graham Chair of Gender Studies at Harvard University.

Ongoing in-depth studies into the position of women and analysis of their results has, in time, led to more developed reflections on the role of social and cultural sex, its links with power relationships, social position and status, and traditional divisions in the private and public spheres. They have also laid foundations for formulating more general theories. The next stage was the development of men's studies, focusing on issues such as dominant and marginalized standards of masculinity, and in particular limitations placed on men by stereotypes and expectations linked with their sex. Eventually, women's studies and men's studies evolved into a study field known today as gender studies. According to the World Health Organization, "Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behavior, activities and attributes that a particular society considers appropriate for men and women."

Fickle femininity, mutable masculinity

Gender has two important features. The first was already discussed in the previously quoted work by Mead: cultural sex is shaped by cultural contexts. Being a woman is quite different in present-day Europe and

Awareness of gender issues in Poland

in Saudi Arabia; each culture has different perceptions and standards defining the scope of men and women's rights, roles and duties. Furthermore, cultures exist in which certain social customs and procedures enable biological women to take on social roles of men and be widely regarded as such. One such custom is known as *tobelija*, with women donning men's clothes and adopting masculine behaviors, entitlements and duties; the society treats those women as men. Certain Native American tribes, including the Zuni, have gender-variant individuals known as *berdaches* or two-spirit people, most commonly men dressing and behaving as women; this may but does not have to reflect their sexual preferences. Some societies take this process even further, in that masculinity and femininity are viewed more as a continuum; at times, men and women's position and social roles can even shift during their lifetimes (one example is the Hua tribe in Papua New Guinea).

The other important feature of gender is its variation over the ages. For our great-grandmothers, the behaviors and lifestyles of contemporary women would seem to undermine the very idea of womanhood. Formerly, men had a legally defined position of power within the family, which is behind the concept of their "natural right" to exercise authority over children even in the event of divorce. It was not until the 1960s that children's remaining with their mother was justified in terms of the fact that they had developed "natural bonds" during pregnancy and birth.

Equality – hard to swallow?

As a consequence of the inequalities between the sexes, stipulations have been formulated aiming to prevent discrimination; the concepts were originally developed as part of women's studies and later enshrined in law.

One of the policies of the European Union is gender mainstreaming – a concept of assessing the different implications for women and men of any planned policy action, including legislation and programs, in all areas and levels. In the first stage, any activities are evaluated from the perspective of gender equality; if inequalities are found, their sources are investigated, changes are devised and proposed, and new policies are



implemented and subsequently appraised. The strategy is difficult to summarize since specific actions should be adapted to the situation, location and activity at hand. It is stressed that the fundamental question of assessing the consequences from the perspectives of men and women must be obligatory for all new legislation in order to prevent groundless inequalities. And yet Poland is rife with inequalities with no remedial steps being taken; for example, under the new retirement pension system, women will receive significantly lower payments than men.

It is deeply concerning that in Poland, the introduction of specific solutions aiming to reduce inequalities is not only widely questioned in Poland, it even stirs something of a "moral panic" – such as has occurred in connection with proposed programs of equality-centered education at kindergartens, where children are taught that various social roles are not reserved for just men or just women. Given the (poor) quality of discourse surrounding gender issues, the principle of gender equality is unfortunately still being championed in our country mainly on the level of superficial declarations. ■

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Further reading:

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- Faludi S. (2006). *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (15 Anniversary edition). Broadway Books