

# Social construction of male and female identities



To understand gender analysis in a historic context, it will be important to start off by defining what gender is and gender analysis. Gender refers to the social construction of male and female identities. It is more than the biological make up of the two sexes. It deals with how the differences between men and women, whether real or imagined, are valued, used and relied upon to classify men and women and to assign them roles and expectations. The effect of this categorization is that the lives and experiences of men and women occur within complex sets of differing social and cultural expectations. Gender analysis therefore examines the differences in men's and women's lives and applies this understanding to policy development and service delivery (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman 2009).

In history, the current understanding of gender as a category of historical analysis can be traced to the late twentieth -century feminist political mobilization that occurred in Europe and the United States which led to the development of the field of women's history both as a product and practice. Many of the early women historians in many cases employed the category 'women' when talking about women's roles, perceptions of women or myths about women as opposed to the analytical language of gender as we know it today (Parker & Aggleton 1998). Most of these embraced the concept of gender closely akin to Gayle Rubin's classic early formulation that stated that in every society, there is a set of arrangements by which the biological human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention which is actually gender (Shepard & Walker 2009). The work of the feminists was primarily to expose those gender systems and redress their injustices to women.

In this context therefore the work of the women's historians was to discover and bring into the public domain such patterns in the past, to return women and their activities to the historical record and to bring out ways in which women in the past tried to resist sexual oppression in the societies within which they lived.

Despite the fact that distinction between sex and gender remained common in feminist history, its framework had many critics especially among theorists who questioned if physical bodies were not in a way socially constructed and whether they ever existed apart from culturally fashioned meanings about them (Shepard & Walker 2009). Early women historians equated gender with sex. This meant that the physical body is what they used to classify gender. This was the bone of contention with other scholars who rightly asserted that it would be simplistic to equate gender with sex. However, since the field of women's history originated in social history, and so because the early women's history did not seriously interrogate bodies as a historic subject, most of the early women historian did not confront the dilemma of the sex/gender distinction which continued to inform the assumptions of their work (Shepard & Walker 2009).

Theorizing about gender increased from the 1970s through the 1980s among women historians but their emphasis was more on the relation of gender to other categories, more so class and patriarchy but not on so much on the gender itself. According to Shepard & Walker (2009) " efforts of this sort continued in many ways to conceptual gender, class and other social processes as distinct which made it difficult to capture the complexity and particularity of their unified processes in a specific historical circumstance".

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In absence of a standard definition of what constituted gender, historians continued to write about gender from the Western cultural view of what constitutes gender. However by 1980s other issues had come up that challenged this position calling for a more inclusive approach.

An analysis of gender and history has also focused on the position of the woman during colonialism in Africa and elsewhere. The woman was seen first as a daughter, then as a woman and finally as a prostitute. Any woman who stayed alone was seen as a prostitute. Women were seen as safe when within the confines of their home in the countryside. Those in towns were stereotyped as being of loose morals and rebels. Although the fuller investigation of these points would follow in the studies of gender and colonialism of the 1990s, scholars of race and slavery in the Americas and Europe were zealous in pointing out that the bodies of colored women had been socially constructed to meet the interests of Europeans since the first colonial contacts.

Still in the 1980s the field of women's history was thriving. By this time it supported influential journals in Europe and in the United States. Works in women's history were beginning to appear on the lists of major publishers and also in prominent general historical journals. It was however not all rosy. Critics within the profession questioned the legitimacy of the field of women history and its practitioners. Women history was described as narrow, over-specialized and immaterial to the truly important matter of history (Downs 2004). Women's historians were accused of trying to fashion their own life frustrations into a respected field. A more unifying concept of gender free of

activism might as a matter of fact provide legitimacy for the field and its practitioners (Shepard & Walker 2009).

If gender could be argued out as a key field of experience for both all persons, then gender is a subject of universal relevance. Joan Scott's (1986) article titled "Gender: A Useful Concept of Historical Analysis," which appeared on the American Historical Review, December 1986 issue, was written in this political context. This was a no mean achievement for a prestigious conservative journal. Scott noted that the proliferation of case studies in women's history called for some synthesizing perspective and the discrepancy between the high quality of the work then in women's history and the continued marginal status of the field as a whole pointed up the limits of descriptive approaches that do not address dominant disciplinary concepts in terms that can shake their power and transform them. The article's purpose was to examine the implications of feminists' growing tendency to use gender as a way of referring to the social organization between the sexes and to offer a useable theoretical formulation of gender as a category of historical analysis. Scott found the feminist theorizing of the 1960s and 1970s limited because they tended to contain reductive or simple generalizations that undercut both history's disciplinary sense of the complexity of social causation and feminist commitments to analysis that would lead to change (Scott 1986).

According to Scott, historically gender has been used as a primary way of signifying relations of power (Scott 1999). The power in question is the power of domination and subordination; differential control over or access to material and symbolic resources. Emphasis is laid on the difference as a

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characteristic of power derived from the oppositional binarity of gender, but it also defined and limited the concept of gender which having been defined could not operate other than as a vehicle for this power. Women in most societies have been dominated by men.

However this proposition is challenged by a number of non western scholars who argue that not all societies organized on the basis of gender as implied in the work of most Western historians. Oyeronke Oyeyumi (2005), an African Historian from Nigeria is one of them. Oyeyumi argues that Western work on gender has been and continues to be preoccupied with the oppositionally sexed body, which inhabit the category gender and invests it with a rigid corporeal determinism. This she argues is not universal but specific to the western cultures and history. If gender is socially constructed, then it cannot behave in the same way across time and space. Therefore if gender is a social construction there must be a specific time in each culture when it began and therefore the time before this beginning it never did exist. Thus gender as a social construction is also a historical and cultural phenomenon which may presumably have not existed in some societies.

In a similar view, Ifi Amadiume (1987) criticized the use of Western gender concept as a category for analyzing Africa history of gender. She argues that the ethnocentricity of gender of early feminist anthropology does not have a bearing on African societies. To these groups she argues the social and cultural inferiority of women was not questionable. In her work among the Igbo culture in eastern Nigeria, Amadiume did identify a gender system through which numerous mythical, social and culture distinctions were articulated according to a binary of masculine and feminine. But she also did <https://assignbuster.com/social-construction-of-male-and-female-identities/>

establish that in this binary the attributes associated with females did not necessarily lead to economic or political subordination of the social group women and that the social institutions, especially those of male daughters and female husbands permitted individual females to enjoy those privileges of social positions gendered masculine.

In the United States, intervening decades have given birth to a rich and expanding scholarship on the history of colored women. The colored slave woman owed his master and the men his master had selected for her sexual favors and reproductive services on top of the labor (Gerald, N. G., Billias, G. A 1991). The work written on the colored woman history is however minimal compared to what have been written on white women. Furthermore much of the work done on colored women still subordinates them within the history of white women. What that means is that American historians, until very recently, have showed little interest in identifying differences between West African and colonial Euro-American ideas of the social and cultural relations of the male and the female or giving interpretive authority to evidence of differences between African American and Euro-American communities over time in the United States. Of greater importance is the construction of colored women as negative markers of a Western concept of gender and the pressure borne on colored women to conform to those to that concept. To greater extent this centers the story on Western concept, not on African American women or on the understandings of gender that may have characterized their communities (Collins 1989).

To illustrate further the problems in the use of gender as a category in historic analysis, North America can be studied. The early republic provides <https://assignbuster.com/social-construction-of-male-and-female-identities/>

vital information because that is where U. S women's history began classics like Carroll Smith Rosenberg's "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman," Kathryn Kish Sklar's "Catharine Beecher" and Nancy Cott's "The Bonds of Womanhood" (Cott 1997). These works sought to understand the origins of the late twentieth century trope of gender in the nineteenth-century. This was not unusual because like other historians, these women historians studied subjects in the past that were of continued relevance to their day. They focused on the social and intellectual life in the early American Republic that resonated in the female struggle. This majored on familial, political, legal, and economic subordination of women as a group by men as a group. The works continued to organize the field as it developed with works such as *Women of the Republic* by Linda Kerber, *Daughters of Liberty* by Mary Beth Norton and *Good wives* by Laurel Ulrich. The wives in the seventeenth and eighteenth century played a greater role in the management of the family resources. It was taken as the duty of a wife to defend and take care of the husband's investments. Wives were supposed to be aggressive in this. However during the nineteenth century, the woman's role in the management of the husband's wealth diminished significantly (Cott 1997).

Another milestone in the study of gender analysis is the entry of women into public jobs in the 20th century (Scharpf & Schmidt 2000). This brought profound change to the woman. She got financial independence and her dependence on the man diminished. This entry into the job market went hand in hand with increased education attainment, increased civil rights like the right to vote and increased participation in the political process. These



were great milestones for women that changed completely the relationship with the man. With it too came increased divorce rates, and choosing not to get married.

When gender is treated as a question of analysis, it encourages the researcher to regard the sources of information more critically and more creatively. To some extent it is true that historians have been able to establish gender as a category of historic analysis. This is because the circumstances human beings operate in have expectations of behavior and conduct based on ones sexuality. These are either classified as masculinity or feminine. A man is expected to act and behave in a masculine way while the woman is supposed to portray a feminine behavior. These expectations have over the course of history shaped the relationship between the males and the females. Not only that but also within a sex, treatment is different. In America for example, An African American woman, a white woman and a native Indian woman were all treated differently.