

# GENDER CONTENTS BETWEEN NATURAL DATA AND SOCIO-CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS

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**Abstract:** *The paper proposes an analysis of the content of gender stereotypes on the natural - social continuum. Starting with some lexical definitions we reveal the fact that inequalities between men and women are prescribed in a cultural framework beyond any biological differences. Regarding gender as a social construction we elaborated a synoptic of biological differences between men and women that are rebuilt within a culturally discriminatory framework for women.*

**Key words:** *gender, biological experiences, social interpretations, the patriarchy.*

## 1. Lexical determinants

There is no doubt, that on the common sense level, the so called “biological” differences between men and women place by definition these two categories on positions that are more than different. They are incongruent.

A summary analysis of the definition in the DEX (1998) reveals an obvious issue. The woman is constantly placed at an inferior level than the man.

The paradox is that this incongruent force has nothing to do with the biological framework. While “man” means to be capacitated for certain events and important contexts in life (family, work, defending the country) being a woman means assuming only one attribute that of being somebody’s wife and subsequently engaged in motherhood.

## 2. The gender concept as a social construction

Exploring the psycho-social mechanisms that are the basis of the unequal chances between men and women (that are apparently irreducible) the theorists of the second wave of feminism have conceptually marked out the gender from sex within a natural-cultural axis framework. In their vision, the gender refers to the differences (that are socially and culturally built and interpreted) between two distinctive social categories “men” and “women”.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) was the first feminist who denied these already famous affirmations: “*we are not born women but we rather become women*” and “*if the woman wants to be equal to the man she has to become a man*”.

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In other words the differences between men and women are not based on biological features - as the Romanian DEX shows with which we entered the third millennium. The gender studies do not ignore the biological differences between these two sexual categories. These were observed and underlined in much of previous work.

The aspect that draws the feminist's attention is the construction and cultural patriarchal teaching about other differences that have nothing in common with the natural or with the equity principle. Although it seems a paradox, this discourse was preserved through several historical stages.

*"The inferiority of women is not natural but it comes from this binary hierarchy invented by the patriarchy in order to promote the masculine authority. The man doesn't define the woman through herself but by her relations with him. He is the Subject and the Absolute and she is the other"* [11, p. 157].

One of the most contested feminist theses is the "biology as destiny". Several researchers have shown that gender does not depend merely on sex.

To exemplify, trans-sexuality phenomenon can be seen as a proof of the dissonance between the biological, psychological and social. These people deny their biological sex by feeling that they belong to the other sex and they constantly wish to do something for being recognized as the members of the opposite sex. In 1952 doctor C. Hamburger has done the first sexual change surgery following which Christine Jorgensen has turned from man to woman. Another well-known study belongs to Harold Garfinkel (1976) and it deals with a trans-sexual man named Agnes who was operated and has become a woman.

### 3. Gender stereotype contents

In order to analyse the validity of gender stereotypes we propose to open the discussion with a list of gender stereotype contents that place the asymmetric psychological features in terms of the same dimension [14]. It is well known that these features and roles prescriptions operate as standard performance for both men and women.

Table 1

*Features and roles prescriptions*

Men features	Women features
Independence	Dependence
Rationality	Sensibility
Aggressiveness	Mildness
Objectivity	Subjectivity
Self confidence	Need for protection
Competition spirit	Fear of not hurting others
Analytic abilities	Context sensibility
Essence orientation	Details and apparent orientation
Strengths	Weakness
Inclination for sciences	Inclination for arts
Ambition	Tact
Self-assertion	Care for others

As boys or girls, we learn that we have to behave in a certain way in order to be accepted by other people (children and adults). The question that we focus on is to highlight on what kind of principles these prescriptions are delivered to people by the society itself through oral history and all kind of social institutions' discourses. It is an arbitrary principle or a rational one, namely a principle routed within real descriptors and differences between men and women.

#### 4. From biological data to socio-cultural paradigm

“*The differences between men and women*” is a very researched and discussed topic. This approach is difficult because the distinction that we operate with its submitted to a causal circulation. Many differences that have been identified within previous work are the product of gender socialization, in other words, the product of some instrumental conditions that nowadays have produced effects that are seriously detached by their biological dimension.

Let's not forget that these cultural constructions that refer to differences between men and women are the result of a patriarchal discourse that exists for millenniums.

Hereby we propose a synoptic of biological differences between men and women that have been rebuilt in a culturally discriminatory way for women:

- Height, weight and muscular mass differences - a report that is in the men's favor.

This kind of report is desirable for a heterosexual couple from the esthetic point of view. In reality this difference means that power keeps the man's ascendance on the woman- regarding the capacity of controlling the partner by force (from here the little men's complex that have to look for shorter partners) DISCRIMINATION

- The chromosome difference – the man has a different Y chromosome than woman. It seems that this is responsible for the aggressive impulses [12]

In the case of men, aggressiveness is encouraged (although it is present in their genetic code but not social desirable). Instead, in the case of women, it is not encouraged. DISCRIMINATION

- Differences regarding the physiology and biochemistry of brain.

This kind of differences have justified men's higher cognitive performances in comparison with women. REFUTED THESIS - there are not real differences at the level of cognitive aptitudes between boys and girls [10] DISCRIMINATION

- The differences regarding the internal and external genital organs - penis (M) and vagina (W)

The penis as a sexual organ has been symbolically interpreted by receiving the new conceptual acceptation of Falus. The penis-vagina dual concept has become Falus-nonFalus. CONTRA ARGUMENTS [7] DISCRIMINATION

- The difference between the number of sexual cells (W. eggs, M. sperm)

This difference explains the indifference between men and their descendants and the profound attachment of women for their children. The lack of maternal love attracts the contempt of the community but the lack of paternal love is accepted. DISCRIMINATION

DISCRIMINATION

- The women's menstruation

Although is a natural phenomenon which creates conditions for having babies, it was interpreted especially by church as being not pure and standing in the way of the intimacy with God. Thereby, women were shut out from the altar and even forbidden to enter the church during menstruation (in the catholic and orthodox religion) DISCRIMINATION

DISCRIMINATION

- Virginitiy

In many cultures the woman's virginitiy was (and continues to be) seen as a property of her husband. The man's virginitiy is seen as a lack of sexual experience of the future husband - that's why the acceptance towards the man's sexual *periplus* before marriage.

Subsequently, the idea that there are two types of women - the ones that instrument this form of experimentation for men (but they lose men's respect for good) and women that have the husband as sole sexual partner in the absence of additional evaluation criteria regarding their own sexual satisfaction. In the past, the rape of a virgin girl was more severely punished than the rape of a married woman. DISCRIMINATION

- Pregnancy

Especially in the last month is seen inconvenient for the public situations. The physical distortions during the pregnancy are seen as profoundly unaesthetic. DISCRIMINATION

- Giving birth

It is seen as the woman's obligation, an existence duty to become a generating principle for the other members of the enlarged family. The incapacity of producing descendants attracts the family's opprobrium. In the same time it is seen as an impure experience that in the Orthodox Church requires a special prayer without which the new mother is not allowed to get even near the church. DISCRIMINATION

The synopsis of the biological differences between men and women are rebuilt in a culturally discriminatory way for women.

Regarding this synoptic, one thing is absolutely clear, men and women are different. On the one hand, all these differences have been explained as inequalities between men and women, with all of them favoring men.

Patriarchal discourse has interpreted all the biological differences between the two sexual categories so that men outperform women. On the other hand, all the exclusively feminine biological experiences have been interpreted as depreciative for women.

## 5. Differences suspected to be biologically denied later

Analyzing the differences between the two sexes regarding the mental skills E. Maccoby and C. Jacklin (1974) *apud* Petru Ilut (2000) [8] have formulated the following conclusions:

1. There are no major differences between sexes concerning their general intelligence
2. It is not true that girls have best performances in learning things by heart or in simple repetitive duties and boys have performances in activities that imply a higher level of the cognitive processes.
3. Studies show major differences in the favor of girls with respect to verbal abilities (vocabulary, writing, reading and pronouncing)
4. Boys have higher performance abilities in math calculations and in visual-space representations (especially the tri-dimensional rotation)

A meta-analysis of several such studies on performances of psychometric tests (Feigold, 1998) has shown that the differences between girls and boys regarding the mathematical and verbal abilities are much smaller than previously thought and that the differences within the group are bigger than between groups.

The conclusion upon the differences between men and women concerning the mental abilities has been formulated by J. Simons (1994) as there are no cognitive differences between men and women in certain domains, in some they disappeared and in the ones left are rather small [8].

## 6. The circularization of the gender socialization

Regarding the causes of many human experiences, the gender socialization enlightens an intense traffic of gender attributions. If we discuss the causes of

the performances we will see that these are differently explained depending on the subject's gender. The men's successes are explained by internal causes (that are dispositional) often claimed as routed in men's superior intellectual abilities, while women's successes are based on external factors (circumstantial ones) that are not claimed to be routed on their intellectual abilities and in fact, even depreciative for these. The causes of men's success are predominantly intrinsic targeting exclusively their superior intellectual abilities and talents.

Failure is also connected to intrinsic elements but this time without any binder to men's cognitive capacities. In other words men's success has a well-marked natural character. Women's success is unnatural and it's previously attributed to circumstances and to external factors that have nothing to do with this labor conscription. Therefore, women's failure has been often connected to rather poor intellectual equipment.

The conclusion to which these attributions lead is that the woman is predisposed for bankruptcy behaviors because she is not intelligent and in the unlikely case that she obtains performances these happen due to external factors that favor her rather than her gifts or hard work. Success is almost always a man prerogative.

This thing is proved by the fact that both in the family (National Public Radio, 1992, USA) and the school practices (Stanworth, 1981), men's successes are gratified while women's less recognized and celebrated. The use of these attributions in the informal and formal educational discourses (family, school) obsessive reinforces the socialization with gender contents that are considered to be self-affirming prophecies.

The consequences of this fact are multiple [8]. One of them is gender

educational and professional orientation—more modest paths for girls because success in their cases depends on luck and massive investments of time and effort, while for men richer professional trajectories because men grow up in the comfort of a naturally equipment for success.

Another consequence shows the women's lower expectancy and aspirational levels in comparison with men at the same ability level (Beyer & Browden, 1997). Women are less oriented towards the dimension of the social dominance than men and therefore less likely to take up careers that imply social ascendance (F. Pareto and co., 1997). In comparison with men, women provide a greater social support to others (Shumaker & Hill, 1991; Unger & Crawford, 1992).

The place of control is distributed mainly according to the gender, women being externalists in a greater proportion than men [10].

### **7. The consequences of the gender stereotypes**

The researches in this field identified a series of inequalities concerning the opinions that we have about men and women.

- Women are under-represented as a public politically engaged image although their number exceeds half of the world population.
- Men are represented as active persons who are influential and who are affirmed and women as passive persons who have little influence on others.
- Men appear as experts and leaders, women as subordinated.
- Men's roles are extremely diverse, women's roles are rather reduced to the ornamental, domestic, marital or maternal duties.

- We are all the supporters of some feature sets that characterize men and women differently. The risks of these gender stereotypes are multiple.
- Stereotypes simplify too much leading to exaggerations and misjudgments. While we wait for the men to bring the scientific progress women have the role of inspiring and taking care of them, both sexes being discouraged to take the role of the other. Stereotypes exaggerate the differences between groups and minimize the differences within the same group.
- Women are considered to be less capable of performances.
- Stereotypes tend to become the prophets that achieve the self-fulfillment.
- The explanation of failure and success is influenced by the gender. The men's professional performances are explained mostly through their qualities and women's professional performances through chances, favorable circumstances or by seducing somebody in a key position.

### 8. The patriarchy - is it in dissolution?

The patriarchal societies are characterized by a unique principle of social organization in the family and society in its ensemble - *the father's rule*. By definition, discrimination means depriving somebody from his/her rights on a legal basis. As a historical phenomenon according to certain sources it can be placed in time together with the antic writings in millennium IV b.Ch [12, p. 276]. Adrian Thatcher, in his work "A Christian theology of sexuality" (1993), mentions the fact that according to several theories, the patriarchy would have appeared following the change of women between tribes for explicit sexual purposes but also because of their procreation capacity.

In the domestic economies the households were the basis of the production of goods and food consumed in the society. Each production system needs a represented working power, in our case, women, slaves and elder children. The social reproduction was achieved by not involving those male children in the household work and instead by instructed them for a lucrative career. These men were the heirs of the property after the death of the head of the family. Girls remained in the household and were apprentices because they were not offered any kind of education. Young girls could not choose their partners, and with the marriage another task was given to them - producing descendants for the husband's inheritance line. Now it is obvious why the fathers that had girls were the irony of other family heads.

Women didn't have the right to vote and their access to education, property, political role and legal status was strictly forbidden. Here we remember Pitagora's famous saying: "there is a good principle that has created the order, the light and the man, and a bad principle that created the chaos, the darkness and the woman" [13, p. 164]. Another source mentions that, together with other peoples, the old Celts in Ireland considered the woman "as destitute of sensitivity as the slaves, prisoners and drinkers" [13].

In her well known work on the creation of patriarchy, Miroiu (1986) proposes a list of development stages of the patriarchy *apud* [11, p. 276].

1. The first form of private property was the one of men upon the reproductive capacity of women. This domination begins before the appearance of properties and classes and stands at the basis of private society.
2. The archaic state was the one that was organized in a patriarchal way and that was interested in keeping the patriarchal family.

3. The first form of domination was the one of the man over women and it was a model for other forms.
4. The first law codes were the institutional bases of the sexual subordination (with the acceptance and help of the state).
5. The relationships between the men and the production methods were direct; the relation between the women and the production methods was mediated by men.
6. Even if they were sexually and economically subordinated, women continued to be mediators between humans and gods as priestesses or prophesiers.
7. The dethronement of the goddesses and replacing them with the unique God.
8. The spreading of the Jewish monotheism has attacked the cult of the fertility goddesses. The sexual power of the woman used in other purposes than procreation has become a sin and an evil.
9. In the medieval monastery community women were excluded from the metaphysical communion with God, their only holy communion with God was being mothers.
10. The symbolic devaluation of women in relation with the divinity has become a basic metaphor of philosophy and the vest civilizations. The subordination has become natural and divine (therefore "invisible"). That is how patriarchy has settled as a fact and an ideology.

The dissolution of the patriarch society has begun only at the end of the 19th century when the defenders of the woman's rights have condemned this kind of social organization. In this way, at the beginning of the 20th century for

the first time women have gained the right to vote, to own property, to participate in the political life, and to gain access to education and professional practice.

Despite, the gain of these women's lives in the public territory has not completely changed. The work division within the family has been maintained so that women that longed for a carrier and for relative financial independence are unfairly positioned on two plans: the one of personal affirmation and the one of the household work. This is what women called "the double work day".

The responsibilities in the domestic space, taking care of children and also of the professional carrier limit the chances of affirmation for women that are still disadvantaged in comparison with men. Because of the limited time for the professional instruction, for orientating towards shorter working programs in order to keep enough energy for the household work and for children, women have to choose more modest professional ways concerning the social status.

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