

**AN INTRODUCTION TO**

**SOCIOLOGY**

# **AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY**

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**PART 3**

**INEQUALITIES  
AND IDENTITIES**

# 12

## GENDER

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To understand what is meant by the term gender and the role gender plays in making and remaking social relations and divisions.
- To show how gender connects to other social relations, such as class, race and ethnicity.
- To look at some of the links between gender as an empirical description of societies and gender as an explanatory concept.



### Framing Questions

1. Why and how does gender matter?
2. What are sex and gender and how are they connected?
3. *How* do we know about sex and gender?
4. What do sociological analyses contribute to the study of gender?
5. What is the relationship between gender and other social relations and inequalities?

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## Introduction

This chapter outlines some of the developments in the sociological understanding of gender as a useful concept for explaining social relations and inequalities over time and in different places. Gender studies is an important, fast-changing area of sociological inquiry, which strongly relates to other sociological concerns and theoretical frameworks explored in this book. Sex and gender are features of the classification of animate creatures, including human beings and all known societies. You will be familiar with the terms sex and gender as they are part of everyday language, but are sex and gender the same thing or do they mean something different but connected? We will address these questions in this chapter as well as how gender relates to other social relations, such as class and race. (Questions about gender also feature in Chapters 15, 16, 17 and 18.)

We write this chapter as sociologists, which means that we ask questions which are relevant to daily life and experiences. Think about your everyday life. How often are you asked to state your gender? Why do you think it is important to know what sex you are when you apply for a driving licence, insurance or welfare benefits? There are some occasions where this information may seem especially relevant, such as in some health care. For example, COVID-19 impacts more upon men than women (Global Health, 2020), which demands explanation for further research and treatment. In everyday life, sex or gender may seem self-evident to many people but sociologists question the taken-for-granted and ask: how is gender decided? Why are such divisions deemed so important? The sociology of gender involves mapping out and documenting how people experience gender and gendered divisions, as well as providing explanations for these divisions and experiences. This chapter therefore introduces you to how we develop knowledge of gender as well as to theories of gender, which offer ways of making sense of gender.

Gender is complex and contested, which, in the tradition of sociology, presents us with arguments and disputes and raises different questions. This chapter will therefore start by mapping the terrain to familiarize you with where the sociology of gender comes from. We then move on to discuss the relationship between sex and gender as well as get you thinking about how gender and sex relate to other social differences. The chapter then focuses on thinking about where our understanding and knowledge of gender come from – big data and statistics are often used to paint pictures of gender inequality and we explore how these are useful, as well as what their limitations are, by considering research which uses qualitative data that centres people's experiences and stories of gender and inequalities. Once you are familiar with the key terms and debates around sex and gender, we will look at two different examples to demonstrate how a sociological critique of gender works, focusing on: how gender is lived and how we might explain gender as a form of social organization. The first area is sport, which is almost always divided into male and female competitions and serious gender inequalities, often with different rules for men's and women's competitions and a history of excluding women. Ruling bodies of sport have claimed certainty about who is a woman and who is a man through gender verification testing. Sport is governed by rules that sociologists argue are the everyday interactions of social life. The second case study looks at the socialization of children and examples of raising a child in a gender-neutral way and what we can learn about gender from exploring challenges to traditional, gendered child rearing.

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### Mapping the Terrain

Gender has not always been a key focus of sociology. The 'founding fathers' of the discipline assumed that 'man' was the (gender-neutral) standard by which everyone was judged rather than being a male norm.

*(Continued)*

'Men', and more specifically 'man', stood for humanity, as evident in sociology texts with titles like 'man in society'. Terms such as 'mankind' and 'everyman' are still routinely used. 'Womankind' means people who are classified as women and not humanity. Even in the 21st century you will see and hear references to the characteristics, beliefs and practices of 'man'. How often have you heard 'woman' used to describe everyone that is male as well as female? Women per se have played little part in sociological inquiry. By the 1950s, it was argued that women were located within the private arena of the family, for example within functionalist sociological theories (for example Talcott Parsons (1937) and Robert K. Merton (1968), who developed Émile Durkheim's (1956) view of society as an organism with necessary and functional component parts), which saw women and men playing different social roles to facilitate the smooth running of society as a whole (see Chapter 15). Men were breadwinners, fulfilling instrumental roles, whereas women served in what were understood as expressive roles. Gender was social and cultural, but arose from sex, which was biological, with women largely being relegated to and dominated by a reproductive role, whether or not they actually had children.

Early sociological analyses of social relations assumed that:

1. Men stood for humanity and thus for women too.
2. Women, when identified as such, were seen as occupying largely domestic, caring roles. In many sociological texts in the 1950s and 1960s, the only time women were ever included was under the auspices of 'family'.

The rigidity of such views was challenged by feminist critics who argued that there is a distinction between sex and gender. For example, Ann Oakley (1972) argued that sex is biological and closely linked to bodies, especially reproductive capacities, whereas gender is a social and cultural construct seen in: the job you do, domestic and childcare responsibilities, the clothes you wear and the leisure activities you engage in, differing within and across societies. This approach provided ammunition for women coping with discrimination, such as being paid less than men for doing the same job and not having rights over their own bodies in terms of contraception or control over childbirth. This was in stark contrast to policies which reduced women to biology and suggested that the sexed body you have determines everything else, even how much you are paid. Oakley's approach stressed gender as a social institution and made a distinction between social and cultural practices which made and remade gendered identities and sexed bodies and the categories of sex. If gender was cultural, it could be changed.

Although this distinction has endured and still has considerable purchase, the idea that sex and gender can be separated, or that sex is biological and gender cultural, has been questioned. One of the most powerful and influential challenges comes from Judith Butler (1990), who argues that sex as well as gender is socially constructed through iterative acts: what we do and how we do it. Sex and gender are made through repeatedly performing those actions and bodily practices. We define sex from the moment of birth when the infant is accorded a sex based on external physical characteristics, which already carry a series of expectations about what is appropriate for either a female or a male person. The speech act of announcing 'it's a boy' or 'it's a girl' at birth establishes one of two possibilities and, having stated which one, the sex of the new person is made. This is not a one-off event but the beginning of an ongoing process wherein sex and gender are, in Butler's terms, performed, as a baby girl is given pink clothes, we talk to children and give toys differently, depending on perceived gender, etc. This repeats the message that this is a girl or boy and of how she or he is supposed to look, behave and act; this carries on throughout the life course.

If this is how the binary logic of man/women or boy/girl is created, then this is also how it can be subverted and undone. By changing practices (what we wear, how we walk, how we talk, what we do and what we

value), the restrictions of sex as well as gender can be transformed. Subsequent developments of Butler's ideas and those of Michel Foucault, upon whose work Butler draws, have opened up new ways of re-thinking gender, including, for example, opening up a space for and instituting non-binary sex. This has impacted upon social policy in multiple ways, from equality legislation, like the UK 2010 Equalities Act, to LGBTQQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex) classifications and multiple gender identity options on Facebook (71 at the time of writing). It has also had a role to play in the creation of gender-neutral toilets, which have been a particularly welcome development for people who are non-binary (those who do not see themselves as exclusively male or female and, for example, may choose to be referred to by the pronouns they/them). Feminist research has questioned the 'naturalness' of gendered traits, with men and masculinities also becoming the focus of attention (Anderson and Magrath, 2019; Connell, 2005; Segal, 1990, 2007; Whitehead, 2002). Sex/gender may be a false dichotomy because the two are interrelated and in conversation much of the time, so thinking about sex and gender together, 'sexgender', might be a more useful description and a more productive way of understanding gender (Woodward, 2012).

## Sex/Gender

Feminist sociologists put gender on the map first by drawing attention to what is socially specific and distinctive about women and their experience and, second, by researching women's social roles as well as embodied experience, which were often very different from men's. This was a key contribution of the second wave of feminism; the first wave of feminism is understood to be the fight for legal rights and especially women's suffrage (women having the right to vote) and the second wave, which was particularly active from the 1960s to the 1980s, brought together **theoretical** explanations and political activism to combat gender inequalities, showing that 'the personal is political'. Gender impacted upon all aspects of life from housework, contraception and childbirth to law, public life and war, and was worthy of serious research as well as political activism. These were radical suggestions at a time when humanity was coded male and the public arena was male. Women were relegated to the private sphere of domesticity and, by implication, as a result of the artificial separation of public and private spheres, the less important and less powerful half of the world. Feminist sociologists argued that women had been 'hidden from history' (Rowbotham, 1975) in public narratives and allocated seemingly insignificant private roles subsumed into '**family**', where what women did was mostly taken for granted as 'natural', as if women were biologically programmed to do all the housework and childcare. Marxist feminists argued that women's reproductive labour was essential to the economy in spite of being marginalized and unrewarded within capitalist economies. Ann Oakley's seminal research on domestic labour, *The Sociology of Housework* (1974), detailed the significance of domestic labour and, in particular, its practice by women as everyday routine, as an important and highly relevant focus of sociological inquiry. Oakley's work is important because it puts the specificities of gender into critical sociological analysis through the use of substantial quantitative and qualitative research (the relationship between quantitative and qualitative research is discussed further in Chapter 9).

These feminist views were based on the idea that gender as a social and cultural construct which oppresses women cannot derive entirely from biological or anatomical features. Anthropological evidence of diversity both within societies and between different cultures across the globe supports the view that gender practices

are culturally specific and changeable. So too is sex. Sex has been seen as a binary division between male and female, and yet this obscures the diversity within the category female and male. Sex might initially appear to be straightforward: anatomical, biological and genetic, defined by DNA. However, these multiple biological markers do not always coincide, as sex is in fact very complex. In addition, the wide-ranging, repeated, socially reinforced everyday practices of making and re-making gender also impact upon what we think of as sex (Butler, 1990). There is, however, a case for using the term *sexgender* in order to incorporate distinctive and influential anatomical, genetic and corporeal aspects of sex, and the cultural practices of 'gender as sex' and gender are powerfully interrelated. *Sexgender* includes culture and biology and shows how they can be inextricably interconnected. Using the concept *sexgender* means being attentive to the body you have and the shared culture in which you live, and paying attention to the words we use and classifications we have to describe gender identities. The physical body you have matters enormously and powerfully shapes who you are – for example, if you cannot have a baby and want one very much. Contraception for heterosexual people is dependent upon a sexed body, or needing to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, for whatever reason, is an embodied experience and responsibility. Bodies matter, but bodies do not entirely determine how people live their sex and gender. *Sexgender* is a way to navigate the complex, connected and at times contradictory relations between bodies and experiences. Saying sex is not straightforward does not come at the expense of denying the powerful ways in which sexual differences have been linked to and mark inequalities and experiences. An example of this is childbirth, which has been the basis of significant social inequalities. Maternal and infant morbidity and mortality are heavily dependent upon socio-economic factors. Pain and mortality are corporeal, although in every case the social and cultural meanings shape experience, and what is natural and what is social are deeply interconnected.

Sex and gender have intersected with different social forces, notably race and class, to shape the impact of COVID-19 in often complex ways. More women were diagnosed, possibly because more women are health workers than men, but – once infected – more men have died (Global Health, 2020). Bodies and what they can do are shaped by cultural practices, which include diet, exercise, and how you use your body, such as how you stand, walk and cross your legs. Think about it the next time you're on the underground or on a train, or maybe in a meeting or social gathering. How do men sit and how do women sit? How much space do they occupy? Men often sit with their legs wide apart and occupy a great deal of space, whereas women are expected to sit more primly with their knees together, keeping to their own seat space. As Iris Marion Young argues, girls learn to walk (and throw) in particular ways, so that they seem to be natural, as highlighted in the title of her influential work, 'Throwing Like a Girl' (Young, 1980).

Sexuality is sometimes included in discussions of gender. For example, within the recent classificatory systems of *sexgender*, such as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, queer and others, such as questioning (Q) and intersex (I)), trans is grouped with the sexual orientations of lesbian and gay people. Intersex covers genetic and hormonal variations in determining gender, while trans includes how you see yourself. LGB are classified by the gender of the people to whom you are sexually attracted; in this case, there is a clear connection to gender as sexuality. However, the classification of trans, for example, pertains to gender and not sexuality.

Gender is the preferred term of sociologists and policymakers, used to describe the categories of women and men. Increasingly and more recently, gender includes identities involving the characteristics of both sexes and cannot be clearly put into one of two categories. Gender has been distinguished from sex, with gender denoting social and cultural attributes and sex being biological and physiological and characterized by greater certainty, which can be ascertained and measured. This separation has been challenged. Contemporary **sociology**



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accepts the interrelationships of sex and gender and uses gender to explore how and why gender as an expression of difference operates in particular societies, and accepts the inequality of such classifications, not least because the vast majority of societies are dominated by the male/female binary, with women having experienced social, political, cultural and economic deprivation and disadvantage in varying degrees.



### Pause for Thought

Sex and gender as biology and culture elide. Can you think of examples in everyday life of when people determine how someone should behave or act according to their sex/gender? It is often especially evident with children, when we react differently to lively behaviour from small boys than from girls. We may be more shocked by violence when perpetrated by women than by men. Can you think of times when 'it's only natural' is based on gender? Later in the chapter, we will look at two different areas – sport and the socialization of children – to explore the relations between bodies, culture, gender norms and practices in the formation of gender and the intersection of gender with other social inequalities and categorizations.

## Evidence of Sexgender: Measuring Gender Inequalities

In the contemporary world especially, our understanding about how gender operates in social worlds derives from quantitative (often called 'big') data and qualitative research which provides knowledge about the lived experience of gender in everyday life in different societies and situations. As the United Nations (which now collects evidence about all aspects of gender relations) argues, 'in a digital age, social movements and policy priorities are increasingly shaped by the use of data to inform our daily decisions and help us connect with each other' (UN Data, 2019). The UN defines gender statistics as 'statistics that adequately reflect differences and inequalities in the situation of women and men in all areas of life' (UNSTATS, 2015). These align with sociologists' concerns with what the UN describes as 'differences in health, education, work, family life or general well-being'. The UN, like most sociologists and those who shape social policy, prefers the term 'gender', because of the associations of 'sex' with biological fixity and 'gender' with more fluid and malleable social and cultural practices. More recently, in the coronavirus **pandemic**, reproductive capacities have been underplayed and sex is defined in relation to risk of disease, hormonal and immunological responses and gender, following the UN definition in 2016, as what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man, which is subject to change (Global Health, 2020).

Quantitative **empirical** evidence of gender in everyday life across the globe demonstrates the persistence of gender as a social **force** (UN Women, 2018). Data relating to sex provide part of the story and are very important in informing policy and practice. Including women's experience is relatively new in the collection and collation of such data, giving particular emphasis to differentials in pay and access to education (UN Women, 2018, 2019; UNSTATS, 2015). In the UK, the Office for National Statistics provides evidence, for example, of the gender pay gap, which meant that in the year to April 2019, pay was 8.9% higher for men (ONS, 2019), in spite of the UK having had equal pay since 1970. Such official statistics also cover attitudes to gendered social attitudes, such as responsibilities for housework, childcare and care of dependent family members, which remain disproportionately 'women's work' (ONS, 2019). Recent evidence covers the hitherto private arena of domesticity, including domestic violence, and women's health, such as health and

the management of menstruation, in relation to human rights and economic deprivation and local cultural practices (UNPF, 2019).

UN statistics show that gender inequality is a major cause and effect of hunger and poverty worldwide, estimating that 60% of chronically hungry people are women (UN Women, 2019). Similarly, in education, women make up two-thirds of the world's 796 million illiterate people, and only 39% of rural girls go to secondary school compared with 45% of boys. Rates of illiteracy are especially high in some parts of the world; in Cambodia, 48% of rural women are illiterate compared to only 14% of men.

The stark inequities of these data demand explanation. Poverty and economic forces are clearly evident, but the question remains as to why, given very scarce resources, women, for example girls in education, are deemed less deserving than boys. Cultural practices offer some explanation, as does the feminist concept of **patriarchy** (Walby, 1991), which clearly operates in relation to economic forces. Patriarchy is the systemic, organized advantaging of older men over younger men and men who do not conform to a particular version of masculinity, and especially, men over women, in that men and masculinity are valued more than women and femininity. Patriarchy is a **social system** rather than just the practice of individuals. Recent developments (Gilligan and Snider, 2018) of the concept embrace more diversity than the idea as developed by radical feminists in the second wave suggest, but it remains useful for making sense of gender, especially through the intersection of different power axes, such as gender, race, class, **ethnicity**, location and disability.

## Qualitative Data

Whereas **quantitative methods** are able to paint a broad picture of the scale of gendered inequalities, as well as the correlations between different factors, **qualitative methods** allow people's voices – particularly women's – to be heard and their experiences made visible. Qualitative methods such as conducting interviews through a feminist lens were a way to access women's experiences, many of which had been hitherto unheard within academic research. This was a way to question and to challenge the implicit maleness and whiteness of academic research (Hesse-Biber, 2007) as well as the presumed neutrality of statistics. Qualitative methods allow exploration of how gender is constituted and experienced in everyday life as well as on the macro scale of big data. Qualitative methods allow insight into lives which are both hidden from history and lived outside the spotlight of a public gaze. They can facilitate access to the relationship between inner worlds of feelings and emotions and outer worlds of cultural **norms**. People have strong personal investment in gender as part of their sense of who they are, which cannot be easily understood from large-scale, quantitative approaches, especially in terms of the contradictory feelings people have about gender identifications.

Feminist qualitative methods allow people's experiences of gendered inequalities to be centred and also entail a political commitment to letting those experiences be heard (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). There are many different qualitative methods, but one of the most widely adopted ones in feminist empirical research is semi-structured interviews (Reinharz, 1992), as open-ended questions allow people to talk about their own stories and experiences. Researchers are encouraged in interviews – and all qualitative methods – to be reflexive, that is, to think about the influence they have had on the participant and the interview data that has been produced. One popular variant of the semi-structured interview in feminist research is the narrative approach. This method focuses on the 'how' and 'what' aspects of stories, allowing

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an understanding of particular events such as childbirth, or the telling of histories of sexual abuse (Fraser and MacDougall, 2017), to highlight the processes through which wider structural inequalities intersect with personal experiences. Gender is both a personal experience and an embodiment of wider structures, and so narrative **methods** and exploring the stories people tell is one way to understand how the personal is political – a key tension that feminist research explores.

Ethnographic methods are another well-used qualitative approach in feminist research. Participation and observation form the core of these methods, as researchers spend time with people to observe their practices as well as listen to what they say. Observing interactions can be a way to understand how gendered inequalities take place; observations can take place in public settings to highlight how gendered inequalities are part of the everyday world, or in private settings. Woodward (2007) shows how women balance social expectations and their own personal preferences and feelings about their bodies when they get dressed every day. Auto-ethnography is a form of ethnography on the self and can be a way to centre **reflexivity** of our experiences, in particular to reflect upon marginalized identities. For example, Crawley's (2012) autoethnographic work highlights the tensions and relations between being butch and being trans through how the body is experienced and is seen. The emphasis that qualitative methods places on depth and experience allows us to see the relations between multiple forms of oppression and inequalities and how these are negotiated. Skeggs' (1997) ethnographic research with working-class women highlighted how gender and class intersect in their experiences and subjectivities over time.

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### Expand Your Knowledge

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Intersectionality has been developed as a theoretical base for understanding the cumulative nature of gendered inequalities as relational rather than additive – that is to say that different axes of power and social systems such as race, class and gender connect together rather than piling up one on top of another. Kimberlie Crenshaw's (1989) seminal work developed the concept to provide a lens through which to explore how power operates, and in particular in response to the homogeneity of 'woman' coded as white in some feminist schools of thought, to explain the oppression of African American women and how gender worked with race and class in their experience. Racism and patriarchy work together along with other forces and institutions in which inequalities are embedded, such as social class, sexual orientation, disability, regional location and religion.

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## Embodied Selves

In some of the distinctions that have been made between sex and gender, it is apparent that bodies and biology sometimes elide. Sex may seem to be about the body you have, especially its reproductive capacities and visible differences. Bodies are sexed, through chromosomes and hormones, cellular and bone structure, but they are also social. Bodies are not simply biological, nor are they fixed. Think of how much intervention there is, especially in the contemporary world with its body projects, enhancements and constant monitoring. Nutrition and exercise play key roles in shaping bodies – for example, athletes' bodies and those of people who engage in manual labour will be more muscular.

Bodies are not just biological subjects of the medical sciences: bodies and minds are interrelated and shape who we are, how we feel about ourselves and are always part of the world we live in. Bodies are also political

because we define ourselves (and others define us) by our bodies. The body you have, especially if it is marked by visible difference, can challenge expected gender norms and affect how you are seen. Social movements are organized around people's feelings about how they can be defined by their bodies and by their efforts to use their bodies to make new selves and new identities. There is, however, considerable disagreement about the extent to which the physical, anatomical body each of us inhabits determines who we are and how far we can self-identify and adopt whatever identity we choose. This in part is determined by whether gender is viewed as fluid and cultural and sex as biological. Bodies and biology are not the same thing but they are always connected, just as sex and gender are interrelated and cannot be entirely disaggregated. Sometimes bodies and biology matter more than others, however.

Sport is one area of social life in which bodies are central and sexgender plays out in very particular ways. Sport also offers an example of the dilemmas faced when trying to fix gender identity and to limit gender to one of two categories.

## Sex Gender Classification in Sport

Sport presents a useful site for looking at gender because it has always been marked by separate competitions for women and men, as well as the exclusion of women from many sports on the grounds of sex gender. For example, women were entirely excluded from the first modern Olympics in 1896 and only very gradually joined in through the 20th century; women's boxing was not included until 2012. Sport is governed by rules and regulatory bodies such as the International Olympic Committee, which has had to engage with changing sexual politics and address questions of gender.

Sport involves two sexes: most competitions are either for women or for men, with a few mixed events, but, on the whole, you have to be one or the other. Sometimes there has been doubt about the sex of women, the implication being that men would cheat and try to pass as women to gain advantage; no woman would ever pretend to be a man, because there would be no competitive benefit. Sport has a long history not only of empirical participation by men, who dominated most sports and competitions until well into the 20th century, but also because sport manifests a particular version of masculinity. This dominant or hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) defines sporting success as competitive, strong, aggressive and powerful, all characteristic of a dominant masculinity. Masculinity is changing, even in sport, with wider inclusion of gay athletes and acknowledgement of men's vulnerabilities, including the incidence of eating disorders and mental health problems among elite male athletes.

Until 2016, sex or gender 'verification tests' were used in order to ascertain 'the truth' of sex, initially by humiliating checks of female athletes' bodies by panels of medical experts which were extended to include psychologists. Recent developments in gender politics and the growing visibility of trans athletes have effected changes. There has been a move from 'objective' testing informed by binary sex, which was subject to assessment by experts, to self-identification and a single criterion: testosterone (Trans, 2019). These debates have implications, first, for how sex and gender are defined and understood and, second, for the importance of women's bodies, for sexual politics and the politics of equality.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) medical code, Chapter 3 (IOC, 2014 ), stated that all female competitors are subject to gender verification out of a concern about formerly male athletes participating in women's events. This might be expressed in terms of men's body size and particular musculature and

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strength, but although less stated, they have participated in men's competitions and benefitted from all the social and cultural advantages of men and masculinity in sport.

One of the few trans male athletes to speak out is Thomas Page McBee (2017). As a child, McBee suffered abuse at the hands of his father and as a poor black girl was grossly mistreated by him. Despite this negative experience of masculinity, he transitioned and came out as a man and became the first ever trans boxer to fight at Madison Square Garden. McBee critiques masculinity as a socio-cultural construct deeply embedded in male bodies and the embodied practices of boxing, and combines the personal and the social in more complex ways than the regulatory bodies of sport. In spite of his negative experiences of masculinity, McBee still felt powerfully and intensely that he was a man. There are other challenges to biological certainties. Self-identification might operate differently if, as in the case of many people, you have some **deviance** from the expected criteria of sexual difference as measured by DNA and hormones.

In August 2009, the black South African 800-metre athlete, Caster Semenya, was suspended from competition until a decision could be made about whether or not she was a woman and, thus, whether she could retain her medal and compete as a woman. The International Association of Athletic Federations (IAAF) instigated testing which ultimately allowed Semenya, who was classified as intersex because of her excessive production of testosterone, to continue to compete as a woman (Woodward, 2012).

Ten years later, the case was re-visited because the criteria had changed and all that mattered was testosterone. In 2019, testosterone levels were the key determinant of a person's ability to compete as a man or as a woman in a shift from the previous use of multiple criteria (the IAAF ruling). In May 2019, Semenya was told she must compete as a man or take oestrogen to reduce her naturally occurring testosterone levels to .5 to combat her hyperandrogenism (an excess of predominantly male hormones such as testosterone, in a female body). She was told this even though she has been female since birth and has only ever participated in women's events.

These debates are contentious and sensitive, but they raise big questions – for example, how sex and gender should be distinguished and how gendered bodies and sexed lives interrelate. The IAAF ruling suggested that sex and gender can be reduced to testosterone levels; this marginalizes life and experience, which are the focus of sociological inquiry, and raises questions about the links between disciplinary fields. It is difficult in sport to be the sex you say you are if your body is classified and measured in reductive ways. In spite of her talent and success, Semenya, as a black athlete from a poor rural family, has not been able to challenge the dominant hierarchies of sport. Race and gender intersect with class privilege across the field of sport; in the following case study, we will address in more depth one of the core questions of this chapter: how does gender intersect with other axes of inequality? We do so through a case study of Serena Williams.

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### Expand Your Knowledge

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- To understand debates within transgender issues within feminism, read: S. Hines (2020) Sex wars and (trans) gender panics: Identity and body politics in contemporary UK feminism. *The Sociological Review* 68(4): 699–717.
  - To appreciate the wider context of a backlash against trans rights and the use of 'science', read: R. Pearce, S. Erikainen and B. Vincent (2020) TERF wars: An introduction. *The Sociological Review* 68(4): 677–98.
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## 12.1 Key Case



### Serena Williams

When Serena Williams won her 21st tennis grand slam at Wimbledon in 2015, instead of focusing on her significant athletic achievement, journalists spoke mainly about her muscular body (Rothenberg, 2015). As a black woman in a mainly white sport, strongly associated with the privileged middle classes and aristocracy, Williams' performance and her athleticism are always framed by race and gender. Williams uses the fact that as a black, African American woman she does not conform to the white gendered norms of tennis to unsettle spectators and commentators by her unconventional clothing and unorthodox behaviour during matches which challenge cultural norms. Williams doesn't hit or serve 'like a girl' or conform to the white feminine norms of the tennis court.

Racialized narratives of popular discourse intersect with those of gender (the topic of race is discussed further in Chapter 13). Rather than performing femininity (Markula and Kennedy, 2012), Williams shapes her own practice and performance and challenges conventional norms of femininity. Bodily practices and training regimes are part of the performance of gender. As an elite athlete, Williams occupies a contradictory position. The very training regimes which render athletes docile also provide them with the means of succeeding and overcoming opposition and re-deploy disciplinary practices to their own ends. As Nancy Spencer argues, 'the most visible traces of scientific racism remain in the obsession with black athletic bodies and black athletes are supposed to have an almost "natural" physicality' (2004: 120), a view which nonetheless unsettles conventional gendered stories of femininity.

In September 2018, Williams called the umpire a liar and a thief when her opponent Naomi Osaka won the US Open final. Instead of adopting the more conventional, passive reaction associated with femininity, especially in tennis, she was politically assertive and accused the umpire of sexism and treating her unfairly as a woman. Noisy arguments and uproars in tennis are usually associated with men, but Williams has quite often included angry protest in her behaviour on court. She has certainly challenged the dress code. She has re-appropriated male behaviour to express her own outrage at how the women's game is marginalized and trivialized as if men's tennis is more serious and substantial than women's.



### Pause for Thought

- How does Serena Williams resist and subvert the social norms of the traditional tennis culture?

Think particularly about the differences between her and the mostly white, conservative upper-class audience.

- How are race and gender made visible by Serena Williams?
- What assumptions are made about black athletes and how Serena Williams responds to these?

The example of sport shows how gender is regulated by official rules and institutions as well as cultural norms, and how people respond to these. It highlights the links between bodies, biology and social forces, especially the intersection of class, race and gender. The next example develops this relation between norms and everyday performances and practices.

## Raising Your Child Gender-Neutral

We have already introduced Butler's idea that gender is a performance that is repeated; this performance comes from how people are categorized and treated as well as how a person dresses, walks and behaves. So, clothing is bought for a girl such as a dress, and the girl, as she grows up, may continue to wear this type of clothing and learns through interacting with others how to become a girl. If practices make gender, then changing practices can also unmake gender. If gender is the source of inequalities, then changing these practices can also be a source of challenging these inequalities. One place where these ideas have been put into practice is in the area of how to bring up boys and girls. In May 2020, Elon Musk (CEO of Tesla) and Grimes (the singer) announced the birth of their first child, and that they would be bringing the child up gender-neutral. Raising your child gender-neutral has become more visible in the last few years, but rejecting gender norms for children has a longer history (such as within second-wave feminism; see Statham, 1986). Elon Musk's decision is mirrored in other celebrity examples, as well as those not in the spotlight.

One couple covered in the popular press is a particularly interesting example to think through. They are bringing up their child Anoush, who they refer to as 'they' rather than 'him' or 'her', as gender-neutral. Family members have not been told the sex the child has been classified as and Anoush is dressed in gender-neutral clothing. They do not want to impose a gender (as clothing, pronouns and naming are seen to do) but instead for the child to choose their own. The parents state that without being seen by others as a particular gender, they can 'grow into their own person' (Whitehead, 2019). The implication is that gender is a restriction and, being free from gender norms, the child will be able to develop their own identity. In this example, identity is seen to precede gender. They want the child to 'choose their gender' when they are old enough. Gender then is presumed to be a choice, although the **age** at which they see this as happening is unclear.



### Pause for Thought

- Think through the example of gender-neutral parenting – how is gender seen? As liberating or as restrictive?
- How does gender-neutral parenting reveal how gender is imposed and experienced through childhood? How can raising a child gender-neutral challenge the norms of gender?

We have already introduced Butler's theory of the performance of gender and how it is created through what people do. Butler also writes about how we are 'subjectivated' by gender, not just 'subjected' (Butler, 1993: 535), as it is also the space in which people may find their identity. Gender is a complex interrelationship between structures and societal expectations and how people identify and see themselves. Examples like this raise the question of how much – even as a child – people can live outside society. The world is heavily gendered, with expectations and interactions being framed through gender. An example like gender-neutral childhood opens up challenges to the gendering of children through a binary logic of boys (blue, cars) and girls (pink, dolls) but also raises many issues of its own.



## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has traced some of the developments in sociological understanding of gender as a useful concept for explaining social relations and inequalities over time and in different places. Gender is an important, fast-changing area of sociological inquiry, which strongly relates to other sociological concerns and theoretical frameworks explored in this book.

- Gender is a social force, which interconnects to other social and political systems and structures, such as class, race and ethnicity.
- Many sociologists prefer the word gender to sex because it can accommodate diversity and the range of cross-cultural practices that are linked to gender.
- Gender is central to people's sense of who they are and thus a key element in identity politics; gender links the personal and the social.
- Sex and gender are closely interconnected and in many ways inextricable since sex as well as gender is socially constructed, making sex gender a useful way of talking about these social forces.
- Trans and queer theories offer a challenge to the narrow binary logic of gender as divided into male and female, and open up the possibilities of non-binary sex and greater fluidity in thinking about gendered bodies and gendered lives.
- Although you cannot simply explain gender by the body a person has, bodies are still central to sex and gender and people can feel that their gender has a complex relation to the body they have.
- Gender interrelates with other social forces and serves to discriminate against groups of people. The persistence of gender inequalities requires explanation and redress through political engagement.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is gender and what is sex?

In your answer, try to think about how these definitions have changed over time. Draw from examples to think through how sex and gender are connected. In particular, think through what role culture has.

2. How does gender intersect with other social inequalities?

As you think about answering this question, what are the inequalities that might be good to think with? Think about what these inequalities are and then how they intersect with gender. What does 'intersectionality' mean and how might this help you to answer this question?

3. What is the difference between qualitative and quantitative data generated on gender?

Be clear about what the differences are between these two forms of data generation, and then think of the kinds of questions around gender that these methods can answer. You are not trying to see one as 'better' than the other but instead what kind of data around gender the different methods can allow insight into.

4. Why are bodies so important in sport, especially to understanding sex and gender?

There are separate men's and women's events, but is this based entirely on fixed physical differences? You will need to think about how far bodies are anatomical and biological and the extent to which gendered bodies are socially and culturally defined. Recent new rules about classifying sex suggests that sex as well as gender can be changed and you can be the sex you want to be, even in sport.



## Go Further

### Books

- Connell, R.W. and Pearse, R. (2014) *Gender*. Oxford: Polity.

This is a clear introduction to the sociology of gender, which traces the historical development of the idea of gender and explores how gender inequalities have been made, with some recent examples and examples from across the globe.

- Mirza, H. and Joseph, C. (eds) (2012) *Black and Postcolonial Feminisms in New Times*. London: Routledge.

This is an edited collection of work on different examples of the intersection of gender, race and class in higher education, which is written by black and postcolonial feminist scholars. The book includes empirical evidence from education and the media with critiques written from postcolonial and anti-racist perspectives.

- Richardson, D. and Robinson, V. (2020) *Introducing Women's Studies*, 5th edition. London: Macmillan/Red Globe Press.

This is an up-to-date collection of wide-ranging accessible critical essays on what is important in contemporary gender studies, including clear summaries of well-illustrated theories.

### Articles

- Beechey, V. (1979) On patriarchy. *Feminist Review* 3: 66–82. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1979.21>

This article is useful as one of the first explanations of patriarchy which put the concept into academic, theoretical discourse as an explanatory concept. Patriarchy *explains* gender inequalities and doesn't just describe them.

- Collins, P.H. (2015) Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology* 41: 1–20.

Patricia Hill Collins has published extensively on the theorization of intersectionality to challenge the idea that oppressive forces like racism and patriarchy and class inequality add on; rather, they intersect. In this article, she problematizes the concept and argues that a major explanatory strength of intersectionality which brings together different forces like race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age is the way in which the concept focuses on power and inequality.

- Haraway, D.J. (1988) Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(30): 575–99.

Donna Haraway has been very influential and useful, especially for those working in gender studies, for her creative development of understanding how knowledge comes from different positions. This article shows how useful it is to ask questions about where knowledge comes from, who's making it and stating it, and how knowledge is produced.

(Continued)

## Websites

- <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/wlmpc>

This Duke University website includes resources on the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States specifically.

- [www.bl.uk/sisterhood#](http://www.bl.uk/sisterhood#)

This British Library site includes oral histories of those in the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

- [www.sistersuncut.org](http://www.sistersuncut.org)

This is the website of the campaigning group Sisters Uncut, who take direct action for domestic violence services and is a good example of feminism in action.

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