

Impact of 'Gender Analysis' as A Framework for Intersex



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Mini Review

Gender has become the standard for research, academic study, policy, and equality. As a framework, it is assumed to explain the social, psychological, and some have even gone so far as saying that it also explains the of a persons sexed being as well [1]. Even one of the latest reports from the UN Special Rapporteur has intimated that gender derives from the feminist movement [2,3] and some even attributing it to Simone de Beauvoir [4]. It has taken on a ahistorical stance with an assumption of universal application [5,6]. Furthermore, some have even suggested that gender is a replacement of the term 'social sex' - a term that refers to how people related and functioned according to their sex in social and cultural roles [7,8]. There has been important critiques of 'social role' (especially the biologically determinist framing leading to the discriminatory and oppressive social structures. But the establishment and application of 'gender' is quite different and does not necessarily answer the critiques of social sex.

Historically, there were specific conditions and theories that were significant to the background in establishing gender. Prior to the establishment of gender, intersex and transgender were considered as part of the wide spectrum of diversity in bodily and psychological sex in medicine and science [6]. This all changed with the establishment of gender. A central basis of gender was the concept of imprinting deriving from the work of Konrad Lorenz [6] and the strong influence of structural functionalism. Structural functionalists believe that expression, behaviour and acculturation was a learned and socialised from infancy through their life into normative behaviours and not determined by biology [9,10]. Moreover, psychiatry, clinical psychology, and other forms of expert guidance became significant to the maintenance of social order and extending the reach of government action into the family [11]. These ideas suggest that processes of socialization and social control were crucial to ensure that individuals conformed to given roles and continued to reproduce the system in question [12]. Moreover, deriving from this period is the notion that humans

are malleable or plastic and not fixed or subordinated to biological traits such as race and sex [6,13]. Along with the background of these theoretical concepts there was social upheaval and moral panic in Western societies including the rise of socialism around the world, increasing openness and acceptance of sexual orientation in society, and the breaking of the social structures due to the rise of feminism [5,6]. The emergent gender, as shall be seen as an apparatus, and institution for a certain historical moment had the major function of responding to an urgency to uphold the social and sexual order in postwar America [6].

Gender does have a historical basis and it goes beyond the 1970s rise of Western liberal feminism back to the medicalisation of sex by medical professionals. It had a function to erase diversity not only from society but also from bodies to ensure the male-female binary within Western society. Sex was in crisis and in need of salvation [14]. The physiological signifiers (gonadal sex, chromosomal sex, hormonal sex, external genital morphology, internal accessory reproductive structures) were no longer reliable for the determinants of a person's psychosocial or psychosexual orientation as male or female [5,6]. After 4 years of study of intersex (then known as hermaphrodites), Dr. John Money and his colleagues determined that only assigned sex was found a reliable predictor of the psychosocial or psychosexual orientation [5,6,15,16]. As an imprinted psychological state, gender could explain how a person's sense of self as male or female could contradict the signs of sex in the physical body [6,15]. Imposing gender on intersex was a means to discipline bodies (physically conform) to ensure the stability and normalisation of Western social structures [6]. It was a means of socialisation and normalisation into a different-sex desiring subject and the reproduction of social order [14].

Money's protocol for intersex children established a foundation for American transsexual medicine protocols [14]. Though Dr. Robert Stoller retained gender in the general sense as defined by

Money, he took gender role (culture) and distinguished it from a person's sense of being a sex - 'I am a male' or 'I am a female', giving it the name gender identity (psychology) [6,14,17]. For Stoller, gender identity was unalterable the body was alterable, malleable, to normalising the individual physically to their gender identity [17]. Stollers' work provided formative mechanisms introduced that gender with its own constituent parts (gender, gender role, gender identity) and formative mechanisms (discovered, examined, and exploited) to cure, placate, and normalize sexual deviancy [6]. The disciplinary power (physical and social coercion to conform) resulted in the pathologizing minds of and normalizing bodies, especially intersex and transgender people, to "fit" the reproductive imperatives of postwar US capitalism [6].

The Western feminist movement of the early 1970s harnessed the political utility of gender including Germaine Greer, Kat Millet, Harriet Holter, Jessie Bernard, Ann Oakley, Gayle Rubin, Marilyn Strathern, Nancy Chodorow, Suzanne Kezzler and Wendy McKenna, Rhoda Unger, and Dorothy Dinnerstein [18,19]. Though there was initial resistance from many global South and Indigenous feminists [19], by 2020, it has become mainstream in usage including internationally [20,21]. It enabled a focus on social and political inequalities between men and women free from the constraints (in theory at least) of biological determinism [5,6]. Under gender, sex were virtually superfluous except to medical professionals and was beyond critique [5,6] though many were still uncomfortable with the diverse bodies of intersex [5,6,22,23]. Gender served to reinforce the idea that sex represents the raw material more fully elaborated and to maintain the binary of social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviours [5,5,17,22-24]. Citing Money, biology feminists argued that had little impact on sex role differences [5,6] and was rendered passive and oppositional to the active category of cultural gender [18]. It assumed a meaning as already known without the need for further examination of its foundations [5]. As such, the patriarchal, Western foundations of gender have only been examined by a few [5,14].

Despite the continuing emphasis on gender in all areas of life and use as a tool of analysis in research and government policy, gender has a relatively short history, a Western one, even a racial one [14,20]. Few have stopped to consider the impact on the population upon which is at the centre of its establishment - intersex. Though intersex have been part of societies since time immemorial, they have usually been recognised especially in traditional and Indigenous societies, but not always been respected. Though intersex has been socially shunned for many years in the Western nations and forced to exist in a male or female persona or face extreme consequences [25,26], gender was a colonising institution of both the body and the soul of intersex people and ensured that the binary Western system of male and female with all that it entails would remain as the social order.

Using gender as a primary centre of analysis continues

to erase being and personhood of intersex. Focusing on and centring gender disembodies intersex. Embodiment refers to the experience of living in, perceiving, and experiencing the world from the very specific location of our bodies, how people relate to their perceived cosmos, and aligns with personhood, and gives agency [27,28]. They are not able to understand their being and belonging or place in society and even connect with their cultural connectedness. Intersex is not an abnormality or simply a 'biological variation' but has deeper cultural and spiritual roots denied by Western society. Even when there is some recognition today, it is often only in a reductionist manner, such as a person with difference of sex development.

Medicalisation, including through gender, still has a major impact on intersex. Money's experience treating intersex patients was the catalyst that propelled the concept of gender to be recognised as an explanatory measure of human behaviour in the biomedical and social sciences [16]. As Repo argues that the "deployment of gender quite literally acted on the child's sex as a machinery of power that explored it, broke it down and rearranged it" (p.37) [6]. More directly, medicalisation was seen as humane, enabling intersex to live as males or females in humanity as with their transgender patients [20] but it continues to leave physical, cultural and cultural/spiritual impacts on intersex. Though transgender may see things differently, for intersex the institution of gender will always represent and impact on them as medicalisation. At most, they are now recognised as having biological diversity for many that still needs to be controlled. Even the push out of the medicalised language of 'differences of sex development' to 'variations of sex characteristics' still leaves it as a biological difference that still can leave the gender binary intact.

Lastly, gender is not as liberating as some make it out to be. The establishment of gender enforces the patriarchal and heteronormative Western society [16] and these foundations remain.

Gill-Peterson articulated the core purpose of gender as: "the concept of gender was meant to save the sex binary from imminent collapse by offering a new developmental justification for coercive and normalizing medical intervention into intersex children's bodies. Gender would make nonbinary morphology into underdevelopment, allowing medicine to claim that sex assignment was merely its normal completion (pp.98-99) [14].

The framework was only ever established, and still does, as a rationale for clinical practices designed to habilitate the intersex into girlhood and boyhood, womanhood and manhood though it has become so much more [5]. Though some are attempting to suggest gender is diverse, the reality expressed in domestic and international environments is gender equality is about being male or female. The gender system will always leave diversity 'othered' and intersex erased. Feminist (from the 1970s onwards) and, later, queer and trans projects seem to have increasingly lost

sight of the conservative historical context of gender's invention and only recently have some begun to revisit the significance of gender's historicity and to revise its misattribution to politically progressive projects [14].

Can a zebra change its stripes? Though some feminist and transgender communities find gender a useful framework, for some, especially intersex, it will never be liberating. As Repo states "the idea of gender was introduced to justify sex reassignment surgeries on intersex infants [and it] is only from this period onward that we can really conduct a genealogy of gender [and] we cannot examine the history of gender before gender itself came into existence." (p.229) [21].

Gender will always be a source of disembodiment and trauma physically, psychologically and culturally/spiritually. It will always indicate a non-inclusive society and one built on Western ideals. If intersex are to have a place in society again, gender needs decentring.

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