

Gender

By Jutta Burggraf

Usually when speaking about gender our reference is to the male gender or the female gender. Just as the male sex exists, the female sex also exists. Today, in a number of international organizations, the concept “gender” is used without providing any clear definition of the term. In this sense, the term “sex” refers to natural traits. Thus two sexes exist that are differentiated in distinctly anatomical ways. But, together with sex, there is also “gender,” a term that describes the roles played by individuals in society. These roles are born in the course of history and result from the interaction between culture and nature. Recently, however, an equivocal concept of “gender” has appeared, one conceived as exclusively coming from culture and therefore can appear and disappear depending on the currents of society and also individuals. The individual-family-society link is lost and the person is reduced to the individual. Some, for example, affirm that maternal love is not inscribed in the nature of woman; rather it is a feeling born in a particular cultural context and can thus disappear or be destroyed if the culture changes. We find ourselves in the presence of a new cultural revolution. Whatever their sex, humans (according to this view) can choose their gender: they can choose heterosexuality, homosexuality, lesbianism. They can opt for transsexuality, to change their sex. Some plans for declarations of “gender” rights exist. This strange disassociation of sex and gender, nature and culture, destroys the personal dimension of the human being and reduces it to simple individuality. The ideology of “gender” therefore includes a radical calling into question of the family and everything that it means in and for society. (↗ Sexual and Reproductive Rights; Discrimination Against Women and CEDAW; An Ideology of Gender: Dangers and Scope; Motherhood and Feminism; New Definitions of Gender; Patriarchy and Matriarchy; Equal Rights for Men and Women)

THE IDEOLOGY OF GENDER

The feminist ideology of gender began during the decade 1960-1970. According to it, masculinity and femininity are not fundamentally determined by sex, but instead by culture. While the term “sex” refers to nature and implies two possibilities (man and woman), the term “gender” comes from the field of linguistics and includes three varieties: masculine, feminine, and neuter. The differences between male and female (outside of the obvious morphological differences) would not correspond to a “given” nature, instead they would be culturally “fashioned” according to socially constructed roles and stereotypes that each society assigns to the sexes.¹ This viewpoint emphasizes (not unreasonably) that in the past the differences were overemphasized, which led to situations of discrimination and injustice for many women. For many centuries, there was

¹ In languages in which two different words are not available (sex-gender), one usually hears of “biological sex” and “psychosocial sex”. And so, for example, in German, it is “biologisches Geschlecht” – “psycho-soziales Geschlecht”.

a “feminine destiny” to be an inferior being excluded from public decisions and higher education. But today – they continue affirming - women are aware of having been victimized, so they break out of the role that was imposed on them. They want to free themselves, above all, from marriage and motherhood.²

Some, following different considerations, assert the existence of four, five or six genders: male heterosexuals, female heterosexuals, homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, and trans-gendered. In that way, masculinity and femininity do not appear in any way to be the only naturally derived models of a biological sexual dichotomy. Any sexual activity would be justifiable.³ Far from being “obligatory,” heterosexuality would mean nothing more than one of the possible sexual practices; its procreative role would not make it preferable. Some affirm that in “more imaginative” societies, biological reproduction could be assured with other techniques.⁴ And since gender identity is allegedly undefined and indefinitely adaptable to new and different meanings, it would be up to each individual to freely choose the kind of gender to which he or she would like to belong in the different situations and stages of life.

To obtain universal acceptance of these ideas, the promoters of radical gender feminism try to achieve a gradual cultural change, the so-called “deconstruction” of society, beginning with the family and the education of children.⁵ They use ambiguous language to make new ethical presuppositions seem reasonable. The goal consists in “reconstructing” a new and arbitrary world that, in addition to the masculine and feminine, includes other genders in describing human life and interpersonal relations.

These pretensions found a favorable environment in the individualistic anthropology of radical neo-liberalism. They depend, on the one hand, upon different Marxist and

² Some gender feminist adepts propose the following: “In order to be effective in the long run, family planning programs should not only focus on attempting to reduce fertility within existing gender roles, but rather on changing gender roles in order to reduce fertility.” The quotation is taken from DIVISION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN FOR THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON FAMILY PLANNING, HEALTH AND FAMILY WELL-BEING, *Gender Perspective in Family Planning Programs*, Bangalore (India), 26-30 October 1992, organized in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

³ Cf. JUDITH BUTLER, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York-London 1990, p.6: “In theorizing that gender is a radical construction independent of sex, gender itself comes to be an artifice free of ties. As a consequence, man and masculine could mean a feminine body as much as a male body; woman and feminine can mean a masculine body as much as a feminine body”. Though this work is itself criticized in several even more radical extremist circles for not completely separating itself from the biological dimension, it can be considered one of the key works presenting the ideology of *gender*.

⁴ H. HARTMAN: *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, Boston 1981, p. 16. Like many others, the author anticipated, in part, the complete disassociation between sexuality and procreation, motherhood, fatherhood, and filiation which artificial interventions make possible today.

⁵ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY, *Familia, matrimonio y unions de hecho* (26 July 2000), 8. Gender feminism has been well received in a good number of important international institutions, among which stand the United Nations. And some universities are also trying to raise *Gender Studies* to a new scientific rank.

structuralist theories,⁶ and on the other, on the postulates of some of the representatives of the “sexual revolution”, such as Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) who invited everyone to experiment with all types of sexual situations. More directly, one can see the influence of atheistic existentialism on Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) who announced in 1949 her well-known aphorism: “You are not born a woman! They make you into a woman!”⁷ later completed with the logical conclusion: “You are not born a man; you are made into a man! So neither is the condition man a given reality in principle”.⁸ The sociocultural studies of Margaret Mead (1901-1978) can also be included in this historical process that consolidated a new branch of radical feminism, even though the scientific validity of her contributions was questioned by other investigators.⁹

Proclaiming that masculine and feminine genders are exclusively social factors wholly unrelated to personal sexual dimensions, the proponents of this gender theory oppose a model, equally unilateral as theirs, that sustains a contrary viewpoint, denying any interaction between the individual and the community at the time of setting a personal identity as man or woman. It affirms that each sex has, given its biological needs, corresponding fixed social functions, invariable in history.¹⁰ This model, however, is considered false today at both the theoretical and legal levels, at least in the western world.¹¹ The problem has been partly, not totally, resolved through legislation,¹² but there remains an undeniable influence of these ideas in social practice.

THE PROCESS OF IDENTIFYING WITH ONE’S OWN SEX

In the human person, sex and gender – the biological principle and the cultural expression – are not identical, but neither are they completely independent. To establish a correct relationship between them, it is good to consider the process in which the identities of a man and a woman are formed. The experts point out three aspects of this process which

⁶ It was Friedrich Engels who established the union between Marxism and feminism. Cf. F. ENGELS, *The Origin of the Family, Property and State*, New York 1972. (original German *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staates*, 1884).

⁷ S. DE BEAUVOIR: *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Paris 1949.

⁸ S. DE BEAUVOIR: *Alles in Allem*, Hamburg 1974, p.455.

⁹ Cf. M. MEAD, *Male and Female. A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*, New York 1949; G. SOLÉ ROMEO, *Historia del feminismo. Siglos XIX y XX*, Pamplona, 1995, 50-53.

¹⁰ With respect to the different models that are presented relating to man and woman, Cf., the clarifying framework of M. ELÓSEGUI, *La transexualidad. Jurisprudencia y argumentación jurídica*, Granada 1999, 91-118.

¹¹ The subordination of women is contrary to the principle of equality between the sexes and against human rights recognized by the Universal Declaration of the United Nations in 1948, as well as in many other documents of the UN.

¹² Cf. the studies of M. ELÓSEGUI, “Los derechos reproductivos. Un nuevo concepto jurídico procedente del mundo legal anglosajón”, in *Anuario de Derecho Eclesiástico del Estado*, 16 (2000), 689. “There still exists today direct, indirect and hidden discrimination in the field of work, in social security, in banking law, etc.”.

are normally and harmoniously woven together: *biological sex, psychological sex and social sex*.¹³

“Biological sex” describes the bodily aspect of the human person. It is customary to distinguish several factors. The “genetic or chromosomal sex”, determined by the XX chromosomes in the female, or the XY in the male, is set from the moment of fertilization and, through the gonadal sex, is responsible for hormonal activity. The “gonadal sex”, in turn, influences the “somatic or phenotypic sex” in determining the structure of the internal and external reproductive organs. It is good to consider the fact that these biological foundations profoundly intervene in the entire organism, in such a way that, for example, each cell of the female body is different from each cell in the male body. Medical science even indicates different structural and functional differences between the male brain and the female brain.¹⁴

Psychological sex refers to human psychic experiences as man or woman. It consists in the consciousness of belonging to a determined sex. This consciousness is formed, from the beginning, between the ages of 2 and 3 years old, and usually coincides with the biological sex. It can be profoundly affected by the education and environment provided to the child.

Sociological or civil sex is the sex assigned to a person from the moment of birth. It is expressed as it is perceived by the surrounding persons. It signifies the specific way of acting of a man or a woman. In general, it is understood as the result of historic-cultural processes. It refers to functions, roles and stereotypes which are assigned in each society to diverse groups of persons.

These three aspects should not be understood as isolated from each other. On the contrary, they must be integrated into a wider process consisting in the formation of one’s own identity. A person progressively acquires, during infancy and adolescence, a consciousness of “being oneself” (“who one is”). They discover their *sexual identity and in it each time more profoundly the sexual dimension of their own being*. Coming to realize bio-psychological factors of one’s own sex and the difference regarding the other sex, they gradually acquire a *gender identity* and discover the psychosocial and cultural factors of the role that men and women have in society. In a correct and harmonious process of integration, both dimensions correspond and complement each other.

¹³ Biological sex is ordinarily and simply called *sex*, while psychological and social sex are called *gender*.

¹⁴ Cf. D. D. KELLY, “Sexual Differentiation of the Nervous System”, in *Principles of Neural Science*, by E. R. KANDEL - J. H. SCHWARTZ - T. M. JESSEL, Appleton and Lange, Norwalk, (Connecticut) 2000, 1131-1149; P. NOPOULOS - M. FLAUM - D. O’LEARY - N.C. ANDREASEN, “Sexual dimorphism in the human brain: evaluation of tissue volume, tissue composition and surface anatomy using magnetic resonance imaging”, *Psychiatry Res* (2000) 2, 1-13. H. DAVIDSON - K.R. CAVE - D. SELLNER, “Differences in visual attention and task interference between males and females reflect differences in brain laterality”, *Neuropsychologia* (2000) 4, 508-514. N. SADATO, V. IBANEZ - M.P. DEIBER - M. HALLETT, “Gender Difference in Premotor Activity During Active Tactile Discrimination”, in *Neuroimage* (2000) 5, 532-540. K. KANSAKU - A. YAMURA - S. KITAZAWA, “Sex Differences in Lateralization Revealed in the Posterior Language Areas”, in *Cereb Cortex* (2000) 9, 866-872.

A special consideration ought to be given to *intersexual* states (the so-called *intersex* persons) since some argue that the existence of transsexuals and hermaphrodites would demonstrate that there are more than two sexes. But these intersexual states are anomalies with various clinical characteristics that tend to occur at a very early embryonic stage of human development. They are defined by the contradiction of one or more of the criteria of sexual definition. That is, transsexual persons have a pathology in some of the links of the biological chain leading to sexual differentiation. They suffer alterations in the normal development of the biological sex and, as a consequence, also of the psychosocial sex.¹⁵ Instead of using them as propaganda to obtain the “deconstruction” of the foundations of the family and of society, one should show respect to them and give them appropriate medical treatment.

One must distinguish *sexual identity* (man or woman) from *sexual orientation* (heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality). Sexual orientation is commonly understood to be the sexual preference that is established in adolescence coinciding with that stage of human cerebral development. It has a biological basis influenced by other factors such as education, culture, and personal experiences. Even though the numbers vary according to diverse investigations, one can say that the immense majority of human persons are heterosexuals.¹⁶

Another matter that must be considered is sexual conduct. In the normal sense, it is designated as personal chosen behavior, since there is a wide margin of freedom in the manner in which men and women can live their sexuality.

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

Since the whole human person is either man or woman “in the unity of body and soul”,¹⁷ masculinity or femininity extends to all areas of his/her being: from the profound significance of the physical differences of man and woman and its influence in corporeal love, to the psychic differences between both and their different ways of manifesting their relationship with God. Although no specific psychological or spiritual trait can be attributed to only one of the sexes, there are characteristics that are to be found with special frequency and in a more pronounced way in men, and others in women. It is supremely difficult to distinguish rightly in this area. It will probably never be possible to determine with scientific exactness what is “typically masculine” or “typically

¹⁵ The phenotypical sex does not fully correspond, for example, to the chromosomic and the gonadal sex, just as there is little correspondence between external and internal sexual organs. Thus transsexual persons perceive themselves as belonging to the opposite sex from the one indicated by their anatomy. For more information, Cf. J. GONZÁLEZ MERLO, “Estados Intersexuales”, in *Ginecología*, Barcelona 1998, chpt. 3, A. C. MARCUELLO – M. ELÓSEGUI, “Sexo, género, identidad sexual y sus patologías”, in *Cuadernos de Bioética* (1999) 3, 459-477.

¹⁶ Cf., for example, the studies of psychiatrist G. J. M. VAN DEN AARDWEG, *Das Drama des gewöhnlichen Homosexuellen. Analyse und Therapie*, Neuhasen-Stuttgart 1995, 17-47. (original English *Homosexuality as a Disease of Self-Pity*).

¹⁷ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 14.

feminine”, for nature and culture, the two great formative influences, are closely intertwined from the beginning. But the fact that men and women experience the world in different ways, carry out their tasks differently, sit down, plan and react differently, shows that each of the latter has a solid foundation in the biological constitution of both man and woman.

Sexuality reveals both identity and otherness. Men and women have the same human nature, but they have it in different ways. In a certain sense, they complement each other. A man “constitutionally” tends towards a woman, and a woman tends towards a man.¹⁸ They do not seek an androgynous unity, as the mythical vision of Aristophanes in *The Banquet* suggests. But they do mutually need each other to fully develop their humanity.¹⁹ The Creator gave woman to man as a “helper”, and vice-versa - which is not a “servant”, nor does it express disdain.²⁰ In the husband-wife relationship, the “submission” is not unilateral, but reciprocal. What is desirable is mutual subordination in love.

It is a biological fact that only a woman can be a mother, and only a man can be a father. Procreation is thus ennobled in them by the love in which it develops and by their union in love, placed by God in the center of the human person as a joint labor of both sexes. Common parenthood is a special protagonist and evidence of an immense confidence in God.

Both man and woman are capable of satisfying the fundamental needs of each other. In their mutual relationship, each leads the other towards self-discovery and self-realization in their own sexual being. Each one also makes the other conscious of being called to a communion and capacity to give self to the other in mutual loving subordination. Both, from different perspectives, find inner happiness in serving the happiness of the other.

While the arbitrary change of gender testifies to a certain eagerness for self-sufficiency, human sexuality shows a clear disposition towards the other person. It is evident that human plenitude is found precisely in this relationship, in this being-for-the-other. The search for human fulfillment clearly pushes a person to go out of self, look for the other and rejoice in his/her presence. It is like a seal placed by the God of Love in the structure itself of human nature. Although each person is loved by God “for himself/herself”²¹ and called to individual fulfillment, this cannot be achieved without communion with others. Humans are made to love and be loved. From this we see that sexual life has an immense value in itself. Both sexes are called by God Himself to act and live together.²² This is their vocation. It can also be affirmed that God did *not* create us men and women primarily so that we can engender new human beings. On the contrary, man, created in

¹⁸ Cf. A. SCOLA, *¿Qué es la vida?*, Madrid 1999, 128.

¹⁹ Cf. A. Scola: *¿Qué es la vida?*, 129.

²⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988), 10. Also the psalmist says to God: “You are my help”. Psalm 70, 6. cf. Ps 115, 9.10.11.; 118, 7; 146, 5).

²¹ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24, and *Mulieris Dignitatem* 7, 10, 13, 18, 20, 30.

²² Human sexuality makes reference to the ineffable will of God. Cf. Gen 1, 27: “God created man in His image, in His image God created them; man and woman He created them.”

the image and likeness of God, is capable of engendering so as to express and perpetuate that divine image reflected in his sexual condition.

But it must be clarified that to be a woman or a man does not consist solely in being a mother or a father. In considering the specific qualities of woman, “spiritual motherhood” becomes a subject of reflection. Pope John Paul II defines this concept and aptly speaks of the “feminine genius”.²³ This concept constitutes a basic and firm attitude that corresponds to the physical structure of the mother and is strengthened by it. In effect, it is far from absurd to suppose that intense guardianship of life by a woman can generate in her certain particular dispositions. Just as, during pregnancy, a woman experiences a unique closeness towards a new human being, so also her nature favors an interpersonal encounter with those who surround her. And so “feminine genius” can be translated as a delicate sensibility towards the needs and requirements of others, in their capacity to recognize and understand their possible interior conflicts. She can be carefully identified with a special capacity to show love in a concrete way²⁴ and to develop a caring “ethic”.

Where there is a “feminine genius”, there must also be a “masculine genius”, a talent specific to man. By nature, man stands at a greater distance apart from concrete life. He is always “outside” pregnancy and birth, and can only be a part of them through his wife. This greater distance can enable him to undertake more serene actions to protect life and assure a future. It can lead him to be a true *father*, not only in a physical dimension but also in a spiritual dimension.²⁵ It can lead him to be a faithful, confident and trusted friend. But it can also lead him towards a certain disinterest in concrete and daily matters, which unfortunately has been fostered in the past by a unilateral education.

In all the areas and sectors of society, in culture, art, politics and economics, in public and private life, men and women are called to mutually accept each other and to build together a habitable world. This world will reach its fullness at the moment when both sexes harmoniously give their specific contributions.

A JUST RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEX AND GENDER

There is a profound unity between the corporeal, psychological and spiritual dimensions of the human person, an interdependence between the biological and the cultural. Work is founded on nature and cannot be wholly dissociated from it.

The unity and equality between man and woman does not eliminate these differences. Although the feminine and masculine qualities vary in great measure, they cannot be

²³ Cf. J. BURGGRAF, “Juan Pablo II y la vocación de la mujer”, in *Scripta Theologica* 31 (1999) 1, 139-155.

²⁴ Cf. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30.

²⁵ Spiritual fatherhood supposes freeing oneself from egocentrism, “to be conquered by love”. Cf. K. WOJTYLA, “Radiation of fatherhood”, in ID., *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, Berkeley 1987, 355.

ignored completely. A background of natural formation is present that cannot be annulled without desperate efforts that definitely lead to self-denial. Neither woman nor man can go against his/her own nature without falling into unhappiness. Breaking with biology frees neither the woman nor the man: it is rather a path that leads to pathology.

Culture in turn must provide an adequate answer to nature. It should not be an obstacle to the progress of human groups. It is evident that many injustices against women have existed historically and some continue to exist in the world. This long list of different kinds of discrimination has no biological foundation, but rather cultural roots, and these must be eradicated. Social functions cannot be considered as irremediably united to genetics or biology. It is desirable that women assume new roles that are in harmony with their dignity. In this sense, Pope John Paul II explicitly rejects the fixed biological notion that all roles and relations between both sexes are fixed into one static model, and calls on men to participate in “the great process of women's liberation.”²⁶ It is clear that the incorporation of women in the labor market is an advance that certainly creates new challenges for both sexes.

The term *gender* can be accepted as a human expression which is based on a masculine or feminine biological sexual identity.²⁷ It correctly describes the cultural aspects that surround the construction of the functions of men and women in society. Yet not all of these functions are things that are voluntarily constructed. Some have larger biological roots. Therefore, “one can appreciate that the presence of a certain diversity of roles in no way is bad for women, for that diversity is not the result of an arbitrary imposition, but rather an expression of what is specifically masculine or feminine”.²⁸

Today many persons are beginning to see clearly again that they cannot become free beyond the limits of their own nature. They see that sex is more than a privilege or a discrimination but is always an opportunity for one's personal development. Hence they strive to promote the welfare of women not only outside the home but within it as well. While it is certain that women are not only wives and mothers, many are or want to be, so one must create the possibilities for them to achieve these desires in a dignified manner. Women who have an active external professional life cannot be the sole model, the only ideal of feminine independence, notwithstanding all the respect that this model deserves.

The family is certainly not the exclusive task of women. But even when the man demonstrates his responsibility and adequately lives his professional and family duties, it cannot be denied that the woman plays a supremely important role in the home. The specific contribution they make must be taken fully into account in legislation and should also be justly remunerated in economic and socio-political ways.²⁹ The collaboration

²⁶ JOHN PAUL II: *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 6.

²⁷ Cf. The documents of the Delegation of the Holy See are incorporated in the Acts of the World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, collected by J.M. CASAA-TORRES,: *La cuarta conferencia mundial sobre la mujer*, Madrid 1998, 78.

²⁸ JOHN PAUL II: *Letter to Women*, 11.

²⁹ JOHN PAUL II: Encyclical *Laborem exercens* (14 September 1981), 19.

needed for this type of legislation must also be internationally considered not only as the right, but also as the duty of women.

FINAL NOTE

The development of society depends on the employment of all human resources. Therefore, women and men must participate in all spheres of public and private life. The attempts to reach that just goal on the levels of political government, business, culture, social and family circles can be undertaken under “the perspective of gender equality” if that equality includes the right to be different. In fact, some countries and international organizations take into account the different situations of men and women, and develop plans for equal opportunities that can lead to the promotion of women. When the time comes to set up policies, the “gender perspective” can lead to an understanding of the possible effects of those decisions for the respective realities of men and women.

This “gender perspective” that defends the right to differences between men and women and promotes co-responsibility in work and family, should not be confused with the radical proposal noted at the beginning of this discussion that ignores and crushes the natural differences of both sexes.