



Perspectives

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Lydia Quarles, J.D., Senior Policy Analyst
John C. Stennis Institute of Government

GENDER ISSUES 101

Lunching alone at one of those places where affluent women often meet, I couldn't help eavesdropping on the conversations swirling around me. And it suddenly struck me: How can we expect men to comprehend gender issues if women don't seem to comprehend them either?

Drafting "Gender Issues 101" and keeping it under 1,000 words is a daunting task, but somebody has to do it.

Kate Millett, in her seminal work, *Sexual Politics* [1970] initiated a discussion of patriarchal power and sexual socialization in America. Millett was the first to popularize the concept of gender as different from sex. The distinction, as she portrays it, is dynamic. Sex is, you see, biological, while gender is societal. Sex is innate; gender is convention.

It's really so simple. Sex, generally speaking, cannot be changed. Convention – how civilized society responds to the sex of an individual – can be changed. Convention is attitudinal and attitudes are subject to change.

Webster's defines convention as "usage or custom, especially in social matters; a rule of conduct or behavior". Societal customs with which we abide in civil society are customs that have evolved from years and years of patriarchal power. They are customs developed when the roles and rules for men and women were very different. And they are no longer appropriate in the 21st century.

Many of us, particularly those of us who grew up in the South, have some pretty ingrained fall-back positions on a great many things. For example, I simply refuse to wear white shoes before Memorial Day or after Labor Day, and I will never wear velvet prior to Thanksgiving or after St. Valentine's Day. Why? Well, those are the rules of polite society— as every member of the Fashionis'ta Polic'ia certainly knows. But when I sit back and evaluate these fashion rules that I live by, do they make any sense at all?

We live by many social conventions equally as arcane or impractical; numerous of these conventions subtly or not so subtly place women in a less powerful position than men— not because of ability but because of convention. Not because of sex, but because of gender.

It is important to examine conventions that we hold dear for the ways in which they may perpetuate men's power positions in society, and the way they may perpetuate the diminution of power of women. This examination not only benefits women, but men as well. Men who have continued to read this far may not readily fathom what convention has done to them, but in many ways convention has subjugated men in as poisonous way as it has subjugated women.

We know that there are clearly differences between men and women. Some are hot-wired differences; some are convention. Most of the differences that we appreciate so clearly in American society are not of the hot-wired variety. Applying convention to society, we can examine a clearly binary system.

Binary System	
individualism	nurturance
engineered	naturally procreative
creation of goods	provision of services
reason	intuition
science	nature
exploitation	conservation
classical	romantic
political	domestic
public	private

Were you confused as to which list of characteristics describes female characteristics versus which describes male characteristics? Of course not! While you may not agree with the oppositional concepts, you cannot deny that these constructs identify us in very particular and yet universal ways. The power and significance of these constructs is implicit in the conventions which govern our lives and shape America's political, economic and ideological hierar-

chy. These conventions shape the everyday social structures (language, media, education, religion, violence, for example) that create, define and perpetuate our personal identities.

An op-ed piece in Australia's XY: Men, Sex Politics magazine is an eye-opener. In 1995, the author noted that on the surface sexism and feminism seem relevant only to women – women who miss out on jobs or promotions, who suffer wolf-whistles or unwanted sexual advances, who are under-represented in politics, whose bodies are objectified in pornography and the media. Moreover, it is the conventional use of the male pronoun “he” in our language patterns that makes women invisible even in our mother tongue.

Clearly it is the “other sex” -- the “he” among us, who participates in the workforce and in politics to a greater degree than do women. It is the “he” among us who is often the wolf-whistler and the perpetrator of the unwanted sexual advance. It is the “he” who owns a pronoun that – in our English language usage— means everyone, or at least everyone important. No wonder, when we consider it in this way, that we could conclude with the op-ed writer, that “men have a vested interest in perpetuating the existence of gender inequalities, of sexism, because [men] gain a lot from them... power, privilege, prestige and an entire group of people that [men] can feel superior to: women.”

Please understand, I'm not man-bashing here. I'm speaking not about the wonderful, self-actualized men I know; I'm speaking globally about America's sexual politics. For centuries, men have grown up understanding that they can exercise power over women, that patriarchal power is natural and that it can't be changed.

Patriarchal power is not power at all. It is convention. It is attitudinal. It can be changed.

But challenging gender biases will not be effective until both women and men are engaged.
How can you be engaged?

- Pay attention to your own behavior. What might you do inadvertently to perpetuate gender bias?
- Engage in mind-bending activities. Search the web for feminist articles – just to listen to what articulate women are saying on the issue.
- Challenge the sexist or gender biased attitudes of others. You can challenge others without aggression. You can simply say: “This offends me. It demeans women.” That's all you need to say. No argument, no tension. Just a calm, purposeful statement.

Of course, before you can be engaged in these ways, you must seriously contemplate how much of social convention you buy into – how much of social convention you can jettison from your everyday life. You may feel about the gender-biased social convention that you have been taught since childhood much like I feel about white shoes before Memorial Day. It's an attitude, but it's not going to change!

We as women must break the mental habit and social practice of conventional thinking. We need not antagonize, but we must be firm. Bring to the attention of women or men that their attitudes are, in fact, attitudes— not based on biology but on some convention so old that we can no longer fathom its inception or the reason for its usage— and attitudes can be changed. Many men do not realize that to continue with convention is to deny the creative, the intuitive, and the sensitive within man, and lock him into the world of reason. Think of all he will miss!

The Australian magazine XY: Men, Sex Politics is now an on-line journal, XY: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Politics.

