Feminist Perspectives on Gender: Theoretical Debates and Transformative Approaches

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Abstract *– This paper examines the theoretical foundations and critical debates surrounding gender within feminist thought, with particular attention to its dual role as both an analytic category and a political tool. Beginning with foundational perspectives, such as Simone de Beauvoir's claim that one becomes a woman and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the discussion traces how feminist scholarship has challenged essentialist accounts and revealed the socially constructed nature of gender. Central debates, including the normativity problem and the commonality problem, illustrate the tensions between the need for political unity and the risk of exclusionary practices within feminist theorising. By engaging these debates, the paper underscores the importance of reflexivity and intersectionality in feminist analysis. Further, it highlights the normative orientation of feminist theory, not merely to describe structures of oppression but to actively contribute to their dismantling. The concluding discussion turns to contemporary gender-transformative approaches, demonstrating how theory and praxis converge in the pursuit of justice and social transformation.*

Keywords*: gender, feminist, woman, social, sex*

Introduction

Feminist inquiry begins by interrogating the very meaning of gender and the criteria by which one is understood as a man or a woman. These questions are not abstract; they shape how societies understand identity, structure power, and justify inequalities. Gender has been defined in many ways across feminist thought: as the social meaning of sex, as individual identity, as norms of masculinity and femininity, as symbolic systems, or as the traditional social roles of men and women. The wide range of interpretations reflects both the richness of the concept and the challenges of defining it in a single way.

Any attempt to give a unified account of "woman" faces two well-known challenges: the commonality problem and the normativity problem. The commonality problem asks whether there is anything all women share across times, places, and cultures beyond physical traits. The normativity problem highlights the danger that defining "what a woman is" may privilege some experiences, marginalize others, and reinforce existing gender norms (Haslanger).

For feminist analysis, however, the goal is not simply to catalogue similarities among women, but to provide an account of gender that can serve as a tool for advancing justice and challenging inequality. In this sense, definitions of gender are inevitably normative—but rather than reinforcing oppression, they can be used to expose and dismantle the structures that privilege some while subordinating others. By situating gender as a question of power and social positioning, feminist inquiry seeks to reveal how norms, identities, and roles are shaped by systems of inequality, and how these systems might be transformed.

Theories and Definitions of Gender

Simone de Beauvoir's influential claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" initiated one of the most enduring debates in feminist theory by insisting on the distinction between sex and gender. For Beauvoir, sex refers to the biological facticity of the body, while gender denotes the cultural meanings, roles, and expectations imposed upon it. This distinction dismantled the deterministic view that biology dictates destiny and showed that femininity is not a natural essence but a socially mediated construction. Within this framework, being female (a biological condition) and being a woman (a gendered

identity) are radically different states of being. To "become" a woman is not simply to inhabit a fixed ontological status but to engage in a continuous process of acculturation, where one's body is interpreted, disciplined, and reinscribed within existing cultural codes. Beauvoir's existentialist framing imbues this process with ambiguity: gender is simultaneously a project of self-construction and a product of external social conditioning. In this sense, the verb "become" is loaded with tension — it gestures toward individual agency in assuming a gendered existence, while also acknowledging the profound weight of cultural structures that prescribe and limit that agency. By opening the possibility that the female body could be the site of multiple gendered constructions beyond the normative category of "woman," Beauvoir destabilized the presumption of a necessary link between biology and gender identity (Butler).

Building on and radicalizing Beauvoir's insights, Judith Butler interrogates not only the cultural construction of gender but also the supposed naturalness of sex itself. In Gender Trouble (1990), Butler dismantles the sex/gender binary by arguing that sex is not a prediscursive biological given but already discursively produced and regulated. What appears as a natural bodily substrate is, in fact, stabilized through cultural, linguistic, and institutional practices that operate within what she terms the heterosexual matrix. Butler's theory of performativity further unsettles the notion of gender identity: gender is not an internal truth or essential quality but a repeated stylization of the body through acts, gestures, and performances that create the illusion of coherence and stability. Crucially, these acts are not freely chosen but constrained by cultural norms and power structures, drawing on insights from Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Gayle Rubin, Monique Wittig, and Esther Newton. Yet, within repetition lies the potential for disruption — subversive performances such as drag expose the imitative nature of all gender and reveal that there is no "original" to which gender performances refer. Butler also critiques feminist reliance on "women" as a unified political category, arguing that this presumes a stable referent that excludes those whose identities do not conform to normative gendered and sexual frameworks. Her intervention thus exposes how categories of identity are themselves mechanisms of regulation and exclusion. Taken together, Beauvoir and Butler illustrate the evolution of feminist thought from dismantling biological essentialism to deconstructing the very foundations of sex, gender, and subjectivity, emphasizing the instability, contingency, and political stakes of how gender is defined and lived.

The Commonality Problem

The commonality problem is central to feminist theory: for feminism to be politically coherent, it requires a usable category of 'woman.' If women cannot be assumed to be oppressed as a sex, then on what grounds can feminism justify its political struggle? The demand for a collective category is clear: feminism requires a subject. Yet, the project of defining "woman" has historically produced exclusionary outcomes. Elizabeth Spelman's Inessential Woman (1988) demonstrated that even well-intentioned, non-essentialist feminists universalised the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual women, relegating women of colour, lesbians, and working-class women to the margins. Similarly, Toril Moi argued that any attempt to stabilise "woman" as a generalised category risks falling back into metaphysics and essentialism. The contradiction emerges starkly: feminism cannot proceed without some degree of generalisation, but such generalisation almost inevitably erases difference.

This dilemma was further elaborated by Maya Goldenberg, who argued that the commonality problem stems not simply from political shortsightedness but from deep metaphysical commitments. Traditional category construction in the Aristotelian set-theoretic model assumes that categories must be defined by shared, intrinsic attributes. Such a framework—monistic in nature—renders any attempt to define "woman" in terms of a common essence inherently exclusionary. Even feminist social constructionist approaches, which sought to move beyond biology, often repeated this logic by reducing the multiplicity of women's lives to a single explanatory factor (for instance, "shared oppression"), thereby reinscribing exclusion. In this sense, the problem of exclusion is not accidental but

structural: feminist theory reproduces the very logic of androcentric philosophy it set out to dismantle.

Yet, abandoning generalisation altogether would strip feminism of its explanatory and political force. As Goldenberg notes, some degree of abstraction is indispensable for collective mobilisation; however, it must be critically examined. Spelman's warning was that unreflective categorisation maintains privilege within feminism, particularly white middle-class privilege. Butler's critique in Gender Trouble (1990) reinforces this, arguing that "woman" as a stable identity category is both regulatory and exclusionary, as it privileges normative gender expressions while excluding others who do not fit. A way forward has been suggested through intersectional frameworks, which recognise that gender cannot be abstracted from race, class, sexuality, or other axes of power, and through Sally Haslanger's structural redefinition of gender as a social position rather than an essence. What emerges, then, is the recognition that feminist theory must treat "woman" not as a fixed essence but as a contested, plural, and relational category, constituted through multiplicity rather than unity. Only then can the political project of feminism maintain solidarity without erasing difference.

The Normativity Problem

One of the central challenges in the philosophy of gender is how to define what it means to be a woman, a man, another gender, or even genderless. Sally Haslanger, in her essay Gender and Race (2000), identifies what she terms the normativity problem, which complicates any attempt to construct a working model of gender. The issue is that definitions of gender categories are rarely neutral; instead, they are value-laden and risk reinforcing the very structures of oppression they aim to dismantle. In other words, to define "what a woman is" may inadvertently privilege some individuals, marginalize others, and reproduce harmful norms.

This concern can be reconstructed as what has been called the normativity argument. It rests on three premises. First, if defining a social category results in the marginalisation of some individuals, then we ought not to define that category. This is grounded in a basic ethical commitment: any definition that systematically harms or excludes people should be rejected. Second, the act of defining social categories inevitably encourages normative behaviour—it sets up standards of belonging, which then become criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Those who conform to these standards are privileged, while those who do not are marginalized. This can be seen in practices of gatekeeping in subcultures, where arbitrary standards dictate who counts as a "real" member. While this may seem trivial in fandoms, the stakes are far higher with categories like gender, which structure everyday life, identity, and access to rights. Third, definitions of "man" and "woman" have historically entrenched normative expectations tied to biological sex. For instance, the dominant view that equates being a man with having a male body and being a woman with having a female body erases transgender experiences and enforces cisnormative standards. This not only delegitimizes trans identities but also produces measurable harm, including systemic discrimination, social exclusion, and violence.

Taken together, these premises suggest that attempts to define gender categories are not only conceptually fraught but ethically dangerous. If defining gender inevitably encourages normative behaviour that marginalizes certain groups—most visibly trans and non-binary people—then, according to the normativity argument, we ought not to define what it is to be a woman or a man at all. Haslanger attempts to navigate this issue by proposing structural definitions of gender that focus on systems of oppression rather than individual traits. However, critics argue that even such redefinitions cannot fully escape the normative effects of categorization. Thus, the normativity problem highlights a deep philosophical and political tension: while categories are necessary for feminist and social justice projects, they simultaneously risk perpetuating the exclusions they seek to undo (Richley).

Gender-Transformative Approaches in Development

Emerging from broader social transformations in the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars and practitioners in international development—such as Srilatha Batliwala, Naila Kabeer, Sara Longwe, Maxine Molyneux, Caroline Moser, Jo Rowlands, Saskia Wieringa, and Kate Young—identified deep gender inequalities within development theory and practice. Building on Ester Boserup's influential 1970 work, these feminists argued that real progress required transforming the social systems that sustain inequality, not merely integrating women into existing structures. Both Young and Kabeer explicitly advanced the idea of transformation, with Young introducing the notion of transformatory potential—whereby women's practical needs could be leveraged into strategic outcomes—and Kabeer creating a widely cited classification system that distinguished between gender-blind, gender-neutral, gender-sensitive, and gender-transformative interventions. While later adaptations sometimes diluted the transformative vision by placing responsibility mainly on women, early theorists insisted that gender transformation was a normative project, one aimed at reshaping social relations in pursuit of equality and human flourishing.

From this foundation, three main streams of GTA practice emerged.

1. Organisational GTAs

Rooted in Molyneux's (1985) exploration of institutional and political structures, this stream targeted systemic transformations across organisations, governance, markets, education, finance, and local government. Post-apartheid South Africa provided fertile ground for politically driven structural reforms, while Rao et al. (1999) highlighted the hidden cultural values within institutions that reproduce inequality. More recent work has examined finance and microcredit systems (e.g., Vossenberg et al., 2018), though critics argue that such initiatives often fall short of genuine transformation. Overall, this stream excelled in addressing structural inequality, but often overlooked interpersonal and relational dynamics.

2. Relational GTAs

Emerging primarily in reproductive health and gender-based violence programming, this approach emphasised engaging both women and men. Influential work by Gupta (2000), Gupta et al. (2003), and Dworkin et al. (2015) centred on HIV/AIDS, masculinity, and male involvement in shifting gender norms. Studies by Barker et al. (2007), Gibbs et al. (2015), and Casey et al. (2018) further explored how masculinities shape health behaviours and power relations. By working directly with men and boys, these interventions sought to transform underlying relational patterns and promote more equitable partnerships. Although powerful in the interpersonal sphere, these strategies often lacked sustained engagement with broader systemic structures.

3. Sectoral GTAs

The third stream situated transformation within specific fields such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, nutrition, and urbanisation. Championed by CGIAR and others, these interventions were tailored to local systems and livelihoods.Work in aquaculture, livestock, and climate adaptation (Puskur et al., 2012; Hillenbrand et al., 2015) illustrated how addressing food security or environmental resilience could serve as entry points for transforming gender relations. Moser (2016, 2017) extended this thinking to urban contexts, framing asset accumulation as central to reshaping gendered inequalities. Despite their promise, sectoral approaches sometimes risked placing the burden of change on women alone, rather than recognising empowerment as a collective, systemic process.

Across these streams, feminist theorists distilled five key principles of gender-transformative approaches:

1. Motivation for profound transformation – Programs must be driven by the explicit aim of challenging deep-rooted inequalities, informed by feminist ideals of justice and equality (Hillenbrand et al., 2015).
2. Critical consciousness – Drawing on Freire (1970) and Kabeer (1999), GTAs emphasise reflection and action to expose discriminatory norms and mobilise change.

Transformation begins with the self, as WOCAN's Gurung famously stated: "if you want to adopt a GTA, the first thing you need to transform is yourself" (Puskur et al., 2012).

3. Human flourishing as the ultimate goal – Inspired by Aristotle, Sen (1999), and Nussbaum (1999), GTAs frame equality not only as a means to better development outcomes but as essential to people's capabilities and freedoms.
4. Transformative agency – As Kabeer (2005) argued, feminist agency must not only address immediate inequalities but initiate long-term structural change in patriarchal systems.
5. Integration of structural and relational change – Sustainable transformation requires attention to both institutional reform and interpersonal dynamics, preventing the fragmentation that has limited earlier approaches.

In sum, gender-transformative approaches reorient development away from treating gender equality as a secondary tool and instead position it as the foundation of justice and human flourishing. By integrating structural, relational, and sectoral strategies, gender-transformative approaches seek not only to dismantle entrenched patriarchal systems but also to establish sustainable pathways for long-term, collective social transformation (MacArthur et al.).

Conclusion

Theorising gender within feminism demonstrates both its conceptual instability and its political indispensability. From Beauvoir's existential claim that gender is socially constituted to Butler's performative deconstruction of the sex/gender binary, feminist thought has persistently unsettled naturalised understandings of identity. The normativity and commonality problems underscore the tensions inherent in categorising "woman," where the need for political unity risks producing exclusions that undermine inclusivity. These theoretical debates reveal that gender is neither a universal essence nor a purely individual choice, but a historically contingent and socially embedded position, shaped by intersecting structures of power. Attending to these tensions not only clarifies the limits of past feminist frameworks but also foregrounds the methodological necessity of reflexivity and intersectionality.

Contemporary feminist strategies increasingly respond to these challenges by moving beyond descriptive accounts toward explicitly normative and transformative interventions. Gender-transformative approaches exemplify this orientation, connecting theoretical critiques of gender norms to practices that dismantle structural inequalities and cultivate more equitable relations. Such strategies highlight the productive interplay between feminist theory and praxis: theory provides critical tools for diagnosing mechanisms of subordination, while praxis ensures that feminist scholarship remains responsive to lived realities. Ultimately, the ongoing dialogue between critique and transformation secures the relevance of feminist thought, not as a static body of ideas, but as an evolving intellectual and political project committed to justice.

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