

Edited by
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4th edition

PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

**An introduction to
Australian society**


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CHAPTER 12

Gender and sexualities

Julia Coffey and Akane Kanai



#Metoo: Harvey Weinstein, gendered harassment, and everyday sexism

In October 2017, *The New Yorker* reported that dozens of women had accused Harvey Weinstein, a prominent Hollywood film producer and executive, of sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape. More than 80 women in the film industry subsequently accused Weinstein of such crimes. It seemed Weinstein's behaviour had long been an 'open secret', raising the question: how was he able to get away with it for so long, and who and what supported the culture of silence that enabled him? The public outrage that followed triggered many similar allegations against powerful men around the world, and led a great number of women to share their own experiences of sexual assault and harassment on social media under the hashtag #MeToo. These events highlighted what feminist activists have called 'everyday sexism', the mundane cultural beliefs that not only naturalise, but *idealise* (heterosexual) gender binaries of female passivity and male domination. Everyday sexism calls upon women to police their behaviour or risk being blamed rather than changing the systems of male power that legitimate sexism, harassment, and even sexual assault in the first place. The events triggered by the Weinstein allegations have brought the 'everyday sexism' that underpins harassment and violence against women into the open. Whether meaningful and lasting change results from these events remains to be seen.

sex

The biological distinction between 'male' and 'female', based on genital organs and physiology. See also *gender*.

gender

The socially and culturally specific meanings associated with biological sex and categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine' that define norms, roles, and behaviour.

gender binary

Refers to both the oppositional and hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity, and to sex and gender categories (e.g. the binary assumes that female-sexed bodies will display socially recognised 'feminine' characteristics).

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING GENDER: SEX, GENDER, AND THE BODY

How we define sex and gender relates fundamentally to our individual bodies, social relations, and deeply embedded social inequalities in terms of activities, experiences, interactions, and opportunities. We can understand '**sex**' as relating to the physical body and to the biological differences between 'male' and 'female' genital and reproductive organs. **Gender**, in contrast, relates to the socially and culturally specific meanings associated with sex and the division between categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine' that define norms, roles and behaviour. Feminist sociologists have highlighted that sex and gender are distinct categories, rather than being 'naturally' or inherently linked. The argument that our biological sex (male or female) is 'natural' and inevitably leads to the aligned gender category (masculinity or femininity) is termed the

gender binary. This binary ascribes gendered characteristics to sex and bodily characteristics. The gender binary has been strongly criticised by decades of

feminist scholarship on the grounds that it plays on an implicit cultural hierarchy in which women are assumed to be inferior to men. The gender binary does not account for the vast variations between sexed categories and gendered performances.

Leading Australian scholar Raewyn Connell, along with numerous other feminist sociologists, has shown the ways in which supposedly ‘natural’ sexual differences are overstated and similarities understated in a deliberate effort to perpetuate the idea that gendered differences are biological, and thus fixed. For example, the statement ‘men are physically stronger than women’ ignores the many women who are stronger than many men (Shilling 2003, p. 110). Further, increasing research and attention to **transgender** issues has highlighted the damage the gender binary causes for the numerous people whose sexed bodies

transgender

When a person's gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

non-binary

A catch-all category for gender identities that are not exclusively or between masculine or feminine.

do not conform to their gendered identities (Rahilly 2015; Johnson 2007). Cisgender is the term to describe someone who is not transgender or gender diverse, and who identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth. These terms are used alongside **non-binary** to denaturalise the sex/gender binary. Understanding individuals as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer (LGBTIQ+) is another means of acknowledging diversity in gender and sexual identities.

In light of this, sociologists argue that how we understand bodily ‘sex’ is itself culturally and socially mediated; and that gender identities should not be tied to binary notions of sex. It is more useful to see both sex and gender as socially and culturally contingent, rather than the sexed body as ‘natural’ and gender as ‘social’. The following section sketches the historical relationship between sex, gender, and the body.

BODILY DIFFERENCES AND GENDERED INEQUALITIES

There has been intense debate in sociology and feminist philosophy surrounding the body’s role in the dynamics of inequality. Biological difference, such as the reproductive capacity of female-sexed women, has long been used to justify major social inequalities. Early gender theorists highlighted that the body is the product of social inequalities, rather than the basis for them. This was important because the female body was long considered to be ‘naturally’ inferior to the male body, and this bodily difference used to legitimate the exclusion of women from public life, with the ‘household’ rationalised as a woman’s ‘natural’ place. Similarly, eighteenth-century **biological determinist** perspectives, which saw racial and class differences as inherent and ‘natural’ in the body, were used to

biological determinism

A belief that individual and group behaviours are the inevitable result of biology.

position the white, upper-class European male’s body as the ‘human’ norm by which all others were judged as lacking. This ‘standard’ was legitimated by the rise in modern ‘science’ through fields such as phrenology and

social Darwinism

The incorrect application of Darwin's evolutionary laws of natural selection to allegedly 'explain' social organisation, inequality, and human behaviour.



See Chapter 5 for more discussion of biological determinism and social Darwinism.

social Darwinism, and formed the basis of some of the most heinous atrocities in human history including genocide and slavery. As key fields of the human and natural sciences were developed during this period, raced, gendered, and classed differences were both enshrined and reproduced. European (white) men

were held as the ideal standard by which all others were compared, including women and all non-white 'races' and ethnicities. Because human differences (inferiorities) were seen as bodily, hierarchies of dominance were by implication 'natural' and inevitable. The involvement of fields of science, medicine, and technology in the naturalisation of inequality and discrimination is a continuing critique made by sociologists and other fields of social science (Coffey 2016). At each stage, the body has been the battle ground of these debates.

For example, one major basis for the argument as to why men dominate society is based on their naturally higher levels of testosterone, which give them an 'hormonal aggression advantage' in competition for the best jobs (Connell & Pearse 2015, p. 36). However, arguments that 'natural difference' legitimises male domination have been widely debunked. The explanation of gender hierarchy as a result of testosterone levels fails, since studies have shown that higher testosterone levels follow from social dominance as much as they precede it. Most appeals to biology as underpinning the dominant social order are similarly unfounded or based entirely on speculation, rather than proven biological or evolutionary mechanisms (Connell & Pearse 2015).

Unless we understand and challenge these binaries, we will perpetuate 'gendered ways of being that give girls relative to boys lower paid and less socially prestigious levels of education and work, inequitable access to public sources of power, and disproportionate family responsibilities . . . [and] an order that privileges boys in terms of future earning capacity and establishment of positions of social power, at the same time exposing them to higher-risk drinking, self-destruction, violence towards others and criminality' (Alloway 1995, p. 12). In other words, sociological perspectives of gender understand that, because gender is not based on essential biological characteristics, the resulting inequalities and harms resulting from gendered norms are not essential: they can be changed. This has been the project of feminist research and activism in Australia and across the globe over the past century.

CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY'S 'WOMEN PROBLEM'

Classical sociology is recognised as having a 'women problem' (Connell 1997; Winkler 2010). The importance of gender as an organising social category was not recognised by classical sociological theorists such as Durkheim and Comte; in fact, the way in which women were theorised by these 'founding fathers' is indicative of the dominance of patriarchal views of female inferiority, which even sociologists had of women at that time in history. In the writings

about women, sex, and gender in the ‘classical era’, women were either ‘almost completely ignored, or briefly discussed then dismissed, or located within specific cultural locations such as the family’ (Winkler 2010). Early modern theorisations of women’s roles in society both drew upon and reinforced the prominent Western philosophical position at the time that society existed in ‘two spheres’: the public, in which men lived, dealing in economics, politics, and the running of social organisations; and the private, to which women were seen as being more suited due to their reproductive and supposed nurturing capacities. This public/private binary echoes many others on gendered lines; men were (and sometimes still are) seen as more suited to public life because of their association with the mind and rationality, whereas women are associated with the body and emotionality.

These ‘two spheres’ were idealised at the time as providing social framings to accommodate supposedly natural differences between men and women. However, the emphatic inequalities associated with this framing are now glaringly obvious, thanks to decades of feminist analysis and social progress. As Ann Winkler (2010) notes, Comte saw women’s core role as to ‘humanise’ alienated and sexually unstable men. He described the ideal of equality between the sexes as ‘incompatible with social existence’—or in other words, impossible. Durkheim, too, understood women primarily as providing a socialising and controlling role for men. Weber, unlike others, viewed women’s subordinate social status as related to patriarchal domination rather than solely biological or mental inferiority; however, he was not immune from the thinking of the time, which held that men were both physically and intellectually superior to women. These views reflected the social and cultural norms of the time in Western society, and show the ways in which knowledge and judgements should always be considered in light of contemporary context, rather than ‘universal’ or beyond reproach. As Raewyn Connell (1997) has argued, ‘classical’ sociologists only became so because they were ‘classified’ by Talcott Parsons in the mid-twentieth century. In this process, the contributions from women sociologists were deliberately excluded (Winkler 2010). The following section gives an overview of some of the key feminist sociologists and their contribution to contemporary feminist scholarship.



See Chapters 2 and 3 for more discussion of classical and contemporary sociological theory.

THE RISE OF FEMINIST SOCIOLOGY

The phrase ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ is one of the most widely recognised feminist statements, originating from French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in 1972. This statement relates to the arguments, described above, which sought to disconnect notions of inequality from women’s bodies, and to highlight that gender is something one ‘does’, rather than ‘is’. Around the same time, another well-known feminist phrase was also circulating: ‘the personal is political’. This phrase was developed by Carol Hanisch (2006) in the context of the Women’s Liberation Movement

in New York in the 1970s. This statement was a powerful call to connect the everyday or mundane details of women's lives with broader structural dimensions of oppression: from their roles as mothers, wives, and homemakers, to the narrow constructions of female beauty to which women are obliged to conform in order to meet norms of heterosexual desirability. These views tend to be classified as 'second-wave' forms of feminism. The themes of second-wave feminism focused on the construction of femininity and role of women, and highlighted that structural change to the dominant order of society was needed to address the fundamental causes of gender inequality. These original feminist statements retain contemporary currency and relevance. For example,

wage gap

Gender pay gaps are an internationally established measure of women's position in the economy, calculated as the difference between women's and men's average weekly full-time equivalent earnings.

recent studies show a persistent inequality in relation to women's domestic and paid labour (Schieman et al. 2018; Baxter & Tai 2015; Jacobs & Gerson 2004). Gendered inequalities are particularly evident, such as Australia's full-time **wage gap**, which is currently around 15 per cent (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2018). The gender pay gap is influenced by a number of factors, including discrimination and bias

in hiring and pay decisions; women and men working in different industries and different jobs, with female-dominated industries and jobs attracting lower wages; women's disproportionate share of unpaid caring and domestic work; lack of workplace flexibility to accommodate caring and other responsibilities, especially in senior roles; and women's greater time out of the workforce impacting career progression and opportunities (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2017).



See Chapter 20 for more discussion of gender and work.

MEN AND MASCULINITIES

The study of men and masculinities is crucial in exploring the dynamics of privilege and inequality in contemporary gender relations. Raewyn Connell's landmark work describes masculinity as key to a hierarchical **gender order**.

gender order

The way in which institutional structures and individual identities intersect to produce social arrangements that privilege the dominance of one gender over another.

Connell (1995) uses the concept of 'hegemony' to explain why ascendancy, or being at the top of a hierarchy, is not necessarily achieved through force or violence. Rather, when a set of practices or way of being is *hegemonic*, it is ascendant because it has achieved the status of common sense or an ideal.

Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity is a 'culturally exalted' model of masculinity that subordinates softer masculinities and femininity. Some continuing aspects of hegemonic masculinity include:

- whiteness
- heterosexuality
- 'rationality', and
- independence.

As such, hegemonic masculinity can be understood as the configuration of gender practices that *normalise* or justify masculine domination. It is a model of masculinity that does not necessarily correspond exactly to the attributes of men that you know. Rather, hegemonic masculinity is a set of fantasies (such as the ‘hero’ seen in film and television) and ideas that sustain the power of men as a group, even while some men are disadvantaged by the narrowness of these ideas. The concept

patriarchal dividend

The economic and social advantages men as a group gain over women.

of the **patriarchal dividend** describes the structural economic and social advantages men as a group gain over women and the ways that hegemonic forms of masculinity are rewarded and privileged in society.

Connell’s theory, initially advanced in the 1980s, is still highly relevant in a context where men overwhelmingly remain leaders in spheres of politics and the economy. In saying this, we must be mindful that being rewarded for masculinity also depends on one’s embodiment. As Jack Halberstam (1998) argues in the ground-breaking text *Female Masculinity*, practices and appearances of masculinity do not have to be confined to ‘male’ bodies. *Female Masculinity* brought the ‘bathroom problem’ to academic circles, discussing the exclusion of individuals whose bodies did not classically correspond to the ‘female’ and ‘male’ divisions signalled by bathroom signs. Despite the fact that we generally do not have gender-based bathrooms in our homes, separation according to gender is a norm in public bathrooms that creates a conundrum for non-binary people. Halberstam discusses the bullying and exclusionary practices to which masculine women are subjected in these contexts. As such, drawing on these scholars, we might say that masculinity is still valorised and culturally exalted, on the condition it is performed by bodies that appear ‘naturally’ and clearly male.

SEXUALITIES

Sexuality is not the same as sex or gender. **Sexuality** describes sexual orientation, desire, sexual identity, and sexual practice. However, the ways sexuality and gender are policed and regulated are often intertwined. For example, returning to Connell’s ideas, heterosexuality is considered one of the ‘ideal’ aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Many scholars have shown that sexuality continues to be regulated by a variety of legal and policing mechanisms. Sexuality encompasses a broad and diverse set of practices and desires. However, even though the idea of

sexuality

Describes sexual orientation, desire, sexual identity, and sexual practice.

heteronormativity

The institutional status of heterosexuality as a norm that regulates life outcomes for both people within it, and people outside of it.

what is ‘sexual’ can vary greatly, scholars have argued that, as with gender, there are continuing hierarchies in sexuality that are tied to broader social structures that produce narrow parameters of what is considered ‘normal’. Heterosexuality, as Adrienne Rich pointed out in 1980, can often feel ‘compulsory’ as a norm. Following Rich (1980), many scholars have gone on to develop the notion of ‘**heteronormativity**’, which defines not only ‘a normative sexual practice but also a

normal way of life' (Jackson 2006, p. 105)—'normative' indicating not only that something *is* considered the norm, but that it *ought* to be the norm.

Not only do institutions like the state and the law often presume heterosexuality, as well as privilege those who are heterosexual, but heterosexuality is often portrayed as a cultural ideal, or as 'normal', in cultural narratives ranging from film, to opera, to reality television (consider shows such as *The Bachelor*, *The Farmer Wants a Wife*, and *Married at First Sight*). These hierarchies are intimately linked to what is considered ideal in terms of gender.

Stevi Jackson (2006) suggests that heterosexuality operates to order life across a number of social dimensions:

1. Structural relations—law, the state. Consider, for example, the property privileges that automatically accrue to married couples, even after separation.
2. Meaning (discourse, language, gender symbolism). This refers to the normalisation of heterosexuality in society and in culture: consider the ways in which femininity and masculinity gain meaning as 'ideals' from their 'complementary' relation to each other, as with heterosexuality.
3. Everyday social practices. These are the everyday practices that establish heterosexuality as a default—for example, where women are routinely evaluated in terms of their attractiveness in relation to heterosexual men's views.
4. Subjects—gendered selves who 'construct, enact, make sense of' these relations'. Jackson suggests that gendering occurs from birth and that we then go on to experience becoming sexual subjects in highly gendered ways.

compulsory heterosexuality

The dominant cultural norm for sexual orientation that is said to dominate all social institutions, making other sexual orientations deviant. Also known as heterosexism.

Heterosexuality as an institution regulates those who are heterosexual to act in particular ways, as well as excluding and marginalising those who are not. Building on Adrienne Rich's ground-breaking work on **compulsory heterosexuality**, Jackson argues that heterosexuality is not just a sexuality like other

sexualities, because it extends to order other aspects of life that are not sexual. For Jackson, heterosexuality is also a gender relationship, resulting in gendered divisions of labour and resources. Normative (ideal) heterosexuality and the way it intersects with gender can close down, fix, and contain its meanings: man as opposite, complementary (and superior) of woman, and heterosexual as the opposite (and superior) of homosexual. Indeed, feminists have often been interested in what goes on within heterosexuality because of unequal gendered practices sustained by such relationships, such as the 'second shift' (Hochschild & Machung 2012) where women must do paid 'productive' work as well as the unpaid 'reproductive' work of the relationship. Being primarily responsible for children in a heterosexual relationship can be a great privilege but, as demonstrated in Australia, can also result in much lower superannuation and

savings over a lifetime, with women suffering poverty in old age at a much greater rate than men (Baxter & Tai 2015).

Heterosexuality, then, has been a means of regulating gender relations, but also race. As historians like Ann Laura Stoler (2002, p. 47) have emphasised, colonial states have long been involved in the regulation of sexuality in terms of ‘who bedded and wedded whom’. Marriage rights have historically been used as a tool to ensure the forms of reproduction suited to colonial agendas; that is, ensuring a class system where whites only married other whites and passed down property to white children. The ordering of gender and sexuality is fundamentally important to broader class- and race-based social structures and is a means of shaping and validating particular (heterosexual) identities and social arrangements.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY BEYOND BINARIES: JUDITH BUTLER

American feminist philosopher Judith Butler is considered a key contemporary ‘queer theorist’ and gender scholar. Her work on the sociocultural construction of

performativity

Butler’s term for the ways gender is performed and produced through our everyday actions, rather than being based in the body, meaning gender identities can be fluid and varied.

gender and sexuality has widely influenced the fields of sociology and gender studies, particularly through her concept of **performativity** (Butler 1990). This theory is widely used to deconstruct the gender binary, as it holds that gendered behaviour and norms are not the result of biology but are, instead, constructed, reinforced and maintained by continuous performance in society

and culture—and by us, ourselves. Butler highlights that both gender and sexualities are produced through repeated practices, rather than essentially determined by one’s ‘sex’. Within sexuality, all kinds of gender may be ‘performed’, not necessarily aligned with binary ‘roles’. Butler’s work helps to theorise and explain the increasingly visible variations in sexed and gendered identities as evidence of the ‘performativity’ of gender and sexuality.

Her work also explores and challenges the ways heterosexuality is constructed as normal and the power relationships that keep this in place. Queer theory challenges the traditional divide between gay and heterosexual, suggesting sexual identity is fluid across different stages of life and sex/gender. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues we should challenge and ‘trouble’ these traditional binary views on gender and sexuality because they do not reflect the diversity of people’s contemporary sexed and gendered identities.

Furthermore, adherence to these binaries often forms the basis for sexist, homophobic language and behaviour—and even legitimates violence against women and non-binary persons. The binary categories of gender and sexuality norms are very limiting and potentially repressive for everyone—but particularly those who identify as LGBTIQ+. According to the National LGBT Health Alliance (2016), a disproportionate number of LGBTIQ+ young people experience poorer mental health outcomes and have higher risk of suicidal

behaviours than their peers. This research highlights that these troubling health outcomes are directly related to experiences of stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and abuse on the basis of being LGBTIQ+. LGBTIQ+ young people aged 16–27 are five times more likely to attempt suicide, with 16 per cent reporting that they had done so (National LGBTI Health Alliance 2016). There is increasing recognition of the need for progressive gender and sexuality policy in health and education to address the root causes of homophobia and discrimination.



12.1 CHANGE THE COURSE: NATIONAL REPORT ON SEXUAL ASSAULT AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

In 2017, the findings of the first large-scale study of the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities was released by the Australian Human Rights Commission. The report was based on quantitative national survey data from over 30,000 students from Australia's 39 universities, and qualitative data including 1849 written submissions. It also explored how universities have responded to disclosures and reports of incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment.

The report paints a disturbing picture of the prevalence of these behaviours at Australian universities. The survey found that 51 per cent of respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment in any location during 2016, and 26 per cent of respondents reported that sexual harassment occurred in a location associated with the university, including travel to and from campus. Of respondents who had experienced sexual harassment, 29 per cent experienced inappropriate staring or leering, 23 per cent experienced sexually suggestive comments or jokes, and 13 per cent experienced intrusive questions about life/appearance. The survey also found seven per cent had experienced a sexual assault at any location during 2015 and/or 2016, with 1.6 per cent reporting that the assault occurred at a location associated with a university.

The three main conclusions of the report are:

- as with broader society, sexual assault and sexual harassment are far too prevalent
- there is significant underreporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment to the university, and
- universities need to do more to prevent such abuse from occurring in the first place, to build a culture of respect and to respond appropriately by supporting victims of abuse and imposing sanctions on perpetrators. (Australian Human Rights Commission 2017, p. 1)

The results of the survey reflect the unacceptably high levels of sexual violence in the broader Australian community. Other research shows that young people, especially young women between the ages of 18 and 24, are at increased risk of experiencing sexual violence (Cox 2015). The report outlines a number of recommendations for universities to address the high levels of harassment and assault occurring on campuses, including examining the gendered power relations that exist in particular spaces and contexts, such as campus bars and colleges.

GENDER AND MEDIA

The media has long been considered a significant presence in individuals' beliefs, practices, and expectations and this extends to gender. As such, the media is considered a key site of power and influence by feminist activists and scholars and has been subject to debates about how the media can be shaped for feminist purposes. This means that there has been significant tension between the desire for 'role models' in the media, and considering the realities of how female audiences have used the media. For example, across the West, second-wave feminists in 1970s and 1980s fought against the limited, passive roles to which women were usually relegated, arguing for better, more serious roles—usually involving working women. Charlotte Brunsdon (2011) suggests that desire for these empowered, working 'role models' was buttressed by the knowledge that many of the women feminists were hoping to reach were doing unpaid work as middle-class housewives. Economic independence through paid work (and equal remuneration for that work) was a central aim. Further, women were (and still are) portrayed in a very narrow range of representations: as the 'bimbo' sexual object or as the housewife and mother. Other feminist scholars, however, argued that this emphasis on role models was too simplistic an aim. Scholars, they argued, also needed to attend to how women were actively consuming television and other forms of media as forms of managing their daily lives. As such, we see the explosion of work on women-centred television, like soap operas and romance novels, as a means of taking seriously the media that women actually found pleasurable (Ang 1985; Radway 1991).

Similar debates over power and agency have been fuelled by the expansion of digital media in more recent years. In the early days of the internet, there were hopes that digital media would produce a more equal gender order. Scholars like Sherry Turkle predicted larger freedoms to explore gender beyond restrictive roles. However, it now appears that we cannot make sweeping assumptions about the progressive power of the internet. While enabling certain forms of feminist and anti-racist action, and creating further spaces of connection for LGBTIQ+ people (see Rentschler 2017; Cho 2015), it also has facilitated sexual harassment, gendered violence and abuse (Megarry 2014). In less dramatic ways, current work suggests that the architectures of social media, in allowing constant connection to others with whom we have different kinds of social relationships, may create further difficulties for users. Feminist scholars have shown that girls and young women must negotiate ever more pervasive double standards in relation to appearance, sexuality, and general presentation (Dobson 2015; Kanai 2015) through the more intensive surveillance made possible by digital media.



See Chapters
21 and 22
for further
discussion of
the media.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Intersectionality explores the ways in which different forms of inequality and oppression intersect and overlap, such as race, class, and gender. This approach

intersectionality

A concept used by social scientists to analyse the multiple interacting influences of race, culture, ethnicity, gender, class, age, and sexuality on life chances.

was an important remedy to critiques that second-wave feminism was mainly preoccupied with the lives and struggles of white, middle-class women. While intersectionality has gained recent popularity in online circles, intersectionality as a framework for understanding oppression has a history that long predates the internet. Gender, race, and class as mutually shaped attributes that affect life opportunities have been analysed by feminists for some time now, led in particular by work from Black feminist scholars in the United States. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a critical legal scholar, developed the term to describe an approach that tries to understand how intra-group differences are productive of different experiences at particular *intersections*. She used intersectionality to critique the application of anti-discrimination law in the case of *Degraffenreid v General Motors*, brought by five Black women against their former employer. Though the plaintiffs in that case were clearly discriminated against, as black women they were not considered to be representative of women, and not considered to be representative of Black people, either. Thus, the court found that they didn't meet the tests of sex discrimination *or* race discrimination, and the law was interpreted in such a way as to deny the plaintiffs a legal remedy. Crenshaw argued that we need to be attentive to how dominant ways of understanding gender and race exclude certain populations, like Black women in this case. As such, intersectionality emerged from a legal and policy context focusing on the intersections of gender, race, and class, but is now used across disciplines.

More recently, intersectionality has been called a 'buzzword' (Davis 2008) because of its frequent and often contradictory use. Intersectionality has also been critiqued because it has been used in an 'additive' way (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach 2008), contributing to the concept of an 'Oppression Olympics' (Martinez 1993). It is important to recognise that simply adding gender, race, and class disadvantage together does not necessarily produce a sophisticated understanding of how power practically operates in specific contexts. Rather, we need to understand local contexts when using an intersectional framework. For example, although intersectionality can be a powerful lens for understanding the intra-action of gender, race, and class, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2008) argues that prevailing US-based scholarship often falls short in failing to consider the situation of Native Americans in race dynamics. As such, in Australia, an intersectional framework needs to attend to Australia's particular history of colonisation, the continuing dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and the local management of multiculturalism and immigration, rather than presuming that US-based theory is straightforwardly applicable.

POSTFEMINISM? BACKLASH, INCORPORATION, AND CHANGE

Feminism has a long history. As a movement, feminists have pushed for changes in the way we think about, and do, gender. Feminism is associated with the

aim of achieving equality between men and women. However, given the existence of inequalities, such as those of race and class, that intersect with gender, bell hooks (2000, p. 17) has perceptively asked: 'Since men are not equals in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure, which men do women want to be equal to?' As such, 'equality' in particular areas of gendered work and social life is not the *only* goal of feminism; the aim, however, is to enlarge the sphere of what is possible in terms of social practices, and valorising principles like care and collectivism over ideals like individualism that tend to further embed existing inequalities.

As mentioned above, there are continuing gendered inequalities that may be seen in phenomena such as poverty rates, divisions in labour and leadership positions, and in everyday assumptions that women's main purpose is to be heterosexually desirable and available for men. Paradoxically, however, scholars have observed that the idea that gender equality has been achieved has become popular in the media and in political culture in recent years—that is, a view is expressed that feminism is no longer needed and we need to move past it. This idea has been attributed to the (partial) success of feminist activism and feminist ideas in media culture. After all, in comparison to Durkheim's and Comte's times, fewer people would now say with confidence that 'men and women are *not* equal' in the sense that they *ought not* to be equal. However, according to scholars like Rosalind Gill (2007) and Angela McRobbie (2009), this 'postfeminist' idea that feminism is 'past' and 'no longer relevant' also serves to *continue* existing inequalities on the pretence that equality has been achieved. If equality is achieved, women only have themselves to blame if they are structurally impeded from sustainable careers, do more unpaid work in the home, and feel unsafe in public spaces.

In this context, McRobbie (2009) suggests that mainstream Western media culture is disproportionately filled with representations of empowered 'top girls' who are able to 'have it all'; they are heteronormatively beautiful, young, often white, (hetero)sexually active, and successful in their career—think *Sex and the City* and the types of women prominent in celebrity and social media influencer culture. McRobbie argues that these types of fantasy representations obscure the realities of gender inequality. Although these representations are supposedly 'empowering', their effect is to suggest that feminism as a collective movement is now irrelevant; 'top girls' possessing the above traits can succeed, individually, all on their own, without the need for broader social change. This emphasis on women's *capacity* reframes the aims of feminism as a set of individualistic goals—'I can do what men can do'. However, returning to hooks' insights above, this systematically ignores the presence of continuing structural injustices, as well as adopting the competitive individualistic ethos that has historically marginalised, and continues to marginalise, women.

CONCLUSION

Feminist sociological perspectives denaturalise gendered inequalities. This means that such perspectives highlight the social and cultural characteristics of sexed and gendered experiences, rather than biological or bodily differences. This is important, as it means that current inequalities and gendered harms, such as rates of sexual harassment and assault against women, the gender wage gap, and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people, can, and should, be changed. This chapter has introduced key feminist sociological debates in gender and sexualities, including the significance of the body, feminist movements, the study of men and masculinities, and the rise of queer theory and intersectional perspectives. Mainstream attention to issues of gendered inequality continues to grow, as evidenced by the outrage surrounding Harvey Weinstein and other prominent figures accused of sexual harassment and assault. At the same time however, America's forty-fifth president, Donald Trump, is shaping an increasingly hostile and conservative political landscape for women's and LGBTIQ+ rights, which are being steadily eroded. In these polarised times, issues concerning knowledge, authority, truth, and power are all up for debate. Feminist critiques aimed at changing the core causes of gendered inequalities in contemporary society remain as important as ever.



SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- ▶ Sociologists understand gender as one of the most profound ways in which society is ordered. The relationship between sex, gender, and the body is central to sociological critiques of gendered inequalities.
- ▶ Sociologists now understand both sex and gender as socially and culturally contingent, rather than seeing the sexed body as 'natural' and gender as 'social'.
- ▶ Feminist scholars have strongly critiqued classical sociology's theorisation of women, dubbing it as having a 'problem with women' in either ignoring their contribution to scholarship or perpetuating views of women as biologically inferior. Contemporary feminist sociological scholarship addresses the roles and behaviours of both men and women in the modern gender order.
- ▶ It is important to explore the ways in which both gender and sexuality exceed traditional binaries, and are experienced as fluid and dynamic.
- ▶ It is also crucial to explore the ways gendered inequalities intersect with and are compounded by racial and class inequalities.



VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

The photograph at the start of the chapter shows men and women rallying in support of same-sex marriage in 2015, which was subsequently legalised in late 2017. Why do you think there was long-held opposition to same-sex marriage?



SOCIOLOGICAL
REFLECTION

1 SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Gender norms can feel so normal sometimes that they do seem to be 'just the way things are'. Make a list of all the gendered assumptions that surround you, or you've heard people say—like 'boys don't cry' or 'girls should be careful if they go out at night'. Think about how these ideas connect to biological ideas of 'natural' sexed difference. Can you think of any strategies for changing these norms and assumptions?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 12.1 In what ways do you 'do' gender in your everyday life? Think about your clothing, your way of speaking, your way of moving or occupying space in public.
- 12.2 Can you think of examples of friends or family who do not conform to traditional gender norms or assumptions? How do they negotiate gender?
- 12.3 What do you think are the biggest harms or issues related to gender inequality today?
- 12.4 Think about the ways heterosexuality and normative gender roles 'go together'. In what ways are these roles rewarded in mainstream society?
- 12.5 What information about gender and sexuality do you think should be included in secondary school education?
- 12.6 Think about the phrase 'the personal is political'. What are some of the structural patterns that shape personal gendered inequalities, and how could they be changed?



FURTHER READING

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WEBSITES

- Bullybloggers: <<https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/>>: A platform for blogging by Jack Halberstam, as well as other scholars of gender, queer theory, critical race theory.
 - Gender and Society blog: <<https://gendersociety.wordpress.com/about-and-guidelines/>>: A blog linked to the journal *Gender and Society*.
 - Raewyn Connell's website: <www.raewynconnell.net>: Raewyn Connell's personal blog publishing ideas, research, social action, and poetry.
 - Binary This: <<https://binarythis.com/>>: A blog by Hannah McCann.
 - Safe Schools Coalition website: <<http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/resources>>: A site with resources for creating more inclusive environments for LGBTIQ+ students, staff, and families.
 - Minus18: youth LGBTIQ+ advocacy organisation: <<https://www.minus18.org.au/>>: the interface for Minus18 with resources and links to events and workshops.
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FILMS/DOCUMENTARIES

- *Miss Representation* (2011). A documentary exploring the negative and limiting images of girls and women, particularly in advertising and the media. Director and producer: Jennifer Siebel Newsom. Distributor: Roco Films.
- *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* (2014). A documentary examining the frustrations, joys, challenges, and legacy of the second-wave feminist movement in the United States. Director: Mary Dore. Producers: Mary Dore and Nancy Kennedy. Distributor: Music Box Films.
- *Ukraine is Not a Brothel* (2013). Explores the success and the fraught politics of the contemporary Ukraine feminist group, Femen. Director: Kitty Green. Producers: Kitty Green, Michael Latham, Jonathan Auf Der Heide. Distributor: Cinephil.
- *Paris is Burning* (1990). A landmark documentary highlighting queer 'house' culture centred around drag balls in 1980s New York, NY. Director and producer: Jennie Livingston. Distributor: Miramax Films.
- *Gayby Baby* (2016). An observational documentary about children raised by gay or lesbian parents in Australia. Director: Maya Newell. Producer: Charlotte McLellan. Distributor: Supergravity Pictures.
- *Call Me Marianna* (2015). A sensitive and complex portrait of Marianna, as she transitions from living as a man to as a woman in Poland. Polish law requires her to sue her parents in order to undergo gender reassignment, and her pursuit of self-determination also risks estrangement from her wife, children, and friends. Director: Karolina Bielawska. Producer: Zbigniew Domagalski. Distributor: Film Republic.
- *Brothers of the Night* (2016). Explores social truths of European gay culture, and offers a poignant glimpse into the lives of immigrant Romany youth, one of the most marginalised groups in contemporary Europe. Director: Patric Chiha. Producers: Ebba Sinzinger, Vincent Lucassen. Distributor: Epicentre Films.

- *On the Road* (2013). The first documentary set in Baekhong Temple, a women-only Buddhist monastery in the mountains of South Korea. Director: Lee Chang-Jae. Producer: Choi Byoung-Hwa. Distributor: Torch Films.

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