

# In defense of genderlessness

---

Erik Olin Wright

## *Abstract (in French)*

*Bien que la réduction des inégalités associées au genre aille dans le sens d'une société plus juste, ce que la justice sociale exige réellement, c'est une société sans genre. L'idée-clef est la suivante : les relations de genre sont fondamentalement coercitives, au sens où elles imposent des contraintes - auxquelles sont associées des sanctions sociales - sur les choix et les pratiques des hommes et des femmes. Voilà ce que signifie le fait de dire que le genre est socialement construit. De telles contraintes vont à l'encontre de l'idéal égalitariste d'un monde dans lequel tous ont un accès égal aux moyens sociaux et matériels nécessaires à une vie accomplie.*

When egalitarians think about the normative issues linked to economic inequality, no one says that their deepest moral aspiration is for a world with "class equality". Indeed, the expression "class equality" is an *oxymoron*, for the very concept of class implies some kind of inequality. One can certainly advocate a reduction in the inequalities between classes or the inequalities associated with class, but the normative ideal is usually specified as a "classless" society, not a society of class equality. This was canonized in the Marxist tradition as the emancipatory vision for communism: a classless society governed by the distributional norm "to each according to need, from each according to ability."

When egalitarians think about gender, on the other hand, they typically specify the normative ideal as "gender equality." The concept of gender is not taken to inherently identify an inequality, but simply a set of socially constructed differences which only contingently are linked to inequalities of power, opportunities, wealth, status or income. The idea of a *genderless* society would seem to many people to be almost nonsensical and certainly not a necessary condition for the full realization of egalitarian ideals of social justice.

In this paper I will defend the idea of genderlessness. I will argue that while reducing inequalities associated with gender constitutes movement in the direction of a just society, ultimately social justice requires genderlessness. The core idea is this: Gender relations are inherently coercive in the sense that they impose socially-enforced constraints on the choices and practices of men and women. This is what it means to say that gender is socially constructed. Such constraints, I will argue, thwart

egalitarian ideals of a world in which all people have equal access to the social and material means necessary to live a flourishing life.<sup>1</sup>

### The Sex-Gender Distinction

To show that egalitarianism requires genderlessness we must first discuss in more detail the concept of gender and its relationship to sex, and the relationship between gender roles and biologically-rooted dispositions.

A standard distinction is made in sociology between the concepts of sex and gender: sex is a biological category distinguishing males from females; gender is a social construction that transforms this biological distinction into a normatively enforced set of expectations about how men and women should behave and what roles they should fill. The key here is that for gender relations to exist there must be socially recognized norms that enforce these relations through various kinds of affirmations and sanctions.<sup>2</sup> In some times and places these norms are enforced in extremely coercive ways, so that people pay a very heavy price for deviating from the prescribed roles. In other times and places the norms are much looser and the sanctions weaker. But in all cases enforcement exists: men and women, boys and girls, are expected to behave in specific ways and there are costs associated with significantly deviating from these expectations. If there are no normative pressures to behave in particular ways because of one's sex, then gender relations do not exist.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction between sex and gender becomes especially complex when we add the issue of *identity* to the equation. In a stable, well-integrated gender order, gender norms and expectations get broadly internalized as gender identities. This makes in practice the distinction between sex and gender more difficult, for most people experience their gender identities as intimately connected to their biological sex. The issue of sexual orientation, as distinct from gender roles, adds a further complication. While sexuality

---

<sup>1</sup> A fuller elaboration of this formulation of an egalitarian ideal social justice can be found in Wright 2010, chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> The "affirmations and sanctions" couplet comes from Göran Therborn (1980)

<sup>3</sup> One other point of terminological clarification: Strictly speaking one could describe the absence of normatively enforced gender-specific roles as itself a form of gender relations, since this absence is certainly a "social construction". In a society without gender-defined roles it would still be the case that the distinction between biological sexes is transformed through a social process into a structure of social relations among people, even though in this case those social relations do not specifically assign differentiated roles to males and females. The resulting relations could thus be awkwardly called genderless gender relations. (This is analogous to calling the social relations in a classless society, "classless class relations").

and sexual orientation are certainly also shaped by social practices, there is considerable evidence that they are to a significant extent directly anchored in biologically-based mechanisms. These mechanisms interact with the social processes that transform sex into gender to produce gender and sexual identities.

To talk about the possibility of a genderless society is clearly not to talk about a sexless society. Nor is it to suggest that everyone would be androgynous in their identities and practices in the absence of gender relations. There would still be behaviors and dispositions that correspond to what we now view as feminine and masculine, and the mix of these would vary across persons. What would disappear is any systematic normative expectation that these traits and dispositions closely correspond to the distinction between males and females. And no costs would be associated with males and females having whatever pattern of “masculine” and “feminine” traits, dispositions and behaviors they might have.

A full degendering of family life would mean that norms around family roles would be connected to parenthood rather than to specific gender roles. In any given heterosexual family there might well be differences in the extent to which the father or mother took on particular responsibilities as a result of differences in dispositions, preferences, and contingent constraints, but there would be no *normatively backed expectations* about who should do what. This does not imply that there would be no correlation between a person’s sex and their social roles. For example, for biological reasons it is inherently easier for a single woman to become a mother than it is for a single man to become a father, and as a result there will almost certainly be more women who are active parents than men even in the absence of gender-coercive norms. But again, this correlation between sex and roles would not be backed by normative sanctions.

One final point on the idea of genderlessness: In the case of struggles for racial justice the point is often made that even if the ultimate goal is the dissolution of race as a salient social category, this does not imply that public policies in a world of racial discrimination should themselves be “race-blind”. It may take affirmative action now to move us towards a world in which race becomes irrelevant. The same is true for gender: it may take gendered policies now to combat gender-enforcing practices and thus move in the direction of genderlessness.

### **Gender roles amplify differences in biological dispositions**

Among both biological males and females there is a distribution of masculine and feminine *dispositions, preferences* and *behaviors*. As I will use

the terms, behavior refers to what people do and preferences refer to what people consciously want. Dispositions include unconscious psychological processes which affect preferences and behaviors. Preferences typically closely correspond to dispositions, but this is not always the case. What is sometimes called “consciousness raising” is precisely concerned with changing preferences in ways that potentially enable people to change their dispositions. Assertiveness training in the women’s movement, for example, would be an example where a preference to be more assertive precedes a change in the unconscious disposition to act in an assertive manner in certain kinds of social contexts.

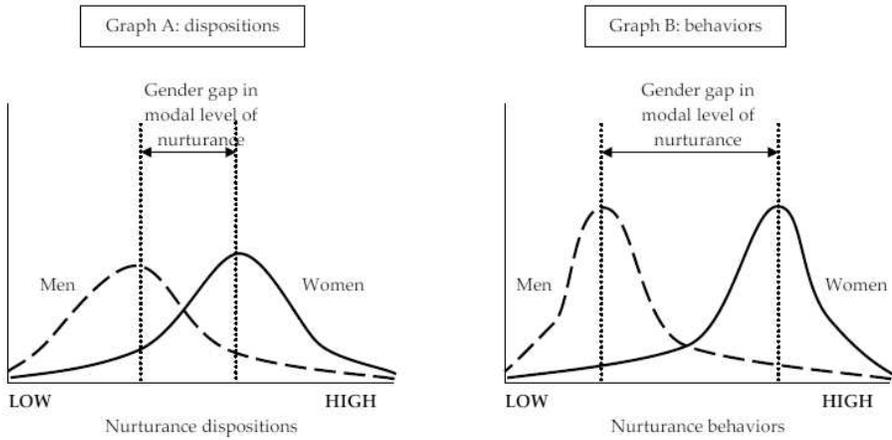
In a society with strongly gendered norms of behavior it is impossible to know exactly how underlying masculine and feminine dispositions vary among biological males and females. What we observe are behaviors: for example, women tend to behave, on average, in more nurturant ways than do men; men behave, on average, in more competitive and aggressive ways than do women. But since behaviors are simultaneously shaped by the interactions of dispositions, preferences and norms, it is impossible on the basis of the behaviors alone to infer how different are the distributions of the dispositions themselves between men and women.<sup>4</sup>

What we can say with near certainty is that in a world in which gendered norms are strong, there will be larger observed differences in the modal behaviors and preferences of men and women than in a world in which gender norms are weak. Figure 1 illustrates this idea for one particularly salient gender norm and disposition: nurturance.

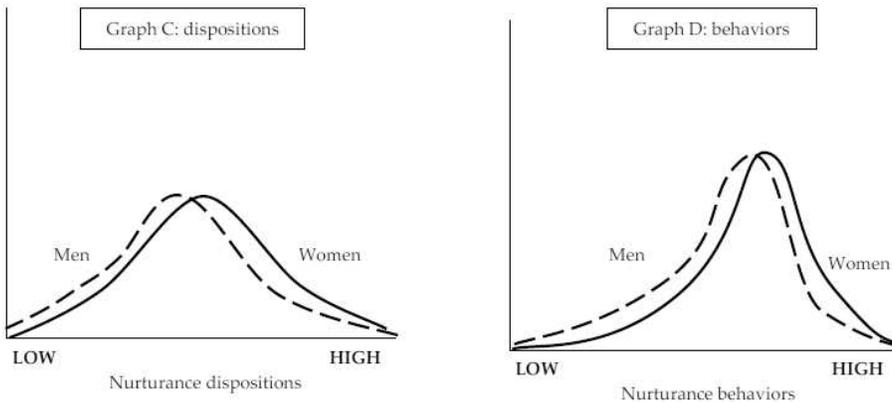
---

<sup>4</sup> There is also a further, deeper complication: growing up in a world with strong and consistent norms around gender affects the underlying dispositions, not just preferences and behaviors. Dispositions are not pure pre-social biological facts, but are themselves the product of the interaction of biological processes with social processes. There are thus five terms in play here: genetically-rooted biological facts that affect such things as hormones and neurological structures; dispositions; gendered preferences; gendered behaviors; and socially-enforced gender norms. These additional complexities, however, do not alter the basic point here that there are large variations among men and among women in masculine/feminine dispositions.

## WORLD WITH STRONGLY DIFFERENTIATED AND EFFECTIVELY ENFORCED GENDER NORMS



## WORLD WITH DEGENERED NURTURANCE NORMS



**Fig. 1: Male and Female distributions of nurturance dispositions and behaviors under strong gender norms and degenerated norms**

There are four basic ideas in this figure. First, in a world with strong gendered norms around nurturance there will be a bigger difference between men and women in the distributions of nurturance *behaviors* (graph B) than in the distributions of nurturance *dispositions* (graph A), and the distributions will be more peaked around the modal behavior. A significant number of people conform to a given norm not because of its

correspondence to their dispositions, but simply to avoid the sanctions of deviation.

Second, even in a world with strong gendered norms around nurturance, there are men who are more nurturant than the average woman, and women who are less nurturant than the average man. This is especially true for the distribution of dispositions, but it will also be true for behaviors.

Third, in a world with degendered norms, the distributions of both nurturance dispositions and behaviors for men and for women (graphs C and D) much more strongly overlap than in the world with strongly gendered norms (Graphs A and B). I have drawn these distributions as still having slightly different peaks on the assumption that there is likely to be at least some difference in nurturance dispositions linked to underlying biological mechanisms, but this gap could be quite small.

Finally, if we assume that in a degendered social world there will be strong positive norms about the general desirability of nurturance for everyone, then it would be expected that the distribution of nurturance behaviors will move to the right for both men and women (i.e. on average people might have less nurturant dispositions than behaviors). This, of course, is not a logical necessity: a degendered world could be one in which current masculine models were generalized to all people. My expectation, however, is that the social processes which push for egalitarian ideals are likely also to embrace caregiving values.

These graphs are not based on actual data and thus they should be regarded as hypotheses. They have also been drawn in what may be an exaggerated way in order to highlight the central ideas. The key point is that in a world with degendered nurturance norms – a world in which there was no normative expectation at all that women should engage in nurturance behavior more readily than men – the degree of overlap of male and female distributions for both dispositions and behaviors should be much greater than in a world with strong gender norms.

### **Back to the problem of equality and gender**

We are now ready to address the question of whether the goal of egalitarians with respect to the problem of gender should be framed as *gender equality* or *genderlessness*. The aspiration for “gender equality” imagines a world in which gender norms remain effectively enforced – a world in which there are normatively backed expectations about the roles and characteristics of men and women – and yet in which it is also the case that the probability of having access to the necessary social and material

means to live a flourishing life would be the same for men as for women.<sup>5</sup> This implies that the potential inequality effects of the normatively enforced gender role differentiation can be neutralized through various institutional devices. The aspiration for genderlessness, in contrast, is for the dissolution of normatively backed gender differentiation in social roles.

My basic thesis in what follows is that while promoting gender equality moves us in the direction of egalitarian ideals, ultimately these ideals involve the dissolution of gender. I will make two arguments. The first focuses on the dynamic effects of policies that promote gender equality: policies which effectively neutralize the inegalitarian effects of the gender relations will also tend to undermine the norms which reproduce those relations. In the long term, therefore, serious gender egalitarian policies will also undermine gender. The second argument focuses on the ways gender norms, because of their coercive quality, directly constitute obstacles to human flourishing for many men and women.

There are three especially important ways in developed capitalist societies in which normatively enforced gender differentiation contributes to gender inequality in access to the conditions of flourishing: the care penalty in labor markets; gender discrimination in workplaces, especially around job promotions; and the gendered caregiving division of labor within the family. For each of these there is an array of institutional proposals for promoting gender equality.<sup>6</sup>

### **1. The care penalty**

Studies of gender inequality in labor market earnings have repeatedly demonstrated that even after controlling for experience, skills and education, the average wage of women is less than that of men. One of the sources of this differential is what has been called the care penalty associated with many of the jobs women tend to do in labor markets (England, Budig & Folbre 2001). This penalty is due in part to what economists refer to as “overcrowding” effects – wage depression because of a chronic oversupply of people for these jobs – and in part to the cultural devaluation of carework as “women’s work”. Both of these mechanisms are connected to the continuing salience of gendered norms and practices that shape both the kinds of jobs women seek,

---

<sup>5</sup> This need not imply the full realization of the conditions for social justice, since there could still be inequalities in access to these conditions among men and among women, but gender equality would be achieved if there were no gender inequalities in the probabilities of access to these conditions.

<sup>6</sup> These policies are generally viewed as *gender* equality policies rather than *sex* equality policies because they do not aim at dissolving gender, but merely eliminating some disadvantage or inequality linked to gender.

the array of jobs that are available to them, and the cultural value assigned to those jobs. Public policies that transform wage norms for jobs on principles of “comparable worth” – equal pay for work of equal skill, complexity and responsibility – would help erode the care penalty and thus reduce the associated gender inequality in earnings. But such policies would also erode the gendered character of the jobs themselves. In the absence of a financial penalty in jobs associated with care, more men would be willing to take such jobs, and this would contribute to undermining the norm that such jobs were women’s work.

## ***2. Job promotions***

Women do not only seek employment in stereotypically female-coded jobs; many are employed in jobs historically dominated by men. Here existing gender norms undermine their prospects in a variety of familiar ways, including such things as direct discrimination, statistical discrimination, sexual harassment, and gendered social networks. Strong anti-discrimination rules within workplaces have proven at least modestly effective in counteracting some of the processes. Just as eliminating the care penalty would increase the number of men in historically female jobs and thus erode gendered norms around carework, effective antidiscrimination efforts that increase the frequency in which women are in workplace authority over men would help erode gendered norms about power and authority.

## ***3. Caregiving responsibilities***

Lurking behind the statistical discrimination problem connected to caregiving responsibilities of women is the actual reality of the unequal gender division of labor in caregiving responsibilities. This caregiving gender division of labor is translated into gender inequality through several related mechanisms: women are much more likely than men to have interrupted careers; they are more likely to work less than full time and overtime; and their labor market choices are more constrained than men’s by issues such as commuting distance and travel obligations. Taken together, these processes contribute to gender inequalities in earnings and careers.

While it is unambiguous that gender differentiation in family caregiving responsibilities contributes to gender inequality in labor markets, it is less transparent what this has to do with gender inequality in “access to the material and social means to live a flourishing life.” Women may on average earn less when they have family responsibilities, but they flourish in other

ways through their roles as mothers. If they experience a time bind from the dual demands of paid work and family roles, a gender traditionalist would argue that this is because of the *weakening* of norms backing strong gender differentiation, not because of the persistence of such norms: if women still embraced the traditional norm of being a fulltime housewife and mother, then they would not experience the flourishing deficit that comes from being torn between careers and family. And furthermore – now we are listening to the neoclassical economist – having children is a choice and many choices involve trade-offs. People aren't forced to have children; they choose to do so. If a woman wants to flourish in this way, then because of the inevitable constraints of scarce resources she probably has to give up some flourishing in other ways.

These are tricky issues. It is certainly the case that many – perhaps even most – people experience the decision to have children as not simply a response to external normative pressures, but as an autonomous choice that is an essential part of a life plan. This is true for both men and women. And life does involve trade-offs. The “equal access to the means to flourish” criterion does not mean “equal access to the means to flourish without ever facing trade-offs.”

Nevertheless, under conditions of the unequal gender family division of labor, the costs involved in these trade-offs are not born equally by men and women. And certainly in the case of single-parent families, which are overwhelmingly single-mother families, women bear a vastly disproportionate burden of raising children. So, even if it is the case that it would be consistent with an egalitarian view of human flourishing for *parents* to experience some trade-off between earnings and having children, the strong gender inequalities in such trade-offs are not consistent with egalitarian principles.

Because gender inequalities in burdens of caregiving responsibilities are forged within the private domain of families, it is more difficult to devise institutional solutions to neutralize their egalitarian effects than it is to neutralize disadvantages women face in the public world of the workplace. Gornick & Meyers (2009) have outlined a package of proposals that attempt to encourage a more equal gender division of labor within families. The key proposal is generous programs of parental caregiving-leaves designed in such a way as to not simply enable but also encourage fathers (through use-it-or-lose provisions) to take time off of work for early infant childcare.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Van Parijs & Vielle (2001) have proposed a tax on men to fund a “virility premium” paid to fathers as an extra benefit when they take leave to take care of their kids. This amounts to a highly gendered policy designed to erode gender inequality: only men pay for it and, when they take parental leaves, they receive more money than do women.

Even in the absence of such policies, there has been some erosion in recent decades of the traditional division of labor in families over both housework and childcare as married women have entered the labor force (Wright and Rogers 2011: 314). Over time, if such policies were vigorously in place, this erosion would be likely to accelerate.

Strong caregiving family leave policies to reduce the inequalitarian effects of the gender division of labor also have the potential to contribute to the erosion of the norms implicated in gender relations. The idea here is that social norms and patterns of behavior mutually affect each other: the prevalence of a norm, especially when internalized, shapes behavior; but also, patterns of behavior we observe in the world either reinforce or undermine the existing norms, depending upon the extent to which the behaviors are congruent with those norms. Policies which change gender-relevant behavior, therefore, potentially undermine the associated gender norms. The more people see men in public taking care of small children – pushing baby carriages, changing diapers in airports, supervising kids at playgrounds, having them in shopping carts at grocery stores – the more such behavior will be seen as “normal” in the purely statistical sense, and the more it is seen as normal in the statistical sense, then, over time, the more it is likely to be viewed as normative as well. Gender equality policies that affect gender differentiations in patterns of behavior are thus also likely to constitute policies in the direction of degendering gender itself.

To argue that advances towards gender equality would also create movements towards a less gendered society is not the same as saying that the goal of egalitarians should be genderlessness, but merely that degendering would be a side effect of the pursuit of gender equality. There are, however, other reasons for egalitarians to directly pursue the goal of a genderless society. In particular, gender norms impose real costs on people who violate those norms and this restricts access to the social means for a flourishing life for people whose gender-linked dispositions do not correspond to those normative expectations. Consider the closely related issue of norms and dispositions around sexuality and sexual orientation. In a world with very strong heterosexual norms about sexuality, homosexuality is stigmatized and homosexuals often feel forced to hide their sexual orientation. This obviously creates significant deficits in flourishing. Gender norms pose the same general issue.

The full achievement of *gender* equality, but not genderlessness, would mean that inequalities in income, power, and status would no longer be associated with gender. But it would not mean that gender would lose its normative, regulative force, and thus gender relations would still undermine equal access to flourishing for those people, males or females, with the

“wrong” dispositions. The ultimate goal of egalitarians, therefore, should be to transcend gender altogether.

### References

- ENGLAND, P., BUDIG, M., & FOLBRE, N. (2001), 'Wages of Virtue: The Relative Pay of Care Work', *Social Problems*, 49(4): 455-73.
- GORNICK, J. & MEYERS, M. (2009), *Gender Equality: transforming family divisions of labor*, London & New York: Verso – volume VI in the *Real Utopias* project.
- THERBORN, G. (1980), *The Power of Ideology and the Ideology of Power*, London: Verso.
- VAN PARIJS, Ph. & VIELLE, P. (2001), 'La prime de virilité', *Le Soir*, 1 December 2001.
- WRIGHT, E. O. & ROGERS, J. (2011), *American Society: how it really works*, New York: W.W. Norton.
- WRIGHT, E. O. (2010), *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London & New York Verso.