

# IS GENDER A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT? A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL

Hyginus Chibuike Ezebuilo

## Abstract

Humanity appears to be facing what one might call a *gender crisis*, especially in the field of affectivity and sexuality. In many educational institutions today, curricula which “allegedly convey a neutral conception of the person and life are being planned and implemented, which, in fact, reflect ‘an anthropology’ opposed to ‘faith’ and right reason.” The disorientation regarding anthropology which is a widespread feature of our cultural landscape has undoubtedly helped to destabilize the family as an institution, bringing with it a tendency to cancel the differences between men and women, presenting them instead as merely the product of historical and cultural conditioning. This current mentality is characterized by challenges emerging from varying forms of an ideology that is given the generic nomenclature ‘gender theory,’ which “denies the differences and reciprocity in nature of man and woman, and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time. In the light of this, a positive approach on gender issues must consider the totality of the person and insist therefore on the integration of the biological, social, and spiritual elements. This is basically the aim of the paper. Employing the critical approach in philosophy, the study, thus, provides a crucial element for understanding women,

which has been missing from the public discourse; an understanding of human sexuality that neither denies nor overemphasizes the differentiation of human beings into two kinds, masculine and feminine.

Keywords: Gender, Constructionism, Performativity, Commonality, Analogy, Essentialism.

### **Introduction**

Gender often entails adhering to normative behavior and roles. It is ‘done’ or ‘performed’ as some have argued, remarking that the performance of gender reinforces the essentialism of gender categories (West, 2002, p.126). Essentialism argues that there are essential differences between genders which manifest themselves in differences in gender performance. Gender performance consists of a stylized practice involving gestures, language, speech, etc., and serves to form and build identity (Butler, 1988, p.520). When an individual performs their gender to the standards set by societal norms, it bolsters the argument of gender essentialism. Historically, and as a result of this position, men have assumed a dominant gender role, and women have been prescribed a role submissive to men. The non-essentialists which we have tagged social constructionists is against this development. They believe, contrary to the essentialist arguments, that there are no essential differences between genders as the differences which manifest themselves in gender performance are matters of social construction. Judith Butler, thus, argued that gender is not an essential category, the repetitious performances of male and female in accordance with social norms which tend to create an essential dualism notwithstanding. Gender, for her, is never a stable descriptor of an individual rather an individual is

always doing gender – performing or deviating (as the case may be) from the socially accepted performance of gender stereotypes (Butler, 1993, p.16). Doing gender is not just about acting in a particular way. It is about embodying and believing certain gender norms and engaging in practices that map on to those norms. These practices, for Butler (1993, p.16), normalize the essentialism of gender category. In other words, by doing gender, we reinforce the notion that there are only two mutually exclusive categories of gender. It follows from this view that the very belief that men and women are essentially different is what makes men and women behave in ways that appear essentially different. By implication, the idea of gender is not an objective reality.

Doing gender is fundamentally a social relationship. One does gender in order to be perceived by others in a particular way, either as male or female. Certainly, gender is internalized and it acquires significance for the individual as some individuals want to feel masculine or feminine. Social constructionists might argue that because categories are only formed within a social context, even the effect of gender is in some ways a social relation. Moreover, we praise or blame ourselves and each other for our presentation of gender or how we measure up. We are aware that others evaluate and characterize our behavior on the criteria of gender. For this reason, social constructionists would say that gender is interactional rather than individual, that is, it is developed through social interactions (Butler, 1993, p.17). The question of accountability is therefore important to the ongoing. While men and women are held accountable for normative conceptions of gender, this accountability can differ in content based on ethnicity, race, age, class, and so on.

Meanwhile, the term ‘gender’ is not used interchangeably with ‘sex.’ Gender refers to those social,

cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts (Lindsey, 2015, p.4). Sex makes us male or female; gender makes us masculine or feminine. Sex is an ascribed status because a person is born with it, but gender is an achieved status because it must be learned. Free Social Science Dictionary defines gender as a socially defined behavior regarded as appropriate for the members of each sex. In trying to draw a distinction, (Ezebuilo, 2009) wrote elsewhere:

Now, gender refers to the roles of women and men of all ages, which are defined culturally, socially, economically and historically. These ideas vary across culture. ‘Gender’ itself is a term that evokes various debates and controversies. At a minimum, to the word ‘gender’ rather than ‘sex’ is to indicate that male and female roles in a given society are shaped not only by biology but by social practice, and that the role of women and men will not be identical in every society. In general terms, ‘sex’ refers to the biological differences between males and females, such as the genitalia and genetic differences, while gender can refer to the role of a male or female in society, or an individual’ conceptions of [himself or herself] in terms of identity.

West and Zimmerman (2002, pp.3-4), give this definition for sex in the paper *Doing Gender*: “Sex is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females and males. The criteria for classification can be genitalia at birth or chromosomal typing before birth, and they do not necessarily agree with one another.” The differentiation

between gender and sex did not arise until the late 1970s, when researchers began using “gender” and “sex” as two separate terms, with “gender” referring to one’s self-identity and “sex” referring to one’s chromosomal makeup and sex organs (DeFrancisco, et al, 2014, p.11). The duality of ‘male’ and ‘female’ leaves out everyone who does not fit into these categories because of genital makeup, chromosomes, or hormone levels.

In discussing this point, Eckert states that: “the first thing people want to know about a baby is its sex, and social convention provides a myriad of props to reduce the necessity of asking (2013, p.4).” Thus, this reinforces the importance and emphasis that society places not only on sex but also on ways in which to point towards one’s. Eckert (2013, p.4) furthers this in stating that determining sex at one’s birth is also vital of how one presents themselves in society at an older age because sex determination sets the stage for a long life process of gendering. Eckert’s position points to Judith Butler’s view of gender as being performative which we shall discuss in more details. Similar to Butler, Eckert is hinting to the fact that gender is not an internal reality that cannot be changed. Instead, he is saying that this is a common misconception that a majority of the population unknowingly reinforces, which sees its emergency during infancy.

Fundamentals questions which this paper tends to resolve are therefore: if gender roles are differentiated, does it imply inequality? Must all forms of equality obliterate all differences? Or, is it possible for there to be an equality of differences? This does not seem possible because the difference as such, lacks commonality – that of which an analogous term is predicated – or common ground, whereby they can be compared and known as equal, or even as inferior/superior (Ezebuilo, 2020, p.60). So, the question

becomes whether the common ground that allows for comparison must be identical – that is – must equality be a univocal concept or can it be understood in analogous sense?

Meanwhile, in its cultural context, anyways, it is clear that sex and gender are no longer synonymous or interchangeable concepts, since, as will be evidence from this study, they are used to describe two different realities. Sex is seen as defining which of the two biological categories one belonged to. Gender, on the other hand, would be the way in which the differences between the sexes are lived in each culture (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019, p.7). The problem here does not lie in the distinction between the two terms, which can be interpreted correctly, but on the separation of sex from gender. The paper is divided into seven sections. The first is the introduction. The second section provides an overview of the social construct theory of gender. In connection with this, sections three and four dwell on gender roles and gender identity respectively. Section five attempts to resolve the tension arising from the feminist claim that socially created gender roles is an agenda for the oppression of women. The sixth section makes apposite recommendations on the problem of gender inequality, while the seventh section is the conclusion.

### **Social Construct Understanding of Gender**

Social constructivists propose that there is no inherent truth to gender, instead “it is constructed by social expectations and gender performance” (Boundless, 2016). Social constructionism is the notion that people’s understanding of reality is socially situated. Meanwhile to say that something is socially constructed does not lessen the power of such a thing. Money, for instance, is a socially constructed reality. Paper bills are worth nothing independent of the value individuals

ascribe to them. The *naira*, for instance, is only worth as much value as Nigerians are willing to ascribe to it. Note that the naira only works in its own currency market; it holds no value in areas that do not use it. Nevertheless it is extremely powerful in its own domain. This basic idea of social constructionism can be applied to any issue of study pertaining to human life, including gender. Is gender an essential category or a social construct? If it is a social construct how does it function? Who benefits from the way a gender is constructed? Are men and women essentially different? Is gender learned or is it something intrinsic in us? In other words, is gender a fact about us or is it something that is taught to us and is being constantly reinforced by society?

The social construct theory of gender is a theory about the manifestation of cultural origins, mechanisms and outcomes of gender perception and expression in the context of interpersonal and group social interaction. Specifically, it holds that gender roles are an achieved status in a social environment, which implicitly and explicitly categorize people and therefore motivate social behaviors (Lindsey, 2015, p.4). It should be noted that in the context of feminist theory, the word “status” refers to the categories by which societies are divided according to ascribed roles.

Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge which describes the relationship between the objectivity of reality and the capacity of human cognition. It asserts that reality exists as the result of social perceptions and expression, and that the reality which is perceived is the only reality worth consideration. This is accompanied by the understanding that reality is subject to manipulation through control over social perceptions and expressions. Social constructivism specifically rejects objectivism, the notion that empirical facts

can be known about reality. This is well demonstrated in Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*, which paid attention to the existence of some socially constructed categories such as money, tenure, citizenship etc, which exist only because people tactically agree to act as if they exist (Pinker, 2002, p.202).

Nevertheless, Pinker does not subscribe to social constructionism as the lens through which to understand reality. Instead, he thinks that our understanding of reality consists in the autonomy and biologically informed nature of human existence (Pinker, 2002, p.202). In this way, Pinker contradicts social constructionist scholars, Mareccek, Crawford and Popp, (2004, p.193) who in their *On the Construction of Gender, Sex, and Sexualities*, deny the autonomy of the individual, as well as assert the *tabula rasa* theory of thinking, as they hold that knowledge and meaning are generated exclusively as a collective effort and that the individual is incapable of doing so independently of the society. This further implies that the perception of the creation of meaning independently of the society is an illusion resulting from manipulation of social perceptions and expressions.

Alsop, Fitzsimmons and Lennon (2002, p.64) also remark that the constructionist accounts of gender creation can be divided into two main streams, namely materialist theories and discursive theories. The former attempts to underline the structural aspects of the social environment that are responsible for perpetuating certain gender roles while the later stresses the creation of meaning that are associated with gender through language and culture. They also argue that both the materialist and discursive theories of social construction of gender can be either essentialist, assuming a clear biological division between women and men when

considering the social creation of gender (masculinity and femininity), or non-essentialist, contesting the assumption of the biological division between the sexes as independent of social construction.

### **Gender Roles**

Gender is used as a means of describing the distinction between femininity and masculinity. West and Zimmerman noted that gender is not a personal trait but an emergent feature of social situation: “both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements, and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (2002, p.126). As a social construct, gender is considered an achieved status by feminist theory, typically one which is achieved very early in childhood. For Fenstermaker and West (2002, p.95), gender is an *activity* of utilizing normative prescriptions and beliefs about sex categories based on situational variables. These gender activities constitute sets of behavior such as masculine and feminine, which are associated with their sexual counterpart and thus defines concepts such as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ respectively. In essence, then, gender can be understood as external to the individual, consisting of a series of ongoing judgments and evaluations by others, as well as of others.

Gender roles are a continuation of the gender status, consisting of other achieved statuses that are associated with a particular gender status. They are functional position in a social dynamic for which fulfillment is a part of “doing gender.” Levant and Alto (2017) purport that empirical investigations suggest that gender roles are social constructs that vary significantly across time, context, and culture. They write:

A recent synthesis of meta-analytic studies of gender differences provides strong evidence for a social construct understanding of gender. Ethan Zell and colleagues examined more than 20,000 findings from 12 million participants comparing men and women on topics ranging from risk-taking to body image. The authors found that the majority of effects were very small (to small), indicating for more similarities than differences between genders (p.718).

Berkowitz has noted that gender is a major axis along which factors of oppression are considered. He remarks that: “The gender order is hierarchical in that, overall, men dominate women in terms of power and privilege; yet multiple and conflicting sources of power and oppression are intertwined, and not all men dominate all women” (Berkowitz, 2010, p.135). He also asserts that gender at large, especially gender roles, contributes greatly as a prolific and potent avenue by which manipulations of social perceptions and expression manifest reality – specifically, a reality in which women are typically oppressed by men within a social structure that establishes roles for women, which are explicitly lesser capacity for accruing and exercising arbitrary power. The system which manifests and exercises this power is typically referred to as patriarchy. Take for example the Igbo-Africa. The traditional Igbo society is patriarchic in structure. Hence, women are said to have the legal status of minors, to be unable to own property in their own names, to be excluded from inheriting property, and to be barred from holding traditional leadership positions. Customary discrimination of this sort creates a tension for democracy in contemporary Africa, which values both customary practices

and women's equality. Consequently, sexism, a belief that women are weaker, less intelligent, and less important than men has become entrenched in the Igbo traditional and contemporary societies. Condry and Condry (1976, pp.81-82) observe that from infancy, male and female children are interpreted differently and interacted with differently. It is not only that male adults seem to enforce male gender more than female's, available evidence suggest that adults' perception of babies are affected by their beliefs about the babies' sex.

Gender discrimination is thus deeply engrained in our social practices, in our understanding of ourselves and of others, that we almost cannot do anything without some consideration for gender implications. Simon de Beauvoir, in a memorable statement cited in Butler (Butler, 1993, p.17), claims that women are not born, they are made; the same is true of men:

The making of a man or woman is never ending process that begins before birth; from the moment someone begins to wonder if the expected child will be a boy or a girl, and the ritual announcement at birth that it is in fact one or the other instantly transform an "it" into a different pronoun: "he" or "she," and standardly assigning the lifetime attribute "male" or "female."

The implication of this observation is that apart from the natural differing genital organs, every child is born the same; hence, that a child becomes man or woman is a social construction, otherwise the children are alike. Culture is like an umbrella under which some people like to hide from rain, and also to shade themselves from the sun. But sometimes you need to fold it. Every social grouping in the world has specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of

which are beneficial to all members, while others have become harmful to a specific group, such as women.

Catherine Besteman observes the differences in gender roles in the context of parenting by Somali Bantu refugees in Lewiston, Maine. She stated that the separate roles communicate the agency of individual based on their gender – agency in which males tend to be favored in terms of social power. According to her, “girls seemed to be under increasing scrutiny to behave respectably as parents attempted to protect them from America’s public sexual culture in the only way they know: early arranged marriage and lots of responsibilities for domestic tasks (Besteman, 2016, p.249).” She claims, however, that boys were given less responsibilities and more freedom. She concludes that the distinction between the responsibilities of boys and girls define the refugees’ children’s understanding of what it means to belong to a particular gender in America with association to parental authority (Besteman, 2016, p.249). Besteman, however, observed that the difference in this particular case, to be a result of a lack of traditional male chores in America compared to Somalia, such as farm work, while the traditional female chores were able to be maintain.

### **Gender Identity**

Unlike gender role, which refers to the external social understanding developed between persons, gender identity refers to the internal sense of one’s own gender on an individual scale. Bussey and Bandura propose that gender identity is postulated as the basic organizer and regulator of children’s gender learning and that children develop the stereo-typic conceptions of gender from what they see and hear around them. Their research assets that after children develop this concept, they also develop “gender constancy,” the belief that their own gender is fixed and irreversible

(Bussey & Bandura, 1999, pp.667-668). Children then act in a way that fulfils their conception.

This view does not account for the fluidity of gender asserted by some psychologists who purport that gender identity is not a stable fixed trait, but is rather socially constructed and may vary over time for an individual (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). The development of gender identity is seen in this case as a process of self-identification which must precede the ability for “children to label themselves and others as males or females.” Thus, the development of gender becomes a tool for developing children to better categorize and define the social behaviors around them. Here, there is the possibility that a developing child may refine and curtail their gender differentiations according to experiences as they develop.

Bussey and Bandura’s view, however, contravenes the notion of gender identity being individual and internal by explaining its source as social behavior and its manifestation as a desire for compatibility with a received notion of gender. According to this view, the concept of gender in a developing child is immutable once established by society. As a term, gender identity allows individuals to express their attitude towards and stance in relation to their current status as either men or women (LaFrance et al., 2004, p.328). Turning the scope of gender from a social consensus to objectivity to one’s self-identification with a certain gender expression leaves much more space for describing variations among individual gender theorists. The question of accountability is also important to the ongoing. While men and women are held accountable for normative conceptions of gender, this accountability can differ in content based on ethnicity, race, age, class, and so on. According to West and Zimmerman (2002), gender is not simply what one is, but what one does; and it is actively produced within social interactions.

Accountability is interactional because it does not occur solely within the individual. Accountability can apply to behaviors that do conform to cultural conceptions as well as those behaviors that deviate, that is, it is the possibility of being held accountable that is important in social constructionism. For instance, one may wonder why there are probably only men in the field of motor mechanics in Nigeria. The reason cannot be unconnected with the fact that such a dirty work is unsuitable for women and, perhaps, women are unable to train because of family duties.

Gender, thus, is the activity of managing situated conducts in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category. This performance of gender occurs not only with others but is also performed alone, in the imagined presence of others. Again, doing gender is not just about conforming to stereotypical gender roles rather it is the active engagement in any behavior that is gendered, or behavior that may be evaluated as gendered. It is argued that it is these sex performances that normalize the essentialism of sex categories. Sustaining this point, West and Zimmerman (2002, p.126) writes:

In other words, by doing gender, we reinforce the essential categories of gender – that there are only two categories that are mutually exclusive. The idea that men and women are essentially different is what makes men and women behave in ways that appear essentially different. Though sex categorization is based on biological sex, it is maintained as a category through socially constructed displays of gender (for example, you could identify a transgender person as female when in fact she is assigned male at birth).

So, gender constructionism asserts that gender is a category that people evaluate as *omnirelevant* to social life. This is to say that people can always be judged by what they do as a man or as a woman. And this is the basis for the reasoning that people are always performing gender and that gender is always relevant in social situations. In criticizing what she considers to be an outdated perception of gender for the reason that such outdated perception is limiting, since it adheres to the dominant societal constraints that label gender as binary. She attempts to introduce the unification of the terms ‘gender’ and ‘performativity’ in stating that “gender proves to be performance – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be.” In this sense, gender is always a doing (Butler, 1999, p.25). In demystifying this concept, Butler sets out to clarify that there is indeed a difference in the terms gender performance and gender performativity. She states:

When we say that gender is performed, we usually mean that we have taken on a role; we are acting in some way...To say that gender is performative is a little different...For something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman...we act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or simply something that is true about us. [While] [a]ctually, it is a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time (Butler, 1999, p.25).

In this way, Butler perceives gender as being constructed through a set of acts that are said to be in

compliance with dominant societal norms. However, Butler is not stating that gender is a sort of performance in which an individual can terminate the act; instead, what he is saying is that this performance is ongoing and out of an individual's control. In fact, rather than an individual producing the performance, the opposite is true. The performance is what produces the individual. This is in concomitant with Nietzsche's claim that "there is no 'being' behind doing...the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything." Thus, the emphasis is placed not on the individual producing the deed but on the deed itself. For instance, paint your lips with some curtest plait your hair in Igbo Africa and you are a woman. The designation also applies to gossipers, weak individuals, etc. Although a seemingly difficult concept to grasp, gender performativity is realized throughout many aspects of our lives, especially in our infancy and young childhood, our teen years, and finally our adult lives.

The idea around gender performativity, when applied to infancy and young childhood, deals with the idea that from the moment one is conceived, arguably even before that, who they are and who they will become is predetermined. Children learn at a very young age what it means to be a boy or a girl in our society. Parents sometimes go as far as coordinating their daughter with the color pink because it is feminine or blue for their sons because it is masculine (Witt, 2020). This emphasizes the fact that gender is something that is taught to us and is continuously being shaped by society's expectations. Thus, calling back to Butler's perception that gender is not a fact about us and is being constantly reinforced. This idea that gender is constantly shaped by expectations is relevant in the online community. Teenagers are easily able to formulate relationships and friendships online, thus increasing the

probability of a teenager's delicate identity to be manipulated and distorted. They often come across situations in real life and online that cause them to question to themselves when facing society, including gender performance.

**Equality is not Sameness and Difference is not Inequality**

There is no room for the slightest sexist discrimination anywhere in human life. But the equality of men and women is an analogous one, so that the differentiation of the sexes must not be lost, not in any of our behavior, any of our laws, any of our customs and traditions. Departing from the status quo over the centuries, John Paul II teaches in no uncertain term that women and men are equal as persons before God (IMRI, 2020). He believes that both “man and woman” are human beings to an equal degree.” For like men, women are created in the image and likeness of God. The power of this at first glance rather theoretical affirmation of spiritual and metaphysical equality is nuanced in practice by the Pope's commitment to gender difference. His work consistently draws upon the traditional view that men and women embody human nature in two contrasting but complementary ways, which means that they play distinct social roles.

Advocating the equality and dignity of women does not mean to play them off against men as is often done in certain feministic circles. According to the Pope, therefore, any rivalry between woman and man was not part of the divine plan, but part of human sinfulness. Man and woman are equal but the equality does not imply sameness. As a matter of fact, no two things can be ontologically the same. The equality of man and woman, according to John Paul II is neither univocal nor equivocal, but analogous. As Ogbo and Ogbuishi (2019, p.131) noted, a term is said to be univocal if one and the same name is predicated of many according to concepts which are entirely the same. Again, a term is said to

be equivocal if one and the same name is predicated of many according to concepts which are entirely different. Finally, a term is said to be analogous if one and the same name is predicated of many according to concepts which are not entirely different, but agree in some common point. As Ogbo and Ogbuishi (2019, p.131) explained, in analogous predication the term remains the same, but the concept of which the term is a symbol neither remains exactly the same, as is the case in univocal predication, nor becomes entirely different, as happens in equivocal predication, but varies yet retaining something.

It follows therefore that there are genuine differences between the sexes that are natural, not just cultural; and sexual, not just individual differences that might be found in people of either sex. By taking human nature to be analogous in men and women, John Paul II shows our absolute equality with each other as persons. And yet, he gives full value to the difference, so that sex, an obvious bodily difference, is not split off from personhood but is pervasive of it. Thus, equality does not mean sameness, and difference does not mean inequality. He avoids the dilemma of, either treating men and women exactly alike, or else making one sex inferior to the other.

So the commodality that allows for comparison must not always be identical, and as such, equality does not necessarily have to be univocal concept. For example, equality of car drivers is univocal since the role of driving is the same for each driver. This is unlike the equality of being an artist which is only analogical since not all artists function in the same way: some make music and others paintings. Yet all are equally great artists based on the commodality of excellence. Yet their equality is not based upon the same excellence but upon an analogous excellence arising from the

relationship of the artists to art. Since those relationships pertain to excellence, they are equals; but since their excellences are different, their equality is analogical. Hence, John Paul II is univocally supportive of gender equality while upholding gender roles that would allow equality to be based upon a commodality that is analogous rather than univocal or equivocal. A gender role is a set of societal norms dictating the types of behaviors which are generally considered acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for people based on their actual (or perceived) sex or sexuality.

### **The Challenge of Apposite Response**

From what we have discussed earlier, gender often entails adhering to gender normative behavior and roles. Over time, therefore, men and women's attitudes have been becoming more liberalized with regard to gender roles. Men and women are agreeing on a more egalitarian responsibility distribution within the family sphere and the society at large. It has become a common practice that women should and can have roles in the public sphere, especially in leadership positions, and that men can involve themselves in the private and domestic spheres. This practice does not prevent a man from being a man nor does it prevent a woman from being a woman. As a matter of fact, it does not imply a total denial of gender roles some of which are truly natural and divinely ordained (as in a woman giving birth and a man obtaining ordination in ecclesial setting). Essential differences between sexes should not be problematic. Some gender roles can actually be socially agreed upon to avoid chaos and conflict in the society, provided it does not have subordination of one gender in view. Undeniably, however, some of these roles are quite natural as well as spiritual.

The idea of male superiority, meanwhile, is not peculiar to any particular society. In several passages in the *Summa*

*Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas asserts the inferiority of women in both bodily strength and in force of intelligence. To top this off, he maintains that feminine intellectual inferiority actually contributes to the order and beauty of the universe. But he also affirms that in Heaven there are and will be women who occupy higher places than men (Ezebuilo, 2020). Perhaps, in this apparent inconsistency he is simply hedging on his seemingly chauvinistic positions to accommodate Mary, Queen of Heaven.

To begin to understand his position, we must ask why Aquinas thinks women intellectually inferior in the first place. Scripture is likely his first guide. St. Paul says in 1Corinthians 11:10 that “man was not created for the sake of woman, but woman was created for the sake of man.” This passage echoes Genesis 2:18, 19: It is not good that the man should be alone. I will give him a helpmate. “Aquinas reasons from these scriptural passages that when one thing exists for the sake of another, it is inferior to that other. Other passages indicate that women’s inferiority is something divinely ordained. When in 1Corinthians 11:3 St. Paul says that “man is the head of woman,” and in Ephesians 5:22 that “a husband is the head of his wife,” Aquinas takes it as evident that if men are meant to rule, it can only be by virtue of intellectual superiority. Yet Aquinas says: “Just as some human beings will surpass certain angels in glory despite the inferiority of human nature to angelic nature, so too some women despite their inferiority as to intelligence” (Ezebuilo, 2020).

There is at least one important thing we can learn from Aquinas – we should love who we are. The beauty of nature lies in diversity. It is pride, the excessive desire of our own excellence that tends to make us sad when another has perfection or grace we do not have. In our discussion of the differences between the sexes, we must avoid yielding to

impulses of envy, but strive rather to love whatever we may have due to our sex. The problematic comes, however, when society takes undue advantage of natural diversity to suppress one class on the basis of sex or gender. The problematic comes, however, when society takes undue advantage of natural diversity to suppress one class on the basis of sex or gender. This tendency must be avoided by all means especially in policy making.

In this context, promoting equal opportunities for women and men is a major priority. Restrictive attitude towards gender roles can lead to a denial of the basic human right of equality. As such stereotypical gender roles can prevent human development and social justice. Equal opportunities, Mamdani observes, means that men and women “have equal access to and control over resources and decision making process; enjoy equality under the law; have autonomy to make life choices free of violence” (Ezebuilo, 2020).

Frankly enough, interventions to promote development have not necessarily served women and men equally, especially in developing countries. Because more men are employed in the formal economy in developing countries, more women are left outside of initiatives that promote labour rights, minimum wages, safe working conditions, and so on. There is therefore an onus on governments and agencies to develop projects which will more explicitly target the development needs of women. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* leaves no room for doubt: “Man and woman have the same dignity and are of equal value” (Ezebuilo, 2020). This is not merely a truth to be acknowledged but a statement that needs continuous and active promotion.

If we wish to take an approach to the question of gender theory, it should be based on the path of dialogue, as such, it is vital to bear in mind the distinction between the ‘ideology’ of gender on the one hand, and the whole field of research on gender that the human sciences have undertaken, on the other. While the ideologies of gender claim to respond, as Pope Francis has indicated, “to what are at times understandable aspirations,” they also seek “to assert themselves as absolute and unquestionable, even dictating how children should be raised,” and thus preclude dialogue (Ezebuilo, 2020). However, other works on gender have been carried out which tries instead to achieve a deeper understanding of the ways in which sexual difference between man and women is lived out in a variety of cultures.

The Holy Father affirms the strict equality of women with men in the dignity of being persons. Our equality, he noted, is a religious equality, the deepest equality of all. It is revealed chiefly in two places: the Adam and Eve story in the book of Genesis and the account of Jesus’ many conversations with women in the Gospels (Rousseau, 1990, p.19). But our personal dignity is differentiated sexually; and so, equality is not sameness, and difference is not inequality. John Paul II is keenly aware of the discrimination women have faced throughout history. He observes that it is mostly anchored in the violation of universal human rights. He made this observation when he says, “If the potential and aspirations of many of the world’s women are not realized, this is due in great part to the fact that their human rights, as acknowledged by these instruments, are not upheld (Pope John Paul, 1995, p.2). The fact remains, then, that greater efforts are needed to eliminate discrimination against women especially in areas that include education, health care, politics, and employment. The pope also noted another form of

discrimination, namely the fact that women are virtually ignored by those who write history: “History is written almost exclusively as the narrative of men’s achievements, when in fact its better parts is most often molded by women’s determined and persevering action for good” (Pope John Paul, 1995, p.6).

Nowadays, however, there are calls for public recognition of the right to choose one’s gender, and of plurality of new types of unions, in direct contradiction of the model of marriage as being between one man and one woman, which is portrayed as a vestige of patriarchal societies (Pope John Paul, 1995, p.6). The ideal presented is that the individual should be able to choose his or her own status, and that society should limit itself to guaranteeing this right, and even providing material support, since the minorities involved would otherwise suffer negative social discrimination. The claim to such rights has become a regular part of political debate and has been included in certain pieces of national legislation.

Again, in many educational institutions today, curricula are being planned and implemented which “allegedly convey a neutral conception of the person and life, which, in fact, reflect ‘an anthropology’ opposed to ‘faith’ and right reason.” This tendency is simply a disorientation and it can help to destabilize the family as an institution, bringing with it a tendency to cancel out the differences between men and women, presenting them instead as merely the product of historical and cultural conditioning. Insofar as it is needless using unnecessary gendered languages in the classroom, the fact remains that we all have gender and it is important to have an understanding of that from a young age. Ultimately, it is not about telling children what gender is. It is about creating learning spaces that encompass all children.

However, they will come to identify themselves. Therefore, real life situations present gender theory with some valid points of criticism.

Gender theory speaks of a gradual process of denaturalization. This is a move away from nature and towards an absolute option for the decision of the feelings of the human subject. There is need to recognize that man has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. *Nature, for instance, has imposed on women the gender role of childbirth.* Therefore, it is wrong to look at the concept of gender as dependent upon the subjective mindset of each person who can choose a gender not corresponding to his or her biological sex. Christian anthropology has its roots in the narrative of human origins that appears in the Book of Genesis, where we read that “God created man in his own image [...] male and female he created them” (Gen.1:27) (Pope John Paul, 1995, p.6). If gender identity and gender roles were unnecessary, the self-compliment which was intended by the creator would have been unnecessary.

Therefore, there is a need to reaffirm the metaphysical roots of sexual difference, as an anthropological refutation of attempts to negate the male-female duality of human nature. The denial of this reality not only erases the vision of human beings as the fruit of an act of creation but creates the idea of the human person as a sort of abstraction who chooses for himself what his nature is to be. Such a freedom of choice is a result of man’s sinful nature and must be discouraged. We are free beings, and so we make moral choices; but a true freedom cannot be without some genuine limits, and it is pointless seeing all our limitations in terms of moral determinism.

## **Conclusion**

This study has attempted a study of the pertinent question, whether gender is a social construct or something essential to the reality of humans. Some feminist thinkers argue that gender is not an essential reality but something merely created by the society and enforced to the individuals beginning from infancy through some social norms. The Christian vision of anthropology, however, sees sexuality as a fundamental component of one's personhood (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019). According to this view, our sexuality plays an integral part in the development of our personality. In fact, "it is from [their] sex that the human person receives the characteristics which, on the biological, psychological and spiritual levels, make that person a man or a woman, and thereby largely conditions his or her progress towards maturity and insertion into society" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019). As each person grows, such diversity, linked to the complementarity of the two sexes, allows a thorough response to the design of God according to the vocation to which each is called.

The study regretted that over the years, women have been subjugated and subordinated by society in the name of gender. This practice cannot be justified since man and woman, sharing in the same divine image are equal. This equality, however, does not imply sameness. The beauty of creation lies in the difference which is perceived among realities. Yet in the case of man and woman, this difference does not imply inequality. We noted that precisely that the equality of man and woman is to be understood in the analogous sense.

Therefore, contrary to the current mentality which is characterized by challenges emerging from varying forms of

an ideology that is given the general name ‘gender theory,’ which “denies the differences and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family; this study adopts an understanding of human sexuality that neither denies nor overemphasizes the differentiation of human beings into two kinds, masculine and feminine.

**Hyginus Chibuikwe Ezebuilo (PhD) is a priest of the Catholic Church and teaches at the Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Email: [hc.ezebuilo@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:hc.ezebuilo@unizik.edu.ng)**

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