

Real Freedom for all Women (and Men): A Reply

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Abstract

The disadvantages men suffer relative to women in certain dimensions are not always as significant as they seem. And even when they are real, they are not necessarily unjust. This reply to a set of six reactions to “Four Puzzles on Gender Inequality” offers a critical discussion of these claims. Above all, it questions the very idea of discussing issues of gender and justice in terms of “gender justice,” i.e., of justice between two categories of human beings.

Keywords: gender equality, longevity, education, political representation, social justice

INTRODUCTION

Yes, my short speech on gender inequalities is what I think most of my commentators understood it to be: a modest invitation to help us better understand the demands of so-called gender justice and of justice more generally, by reflecting on some puzzles, none of them new but some of them sticky.¹ Ana de Miguel’s superbly formulated and entertaining commentary was most useful in helping me see better why my initial speech could be misunderstood, even with the explanatory notes I subsequently added.² I never read any masculinist pamphlet and do not intend to do so. But I can now imagine that some of what I said could have been reminiscent of some of what can be found in such writings and thereby suggest that I may be supporting their cause. Ana de Miguel can rest reassured. I do not believe,

1 In addition to the authors of the six comments included in this volume, I am most grateful to Sophie Heine, Meira Levinson, Anja Topolski, and the participants in the Lovanium Seminar in Ethics and Public Policy (Leuven, 21 November 2014) and the Nuffield Political Philosophy seminar (Oxford, 1 June 2015) for the sort of comments I was hoping to trigger – and be enlightened by.

2 Perhaps contrary to her expectation, I particularly enjoyed de Miguel’s contribution. I hope she enjoyed writing it at least as much as I enjoyed reading it – and more than I did trying to reply to it.

and never claimed, that it is high time we should start pitying the male gender, let alone that justice demands that it should be compensated for its many “weaknesses.” As a male member of a well-off segment of a wealthy society, I am only too aware of the privileges I enjoy, not only nor mainly by virtue of being a man, but definitely partly by virtue of being a man.³

Thus, the aim was not pro-male advocacy but philosophical clarification, and the point of departure, as so often for us philosophers, was a set of genuine puzzles, the nature of which is well captured by Paula Casal (2015: 90-106) in the case of longevity. She is sure, she writes, “that if a random mutation resulted in women starting to die far ahead of men many of those who currently find Van Parijs’s suggestion [that men’s shorter life expectancy may be unjust] absurd would start listing lesser longevity as one of the disadvantages women suffer” (90-106). If this is the case, and holds more generally for at least some of the other inequalities I listed, does it not follow that they should count, albeit *prima facie* and *pro tanto*, as injustices against men? This is, at any rate, the upshot of Gina Schouten’s careful discussion of differential incarceration: “I tentatively conclude that men’s higher likelihood of incarceration *is* a distinct injustice to men” (3).

Schouten usefully distinguishes two ways of accommodating this acknowledgment. If one is willing to adopt a general metric of justice, gender inequalities in favor of women would reduce the overall level of injustice they suffer: good news for overall gender justice. If instead no inequality in life expectancy, homicide, or incarceration can do anything to offset inequalities in, say, labor income, social status, or sexual violence, all these inequalities simply constitute incommensurable forms of injustice, and if an unjust inequality develops in favor of women, this would not reduce but further worsen gender injustice. But we are not there yet, and may never get there: most of my commentators deny that the inequalities I listed are injustices against men.

In this response, I shall discuss several of their insightful, sometimes ingenious arguments. But I shall not bore the reader with a point by point response, in particular with a defensive inventory of the many cases in which I feel that a (genuinely or falsely naïve) question I was asking was misunderstood as a suggestion, or even as an assertion. The literary genre

3 In particular, had I been a woman, it is most unlikely that I could have enjoyed as much as I did the immense privilege of combining a large family and a demanding job (see the section “Femmes Francqui” in my “Allocution à l’occasion de la remise du Prix Francqui 2001,” www.uclouvain.be/8611). Possibly in a slightly weakened form, Jesús Mora’s apt remark can most probably be generalized: “Men with very successful careers in the hard sciences often have several children, successful female scientists often have no families at all, as they have to compete with men who have housewives that do everything for them whilst lacking one. So a group of well qualified women are childless or even entirely alone” (Mora 2015:).

of my initial piece is certainly largely to blame for such over-interpretations. Precisely because it (uncharacteristically) abstained from making specific proposals, it did not need firm assertions by way of premises.⁴ It stopped at listing and motivating some questions. Asking a question leaves open the possibility of an answer my critics would find objectionable but does not amount to proposing it.

1. NO DISADVANTAGE

The general format of the question I asked was: are the apparent disadvantages of men that I listed unjust and, if not, why not? A first type of response to this sort of question consists in arguing that, once looked at closely, the appearance of advantage vanishes, or at least much of it does. This is the case for life expectancy. Paula Casal (90) usefully invites us to have a look at the age pyramid. If it turns out that there is little difference between the two sides except at the very top, it reinforces the idea that the advantage, if any, cannot be that great. At the limit, women simply “enjoy” some extra miserable years in their nineties which they may prefer not to have to endure (and would not if euthanasia and assisted suicide were legally and socially easier). Unequal numbers of years in good health would arguably be a better indicator of a genuine inequality of advantage, despite the unavoidable arbitrariness of the cut-off point between good and bad health. But this would still not do.

As briefly pointed out in my piece and insightfully developed in Casal’s, this would overlook the asymmetric care-giving to the ageing partner. Even if preaching and material incentives (favorably discussed by Casal) could drive down the average age gap between partners to zero, even if the disposition (and competence) for caring for one’s ageing partner had been equalized across genders, even if as much as possible was outsourced (as also recommended by Casal), there would remain, on average, a greater burden for the female members of heterosexual couples, simply owing to their longer life expectancy. This greater burden further reduces the associated advantage. In order to assess what advantage is left (if any), this suggests designing a notion of QALY (quality-adjusted life years) that does not only take health into account, but also such burdens. Inequality, using this amended metric, might still be in favor of women, but it will definitely be far smaller than when measured by the raw gap in life expectancy.

⁴ When in other contexts I asked such incongruous questions as whether surfers should be fed (Van Parijs 1991), or the elderly disfranchised (Van Parijs 1998) – which some hard workers and some pensioners might have found offensive – I did not leave the questions open but argued for an answer (yes to food for surfers, no to taking away the old folk’s vote!).

A second interesting example of an advantage that arguably melts once scrutinized is provided by Jesús Mora in his stimulating discussion of education. While claiming that education should be regarded as a dimension of advantage not entirely reducible to the earning power it generates, I had also stressed the relevance of a paradox: “Having to work so much harder to be rewarded so much less is, as Van Parijs at one point suspects, one of the forms of compound injustice that women face” (Mora 2015: 114). Mora does not challenge the independent importance of education: “it is true that education *could* potentially, in some possible world, offset men’s economic advantage” (108). But his explanation for the paradox I stress makes the educational advantage enjoyed by women a necessary by-product of the inequality they suffer in other respects. Here is the core of the argument.

Females invest more than males in their own education because they anticipate that they will need it more than men for their own material security: “with every pregnancy and every year into the marriage, women become less desirable both in the love and the labor markets”(109). This is reflected, he conjectures, in a material return to education that is systematically higher for women than for men. Women’s greater educational achievements “are thus symptoms of gender inequality, not signs of its disappearance” (114). To the extent that the higher average level of education is inextricably linked to disadvantages in other dimensions and hence, by hypothesis, would disappear in its absence, it is therefore no longer clear that it could be considered a separate, possibly compensating, dimension of advantage, or at least it is less clear than I had made it sound. This is an interesting conjecture, and certainly part of the story.⁵ Even if it is not the full story, it can legitimately be used to argue that the alleged advantage is less than it seems.

2. DISADVANTAGE JUSTIFIED

Let us now accept, as several of my commentators do, that along some dimensions women enjoy some advantage, though possibly smaller than what it looks at first sight.⁶ A second response then consists in arguing that there is nothing unjust about it. A first version of it is the “Rawlsian”

5 Can the comparatively high rates of absenteeism, unruliness, and dropping out among male teenagers and their long-term consequences on the education gap be entirely accommodated by this conjecture? I doubt it.

6 One candidate I did not mention is strikingly documented by Casal (2015: 93): the probability of being killed is 2.5 times less if you are a white woman than if you are a white man, 9 times less if you are a black woman than if you are a black man. Does the fact that the overwhelming majority of the perpetrators are men prevent us from regarding men’s much larger probability of being murdered as a genuine and potentially unjust disadvantage?

argument developed by Casal (2015:98) against the background of fascinating evolutionary conjectures: “the inequality in longevity is not unjust because its removal would make humans worse off.” In the human and some other species, the females having longer lives than males is apparently beneficial to the care, survival, and education of all their offspring, male and female. This arguably turns women’s greater longevity into an adaptive feature, which natural selection has preserved throughout the millennia and is still with us. Let us suppose that this explanation is correct. By no means does it follow that the inequality it explains is thereby justified. For the surplus of strength or resilience that enabled more mothers to steer their offspring into adulthood, despite the hazards of delivery and other perils, is now what accounts for a life expectancy of 85 rather than 80 or so. We are therefore talking here about one of those features which, however crucial they might have been in a more or less remote past, have lost their function in a deeply altered environment. Similarly, male aggressiveness must have been a handsome asset, in both individual and group selection, throughout the millennia in which some of our ancestors lived in rival tribes of hunters, but this is no justification for it in our societies.

The other challenges to the injustice of a recognized disadvantage suffered by men rely on the assumption that this disadvantage –in terms of longevity, incarceration, education, etc. –is mediated by a lifestyle or behavior pattern that is male-specific or at least displayed by men more often than by women. The phrasing of my puzzles occasionally suggested that it was essential to them that this propensity to behave in a certain way should be linked to man’s hormonal constitution. But I fully agree with convergent remarks by Casal (2015: 91, 98), Ottonelli (2015: 134), and Schouten (2015: 139) to the effect that, however big a difference this may make as regards possible remedies, there is no crucial difference as regards justice or responsibility between causal accounts in terms of genetic equipment, early socialization, or socially sanctioned expectations about what it is to behave as a “real woman” or as a “real man.” Early socialization and social sanctions are no more chosen by the individual men and women shaped by them than is their genetic equipment.

This being clarified, let us consider the suggestion that women’s greater longevity is (*prima facie* and *pro tanto*) unjust, against the background of the factual assumption that men are predisposed, either by their genetic equipment or by their social environment, to a behavior pattern that will inflict on them a genuine disadvantage relative to women, by costing them on average several years of valuable life. Casal formulates two “liberal-egalitarian” challenges to this disadvantage constituting an injustice, one inspired by Tim Scanlon, the other by Ronald Dworkin.

According to the “Scanlonian” challenge, once society has done enough, i.e., once men, under appropriate circumstances, have been sufficiently warned that some behavior pattern can have detrimental consequences for them, there is no injustice involved if they persist in behaving in a damaging way. One serious problem with this challenge is that making people aware of the consequences of their choices does not get rid of the underlying unchosen disadvantage, as well characterized by Schouten in the case of incarceration: “Whatever configuration of social and natural causes are at work, they presumably make males likelier to be incarcerated because they make it more difficult for males than for females to avoid the kinds of behaviors that lead to incarceration” (Schouten 2015: 139). Much of the material injustice suffered by women is of fundamentally the same nature: “to make the counter-gender-typical choice of prioritizing paid labor, the average woman will have to overcome either ingrained social norms or a natural predisposition to prioritize others’ needs for care, or both; and she will have to pay the costs of violating social norms.” (141) Whether or not men or women are being properly warned about the consequences of following their natural or social inclinations, “in both cases, the inequalities in the background against which the relevant choice is made are *not* chosen; and in both cases, the relevant choice is *harmful* to the chooser” (142). If appropriate warnings are deemed sufficient to nullify the alleged injustice suffered by men as a result of their choices, the door is wide open for this sort of excessively easy justification of inequalities suffered by women.

The “Dworkinian” challenge presented by Casal deactivates the imputation of injustice by focusing on what the alleged victims of injustice identify with, rather than the warning given to them. There is no injustice involved (let alone compensation due), so the challenge goes, if men identify with the behavioral pattern that triggers the disadvantage. To the extent that they identify with it, such a behavioral pattern is not a handicap, like an addiction, which they would prefer to be without. It is part of their identity, like a religion which they may never have chosen – if they grew up within it – but which they embrace. The test proposed by Dworkin in order to determine what counts as an injustice calling for redress or compensation consists in a counterfactual insurance device, where people are supposed to know their ambitions but not their endowments. When performing this exercise, men “would have insured against illness or disability but not against being male” (Casal 2015: 100).

The trouble with this challenge is that nothing prevents, in Dworkin’s device, taking male, or female, or atheist, or Muslim, as part of what one identifies with, and hence of one’s ambitions (like wanting to be a pianist or a gardener), while insuring against how costly it will prove to be. This

presupposes that one can dissociate being male from the cost it involves (here in years of life), and there is no reason why such dissociation should be ruled out, unless the cost is what one identifies with (as some may do with fasting). If one did rule it out, as implied by Casal's Dworkinian argument, it is true that one could no longer make sense of the injustice of a number of disadvantages suffered by men, but equally of many putatively unjust disadvantages suffered by women.

"Some may worry," Casal (100) notes, "that this Dworkinian use of self-identification as a criterion for justifying compensations may not always favor feminist demands." Indeed they should worry. Spending plenty of time with their children is part of an identity some women embrace, and if the implied cost in foregone (current and future) income could not be dissociated from what they identify with, they would have no "Dworkinian" complaint of justice against the income inequality stemming from this source, just as men, for analogous reasons, would not have a "Dworkinian" claim of justice against inequality in life expectancy stemming from a lifestyle with which they identify. If we are not to miss a big part of the injustice inflicted to women, it would therefore seem wise to allow a dissociation between gender-specific behavioral patterns and their cost, at the price of acknowledging the failure of the "Dworkinian" challenge.

Are we then forced to admit that any disadvantage – whether higher chance of being killed or more expensive consumption – stemming from men's specific lifestyle or pattern of behavior is, albeit *prima facie* and *pro tanto*, unjust, given that it is causally linked to the unchosen fact that they are men? We are not. Clearly, any plausible conception of justice must manage to make a distinction between a handicap that justifies redress or compensation and preferences the cost of which need to be borne by those who have them. This point is forcefully made by de Miguel (2015: 154) in the case of prostitution: "It is also very strange to say that somebody is to some degree disabled in an injustice-involving sense merely because they have, or are more likely to have, a preference. The same is true if the preference is a passion, for instance for the sea or the snow, that might kill you in some circumstances. The word 'handicap' suggests something stronger than the frustration of a mere preference, the existence of an unmet need." Thirst, she argues, can qualify as a need, but not the preference for having it satisfied in a fancy way. "And the desire for sex is like this 'thirst-thing' for most men. They love having it, and so long as they are not handicapped in other ways, and so still have hands, relief is simple, instant, and gratis" (de Miguel 2015: 153). Any sensible conception of justice must make room for a distinction of this sort. In the following section, I shall drop the *ad hominem* (or *ad feminam*) posture I have adopted so far (as well as in

my initial piece) and sketch how the conception of justice to which I subscribe myself tries to accommodate this important distinction and to address other key issues raised in the comments.

3. SOCIAL JUSTICE AS REAL FREEDOM FOR ALL

Ottonelli (2015: 126) finds it puzzling that I assumed as unproblematic “some version of equality of opportunity for welfare or resources,” which fails to capture key aspects of the injustice suffered by women: “for example, women’s higher unemployment rates, lower income, and greater hardship resulting from divorce,” which should be “taken as signs of the domination, oppression, and exploitation that women suffer in our society.” She is right to complain. These aspects need to be taken on board, and the conception of justice I subscribe to can accommodate them, I believe, far better than the vague notion of equality of advantage which I have been relying on so far for the sake of the argument(s).

This conception can be captured in the slogan “Real freedom for all.” It essentially requires empowering as much as is sustainable those with least power to shape their lives. And it is leading me to advocate, along with Carole Pateman, for example, repeatedly cited by de Miguel (2015: 153, 158), and along with many others, an unconditional basic income.⁷ For the sake of justice as real freedom for all, this unconditional income should be pitched at the highest sustainable level, part of it being given in the form of quality education, health care, and a sane environment, in addition to an unflinching protection of physical integrity. However they are funded, the introduction of an unconditional basic income and the rise of its relative level are bound to involve a net redistribution from men to women and, more importantly, a greater expansion of life options for women than for men.

It should not take too much effort to imagine, in particular, what difference the highest sustainable unconditional basic income would make to the prostitutes described by de Miguel (153-6). Its prospective effect is not mainly to increase their purchasing power. It is above all to increase their bargaining power on all fronts by multiplying exit options. Nor should it take much effort to show that such a conception of justice is more than compatible with Ottonelli’s (130) view that “our treatment of male’s unfortunate hormonal constitution represents indeed a rare case of over-accommodation of an impairing disability” or with de Miguel’s (158) call for putting an end to “overindulgence in the male itch.” Moreover, if it is

⁷ See Pateman (2006), Murray & Pateman eds. (2012), and, for recent discussion of the connection between gender inequalities and basic income, McLean (2015) and Elgarte (in progress).

the case that “an overwhelming presence of men in dangerous, difficult, and hazardous jobs [...] causes countless episodes of killings, torture, physical aggression, humiliation, maltreatment, medical malpractice, physical injuries, and deaths by negligence” (Ottonelli 132), then there is no doubt that justice as real freedom for all would command that an end should immediately be put to this overwhelming presence of men. There may well exist sound evolutionary explanations for male-specific dispositions that generate despicable behavior, but this can never amount to justifying giving the latter free rein.

This being said, it is of course intrinsic to a conception of justice that adopts freedom as its *distribuendum* that it should not erect into an ideal the achievement of equal average scores – or of an equal grand total score – by all categories of human beings for variables expected to be affected by the latter’s free choices. The monitoring of gender gaps, in particular, can play a useful role in locating forms of discrimination or intimidation that hinder the pursuit of justice as real freedom for all. But the existence of significant gender gaps in terms of expected lifetime earnings or quality-adjusted life years, for example, is not, as such, decisive evidence that injustice is being perpetrated. The choices made by men and women that lead to such gender gaps are not made in an angelic vacuum. They are made by people enabled and inclined by their genes to do, on average, different things or do them differently, depending on whether they are men or women. These human beings also grew up and currently live in immediate surroundings and wider societies that tend to expect different things from them depending on their gender. Men and women may or may not identify with these expectations. A just society is not one in which all gender-specific capabilities and expectations have been eradicated. It is one whose institutions allocate resources in such a way that those women and men with least real freedom are made as really free as possible to live as they might wish to live, including of course by refusing to fulfill the existing gender-specific social expectations.

So far (perhaps) so good. But how can such a conception of justice make room for a distinction between, on the one hand, handicaps for which it is fair that one should be compensated and, on the other hand, preferences the consequences of which one should bear? Quite simple – in principle. As mentioned above, part of the highest sustainable unconditional basic income is to be given in kind, in particular, in the form of a health care package. How big this component should be, and what it should cover and how, is to be determined, in Dworkinian fashion, through a thought experiment that requires us to hide behind a veil of ignorance those of our features – including our gender – that affect the probability of our suffering disabilities

and other health impairments in a very broad sense.⁸ The resulting just health care system can safely be expected to cover, for example, pregnancy, abortion, contraception, perhaps female and male infertility. It may well accommodate a dependency insurance that reduces the chance of elderly people needing to rely heavily on their close relatives. But I would not count on its including prostitution vouchers.

4. AGAINST CATEGORICAL JUSTICE

This is not the place to further spell out the content and implications of social justice as real freedom for all, except to further clarify, using illustrations provided in the comments, in what sense it is incompatible with the very idea of gender justice (and, more generally, of category-based justice), and why this matters.

To illustrate the incompatibility, let us first return to longevity. In her insightful discussion, Casal (2015: 94) notes: “It would not make sense to compensate men who avoid all life-shortening behavior and are thus likely to live long. For then there will be nothing they have to be compensated for[...]. But it would make even less sense to compensate individuals who, despite engaging in all the life-shortening gendered behavior, still escape the fate for which they are supposed to be compensated.” Quite right. Let us radicalize the example by considering two fictitious situations. In situation A, all females die at 85 and all males at 80. In situation B, everyone dies at 85 except for one baby boy out of seventeen, who dies shortly after birth, thereby giving males a life expectancy at birth of 80. Surely, it would be absurd to count this lower life expectancy at birth as a disadvantage for the surviving males. If anything, it should count as an advantage, since the form taken by this shorter life expectancy has made them scarcer relative to females in the mating segment of their lives. But this is not only about just-born babies. Suppose that the whole of the gender gap in life expectancy was the result of a higher probability of males dying before forty. There would be no longevity disadvantage in being a male over forty. This should suffice to convey the intuition of why the very idea of talking about justice between statistical categories, gender or otherwise, is problematic. Within the framework of justice as real freedom for all, in particular, categorical justice makes no sense.

⁸ As explained in Van Parijs (2009: section 4), I now believe that this is a better way of accommodating what is usually captured by the preference/needs distinction than the criterion of “undominated diversity” proposed for this purpose in Van Parijs (1995: chapter 3) and mentioned by Casal (2015: 9).

To illustrate the real-life relevance of this rejection of categorical justice, let us return to Mora's stimulating discussion of women's educational advantage. I liked the compact summary of his analysis: "female educational efforts, far from signaling the arrival of equality, are the knotted rope women use to escape the flames of discrimination, domestic and workplace exploitation, and poverty" (Mora 2015: 110). In the same vein, Mora points out that female higher educational efforts are worth pursuing because it is women's "protection, and perhaps the only one, against being short-changed at work and at home," and that higher education is the "irreplaceable tool for them to achieve levels of employability similar to men's" (110). One conclusion one may be tempted to draw from this is that promoting the education of women, and in particular their access to higher education, is the only serious hope for addressing the injustice suffered by women. But I am sure that Mora will want to resist this conclusion. For what about the countless women who, even in the best circumstances, will never go into higher education? Surely, the injustice they suffer is in no way diminished as a result of other women escaping the flames of discrimination and exploitation.

Justice as real freedom for all does not care about justice between genders, or any other categories, taken globally. It demands that prior attention be given to the real freedom, to the bargaining power of the worse-off, most likely women and men who never attended and will never attend higher education. Therefore, the privileges, big and small, enjoyed by those who do get access to higher levels of education can be justified only by the extent to which they contribute to the real freedom of those who do not. The pursuit of social justice as real freedom for all may require policy tools that are categorical, in particular gender-specific. But social justice and injustice themselves must be understood as obtaining or failing to obtain between individuals. One of the great contributions of feminism to the thinking about justice is to have made it more individualistic by blowing up the black box of the household and exposing intra-household injustice. Thinking about justice as applying between categories is no better than thinking about justice as applying between households.

5. POLITICAL INEQUALITY

I have said nothing so far about one inequality I mentioned as a potential injustice suffered by men, the fact that they systematically form a political minority. As well explained by Pierre-Étienne Vandamme (2015), this case is quite different from the other ones. The inequality, here, is not as such an advantage, but only a potential source of advantages. And it is, moreover, a source that is most unlikely to ever be activated.

Vandamme does not question the existence of a solid majority of female voters in mature democracies. He even mentions the stunning figure of seven million more women than men voting at recent US presidential elections. However, he does challenge the expectation that this gap will widen as a consequence of the widening gap between the educational level of women and men. Apparently, with some exceptions such as the US and Switzerland, the positive correlation between education level and turnout is vanishing in mature democracies. By contrast, the positive correlation between age and turnout remains firm, even though one cannot expect the ageing of the population to deepen the gap in life expectancy, nor therefore the male-female imbalance in either the electorate or the turnout.

The key issue, however, is whether belonging to a numerical majority – whether racial, religious, linguistic, professional, whatever – is a feature that matters as regards justice. Clearly, no procedural injustice is involved: one person, one potential vote. Hence, Vandamme (2015: 120) rightly argues that injustice can only arise from a numerical imbalance if the more numerous group uses its electoral power to “turn this numerical advantage into a *substantial* injustice.” One can imagine two situations in which this is unlikely to happen. One is a perfect deliberative democracy, in which all voters are guided by an impartial conception of justice or of the common good, not by their personal interests. The other situation is that of a democracy that is less than perfect in this sense, but in which the interests of majority and minority are so closely intertwined that the majority could not pursue its own interests without also pursuing those of the minority. If we diverge significantly from either of these situations, a serious risk of injustice arises, unless special constitutional or customary constraints are introduced in order to protect the minority, such as veto powers, guaranteed representation, quotas, and parity rules in executives and in legislative assemblies.

Why do such protections seem to make obvious sense in the case of Flemings versus Walloons, Shiites versus Sunnites, etc. and not in the case of women versus men? The reason is not that the categories of women and men are each very heterogeneous. So are the other majority/minority pairs. The difference, I submit, lies elsewhere. If every Fleming needed a Walloon, or each Shiite a Sunnite, in order to procreate, if each of them was born from a mixed couple and if most of them cohabited in mixed households and ended up with offspring from either group, their interests on most issues would converge sufficiently for the risk of a tyranny of the majority to be very limited, far more limited at any rate than if none of this were the case. But this is exactly the situation that obtains between men and women. There is a (quasi) unavoidable territorial and personal closeness between genders that makes for a far more systematic convergence of interests

than in the case of ethnic categories. Not a total convergence, needless to say, but one sufficient for no protective veto power to make sense, however large the gap between female and male voting power ever becomes, especially if, next to the convergence of interest, public deliberation plays some of its civilizing, justice-seeking role.

For the time being, anyway, the danger of misuse of political power is rather coming from the other side. Vandamme rightly stresses that political power does not reduce to electoral power. Whether because of the misplaced celebration of “leadership” qualities denounced by Ottonelli (2015: 130) or because of the unequal distribution of relevant resources, more men than women tend to be involved in forms of political participation more demanding and more consequential than casting a vote at distant intervals. Hence, if political power is being misused in those areas in which the interests of men and women systematically diverge, it is more likely to be at the expense of women rather than in their favor, for example, because platforms and policies are surreptitiously concocted and packaged in gender-biased fashion. This is why the presence of women at all levels of public (and private) power is so important. Not for the sake of equalizing the chance of access to top positions for the select few, but in order to prevent the specific interests of women of all social classes being systematically under appreciated or completely overlooked. This is about political power, though not the power to impose one’s will through majoritarian voting, rather the power to make problems visible and intelligible in time, and to create the conditions for the adoption and implementation of solutions that can be regarded as fair by all women no less than by all men.

EPILOGUE

“Why not go to a disability conference to talk about the four downsides of being able-bodied?” de Miguel (2015: 159) asks. Good question. No, I would not do it. Why then did I agree to do something analogous on gender inequality? No doubt because I believe that there are some crucial differences between the case of gender and that of disability. And also because in this case I was specifically asked to raise some philosophical questions on gender by someone I like and whose action I wanted to support. Given the short time at my disposal, my first puzzles were the way I thought I could satisfy the request most effectively. This turned out to be a mistake in the short run, but perhaps not in the longer run, judging by the discussion in this volume, very instructive and clarifying certainly for me and probably for others too.

Nevertheless, as Schouten (2016: 137) puts it, “we might lament the opportunity costs of theorizing alleged injustices against men when women continue to be victimized by pervasive structural injustices, and worry that such theorizing will slow progress toward women’s equality.” I entirely share the underlying conviction that concern with real-life injustices should be at the core of much of our work as political philosophers. It has certainly been at the core of mine. Asking, as I did, some seemingly incongruous questions was certainly not intended to “slow progress toward women’s equality” (137). As should be clear by now, it was meant to invite more careful thinking about the relation between gender and justice in a way that should have some relevance to the public debate on these issues, and hence also to real-life gender-related public policy.

In particular, I wanted to highlight the possibility that gender justice, understood as justice between two categories, may be the wrong way to think about justice and gender – a point that, in different ways, both Casal (2015: 91) and de Miguel (2015: 159-60), also touch upon. To illustrate the relevance of this challenge to real life, consider the *Gender Equality Index* developed by the Vilnius-based European Institute for Gender Equality.⁹ Such a composite index aggregates a number of variables each of which reflects some aspect of gender inequality, for example, the male-female gaps in earnings, in rates of participation in the labor market, in proportions of tertiary education graduates, in life expectancy or in parliamentary representation. When collected in a reliable and comparable way, the data sets used as inputs are extremely useful for the sake of assessing a country’s performance and guiding its policies. But the categorical-justice approach such a composite index encourages and the arbitrary weights on which it relies are, in my view, obstacles rather than tools in the effort to guide and design public policies in the service of social justice.

In order to engage with real issues, we philosophers often have to venture outside our tiny field of professional expertise. No problem as such: this is both our right and our duty. But it inevitably involves taking the risk of saying or suggesting things that turn out to be wrong, and hence of being corrected by colleagues who know more about the subject or have thought more about it. This is part of the never-ending attempt to give a coherent picture of what we can and must be heading for, to address the objections this picture may give rise to, and to correct it whenever needed. I am most grateful to my commentators and especially to Paula Casal, who master-minded this symposium, for having helped me along on this – sometimes bumpy – road.

9 *Gender Equality Index* 2012, European Institute for Gender Equality, <https://www.eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/genderequality-index>, consulted March 2016.

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