REVISITING THE SEX-GENDER DISTINCTION IN FEMINIST THEORY AND POLITICS*

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Abstract

This critique of feminism opens the debate surrounding the concepts of sex and gender, asserting that these notions are rooted in the biological reality of being born either male or female. However, theorists have argued that the terms "sex" and "gender" encompass contextual biological, psychological, and social dimensions. This paper undertakes a critical evaluation of the central arguments concerning the sex-gender distinction to shed light on the competing perspectives within this debate. It seeks to examine the philosophical, psychological, and sociological foundations of this distinction, assess its implications for gender theory and politics, and explore its contemporary relevance. Furthermore, the paper contends that while there are compelling critiques of the separation between sex and gender, particularly from a feminist standpoint, the division of gender in political discourse represents a complex set of ideas. Nevertheless, this separation facilitates discussions around the recognition and protection of individual rights, irrespective of gender identity.

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Introduction

The distinction between sex and gender represents one of the most significant contributions of second-wave feminist theory to contemporary sociological discourse. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, who famously argued that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*The Second Sex*, 1949), and Judith Butler, who introduced the notion of gender as performative (*Gender Trouble*, 1990), have laid the intellectual groundwork for ongoing debates surrounding these concepts. However, it is critical to note that the origins of the sex-gender distinction predate feminist theory, emerging initially from studies of transsexuality and hermaphroditism. For instance, in 1941, Barbara Ann Richards, a transsexual individual, petitioned the Californian Superior Court to change her name to match her new identity. This act, driven by her desire to align her “outer body” with her “inner necessities” (Meyerowitz, 2002), marked an early moment in the transsexual rights movement and highlighted the tensions between biological sex and psychological self-conception. Richards' case exemplifies how deeply personal experiences have contributed to the politicization of sex and gender discourse, setting the stage for later theoretical developments.

Building on this trajectory, John Money’s 1955 study of hermaphroditism and gender further formalized the distinction by introducing the idea that gender encompasses subjective outlooks, orientations, and roles-essentially, the performative acts that signal one’s social status as male or female (Money, 1955). This foundational work catalyzed broader debates about the constructed nature of gender, which feminist theorists such as Gayle Rubin expanded by interrogating how social structures mediate the relationship between biological sex and cultural gender roles (*The Traffic in Women*, 1975). These debates have

since shaped public awareness, legislative reforms, and the recognition of gender as a complex and fluid construct rather than a rigid binary.

This paper revisits the notions of sex and gender through a holistic and interdisciplinary lens, critically analyzing how these concepts shape individual identities and broader social structures. Specifically, it interrogates the tension between the fluidity of gender, which emphasizes individual self-determination, and the fixed, state-defined categories of sex and gender assigned at birth. By examining the interplay between these perspectives, the paper seeks to contribute a more nuanced understanding of how sex and gender distinctions inform public policy and individual lives. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: *How can the conceptual distinction between sex and gender, as informed by feminist theory, be reinterpreted to address contemporary debates on identity and political recognition?*

The scope of this research is both theoretical and applied. Theoretically, it builds on the intellectual contributions of feminist theorists to explore the philosophical, psychological, and sociological dimensions of sex and gender. Applied aspects include case studies on third-gender identities in Thailand and the ways feminist theory manifests in foreign policy and international relations. The paper argues that alternative gender frameworks can provide empowering and inclusive conceptions of self without destabilizing larger social and political structures. By bridging theoretical insights with real-world implications, the study aims to deepen feminist debates and propose pathways for more inclusive public policies.

Sex versus Gender

Historically, it was commonly assumed that sex and gender were fixed categories determined solely by one’s biological status as male or female at birth. However, contemporary scholarship has increasingly emphasized that

both concepts encompass complex biological, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions. Over recent decades, the idea that sex and gender are distinct has gained significant traction. The prevailing argument posits that while sex denotes the biological differences between males and females, gender refers to a socially constructed framework shaped by cultural interpretations of those biological distinctions (Jackson, 1998). Biological indicators-such as genitalia, hormonal profiles, chromosomal patterns, reproductive functions, and other physical traits-are generally used to classify individuals as male or female. In addition, psychological factors have been highlighted, particularly in relation to transsexuality, where individuals may possess an intrinsic psychological identity aligned with a sex different from their assigned one (Meyerowitz, 2002). Conversely, gender is informed by social roles, behavioral expectations, identity formation, and hierarchical positioning within society.

This paper aims to trace the historical evolution of the sex-gender dichotomy to critically examine the competing perspectives within this debate. It seeks to explore the philosophical, psychological, and sociological foundations of the distinction, assess its implications for gender theory and political discourse, and evaluate its contemporary relevance.

Traditionally, it was widely presumed that one’s sex-being either male or female-was an unchangeable biological fact, carrying with it a set of assumed physical, emotional, and social traits deemed appropriate for each sex (Fausto-Sterling, 1993). To be male was associated not only with having male reproductive anatomy and a deeper voice, but also with traits like toughness and assertiveness. Femaleness, by contrast, was marked by features such as breasts, menstruation, and an association with nurturing and emotional sensitivity (Lloyd, 1993).

Sex is generally defined in terms of the biological differentiation between females and males-chiefly, anatomical structures and reproductive

capacities. Gender, however, is best understood as a cultural category that classifies individuals into socially defined groups of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ (Oakley, 1985). The need to define gender is particularly critical, as it is a widely used, yet frequently misunderstood, social construct. It encompasses not only the attributes and expectations linked to masculinity and femininity, but also the patterns of social interaction and power dynamics between men and women, boys and girls (Tharu & Niranjana, 1999). These associations and expectations are not innate but are learned through cultural socialization and vary significantly across societies.

While cultural contexts historically treated sex and gender as mutually reinforcing, early feminist scholarship began to distinguish the two. Oakley (1972), for instance, emphasized the biological stability of sex in contrast to the variability of gender. Yet subsequent developments have revealed that sex, much like gender, is subject to variation. The previously assumed immutability of sex is increasingly challenged, as illustrated by intersex individuals-those born with both male and female sexual characteristics-and by the availability of medical interventions that allow individuals to transition from one sex to another (Sveinsdóttir, 2011). Moreover, even when a person’s biological sex remains constant, gender identity has become markedly more fluid, evidenced by the increasing visibility of transgender and homosexual identities.

These shifts undermine traditional binary assumptions and support a now dominant feminist perspective: that sex and gender, far from being inherently linked, are contextually and conceptually distinct. This distinction not only reshapes theoretical understandings but also reconfigures social and political conversations around identity and equality.

Sex and Gender in Feminist Theory

A pivotal intervention of second-wave feminist theory was the conceptual disentanglement of sex and gender, developed in direct resistance to the dominant explanatory model of biological determinism. This model posited that distinctions in behavior, psychology, and social roles between men and women were biologically inherent and thus immutable (Antony, 1998; Fausto-Sterling, 2003). Within feminist analysis, biological determinism has been widely recognized as an ideological apparatus that legitimizes gendered oppression by cloaking it in the rhetoric of nature. It operates as a discursive strategy that not only explains but naturalizes systemic inequalities, thereby obstructing both critique and transformation (Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984). Classic determinist accounts framed metabolic differences as responsible for the behavioral characteristics attributed to each sex-casting women as ‘anabolic’ and thus passive, stable, and politically disengaged, while men were described as ‘katabolic,’ active, and socially oriented (Lederman, 2001; Mikkola, 2012). These pseudoscientific narratives were mobilized to justify the exclusion of women from public and political life, under the pretext that biological incapacity rendered such exclusion not only appropriate but inevitable (Moi, 1999). Biological determinism thus served as a normative framework that rationalized gender hierarchy by rearticulating political disenfranchisement as a natural consequence of sex difference (Tharu & Niranjana, 1999).

Against this backdrop, the theoretical separation of sex and gender emerged not as an abstract intellectual exercise but as a politically necessary tool for de-essentializing womanhood. Feminist theorists argued that the socially observable differences between men and women were the outcome of historically specific processes of gender socialization rather than innate biological facts. This is exemplified by the lived realities of trans individuals, whose self-understandings of gender identity often diverge from the anatomical

features traditionally used to define sex, thereby challenging the presumed coherence between sex and gender (Snowdon, 2009). De Beauvoir's (1972) assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" articulates the notion that gender is not a natural condition but a socio-historical construction, imposed through disciplinary norms that come to appear as ontological truths. The perceived 'naturalness' of gendered behavior, then, is itself a product of the social structures that reinforce and reproduce such behavior, making the artificial appear essential (de Beauvoir). Feminist epistemology has consistently worked to denaturalize these assumptions, exposing the ideological mechanisms through which contingent norms acquire the status of biological fact (Haslanger, 1995). Central to this project is the recognition that appeals to what is 'natural' often function as conservative political tools, obscuring the operations of power by presenting cultural arrangements as pre-political givens.

However, the sex/gender binary itself has not gone unchallenged within feminist discourse. While initially effective in disrupting essentialist claims, this dichotomy has since been problematized for its implicit reliance on a stable conception of 'sex' as biologically determined. Increasingly, feminist scholars have interrogated the assumption that sex is a fixed material category, distinct from the cultural variability of gender. Butler (1990), for example, argues that gender is not a substantive identity but a performative enactment-a repeated set of acts through which the illusion of a stable gendered self is produced. Gender, in this formulation, is constituted through discourse and practice, not anchored in biology but rather in the regulatory norms that compel its reiteration. Aligning with de Beauvoir's emphasis on the socio-historical becoming of gendered subjects, Butler posits that gender must be understood as an ongoing process of construction rather than a pre-existing essence. Delphy (1993) extends this critique by suggesting that even sex is not a purely biological fact but a classificatory system grounded in social relations. The apparent naturalness of sex, she argues, is the result of ideological framing

rather than empirical inevitability. In this vein, theorists such as Wittig (1997) have argued that both sex and gender are historically contingent constructs, maintained through discursive and institutional practices that render them intelligible within dominant frameworks.

Crucially, the initial aim of distinguishing sex from gender was instrumental rather than definitive. Feminist theorists deployed the distinction strategically, in order to contest the notion that gender roles were biologically ordained and therefore unchangeable. The identification of gender as socially constituted enabled a critique of the normative systems that prescribe specific roles and behaviors to individuals based on perceived biological difference. Rubin (1975) emphasized that gender must be understood as a system of oppression, rooted in social arrangements that regulate sexuality, labor, and identity. By foregrounding the constructed nature of gender, feminist theory made possible a political imaginary in which gender norms could be destabilized, reconfigured, or abolished. The broader political aspiration was to create a society in which anatomical features no longer predetermined one's social position, capacities, or intimate affiliations (Rubin, 1975). Although the concrete impact of this theoretical intervention is difficult to quantify, its influence is evident in the legal recognition of trans rights, the growing visibility of nonbinary identities, and the broader cultural contestation of normative gender roles.

Feminist theory thus offers a sustained critique of the presumed naturalness of both sex and gender. It insists that sex is not merely a biological datum but a site of social interpretation, and that gender is not a stable identity but a regulative fiction—compelled, reiterated, and often resisted. Thinkers such as de Beauvoir and Butler have illuminated the ways in which gender is produced through performance and social expectation, enabling a deeper interrogation of how power operates through identity categories. At the

same time, feminist theorists continue to wrestle with how to acknowledge material bodily realities-particularly in relation to health and reproduction-without reinforcing the very essentialisms they seek to critique. Intersectional frameworks further complicate these debates, emphasizing how gender is always experienced in conjunction with race, class, sexuality, and other axes of power. Critics caution against collapsing complex forms of embodiment into purely cultural accounts, while also resisting the reductive biologism that underpins many mainstream discourses. Ultimately, feminist engagements with sex and gender have profoundly reoriented the landscape of critical thought, unsettling binary categories and advocating for more expansive, inclusive understandings of human identity and social possibility.

Sex and Gender in Social Areas

The distinction between sex and gender is not confined to feminist theoretical discourse; rather, it has extended into broader legal, political, and cultural spheres, prompting significant shifts in public consciousness and institutional responses. As societal understandings of identity have grown more nuanced, the debate surrounding sex and gender has catalyzed legislative and policy reforms aimed at accommodating individuals whose lived realities defy binary or biologically deterministic frameworks. These developments echo key insights advanced by new wave feminists, who argue that both sex and gender are not only distinct but also inherently fluid and socially constructed (Moi, 1999). Cases such as that of Caster Semenya, a South African athlete subjected to invasive scrutiny over her eligibility to compete in women's sports, underscore the epistemological instability of sex as a category. Allegations regarding her intersex traits-based on her muscular build, deeper vocal register, and athletic performance-exemplify how cultural expectations of femininity and masculinity continue to inform and distort notions of sex and gender

(Harris, 2009). The controversy surrounding Semenya did not emerge from biological ambiguity alone, but rather from entrenched social norms that equate strength, speed, and vocal depth with maleness. Her self-identification as female was disregarded in favor of externally imposed criteria, revealing how normative assumptions operate to police gender boundaries and discredit identities that transgress them.

Significant policy shifts have occurred in response to growing advocacy for the autonomy of individuals in determining their own gender identities and sexual orientations. Increasingly, even historically conservative institutions, including religious authorities, are being compelled to re-evaluate their positions. Political leaders such as Barack Obama and David Cameron have voiced unequivocal support for LGBT rights, demonstrating how public discourse has evolved to embrace more inclusive understandings of identity (Cassell, 2013). This growing support has been bolstered by shifting public attitudes that align with the feminist critique of essentialism and affirm the separation of sex and gender as a legitimate and socially resonant conceptual distinction. Legislative reforms further reflect this evolution: the enactment of laws such as the UK's Marriage (Same Sex) Act 2013 signals a reconfiguration of legal structures to better accommodate gender and sexual diversity. Prime Minister David Cameron's declaration that the UK is "the best place to be gay or transgender in Europe" illustrates how political rhetoric is increasingly being used to affirm the rights of marginalized sexual and gender identities (Hope, 2013). While opposition remains within certain sectors of society, the broader trajectory indicates a growing institutional and cultural alignment with the foundational arguments of contemporary feminist theory, particularly those that highlight the performativity and constructedness of gender (Wittig, 1997).

In parallel, recent interventions from religious figures suggest an incremental shift in long-standing doctrinal opposition to gender and sexual

diversity. Pope Francis's now-famous rhetorical question-"If a person is gay and seeks the Lord with good will, who am I to judge?"-signaled a potential softening of the Catholic Church's historically rigid position on gender and sexuality (Selby, 2013). While the comment did not represent a formal doctrinal reversal, it marked a moment of rhetorical divergence from the Church's traditionally moralizing stance. Francis's later criticism of the Church's preoccupation with condemning homosexuality and his call for a more inclusive and compassionate pastoral approach (Goodstein, 2013) reflect the growing tension between institutional orthodoxy and the demands of a changing social landscape. These statements, while symbolically significant, have not translated into doctrinal reform. The Vatican continues to uphold a theological position rooted in natural law, wherein gender is viewed as divinely assigned and immutable. Within this framework, biological sex is considered ontologically fixed, and any deviation from heteronormative sexual orientation or gender identity is deemed morally problematic.

The Church's teachings continue to reject the legitimacy of gender-affirming medical interventions and the recognition of gender fluidity, reinforcing a binary model that clashes with contemporary feminist perspectives. Homosexual acts remain classified as sinful, even as individuals are called to be treated with "dignity and respect." This distinction between personhood and behavior enables the Church to maintain a posture of tolerance without altering its condemnation of non-heterosexual relations. Although Pope Francis's tone has introduced a pastoral nuance, the underlying dogma remains unchanged: the Church supports only heterosexual unions and rejects gender theories that deviate from binary sexual roles. This doctrinal rigidity continues to generate substantial controversy and critique, particularly from feminist and queer theorists who highlight how such frameworks perpetuate exclusion and foreclose alternative modes of being. As feminist critiques demonstrate, institutional investments in fixed definitions of sex and

gender serve to sustain normative hierarchies and obstruct efforts to realize gender justice and inclusion.

Sex and Gender in Social Relations

The theoretical and practical separation of sex and gender carries profound consequences for contemporary social structures, particularly concerning role distribution, labor division, and occupational stratification. The systemic marginalization of women and the devaluation of 'feminine' traits in various domains underscore the necessity of disentangling gender from sex. Delphy (1993) provocatively asserts that "gender precedes sex," challenging essentialist assumptions by positioning sex itself as a socially constructed category that is embedded within and emerges from pre-existing gendered power relations. This framework compels a critical reassessment of practices such as the sexual division of labor, which, contrary to biological determinism, lacks any inherent or physiological foundation. As Menon (2008) observes, societal prescriptions about which tasks or roles are suitable for specific sexes are ideologically driven, not biologically ordained.

Across cultural contexts, deeply entrenched binaries dictate that domestic and caregiving roles-cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing-are women's natural domain, while roles demanding authority or physical labor are associated with men. Similarly, occupational gendering relegates professions like nursing and primary school teaching to the realm of 'feminized' labor. These rigid divisions, far from reflecting innate capabilities, are emblematic of gendered socialization and institutionalized inequality. By highlighting such discrepancies, the sex-gender distinction destabilizes the presumed natural order and foregrounds the role of sociocultural conditioning in sustaining gender hierarchies. The subordination of women, therefore, cannot be credibly traced to biological determinism (sex), but must be located within the

ideological and institutional configurations of patriarchy (gender), as argued by Tharu & Niranjana (1999). In this context, the conceptual differentiation between sex and gender provides a critical lens through which to interrogate and challenge the political economy of labor, sexual regulation, and reproductive control.

The political salience of the sex-gender distinction is further evidenced by its influence on contemporary reformist movements and legal frameworks that aim to affirm and protect individuals' rights to self-identify beyond binary constraints. In recent decades, the push for legal recognition and anti-discrimination protections has reflected a broader shift toward acknowledging the complex interplay between sex, gender, and identity. The decriminalization of homosexuality and the institutional acceptance of transgender and intersex persons represent crucial victories against normative erasure. In the UK, the passage of the Gender Recognition Act (2004) institutionalized the legal right of trans individuals to amend their sex designation, reinforcing the understanding that legal and social recognition should not be tethered to assigned sex at birth. Furthermore, comprehensive protections now exist in employment, housing, and access to services to prevent discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

Crucially, the significance of the sex-gender divide in the present moment can be assessed through its capacity to contest two persistent forms of systemic injustice: first, the discursive and institutional naturalization of women's subjugation; and second, the exclusion and marginalization of those whose identities-transsexual, transgender, intersex, and homosexual-do not conform to heteronormative or cisnormative frameworks. By reframing these experiences as political rather than biological, the distinction between sex and gender opens space for critical interventions aimed at dismantling entrenched hierarchies and fostering inclusive social transformation.

Third Gender in Thailand

From a postmodern feminist standpoint, the distinction between sex and gender functions not as a fixed binary, but as a critical disruption of the essentialist logic that has historically naturalized women's subordination. The act of separating sex from gender was, and continues to be, a political strategy aimed at denaturalizing patriarchal power and unsettling the claim that biology is destiny. As such, the ongoing relevance of this distinction hinges on the extent to which contemporary legal, social, and political institutions have dismantled or reproduced gendered norms and exclusions.

Societies that recognize gender identity as fluid and performative provide fertile ground for examining the utility of the sex-gender distinction. Thailand, for instance, with its visible population of kathoeys-a term referring to effeminate gay men or transgender women-demonstrates how dominant cultural frameworks can allow gender variance while simultaneously reinforcing structural exclusions (Jackson, 1999). The widespread presence of kathoeys has been interpreted as a sign of cultural openness, but this visibility often masks deeper systemic marginalization (Ocha, 2012). While individuals may openly identify as a ‘third gender,’ legal recognition and protection remain limited, revealing a disjunction between cultural tolerance and institutional legitimacy.

Despite Thailand’s international reputation as a haven for gender diversity, state recognition of trans and non-binary individuals has lagged. Although Article 30 of the Thai Constitution prohibits discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, critics argue that these provisions have lacked enforcement and have not translated into meaningful protections (Paisarin, 2009). In this sense, the sex-gender distinction continues to offer critical leverage for feminist and queer activism, illuminating how sociolegal systems reproduce hierarchies under the guise of neutrality.

The original feminist impulse behind the sex-gender split was to relocate discussions of identity from biology to discourse, politics, and culture. Rubin (1975) argued that the sex/gender system is not inevitable, but rather socially constructed and therefore subject to transformation. Similarly, Fausto-Sterling (1993) and Jackson (1998) underscore how both sex and gender are mutable categories, forged through ongoing negotiations of power. The distinction thus remains useful in disrupting heteronormative assumptions and advocating for broader inclusion of individuals whose identities fall outside binary norms.

In the Thai context, legal advancements have offered partial validation of this theoretical framework. In 2024, Thailand passed a marriage equality law that for the first time used gender-neutral language to define legal partnerships, replacing the traditional terms of “husband” and “wife” with non-gendered identifiers. While this legislation marked a historic moment in securing equal material rights-such as in property, inheritance, healthcare, and social security-it simultaneously reasserted the state’s commitment to binary gender classification. The law does not recognize non-binary identities or allow for the alteration of one’s legal sex beyond the male/female dichotomy. As such, while the law affirms same-sex unions, it fails to accommodate gender fluidity as understood through a postmodern feminist lens.

Winter (2002) has noted that kathoeys are often permitted to express their identities in public institutions, such as schools and workplaces, suggesting that cultural attitudes may be more progressive than legal codes. However, this partial acceptance is symptomatic of a broader dissonance-where gender variance is tolerated aesthetically or economically, but not structurally validated. The sex-gender distinction, therefore, remains relevant not because it resolves this tension, but because it exposes the ideological fault lines between recognition and rights.

Yet the distinction is not without critique. Mikkola (2011) contends that the sex-gender binary can carry problematic ontological implications, implying that the ultimate feminist goal is the erasure of gender categories altogether-an aim that may not resonate with individuals who find personal and political meaning in gendered identities. The feminist effort to unmoor gender from biology risks alienating those whose lived experiences are grounded in gender identification rather than abstraction.

Similarly, Prokhovnik (1999) and Grosz (1994) caution that the sex-gender distinction may inadvertently replicate dualistic thinking-mind over body, culture over nature—that has long been used to justify women's oppression. By assigning gender to the realm of social construct and sex to biological fact, the framework can inadvertently privilege masculinity, reinforcing the association of men with choice and reason, and women with corporeality and constraint. Lloyd (1993) notes that this logic often materializes in real-world practices, such as employment discrimination where women are questioned about reproductive intentions while men are presumed to be unencumbered by such concerns.

The 2024 Thai marriage equality law illustrates the limits of symbolic progress. While legally inclusive in its language and implications for same-sex couples, the law stops short of recognizing gender as a spectrum or legitimizing identities beyond the binary (Kingdom of Thailand, 2025). The state's continued assignment of sex at birth and refusal to permit legal recognition of third-gender or non-binary identities exemplifies how even progressive legislation can perpetuate exclusion. In this light, the sex-gender distinction remains a necessary but insufficient tool-vital for unsettling dominant frameworks, yet always requiring continual interrogation to avoid reifying the very binaries it seeks to undo.

Feminist Foreign Policy and International Relations

Feminist foreign policy was first introduced in 2014 by Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström. Conceptually, a feminist foreign policy is one which takes as a basis women's historical and contemporary inferiority within the structural balance of power embedded within hierarchies of a social, economic and political nature (Thomson, 2022; Uspenskaya and Kozlova, 2022; Zhukova, 2023). Within this paradigm of state engagement is the understanding that women's positions within structures are based in unequal distributions of power that effect women's opportunities in employment, government, education, marriage, reproductive rights as well as a host of other areas of social, cultural and political life (Zhukova, 2023). Sweden as the pioneer of had at its core the nexus between notions of gender equality and security. Security in this sense refers to both traditional state security issues such as war, peace and reconciliation as well as non-traditional or human security issues (Aggestam and Rosamond, 2019; Rosamond, 2020). Sweden's first foray into its feminist paradigm was one of advocating vigorously for women's reproductive rights within the context of women's rights being human rights (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016). It has been argued that Sweden's policy paradigm is not novel but rather 'postcolonialism' dressed up as feminism (Nylund, Håkansson and Bjarnegård, 2022). Sikkink and Clapp have argued that this approach is one of a broader understanding of applied justice from a core to periphery through policy tools which enhance opportunities to create conditions for appropriate application of gender and identity-based policies to targeted groups (Sikkink and Clapp, 2024). It has been argued that there is delicate line between adding women into the discussion on policy and one of simply advocating which is an important distinction as one advances a notion of having a seat at the table of discussion and power and the other an external role of disruptor (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2019). The approach pioneered by

Sweden has been seen as an attractive model for the EU to take up into ESFP and other foreign policy areas such as the Neighborhood Policy (Guerrina, Haastrup and Katharine, 2023.

Canada and the United States followed later (though the United States largely in legislation rather than executive action) through the approach of widening the spheres of women's engagement and empowerment of the women's reproductive rights but extending this into education, work, political life and freedom from violence (Angevine, 2021; Chapnick, 2019; Sundström and Elgström, 2019; Thomson, 2020). Israel and Germany have also taken up aspects this in their foreign policy engagement through military participation as well as the political arena by providing quota's and encouraging participation in political life and structures through policy-based programming (Aran and Brummer, 2024). More recently this has spread from the Global North to the Global South, albeit in a much slower fashion. Mexico was the first Global South country to implement a feminist paradigm into its foreign policy approach under the rubric of an intersection approach to global issues. At the heart of Mexico's policy is one of multilateralism and legal based instruments as exhibited in Mexico's advocacy for OAS and Inter-America's human rights treaties and UN human rights treaties. This is anchored in not only advocating for ratification but also implementation of legally binding treaties into national legislation, policy, programming and budgeting (Zhukova, Sundström and Elgström, 2021).

Canada's 2017 Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) represents a form of liberal governance feminism, primarily focused on development aid. Morton, Muchiri, and Swiss (2020) critique the approach for framing gender inequality as a matter of individual agency rather than structural transformation, often sidelining intersectional analysis. Although the OECD has acknowledged Canada's commitment to gender-focused aid, allocating approximately 15% of

bilateral development assistance to women's empowerment, evaluative frameworks remain limited (Morton et al., 2020).

Germany's feminist foreign policy, formally announced in 2021 and integrated into its 2023 National Security Strategy, mirrors Sweden's foundational model of rights, representation, and resources, but adds a fourth pillar: diversity. The Federal Foreign Office has committed to ensuring that 85% of its project funding is gender-sensitive by 2025 (Rotmann, 2022). Rotmann also notes significant improvements in gender parity among foreign service recruits and the designation of gender advisors. Yet, entrenched military paradigms, limited monitoring, and unclear implementation strategies present notable challenges.

Sweden, as the originator of feminist foreign policy, has institutionalized FFP through mechanisms such as gender focal points in embassies, mandatory training, and a dedicated policy handbook. These developments reflect Sweden's status as a "gender cosmopolitan" state and its reliance on digital diplomacy as a soft power tool (Bergman-Rosamond, 2020). However, its credibility has occasionally been undermined by contradictions between rhetoric and practice-especially arms exports to authoritarian states and restrictive refugee policies that conflict with its stated feminist commitments (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016).

France launched its feminist diplomacy in 2018–2019 and later created a €250 million fund to support feminist organizations between 2023 and 2027. However, Thompson and Clement (2020) criticize the initiative for lacking conceptual coherence and robust institutionalization. The absence of clear goals and cross-sectoral mechanisms has limited France's ability to align its feminist branding with consistent implementation.

Spain's feminist foreign policy, adopted in 2020 and formalized in an action plan for 2023–2024, is grounded in strong domestic gender equality legislation. Its co-chair role in the UN Feminist Foreign Policy+ group and stated

emphasis on intersectionality mark it as a normatively ambitious actor. Still, limited funding, underdeveloped monitoring systems, and inadequate inter-ministerial coordination pose barriers to realization (Thompson & Clement, 2020).

Dimension	Canada	Germany	Sweden	France	Spain
Inception	2017 (FIAP)	2021, NSS guidelines 2023	2014 (FFP launch)	2018–19 (strategy), fund from 2023	2020 strategy, action plan 2023–24
Scope	Aid-focused	Comprehensive (diplomacy, security, trade)	Fully comprehensive	Diplomacy-centered, cross-sectoral	Comprehensive; domestic–foreign coherence
Institutional embedding	Medium; ministry-level leadership	High; NSS integration, gender targets, ambassadors	Very high; ministry-wide, manuals, training	Low-medium; fund but no unified policy	Medium; addressing structural reforms at cross-ministry
Budgetary commitment	~15% bilateral aid to gender equality	85% of external projects gender-sensitive by 2025	Significant ODA reallocation	€250m feminist fund; broader budget unclear	Moderate external funding; strong domestic funding

Dimension	Canada	Germany	Sweden	France	Spain
Monitoring	Limited evaluative frameworks	Targets exist but impact assessment weak	Largely self-reporting, few impact metrics	Weak logic and monitoring systems	M&E systems remain underdeveloped
Intersectionality	Moderate; guided by GBA+ principles	Explicit diversity pillar; stronger	Moderate; cis-normative critiques persist	Weak; limited inclusion of LGBTQ+ or environment nexus	Strong; intersectionality emphasized in policy
Key tensions	Sectoral limits; weak structural transformation	Militarized norms clash with feminist logic	Arms exports and migration policy inconsistencies	Conceptual vagueness and lack of coordination	Limited resources; inter-ministerial gaps

The outward expressions of a feminist foreign policy are varied be it from a public, private or hybrid model of governance, policy or advocacy (Hudson, 2017). Regardless of the means the central animating feature of a feminist foreign policy is one of advocating for gender equality through programming, policy, diplomacy as well as other various means of social engagement.

Conclusion

The distinction between sex and gender remains one of the most enduring yet contentious conceptual frameworks within feminist theory and politics. Central to this debate is the question of what it means to be a "woman" in contemporary society—a category that is simultaneously invoked as a basis for political mobilization and interrogated as a site of normative regulation. Traditionally, womanhood has been delineated through a matrix of bodily features, social behaviors, and culturally prescribed roles. However, feminist theorists such as Alcoff (2006) have persuasively argued that these definitional markers are neither essential nor stable, and that they risk reifying biologically deterministic understandings of gender.

The analytic separation of sex from gender has offered a crucial intervention in this regard, allowing for a conceptual space in which to challenge the naturalization of gender roles and to recognize gender as a mutable, socially constructed identity. This theoretical move has enabled important critiques of heteronormativity and patriarchal power, while also supporting more inclusive understandings of identity that reflect the diverse lived experiences of individuals across the gender spectrum. Yet, this same distinction introduces a paradox for feminist politics: in order to organize effectively for women's rights, a shared referent—"woman"—is often presumed, even as its ontological stability is contested. This tension becomes especially visible in culturally specific contexts, such as the case of the Thai kathoeys, whose embodiment and self-identification as women illustrate both the performativity of gender and the persistence of gendered coherence. Their existence foregrounds the complexities of global gender practices, while underscoring the challenges of applying Western feminist categories in diverse cultural milieus.

As Young (1997) and Alcoff (2006) have noted, one of the theoretical risks of decoupling sex from gender lies in the potential disintegration of collective political identity. If the category “woman” is rendered entirely contingent, there is the danger of atomizing feminist solidarity into an assemblage of individualized experiences, lacking a unifying political subject. At the same time, the continued uncritical alignment of gender expression with biological sex undermines the radical potential of feminist critique, reinforcing the very binary logics-male/female, masculine/feminine-that feminists have long sought to dismantle.

Emerging discourses around non-binary, intersex, and gender-nonconforming identities challenge the adequacy of the traditional sex-gender framework. As Lippa (2005) has shown, the proliferation of gender identities beyond the binary complicates efforts to sustain sex and gender as discrete, analytically useful categories. These developments demand that feminist theory evolve in response, resisting the reductionism that has often accompanied earlier conceptualizations. While the sex-gender distinction played a foundational role in disrupting essentialist notions of identity, its capacity to explain the full spectrum of contemporary gender experience is increasingly called into question.

Nonetheless, the continued relevance of this distinction must be assessed not by its conceptual purity, but by its political utility. When deployed critically, the sex-gender split remains a powerful tool for exposing and resisting biological determinism. It has underpinned efforts to decenter cisnormativity, interrogate normative family structures, and protect the rights of individuals whose identities diverge from conventional expectations. Moreover, it sustains the epistemological and ethical imperative to view gender not as a fixed essence but as a relational construct shaped by power, history, and institutional arrangements.

In this light, the task before feminist scholars and activists is not to abandon the sex-gender distinction, but to interrogate its limitations and recalibrate its application. It is essential to recognize that even as the category of “woman” remains politically necessary for legal protections, health rights, and social recognition, it must also be understood as internally diverse, unstable, and contextually defined. The challenge lies in maintaining strategic coherence without succumbing to exclusionary or reductionist definitions.

A future research agenda should pursue the development of post-binary frameworks that are both theoretically rigorous and politically actionable. Such frameworks must reckon with the practical demands of legal reform, educational curriculum design, and grassroots activism. They must explore how institutional recognition can accommodate fluid and intersecting identities without relying on fixed categories that reinforce normative hierarchies. For instance, legal scholars might investigate the feasibility of third-gender or non-gendered classifications in public documentation; pedagogical theorists could examine curricula that teach gender as historically and culturally contingent; activists might devise organizing strategies that mobilize around shared values rather than fixed identities.

Ultimately, the sex-gender distinction must be approached as a historically situated tool-one that has enabled substantial feminist gains but is not immune to critique or revision. Its enduring value lies in its ability to open up political and conceptual space for contesting oppression, while its limitations underscore the need for continued innovation in feminist thought. Critical engagement, intersectionality, and global contextualization must guide this ongoing project, ensuring that feminist theory remains responsive to the lived realities of all gendered subjects.

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