CONTENTS

Series Editor’s Foreword ix
Acknowledgements xiii

Introduction: Gender and everyday life 1

1 Sexed bodies? 15
2 Learning and doing gender in everyday life 34
3 Gendered relationships in everyday life 58
4 Resisting gender in everyday life 81
5 The future of gender 107

Conclusion: Gender, everyday life and degendering 129

References 144
Index 157
Think about what you have done so far today. How much of it would be different and how much the same if you were a member of the opposite sex? It is not just a matter of having different bits to wash in the shower. Did you shave your face or not? Did you apply make-up? How did you adorn your body once cleaned? Were jewellery, frills and high heels involved? When you ate breakfast did you count every calorie or worry about your lack of muscle? Did you eat breakfast at all? When you left the house how did your day differ from that of your siblings or friends of the opposite sex? Did you go to different types of jobs, attend lectures in different subjects, play different types of sport, have different conversations, different worries, engage in or imagine different types of careers? Maybe you did, but maybe there were a lot of similarities. Contrary to the way we talk a lot of the time, women and men are not different species. Yet everyday life is organized in ways that constantly distinguish women from men.

People tend to believe that women and men are naturally different, that they have different bodies, different biology, different psychology and therefore they act differently. The problem with this argument is that it usually suggests that how women and
men live their everyday lives cannot or even should not be changed. But as most young people will tell you, the world is not the same as it was for their parents or grandparents, and they should not be expected to behave in the same way. What sociology can do is help us understand to what extent there are differences between women and men, why, and how significant they are. It can also help us understand change. It does this by looking at the way in which the social environment shapes women’s and men’s lives differently, how it genders them.

GENDERED LANGUAGE AND GENDERING EVERYDAY LIFE

In examining gender, sociologists and others in similar disciplines have developed a shorthand for discussing sometimes complex ideas. In other words, there is some special language used in the sociology of gender. Key terms (in bold type) are explained as they arise within each chapter, but there are some oft-used concepts that are worth mentioning here in order to introduce sociological thinking on gender in everyday life.

One of the most important things that sociologists do is distinguish between sex and gender. **Sex** refers to whether a person is considered female or male, based on the kind of body they have. **Gender** describes the ideas and practices that constitute femininity and masculinity. As we will see, male and female and masculine and feminine are not necessarily clear and opposite categories. Some people may have bodies and/or act in ways that do not neatly fit the labels male/masculine or female/feminine. And whether sex really describes something different from gender is open to question. However, it is important as a starting point to think of sex as about the bodily bits we have and gender as about social meanings.

Sociologists are interested in the social construction of gender, which means looking at how the way that society is organized shapes us into particular kinds of women and men. This shaping
happens through large-scale social organization and through everyday interactions that we usually take for granted. For example, on the large scale, social institutions such as family, school, the workplace and the media teach us that girls should act in certain ways, such as being caring, and boys in different ways, such as being strong and independent. This process of teaching us how to behave is called socialization and it is highly gendered. But these institutions not only pass on ideas about how girls and boys are expected to act but channel girls and boys into doing different kinds of things. Girls and boys are dressed in different kinds of clothes, do different school subjects, usually end up in different jobs and are portrayed differently in everything from magazines to movies to television shows. From birth, girl children and boy children are treated differently, and every day of our lives involves interacting with other people according to their gender. We talk to girls/women differently about different things, assuming they are more delicate and will be interested in, say, clothes or children or cooking. Meanwhile, boys/men are treated as though they are tough and likely to be interested in sport or cars. Differences can be a good thing, however it is often women who have been thought different from men, who are assumed to be ‘normal’ and superior to women. Sociologists challenge such common-sense ideas.

While many people now believe that women and men are equal, this book will show that societies are still organized in ways that tend to benefit men more than they benefit women. We live within a patriarchy, a society largely controlled by men and in which men usually have a greater share of the rewards (both in terms of wealth and status) available. Even if men are uncomfortable with this and would like to change it, they still benefit from living within a male-dominated society. Sociologists have noted that gender is a major boundary around which resources and prestige and power are divided, with the majority of women often struggling to keep control over their lives. Therefore, in understanding gender it is important to examine and explain the
apparent inequalities between men and women, and how they impact on people in everyday life.

The important thing about sociological views of gender is that change is thought possible. The problem with many arguments which insist that women and men are ‘naturally’ different is that it is assumed that things therefore will or should always stay as they are. Although inequalities are persistent they are not inevitable and sociology allows us to imagine that we could organize our world in a way that would benefit women and men more equally.

The everydayness of gender is central to this book. Life is lived mostly in the detail and much of that detail is taken for granted. Women put on make-up in the morning without really thinking about why. Men shave or trim their beards, but seldom stop to ponder these practices. In unusual circumstances, or if things go ‘wrong’, people are sometimes jogged into reflecting on the constant distinctions made between women and men. For example, in a busy cinema women may wonder why they are queuing for the women’s toilets while the men waltz quickly in and out of the men’s. This is a fairly trivial example of things going ‘wrong’ but small disruptions can be enough to upset the taken-for-grantedness. This small inconvenience raises several questions: Why do we have public toilets designated as either men’s or women’s when at home everyone shares the same toilet? Why are there not queues forming at the men’s toilets? Possible answers are that Western culture views the expelling of human waste as shameful and disgusting, and so there is thought to be a need to protect women and men who are strangers from witnessing each other’s bodily functions so that sexual mystique can be maintained. Also, common differences in women’s and men’s bodies, the kinds of clothing they wear and the types of toilets provided (men can use urinals) make it quicker for men to go to the toilet than women. This means that more cubicles are needed in women’s toilets but that has not often been taken into account by planners, architects and developers, who are conscious mostly of costs (Edwards and McKie 1996). It is how the social
environment is organized that leaves women waiting for the loo. The ‘trick’ of sociology is to turn a fresh eye on such social organization, including everyday gender practices. One famous formulation of how this ‘trick’ works is called the sociological imagination.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND GENDER

The sociological imagination is a way of understanding the world that sees individuals as a product of the social world in which they live. The phrase comes from a book of that name by the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959). Mills argues that what sociologists, and indeed everyone, can do to better understand the world is to consider how each person’s life is caught up in the history of their times. It is easy to illustrate what this means in relation to differences between women’s and men’s lives. Imagine you were a young, lower-middle-class Englishwoman in the late nineteenth century. You might write about your day in a diary:

10 February 1898

I really have had no time to come here before, and as usual, now I am here I have forgotten all my deeds. On Sunday Ewart and his sister Nellie came to ask us to tea in the afternoon. It was a very long way to his house which is 108 Heigham Road, East Ham. There are six of them alive and six dead. Mrs Johnson is very nice.

On Monday afternoon I went up to the day school to tell Mrs Osborne that Daisy and I had left. I have not been for weeks. I have been to the Doctor’s four times and he says I am not strong enough for teaching and so I am going to stay at home and help Mother for a little while with the blouse work she sometimes does for a friend. Daisy is going as an apprentice to a dressmaker next week I think. Mrs Osborne was sorry and said all the nice girls were leaving. Also that she would be pleased to see us any afternoon we had to spare. In the evening we went to night school.

(Ruth, cited in Thompson 1987: 20–21)
This is a real diary entry by a 13-year-old called Ruth. It would contrast with that of a young man at the same time, as well as being different from the everyday life of a young woman today. She writes in a diary, not an online blog, she sends letters rather than texts to her best friend. She walks a long way to a friend’s house rather than being driven. Ruth notes rather casually that only six of her friend’s twelve brothers and sisters are still living; but it was common then for children to die before they were five. Ruth is leaving school at the age of 13 and about to start work, helping her mother sew blouses at home. Even had she been able to afford more education, universities had only just become open to women, and only the most privileged women went. She could not look forward to voting when she turned 18 as women were not given the right to vote in Britain until 1918, and then they had to be 30. However, as a result of new laws passed in the 1890s, if Ruth married she would be able to continue to legally own property after marriage, unlike her mother whose property automatically became her husband’s. Meanwhile, if Ruth had a brother he may have found his job as a secretary or clerk was disappearing as the invention of the typewriter and the increased numbers of women who could be paid less in the workforce saw clerical work change from a male to a largely female occupation (Rendall 1985; Lowe 1987). Indeed it is clerical work that Ruth ends up doing. Changes in society, in social and historical conditions, have consequences for the kinds of lives that individual women and men can lead.

History, as Mills uses it, does not just mean what happened in the past, but refers to the wider circumstances within which people live. Giddens’ (1986: 13) interpretation of Mills is useful in understanding these circumstances. He says that they can be comprehended by looking at the past, by comparing how different groups of people do things, and by thinking critically. This version of the sociological imagination as historical, comparative and critical, forms the central framework for this book so I want to spend a little time examining each of the aspects noted, and how they help us understand gender and everyday life.
HISTORY, GENDER AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Small people get caught up in large events. What it means for someone to be a woman or a man is different depending on the historical period in which they live. Drawing loosely on nineteenth-century research by Friederich Engels (1969/1845) and later investigations by scholars such as Sheila Rowbotham (1972), I want to think more about an individual’s day and how each part of that day will differ depending on the time and place in which they live. What time someone gets up will depend on what kind of work they have to perform that day. Prior to the Industrial Revolution people usually worked on the land or in cottage industries and so they didn’t travel to work. Before the mid-twentieth century only a small proportion of mothers went out to paid work, so the time they got up was related to their children’s ages and timetables, as well as how much work they did in getting husbands off to their jobs. The kinds of things that people did in the morning differed. Before indoor plumbing was available, washing oneself was likely to be cursory or non-existent. The kind of clothes that women and men put on were very different to those worn today; prior to the 1920s women did not wear trousers, for instance. Before most of our food was mass produced, preparing breakfast involved rather more effort than pouring out a bowl of cornflakes, and many women may have had to go out to milk the cow to get the milk for the porridge or to rise especially early to light the fire in the range and perhaps start baking some bread. When most of the population still worked in agriculture men of the peasant classes would no doubt be up at dawn and do a few hours of backbreaking work in the fields before returning to eat breakfast. Women of the same class were also likely to be out working on the land, but were also expected to prepare food for the men’s return. Schooling was not made compulsory in much of Europe, the British Empire and America until the 1870s, and until then children of the working classes were likely to be at work, doing dangerous jobs in the new factories, or down the mines or...
cleaning chimneys in the houses of the wealthy. The older girls in a family were likely to be looking after their younger brothers and sisters while their parents worked. It was difficult for nineteenth-century women to control their fertility, and the paid and unpaid work they did was increased by the relentless arrival of new additions to the family—although many children died in their first five years. Indeed, many women died in childbirth; therefore death was much more a feature of everyday life than it is in the present day. In many communities it was the women who prepared the bodies of the deceased to be laid out and did much of the work of providing for mourners. Whatever work a day had involved, the hours were long. Men might enjoy a drink at the end of a hard day, perhaps at the local pub. However, even in the mid-twentieth century in Britain and its former colonies, women were prohibited from entering most ‘public’ bars, and ‘respectable’ women would have entered lounge bars only in the company of male relatives. When it finally came time to retire to bed most Victorian children would have shared a bed with other siblings and slept in the same room as their parents. Clearly what women and men got up to after dark would have been rather constrained by such circumstances. All or some of these things may be unfamiliar to those of you reading this now, because of changes in the wider world in which we live.

A jumble of things are described above, but sociologists can make sense of the kinds of changes mentioned by looking at the patterns of large-scale social changes. Mills (1959) talks about this in terms of drawing a distinction between private troubles and public issues. If one woman was thrown out of a pub for drinking too much that might be a private trouble; however, if any woman who set foot in a public bar was breaking the law, that was a public issue. If one young man failed to find work in times of prosperity because he was thought unreliable that was a private trouble; it became a public issue if many young men found it hard to get work because women and children were cheaper to employ within the new factories springing up in the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries. If a married woman chooses to give up her job because she wants to stay at home and care for her young children, that may be a personal decision; however, if getting married meant that you had to give up your job, as it did for married women teachers even in the early twentieth century, that was a public issue to do with social expectations and social organization around gender.

The major pattern that sociologists see in bringing social change, including that relating to gender, was the shift from an agricultural to an industrial society, which brought about modernity. Modernity is a phase in which everyday life lost its connection to tradition and people had to develop new ways of living. Most of the population moved from rural to urban areas during the nineteenth century and these urban areas rapidly grew. Instead of relying on farming and small craft industries to meet their daily needs most people had to work for wages, often in appalling conditions within factories. Having worked at, around or very close to home, now many people went ‘out’ to work and this separation of home and work had a profound impact on family life, especially as child labour became less acceptable and pressure was put on women to stay at home and care for children, even though working families could not survive on the male wage alone. Individual women and men faced new possibilities, but also new problems as a result of the huge changes happening around them. These changes continue and sociologists, as we shall see, are currently debating how to talk about them. Some argue that we are now in late modernity, where processes of individualization (people being encouraged and/or forced to rely on themselves) and globalization (the speeded-up connections between parts of the world) are crucial in shaping the everyday lives of women and men. But not all women and men are affected in the same ways.
COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO GENDER

The point of comparisons is to establish that gender is shaped differently by different social environments. This assists in understanding that differences between women and men are not simply a product of their biology. If biology determined women’s and men’s behaviour, we would expect all women and all men to be more or less the same. However, this is not the case. So far I have made a lot of generalizations, and sociology can help us talk about what was and is happening to most people, but it also helps us see how different groups are affected differently by what is going on in society. One of the major differences in which sociologists have been interested since the discipline emerged almost 200 years ago, is class. Differences between cultures and other ways of grouping people to make comparisons are also discussed.

Class describes a grouping of people who share a similar degree of wealth and status within a society. Karl Marx, considered one of the founders of sociology, concentrated on class as being about the kind of work people did. He distinguished the main classes in modernity as the capitalists, or bourgeoisie, who owned the factories and other businesses, and the workers, or proletariat, who had to sell their labour to survive. He thought that classes were inevitably in conflict with each other and that was how social change happened. Max Weber, another founder of sociology, thought that it was not only the work people did and how much money they had that was important, but the amount of prestige they had. For example, some aristocrats may have no money left but are still highly regarded; meanwhile some prostitutes may make a lot of money but are not respected. Class is a complex issue, and class divisions shift, but it is still a useful category. It helps us understand how and why different groups share unequally in the resources and rewards society has to offer. What is crucial in terms of this book is that not all women are the same and not all men are the same. Working-class women are likely to share similar experiences of gender that are different to those of middle-class women.
Patterns can be seen connecting upper-class men’s lives, for whom economic privilege and status will give them advantages not shared by working-class men. Some examples are given in Chapter 2 about how ways of being feminine differ in different classes, thus illustrating social variations in gender.

The examination of cultural differences in gender is another way in which the importance of the social can be established. This is the point at which sociology overlaps with, or turns to, anthropology. Anthropologists have tended to study traditional, non-Western societies, while sociologists have looked at modern Western societies. This is not a hard-and-fast distinction, but whether comparing Papua New Guinea and the United States, or Scotland and Australia, the differences between cultures reveal a great deal about how gender is socially constructed. One society may have completely different ways of understanding and doing femininity and masculinity to another. For example, in Chapter 1, we will discuss tribes who have other categories to classify people in between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’. Yet these are not the only differences to note.

Other comparisons can be made between women and men of different ages, with different locations in relation to power, or at different stages of life – for example, before and after having families. Of course, not all women and men form the same kinds of families or relationships, as Chapter 3 notes. There we use quite a common comparison within sociology, that between groups doing things in conventional ways and those who are different or ‘deviant’. Sometimes the non-conventional groups are at the forefront of social change and this may be the case with those with new ways of organizing their intimate lives that move away from traditional ideas about gender. Alternatively, it can be useful to compare more powerful groups with less powerful groups. One example of this appears in Chapter 4, where, having looked at histories of women’s resistance, we look at the rather different project of men who resist norms around masculinity. Comparisons can primarily be descriptive, outlining how one group of
people differs from another. However, they can also be a crucial background to and/or component in critical thinking.

**CRITICAL THINKING**

Sociologies of gender are not simply about differences between women and men but about the social hierarchies and inequalities that arise from the social construction of gender. A critical stance on gender involves thinking about why men usually have more privileges and power than women. Sociology strives to go beyond describing the social world and endeavours to understand why it is as it is and how it could be otherwise. Critical thinking is to do with examining the strengths and limitations of various ideas and ways of life. In many ways a critical approach within sociology includes the elements already discussed. A critical approach to gender is assisted by looking at how gender has had other meanings and been done very differently at different times and within different cultures, different classes and other different social groups. Sociologists of gender try to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of these different ways of doing gender. Generally, past ways of doing things may have been more restrictive for women; however, there may have been some ways in which women had more control over their lives – for example, there are disadvantages to current expectations that women both have careers and be highly involved as mothers. Similarly, care needs to be taken in assuming that men have more control over women in other cultures. This usually underestimates the limitations many Western women face in their lives, and lumps together all non-Western men and women as somehow ‘backward’. There are many examples that might challenge these stereotypes – one is to consider women in political power. The African nation of Rwanda currently has the highest percentage of women in a national parliament; almost half the MPs are women, whereas in the United States only 16 per cent of those in the House of Representatives are women (Inter-parliamentary Union 2007).
Another crucial aspect of thinking critically is to examine existing debates around sociological issues such as gender. Not all sociologists agree, and the task of sociological thinking is not to establish the truth but to try to forge better understandings of how the world works. Various explanations, or theories, are forwarded by different groups of sociologists and other scholars in trying to understand gender. In the critical section of each chapter, I evaluate some of these different sets of ideas, and give an assessment of some of their strengths and limitations. I encourage you as readers to add your own critical assessment to mine. And, in order to stimulate critical thinking further, I offer a whole chapter on the future of gender, the main purpose of which is to examine ways in which gender may be done very differently in years to come.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

To begin to imagine different possibilities requires understanding how society presently divides people according to whether they are women or men, expecting them to think, act and feel differently. Gender will be explored as the socially constructed and socially practised differences between masculinity and femininity. This means looking at how people live their everyday lives in a world where what it means to be a woman or a man is uncertain and changing. The framework of the book will be based on the interpretation of the sociological imagination I have outlined as involving historical, comparative and critical analysis (Mills 1959; Giddens 1986: 13). To understand gender will involve seeing how femininity and masculinity have been understood and lived in the past (history), how they are understood and done differently by different cultures and groups within cultures (comparative), and what might be the strengths and limitations of different ways of thinking and doing gender (critical analysis). This understanding will be clearer if we constantly keep in mind how gender is lived in everyday life. Therefore the book considers gender as something that is lived and experienced from within particular types of