



## 1. Equality, gender equality and gender – an introduction

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*This text is part of a series of publications on gender research and gender equality that has been produced by researchers at KTH as part of the efforts at KTH to integrate knowledge about gender equality, diversity and equal conditions in education. The purpose of the series is to disseminate, in an accessible way, knowledge from gender research in various subject areas that are relevant to students, doctoral students and teachers at KTH.*

The following text contains an introduction to the terms equality and gender equality and the way in which they represent political goals. The scientific term gender and certain underlying ideologies and research areas are also introduced in order to highlight where knowledge in this field comes from. The text is based on a vast field of research which is summarised in the works listed in the list of references.

### *Equality and gender equality*

Equality is a political term that refers to fair and equitable conditions among all individuals and groups in society and is based on an ideological standpoint of human rights and the principle that all human beings are created equal and are of equal worth. For example, in the Swedish Instrument of Government (SFS 2018:1903) it is stated that "the public institutions shall work to promote the opportunity for all to attain participation and equality in society and for the rights of the child to be safeguarded. The public institutions shall combat discrimination of persons on grounds of gender, colour, national or ethnic origin, linguistic or religious affiliation, functional disability, sexual orientation, age or other circumstance affecting the individual." Equality within politics has to do with democracy, whereas economic equality concerns matters such as equitable access to education and equitable distribution of income and wealth. Equality therefore entails both equitable conditions and equitable outcomes.

Equality has also been identified as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Many of the Sustainable Development Goals are associated with various aspects of equality, and an overall ambition has therefore been formulated to "Leave no one behind". There is also a specific goal, SDG 10 – "Reduced inequalities" – which has to do with reducing inequality within and among countries. Among the targets associated with this goal are the targets of reducing income inequalities, promoting social, economic and political inclusion, and ensuring equal opportunities and freedom from discrimination for all.

While the term equality is used more generally, the term gender equality is used to focus on the relationship between the genders. Gender equality means that everyone, regardless of gender, has the same rights, obligations and opportunities within all areas of life. In Sweden, for example, there is an overall political goal that women and men shall have the same power to shape society and their own lives. This goal was adopted with widespread political consensus in 2006 and has been broken down into six sub-goals:

1. Equal distribution of power and influence. Women and men shall have the same rights and opportunities to be active citizens and to shape conditions for decision-making.
2. Economic gender equality. Women and men shall have the same opportunities and conditions with regard to paid work which provides them with economic independence throughout their lives.
3. Gender equality in education. Women and men, girls and boys shall have the same opportunities and conditions with regard to education, study options and personal development.
4. Equal distribution of unpaid housework and provision of care. Women and men shall have the same responsibility for housework and shall have opportunities to provide and receive care on equal terms.
5. Gender equality in health. Women and men, girls and boys shall have the same conditions for good health and shall be offered healthcare and care on equal terms.
6. Men's violence against women must cease. Women and men, girls and boys shall have the same right to and opportunity for physical integrity.

In other words, gender equality has to do with an equitable distribution of power, influence and resources, and the human right to live a life without discrimination and violence. The various goals are based on statistics and research which indicate the existence of gender inequality in society, in other words, that women and men are treated differently, and that this also affects their conditions for life in different ways.

As with equality, gender equality has also been identified as a Sustainable Development Goal in the UN's 2030 Agenda. For SDG 5 – "Gender equality" – there are six targets:

- 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.
- 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.
- 5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.
- 5.4 Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.
- 5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.
- 5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

Gender equality is also often viewed as a prerequisite for the achievement of other Sustainable Development Goals. For example, analyses show that women have a greater level of climate engagement when it comes to both values and action, and climate issues are therefore expected to be more highly prioritised on the political agenda with more women in decision-making bodies. There are also analyses which indicate that gender equality has a positive effect on a country's economic growth as a result of increased access to labour and utilisation of the population's total pool of skills, knowledge and abilities. For example, studies show that, on average, women in developing countries invest a higher percentage of the household's income in the family's welfare and the children's health and education than what men do, which creates better conditions for the next generation and contributes, in the long term, to economic growth in the country. In the business community, it is also common to view gender equality and equality as a means of achieving other goals, for example increased efficiency in businesses, business development and increased growth.

In many everyday contexts, gender equality is often associated with issues that concern problems and injustices against women, and "the women's cause" was an early name used in reference to gender equality measures. That the term gender equality is often associated with women can be understood on the basis that it is primarily women who have pointed out that, and have identified the ways in which, women are disadvantaged in the patriarchal social order. This unequal power relationship also affects men, which is why it is important to remember that gender

equality does not just concern women, but rather the power relationship between the genders.

Furthermore, discussions regarding gender equality tend to be based on a binary understanding of gender. There are two categories of gender, women and men, that dominate our society, and these are, for example, the two legal forms of gender referred to in the Swedish legislation. There are, however, people who either cannot or do not wish to be included in one of these two categories of gender, but who are affected by the view of gender that exists in society. There are also voices in the social debate that are calling for a broader understanding of gender and the existence of more categories of gender than the two main categories mentioned above. Gender equality can therefore be said to mean that everyone, regardless of gender, not just women and men, has the same rights, obligations and opportunities within all areas of life.

Furthermore, the gender categories women and men are often viewed as homogeneous categories, but research indicates that there are differences in conditions within these categories which are related to other inequalities in society. For example, in Sweden, women with a foreign background have, on average, worse economic conditions, greater difficulties entering the labour market, lower levels of income and worse health than women with a Swedish background. Gender equality therefore also has to do with other aspects of equality, just as gender equality is an issue that intersects all aspects of equality. Consequently, gender equality cannot be disconnected from equality or viewed as a narrower issue than equality. A common point of departure has therefore been that gender is always of importance but that it is never the only aspect that is of importance.

The term diversity is often associated with equality and gender equality and pertains to differences between individuals and groups. In Swedish politics, the term "mångfald" (diversity in Swedish) started to be used during the 1990s when issues concerning immigration and integration appeared on the political agenda. Since then, the understanding of diversity in Sweden has also come to include other dimensions such as age, physical ability (or disability) and sexuality. This understanding has been influenced by the American discourse on diversity, which emphasises appreciating differences between people, and the benefits of making the most of these differences. However, research has identified that one risk associated with the use of the term diversity is that focus is not placed on combating differences in conditions, but rather that it instead reproduces stereotypical perceptions of different groups.

### *Gender*

In comparison with the three terms equality, gender equality and diversity, all of which are characterised by political objectives and measures intended to achieve

change in practice, the term gender is different. Gender is a scientific concept that is used within research to capture meanings of gender. It is understood as a sorting principle based on perceived differences. In our culture we divide people into two groups, women and men, and we assign certain characteristics (femininity and masculinity) to these groups. Not only do we often view these characteristics as different, we often understand them as being opposites to each other. Furthermore, these characteristics are associated with different things or phenomena in our society. In research, this is described using various concepts, e.g. gender marking, gendering or gender coding, that capture the same phenomenon, namely that we associate various phenomena, such as occupations, work duties, roles and positions, with either masculinity or femininity. These associations and assignments of category are reflected in how our societies are structured and have an impact on people's lives, regardless of whether or not we identify with the category in which we have been placed. However, research shows that the meaning of being a woman or a man, and of femininity or masculinity, is not constant but rather varies across time and place. There is, however, one recurring pattern in most societies we are aware of – namely that men and masculinity are valued more highly than women and femininity. Gender is thus a power relationship, a relationship that also interacts with other power relationships such as class, ethnicity, race, physical ability, age and sexuality.

The point of departure is that gender is understood as a social construction, in other words, socially and culturally created notions, norms and values that vary in different contexts and change over time. These social constructions have consequences in terms of how we view biological differences. With a gender perspective, human beings are not viewed as creatures that are determined by their biology. Instead, the point of departure is that behaviour and characteristics are affected by a complex interaction between hereditary and environmental factors, and that it is difficult to distinguish clear causalities between biological differences and social differences that apply regardless of time and place.

Knowledge of how gender is reproduced has been influenced by various feminist ideologies, that is, ideas about how society should be, how society works and thus also why members of different genders encounter different conditions. Even though gender research often has an explicit emancipatory ambition, i.e. that it aims to generate knowledge that contributes to an equal distribution of power between the genders, this does not mean that gender research is more ideological or political than other types of research. Gender research has highlighted that research can never be neutral and free from ideology, but rather that it is always partial and biased, which is why this requires awareness and reflection on the part of the researcher.

Two influential feminist ideologies have their origins in the established ideologies of Marxism and liberalism. Marxist feminism takes its ideological bearings from the unequal power relationship between the genders that arises from capitalism and the

power of capitalism over work. A prerequisite for work is that the worker has someone else who performs the unpaid housework in the home, and capitalism thus derives benefit from the unequal distribution of work duties between the genders in the home. Men's power over women is therefore viewed as a result of capitalism's power over work. Marxist feminism has also highlighted the role of the ideology in reproducing perceptions of gender. Within liberal feminism, gender inequality is not viewed as a result of social structures but rather as a consequence of a large number of individual injustices, such as the fact that women do not have the same rights and opportunities for education and work as men, or the existence of sexist attitudes among individuals which contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality.

Within a third ideology, radical feminism, the male superiority is deemed to stem from men's control over women's bodies and sexuality. Radical feminism points to how prevailing heteronormative culture is based on the idea that women and men complement and desire each other, and how this affects the organisation of other aspects of gender relations. A closely related ideology, socialist radical feminism, views class and gender as intertwined and highlights that society is organised in two spheres, production and reproduction. Reproduction is associated with duties performed by women, such as building a family, sexuality and providing care, and is subordinate to production, which is associated with men and paid work. Socialist radical feminism has highlighted women's unpaid and devalued duties by naming it as work.

Furthermore, ideologies within American Black feminism and postcolonial feminism have pointed to how gender is intertwined with power structures connected to ideas of nationality, skin colour and ethnicity. It is within postcolonial feminism that the term intersectionality has been developed to show how gender interacts with different power relationships. Yet another ideology, ecofeminism, connects gender inequality with the destruction of the environment. It highlights the idea that Western dualistic understandings of nature/humanity and women/men position men as superior, and everything that is deemed to be non-human and feminine is therefore viewed as representing resources to be utilised by men and humanity. All feminist ideologies have contributed to the understanding of gender as a complex power relationship that is intertwined with other power relationships and is reproduced in different ways in a large number of different contexts.

Within gender research, gender is commonly described as not just something that exists, but rather as something that we "do" in our everyday lives. Our thoughts and actions are influenced by the norms and values that exist in the culture and society around us. Certain norms and values are formalised, for example via legislation, while others are more unspoken. However, these unspoken norms and values come to the fore when we violate them, for example, when we react if a man wears a dress. These norms and values often seem so obvious to us that we rarely think about them, let

alone question them, and we therefore reproduce them unconsciously time and time again. This means that it can be difficult, but not impossible, to change gender relations.

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