

Svetlana Zečević
Filozofski fakultet
Nikšić

MODERN UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER AND GENDER EQUALITY: OYSTEIN GULLVAG HOLTER'S PERSPECTIVE

1. Introduction

Oystein Gullvag Holter's thesis that modern gender is a social system is one amongst many perspectives on gender equality. In order to explain any of these perspectives it is necessary to determine the basic assumptions that underline them. What we have in mind here are the following assumptions (and each of the assumptions comprise several approaches to gender equality):

- *the assumption of sameness* according to which women and men are generally the same (this assumption is included as fundamental thesis in Norway's gender equality programs in the last decades, and the key idea behind the Gender Equality Act (1978, and later revisions) is that women may and must have the same rights and opportunities just like men do);
- *the assumption of difference I* according to which gender differences are historical, constructed and socialized, and the key idea here is that although women and men are naturally and ultimately of the same kinds of human beings, they are different due to the history, economy and socialization process;
- *the assumption of difference II* according to which gender differences are understood as real, essential and unchangeable, and the key idea here is that women and men are different in their biological, psychological and spiritual essence;
- *the assumption of postmodern feminism* according to which gender is not what we do as a female or a male, but what is important is to what identities we assent to or dissent from, or what identities we claim or reject (and even creating a new ones as well).

O. G. Holter's thesis that modern gender is a social system that has replaced the old system of patriarchy actually represents his explanations of the emergence and reproduction of gender itself, but his perspective on gender equality as well. The important fact which is pointed out by Holter in his *Can Men Do It?* (2003: III, 65) is that the development of working life and family in pre-modern and early-modern society is based on the man-provider and the women-housewife configuration. Here the perspective on gender is that which

emphasizes historical perspective, social change perspective and work perspective having great impact on the existence of gender as symbolic and material model beyond gender as the model of social roles and constructions.

To explain Holter's view of the emergence and reproduction of gender it is necessary to touch upon the social change view and important distinction between the gender-equal status relations and gender system itself, horizontal-vertical division of work, the rise of modern gender, the gendering process of exchanging the patriarchal authority to a more democratic gender system, and other related theses.

The first goal of this essay is to present Holter's view of the emergence and reproduction of gender, but with the connection to the gender-equal status relations and gender system as a modern and democratic perspective on gender equality. Second goal is to provide a comparative analysis based on comparing different perspectives on gender equality with that of Holter, by determining the basic assumptions, each of which comprises several various approaches of gender and gender equality.

2. Holter's Perspective on Gender

2.1. Emergence and Reproduction of Gender

Speaking about the perspective on gender which emphasizes historical perspective, social change, social roles and construction process O. G. Holter (2003: 63–64) distinguishes between *gender-equal status* and *gender system*, where he pointed out that the gender-equal status relations has great impact on women's and men's status in society. These relations are sometimes gendered which means that femininity and masculinity can be regarded as central in the interaction, but often the degree of direct reference to gender does not determine the disbalance between women and men's social status. This view is opposite to a common point of view in gender studies, meaning that here gender is regarded more as a historical relationship and not as two universal categories. So, it is not strange that men's caregiving and fathering are discussed in this perspective: it is stressed that men's caregiving, for example, has always existed but with different level of intensity and activity, with different forms of recognition in society and in different relations to power. It is important to note that the deconstruction of older forms of men's caregiving is linked to the industrialisation process, not just in Nordic region but elsewhere as well.

Holter's *sprinkle system* is interesting here as well, and it consists of economic stimulus that put accent on the breadwinner role instead that of caring. The sprinkle system actually shows that men are out of care-related activities, out of professional caregiving work, and out of caregiving in their private lives as well. But, according to Holter, the sprinkle system is not just economic in its nature, it is also social, cultural and psychological. He point out the two main messages of this system: „*men are expendable*“ and „*men do not care*“. It is important to note that the gender ideals (like breadwinner, for

example), as the sprinkle system settles down, are embedded into social interactions as norms, and it is hard to change them and even slower in terms of social development. This refers to well known Durkheim's *social fact* which includes facts, concepts and expectations that come not from individual responses and preferences but from the social community which socializes each of its members. This is clearly a study of social relationships, in its nature quite different from biology and psychology, which affect human growth and relationships. Holter concludes that the sprinkle system connects masculinity and success, gender and man, but in specific way (for example, men who have the largest influence among men, almost have no interest to contribute in developing a more caring masculinity; – Holter, 2003: 27).

However, it becomes clear that the femininity and masculinity that emerged in modern society differ from earlier versions in very important respects. The well known fact is that the social differences between women and men can be found in every society, but they may be overshadowed by different principles, for example, those connected to age. On the other hand, modern gender is more linked with power in the sense that it becomes a means of power acting on its own. Holter points out that gender is more economically oriented, it is very closely associated with a breadwinner-oriented industrial economy. The connection between gender and industrialisation is very complex. The factory system produces a so called „gender blindness“, namely the capitalists often chose women as worker instead of men, especially where the first industrial systems emerged in traditionally women-oriented work areas. According to Holter (2003: 65) this trend can be found in the Nordic region, but in UK, US and Japan as well. What this means is that gender was fabricated by the factory system of advanced capitalism, and that the three main categories (factories, breadwinners and nuclear families) were regarded as deeply linked social patterns. What can be concluded here is that work changes gender, meaning that a new economic system and work organisation created a new gender system (where gender is regarded as a kind of work organisation). Quite opposite to this gender as work-organisation view is the gender-essentialist view that nothing changes.

2.2. Vertical and Horizontal Spheres

In modern sense of the word, gender is regarded as social process, or as a pattern of human behaviour and experience that has different dimensions, like: social, cultural, economical, psychological, and others. It can be institutionalised and manifest, but informal and latent as well. It is regarded as working life division, economic framework of successes and lacks of success, social and cultural sanctions, but as personal and intimate relationships as well. Gender relations equally involve women and men, but often in different ways, and together these relations create a *gender frame of meaning*. The gender frame of meaning is oriented toward social and economic evaluation, and it ascribes the social worth to acts. In words of Judith Butler, 'doing gender'

means creating femininity and masculinity, and some of the ways are more successful than others. Why it is important to speak about the gender frame meaning? The reason to pay attention to this concept is because it tends to turn feminine and masculine into opposites. Moreover, masculine is usually related to the *sphere of production* while feminine to the *sphere of reproduction*. But, in order to explain these two concepts it is necessary to remind on the horizontal and vertical gender dimensions in the societal organisation of work. As the two main sources of discrimination taken together they explain the wage gap between women and men. On the one hand, they show that women hold lower jobs, less-technical and less-production oriented jobs, and accordingly they hold less decision-making power. We may conclude that if women are treated less than men regarding to their lower positions in the hierarchy then we speak about the **vertical gender discrimination**. The next quote pictures this view very clearly: „It has a patriarchal bottom line – ‘*she works-he decides*’“ (Holter, 2003: 90). This implies that men are in the positions of decision-making, and it is quite obvious that vertical form of discrimination had/have a long-term effects on femininity and masculinity. On the other hand, speaking about the **horizontal discrimination** we speak of the fact that women and men’s jobs are evaluated differently even if the level is the same. Today the **horizontal division of work** is regarded as it is not by itself a form of discrimination or power. In this context Holter points out (2003: 90–91) that man’s work is characterised by *production community* and women’s work by *personal community*. In other words, the *sphere of production* (work creating technological resources) and the *sphere of reproduction* (work creating human resources) are known as two main parts of the horizontal dimension. However, important insight is that horizontal forms are indirect and economic, and they are often less easy to recognize than vertical forms. Work creating human resources, or the sphere of reproduction, was overlooked in working life in the early 20th century, and moreover recent research shows that the build-up of occupations like nursing as feminine domain was actually political and in many ways patriarchal process. Important conclusion is that production is seen as the dominant sphere, and this was/is the reason why political and cultural gender equality does not lead to full equality.

2.3. Gendering Process

Of course, we will agree that the economic aspect of gender is not something totally new. On the contrary, it is not surprise at all since the household contracts, for example, have been important in gender relations since the ancient times. But, in the modern gender system economic element becomes more important, although in the early modern period the important elements were democratic and political issues rather than economic ones. The women’s struggle, the increasing self-determination, the denial of parental (or old-society) authoritarianism and break-ups with patriarchy (like the right to divorce), are some of the main features of the modern gender system. Holter

(2003: 68) points out that in the Nordic region the new gender system is connected to new definitions of the social actors, new embodied relations, new work and household contracts, new resources and technologies, and that their application results in creating more democratic and individualised society. But, he reminds that the process is still not finished, and that gender conflicts can find a way of re-emerging. But, why it is important to put accent on *individualisation process*? The rationale behind this question is that individuals could now be seen as gendered individual, as a men or women. As a matter of fact, historical changes are also created a more gendered society, and modern development includes a social „*gendering process*“. The good example is the „marriage marketing“. This means that the extent of paternal and parental control is disputed, and according to some historians in early modern period there was the consensual character of marriage. This is clear association that significant changes and developments appeared. Women were no longer patriarchal dependents, and they had become „the sex“ instead. The father no longer decides about the marriage and young woman is supposed to be free to choose her partner. But important question is *does the new system lead to free choice*? The answer is not affirmative nor negative, and the truth is that partner and spouse selection is still disbalance factor in relationships and lead to women's secondary status in society. Holter concludes (2003: 71) that gender takes the place of patriarchy, and that gender system institution (marriage market) serves as a functional alternative to patriarchal institution (family alliance). It follows that gender appears to be more independent social system having its own power. As such, it takes over where patriarchal authority was reduced. This had a great importance: change from patriarchal authority to more democratic gender system have great influence on people's private lives and intimate relations. For example, limited erotic freedom that was typical for patriarchal authority was replaced by more sexual extensive and sexual free system. On the whole, people's freedom increased and the power relation between women and men, and the struggles around it, were private rather than patriarchal matters. The modern gender system was more comprehensive and regarded as independent guideline to social action. Here the modern sense of individuality emergences, and it was closely related to the development of femininity and masculinity, but this time the masculinity wasn't understood „as a kind of head on the social body“ (Holter, 2003: 72). On the contrary, the masculinity was created around the feminine figure as economic and social framework, a framework that stipulates economic and social commitments in creating the more equal gender relations. On the contrary to old norms and traditions that led to uneven development of equality, the new gender system appears to be more democratic. But, Holter reminds that gender-equal status, representing as gender-equal status relations that has great impact on women and men's status in society, is partial pointing out that there are mixture between gender or sex, the mixture that is a source of differentiation in society, and gender regarded as power (linked to stratification and lack of equal

opportunities). From this point of view, the gender system still can be regarded as democratic but discriminating as well, equal as unequal. The quite suitable name that author attributes to it is a *compromise formation* with different coexisting tendencies.

3. The Comparison of Holter's Perspective on Gender with Other Perspectives

3.1. Different Perspectives on Gender Equality

In order to compare Holter's perspective on gender equality with other perspectives we will briefly remind us on basic assumptions that are the key ideas behind them, pointing out different approaches comprised by each assumption. The main task here is to classify Holter's perspective under the most adequate assumption.

1. Within the context of *assumption of sameness* we can recognize several approaches like:

- **Skjeie and Teigen** (2005: 188) pointed out that gender equality understands *equal rights* for every citizen in a particular society, or universal human rights in every society (since women and men are the same it follows that gender equality is a matter of simple social justice);
- **Skjeie and Teigen** (2005: 187–189) pointed out that there is no logical reason at all to assume that women and men won't be equal some day, and that in principle both women and men could have *identical lives*;
- **Kjeldstad** (2001: 70) accepts that women and men are basically the same, and finds this thesis as one of the fundamental in developing Norway's GE programs referring to this as the „*gender neutral approach*“;
- **Kjeldstad** (2001: 71) accepts the thesis of use of quotas and preferences referring to it as „*gender recognition approach*“;
- **Ellingsaeter** (1999) advocates the *work line policy approach* assuming that everyone can and should work for pay and be economically self-supporting (women have the right to work and to have money, to get paid for their work);
- **Christensen and Raaum** (1999) argue that women are seen as nearly same as men, linking that with the more progressive gender equality achievement, and the transition of women's political participation from legitimisation to incorporation to gaining executive power.

2. Within the context of *assumption of difference I* (regarded as historical, constructed and socialized differences) we can recognize Holter's approach:

- **O. G. Holter** (2003) argues that separation of women and men's roles at home and at work, with respect to the differences regarding the status men have in production and women in reproduction sphere, is

the result of the industrial revolution rather than women's ability to be children *per se*, or men's need to master the world;

- **O. G. Holter** (2003: 106) points out that post-industrial changes lead to the elimination of men's traditional jobs;
- **O. G. Holter** (2003: 26) believes that post-industrial changes reflect, for example, in inherent attractions of a more companionate marriage rather than the divorce-prone;
- **O. G. Holter** (2003: 126) points out that social policies may change the context on which men make their real-life decision, meaning that men can change as much as women in this past generation (this corresponds to already mentioned concept of „*gender reconstruction approach*“; – 2001: 71);
- **O. G. Holter** (2003) strongly rejects „*patriarchal liberalism*“ in which gender progress is based on women becoming men;
- **O. G. Holter** (2003) rejects the assumption that men are the norm and equality is persuading or supporting women to become just the same; in other words, both genders must be rethought;
- **O. G. Holter** (2003) advocates a sort of *soft marxists approach*, emphasizing the important social changes brought by industrial capitalism.
- **Haavind** (1984: 140) puts primary emphasis on power (power as a social relation), but fits to this category of temporary gender difference (men have disproportional economic and political power while women are dependent on men);
- **Haavind** (1984: 138) points out that marriage, for example, is not the cause of the different power positions of men and women, but rather marriage and family life are embedded in a social system of uneven distribution;
- **Walby** (2005: 338) points out that gender interests are socially constructed rather than essentially related to simple conception of social structural location.

3. Within the context of *assumption of difference II* we recognize the following theses:

- women and men are different kind of people in their biological, psychological and spiritual essence;
- women and men are seen as different but more or less equal and complementary in their qualities;
- women are assumed to be both different and inferior;
- the thesis of cultural feminism according to which women's essential qualities are regarded as better than those of men.

4. Within the context of *postmodern analysis of gender* the main assumption is that all of the perspectives on gender (mentioned above) assume an essentialism about gender. The question is not whether women and men have similar or different qualities, but what is important is the fact that there are

different genders that can quite naturally be entitled as women and men, female and male. It is important to find out how much of our gender behaviour and institutions are arbitrary, and what are the direct and positive implications.

3.2. Comparative Analysis

From the above classification it is clear that Holter's perspective on gender equality fits under the assumption which regards gender differences as historical, constructed and socialized. The background thesis for this perspective is that women and men are naturally and ultimately the same kinds of human beings, and in this point it may be linked to the assumption of sameness. But, this is so just at the first glance, because Holter continues to speak about historical, constructed and socialized differences. It seems that the assumption of differences has its background in the notion of sameness, employed just to emphasize the differences and to oppose the two same human beings to each other. We can even argue that the rationale behind the work line policy approach is present or evident in Holter's economical picture of emergence of gender, in his division of labour on horizontal and vertical division, and his production vs. reproduction sphere. These phenomena have a great importance within the context of gender-equal status relations and modern gender system, but only as the step forward to modern urban and more democratic society – gender system that replaces patriarchal authoritarian system. But Holter is not the only one referring to these phenomena, and the above list of perspectives shows that similar opinion can be found in Ellingsaether regarding the division of labour, and in Haavind regarding the modernisation and urbanisation.

Since Holter speaks about gender differences as constructed and socialized, his perspective does not correspond to the assumption which emphasizes the differences but in different way, that is, as real, essential and unchangeable. He pointed out that gender is a social process having its own logic of development, and relates it to power and gender-equality status issue. But, his thesis that gender is the result of socialization has to be regarded differently. Why? The rationale is that social process and socialization have to be distinguished as something happening on two different levels. *Social process* is usually regarded as something that happens on *structural level* where the main issue is about women and men's social positions in the society, and how social organisations function in the society. On the other hand, the *process of socialisation* is more linked not to the structural level but to *individual level*, as something tied up to family and individuals. This refers to the question of identity as well, especially to the identity based on interaction and negotiations in the frame of division of labour, having in mind the well known slogan advocated by Holter that „gender is something we do, not something we are“. This slogan implies not just the frame of division of labour, but confirms that gender differences are actually historical, constructed and socialized. His conclusion is that non-expressive and instrumental masculinity is part of

industrial society mentality, while women are more active in socialisation and caregiving, and this holds for the most of societies and not just for Nordic countries. Holter makes important distinction between „production community“ as linked to men, and „personal community“ as linked to women, pointing out that both are the result of industrial development (2003: 86), and that social order is divided on two spheres: production or sphere of external resources and reproduction or sphere of human resources (distinction which has a great impact and cause important changes in the modern gender system). He admits that democratic values like his gender-equal status are perceived as peripheral, trying to offer economic analyses and work research in order to show the influence of working life conditions on gender relations. Holter concludes that, based on the research in Nordic countries, these gender phenomena are actually results of the organisation of the *economy*, *society* and *culture*, the main three categories that frame his own perspective on gender and gender equality.

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