



Gender Shock: Exploding the Myths of Male and Female

By Phyllis Burke

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At a time when men are staying at home to parent and women are leaving to practice law, medicine, and politics, America is confused and anxious about what differences truly exist between the sexes. To question one's gender role is to invite chaos, the flux of identity, yet the question persists: In a world of evolving roles for both sexes, how are "masculine" and "feminine" defined? If women and men are created equal, how then do gender differences emerge?

In *Gender Shock*, Phyllis Burke explodes the many myths surrounding our rigid gender system of male and female by looking through three lenses of gender identity: Behavior, Appearance, and Science. Combining the latest research in psychology, genetics, neurology, and sociology, Burke finds that gender (or behavior) is not the result of one's biological sex (the body itself); that gender and sexuality are separate elements of the self; that there are more variations within each sex than there are between the two; and finally, based on world-class biologist Dr. Fausto-Sterling's theory of the five sexes, perhaps the most surprising myth of all is that there are only two kinds of bodies: the male and the female.

The most shocking practice Burke encounters is the increasingly popular diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, in which children, as young as three years old, undergo "therapy" both at home and at school for not adhering to accepted notions of "girl" and "boy" behavior. Rather than punishing children and adults who do not conform to gender expectations, Burke urges the rejection of our rigid male-female system and the embrace of a "gender independent" culture, in which individuals adopt the best traits of both sexes, e.g. strong *and* nurturing, rational *and* emotional.

An artful combination of investigative journalism, personal stories, and cultural criticism, *Gender Shock*, will forever redefine our understanding of gender.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Burke, who adheres to the school of thought that gender is a social construct rather than a natural characteristic, argues that Gender Identity Disorder (GID) should be abolished as a diagnostic category. Very young children and preadolescents whose behavior is deemed gender-inappropriate—"tomboyish" girls, "effeminate" boys—are forced by their parents, school psychologists and psychiatrists to undergo therapy for GID. Treatment can include behaviorism, drugs, psychoanalysis, close monitoring of voice, posture, gait and activities, even hospitalization. Burke presents numerous case histories to illustrate the damaging emotional effects such therapy can have on children who are straitjacketed by rigid gender stereotypes. In support of her thesis that masculine and feminine identities are artificial social constructs, Burke marshals studies of perceived physical attractiveness, then takes us inside workshops for male and female cross-dressers. She not only maintains that gender, sex and sexuality are three distinct domains but also asserts that "gender independent" individuals, people free from society's sexist stereotyping, are more flexible, and more accepting of their masculine and feminine components.

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From Library Journal

As lesbian coparent to her partner's son, Burke (Family Values: Two Moms and Their Son, LJ 4/15/93) found herself challenged when asked, "Who will teach him to be a man?" In turn, the author challenges us to explore the connection between gender behavior and sexuality. Burke believes that sex—male, female—is biological, while gender role is behavioral, or learned. She was herself shocked to discover that confusion of the two leads to such practices as gender identity disorders (GID) therapy, in which children as young as three are treated for not acting like a "typical" boy or girl. Much of this book comprises research and documented case histories of GID through the examination of three principal areas: behavior, appearance, and science. Burke feels we all need to acknowledge the feminine and masculine within ourselves to attain gender independence. A thought-provoking work that questions basic assumptions; recommended for academic and public libraries.—Kathleen L. Atwood, Pomfret Sch. Lib., Conn.

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From [Booklist](#)

Horror stories abound in this well-researched work exposing myths that surround the inflexible views of masculinity and femininity based primarily on appearance and behavior. There is the case of a child subjected, during 16 years of institutionalization, to electroshock treatments because of his preference for girls' toys. There is the brainwashing by mental health professionals who reward "appropriate" choices of clothing, behavior, and toys of a boy presumed "effeminate" because of lack of hand-eye coordination. Most frightening, though, is gender identity disorder (GID), which is used to identify children engaging in behaviors stereotypically associated with the opposite sex and formerly regarded as homosexual markers--this despite the removal in 1980 of homosexuality as an official disorder from the manual used by professionals to diagnose psychological disorders. A society in which women increasingly earn half or more of family income, Burke argues, must reexamine societal concepts of gender, distinguish gender and sexuality as separate elements of self, go beyond cultural myths, and offer new paths to our children.

Whitney Scott

Users Review

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