

# Gender and Humanism

Prof. dr. Magda Michielsens

*We have been wimpish about defending our ideas.*

Salman Rushdie, 2008

*My favourite subject of contemplation,  
the future improvement of the world.*

Mary Wollstonecraft, 1796

## 1. Gender

The concept gender refers to the social construction of femininity and masculinity. The characteristics of femininity and masculinity are the product of a historical and social process. Every society has its own expectations concerning women and men. Gender is not the same as sex. By using the two different terms, gender and sex, we can express the difference between culture (gender) and nature (sex).

'One is not born a woman, one becomes one', Simone de Beauvoir wrote it in 1949 (and of course also men are not born men). There is a lot of discussion about the relation between sex and gender and about the usefulness of the concept gender, but globally the concept is accepted to speak about the making of women and men by the demands and customs of society. [1]

This constructivist perspective (*One is not born a woman, one becomes one*) fits well in a humanistic world view. First, because it expresses the supposed flexibility of the human nature. By using the concept of gender more attention is

paid to the flexibility and plasticity of the human being than to the inborn capacities and behaviors. Nobody pretends that there are no congenital characteristics, or that there is no biological basis. But, the constructivist vision does say that the biological basis is not completely determinant for how the life of a newborn will be or has to be. There is so much to learn, and the learning takes place within a society with specific laws and lifestyles. Learning is mediated by parents or other important others and motored by school education. All the societal institutions contribute to the formation of masculinity or femininity. I call that cluster of formatting influences the 'gendermachine'.

Secondly, the concept of gender highlights that the gendermachine changes over time. How men and women are made today, in the Western world, has changed a lot since World War II. The change has accelerated since the 1960s. The changes are experienced by many as progress. Women, having more freedom, more opportunities for development, full autonomy, all decision rights that men have, more social responsibilities, more public duties. Women being more equal to men means that more important values are fulfilled for more people.

Thirdly, the constructivist perspective on men and women has ended the big narrative about the natural or divine destination for women as a mother. Motherhood too is not destiny but a personal choice.

Finally, the use of the concept of gender underlines the extreme importance of education. Education, schooling, socialization makes men and women. This certainly is a conviction shared by humanists and feminists. [2]

Already centuries ago, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), publishing under the pseudonym Sophia, ironically formulated her interpretation about how men looked at women as follows: Why is learning useless to us [women]? Because we have no share in public offices. Why have we no share in public offices? Because we have no learning

In our days the educational gap is closed. Women perform better at schools and universities than boys. This was achieved because developing your talents is not a natural or supranational phenomenon, but is ruled by the laws and practices in society. During that construction process (called 'growing up') choices are to be made, by the person him/herself and by the persons and institutions that do the socializing and formulate the demands.

## **2. Fellow travellers**

Humanists believe in the autonomy of people. Cliteur & van Doren (1990) stipulate in their book 'Geschiedenis van het humanisme' (History of Humanism) the traditional and fundamental humanist values: attention for the human person, focus on human dignity, humanity, solidarity, autonomy of the person; ideals of equality and freedom, universality; no fanaticism and dogmatism and also a big trust in the human potentials. Most of the time, the values have a rationalist flavor. (Cliteur & van Doren, 1990, p. 14). [3]. These values are written down in the 'Declaration of Amsterdam' of 1952 and are modernized in 2002. Worldwide, they are subscribed by the presidents of the international humanist organizations.

The struggle for emancipation by women has been supported by humanist men. If you say that men have the power (women do say that, rightly) and you also observe that things have changed for women, you cannot but realize that men have done a lot for women. Women did a lot themselves, but evidently most decisions had to be made by men. Often these men were free thinkers, open minded people, atheists and humanists. They were men, serving rationality, breaking habits and applying all principles valid for men also to women.

John Stuart Mill for instance, who as a great liberal philosopher wrote 'On the Subjection of Women' (1869). He had his wife Harriet Taylor as a fellow-thinker on the subject. He was the first British MP submitting a proposal to the Parliament to obtain equality for men and women. The position of Stuart Mill also

provided the inspiration for some men from the board of the University of Groningen to accept Aletta Jacobs (the later famous Dutch feminist) as the first female student in medicine (1871) in The Netherlands.

It is in the same spirit of freedom that we have to understand the support of the male French speaking free thinkers in Brussels who supported Isabelle Gatti de Gamond. She founded the National Feminist Council in Belgium and launched a movement for better education for girls. The English Suffragettes were supported by male politicians and journalists. In Belgium men like Willy Calewaert, Roger Lallemand, Willy Piers worked hard to provide an alternative for the illegal abortions. In France, the legalization of abortion, proposed by Simone Veil (1975), was accepted in Parliament with the help of free macon men. Françoise Giroud (Giroud & Lévy) in a published dialogue with Bernard Henri Lévy, comments on what she - as a feminist minister of equal opportunities in the french government - owed to men like e.g. François Mitterand. Giroud is very careful in her interpretations about the support (the support was never unconditional and always subjected to the political game of the moment), but without male fellow travellers progress for women stops. There are enough steel hard opponents. Simone Veil in interviews has always been clear about the hardness and hostility of the opponents of the abortion-law.

Emancipation of women never was the first concern of men, but many of them were reliable supporters. Fundamentally, the struggle of women, not only during the second wave, but also long before, was a common fight against habits, religion, dogma, restrictions, prejudices, and lack of rationality.

### **3. Humanity in general**

Notwithstanding the male supporters from humanist and freethinking circles and notwithstanding an overlap of values in feminism and in humanism, there always has been criticism of feminists for humanists. In principle the women could count on humanist men, but often it was limited to the principles. For girls and women,

to obtain a full position in culture and in society is not only a matter of some great decisions. It is more a daily private and professional fight to translate the principle in practice. The game is to be played on every scale of life. People who consider themselves supporters of the cause of women often do not see the constancy of the exclusion.

Also in theories beyond every day life there is a lack of gender consciousness. Sociologists with a humanist world view continue their work as if there do not exist men and women, but only people. Androcentrism did not disappear from textbooks, courses and researches. Journalists on television (the humanist ones as well) go on speaking about people, even when the situation is very different for men and women. [4]

Humanists have transformed thinking with their focus on the human being, with their ideas about autonomy, freedom and responsibility of human being as the engines of progress. They were right, but just saying 'pour les femmes la même chose' is not enough to include women. Statements about men do not exclude women but certainly do not include them neither. Stagnation is the result. Talking about humanity, human values, human freedom, human responsibility not automatically offer a male perspective, but in reality it does contribute to the continuation of the existing symbolic order (the phallic order, Luce Irigaray would say; patriarchy other feminists would say).

An impressive example is the declaration of the 'Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen' formulated by Olympe de Gouge in 1791. Knowing that in 'The Rights of Men' of the French Revolution women were not seen as citizens, Olympe de Gouge wrote an appendix to the revolutionary manifest. She paid it with her life and died in 1793 on the guillotine. It is more than 200 years ago, but still in 1979 the Cedaw-convention (*Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*) needed to be accepted because the Human Rights Bill was not enough to treat women properly. The Cedaw Convention is an

agreement that works as an international instrument to pressure for respecting women's rights.

The feminist struggle always has demonstrated that generalizations about humans often are not including women. Often it is not a deliberate exclusion but a painful omission. Two examples promoting inclusion:

(1) Margit Eichler wrote in 1988 an inspiring manual for non-sexist research in the social sciences ('Nonsexist Research Methods'). She offers advice against a generic approach, against androcentrism, against forgetting and suppressing women. Her work is an example how to fight the systematic omission.

(2) Gendermainstreaming is to be seen in the same perspective.

Gendermainstreaming consists in systematically screening all policy making activities on their relevancy for men and women. Every action has to be evaluated in their differential impact on women and men and their influence on equality. In Belgium, since the law of January 12<sup>th</sup> 2007, gendermainstreaming is mandatory.

If we look at publications about humanism and publications by humanists, we do not find much attention for women or for gender differences. Humanists seem, by definition, generalists (Humanistisch Verbond, 1987; Cliteur & van Dooren, 1990; Kruithof, 2001; Philipse, 2004; Pinxten, 2008). Women know why this is not enough: the general is always thought with a male model in mind. I do not want to start all over with the feminist equality-difference-discussion, but the genderedness of people and society has to be taken into account.

#### **4. Humanist women**

It is difficult to name important women in the humanist heritage. It is even more difficult than it was to render female philosophers from oblivion. In philosophy we

know rather well now who were and are the important women thinkers. However, I do not find many women who can be called humanistic theorists. The well known female philosophers are not specifically humanist. Not in previous times and not today. Given the androcentrism problem, this is not surprising.

The case of Simone de Beauvoir illustrates the point well. For a long time she thought that things would be settled for women within the general struggle for a better (socialist) society. She became a feminist only when she saw that socialism was not a guarantee and that a separate fight was needed. A humanist (m/f) can easily (but wrongly) think that working for general values automatically generates emancipation of women.

There are many women working in humanist organizations, in humanist education and formation or humanist counseling, but they are not the leading thinkers on a theoretical level.

The development of feminist theories did not suffer much from the absence of female humanist theorists. Feminist theory always developed in a climate we considered secular. Often I lectured about emancipation, about equality and difference, about women and enlightenment. It was always self evident to situate my discourse within a movement of growing enlightenment, increasing, development, rationality and empowerment. In the secularized public and private space religion disappeared as a limiting factor. [5] In a way feminism seemed to have secularization as a presupposition. Religion was not a topic anymore. As it turns out now, taking rationality and the uninhibited scientific thinking for granted was wimpish. We acted too wimpish, too modest, too careful in defending our values. That is the opinion of Salman Rushdie in an interview in Spectator of April the 9<sup>th</sup> 2008. Also in the context of feminism I can agree with him. We do not say often enough and loud enough how important the use of reason is for women, the absence of dogmas, guarantees about equality of men and women, separation of church and state, school education, equal access to opportunities and services. We also say not often enough that we not only need freedom of religion but also freedom from religion. This means an environment in which

thinking is more important than believing and in which the law, policy making and interactions between people are not governed by religion.

### **5. Not the most urgent question**

The free thinking men who do not exclude women but also do not undertake an explicit gesture to include them, often use the argument that there are more urgent problems in society than the position of women.

Most of the time, women are not dangerous. When a lot of women are angry, pamphlets are written, flyers are distributed, maybe there will be held a demonstration, maybe there will be some quarrels at home that the master of the house will not like, there even could be more broken marriages (but new female partners are ready to embrace the free men), More risk than this angry women do not provoke for men or society. The few (house)wife strikes there ever have been were more symbolic than disruptive. Women do not cause casualties. The price of their protests is tiny. Their responsibility in the care for children makes that immediately they are ready for duty again. In the suburbs of Paris women do not dare thinking about emancipation. Public opinion is less disturbed by the subjection of girls than by young men putting the streets on fire. Complaints and protests of women never look urgent.

Simone de Beauvoir apologized that, as late as 1949, she started speaking again about the position of women. In the period after World War II there were of course more important and more urgent things. She knew that, but nevertheless she wanted to speak about women. There were more urgent things, so the reconstruction took place with women at the sink, with women who were sent back to the kitchen and the cosy fireplace, and with a social security system without equality between women and men. World War II is an example, but we see it happening over and over again. At crucial moments, when the opportunity could be used to integrate women and to implement equality between women and men, the opposite happens. The importance of the moment is used to say

that women can wait. At a crucial moment of the war in Afghanistan (March 2009) again women were used as small money and their safety and freedom is not put at the top of the priority list.

## **6. Women and atheism**

Gender and humanism brings me to women and atheism. That is what is in the center of my thinking. Rationality, research, education and free speech are not a guarantee of emancipation and equality, but they are an absolute condition.

How do we defend our ideas and values in an affirmative and assertive way? How do we work for the goals Mary Wollstonecraft put herself at the end of the 18 century: the future improvement of the world and the participation of women in it.

First, clarifying again our ideas is necessary. I am convinced thinking helps. I hold the conviction that thinking provides an instrument for knowledge, insight and evaluation. Freedom, autonomy, equality, progress, the end of dogmas and superstition. Fighting against irrationalities.

Stressing these convictions often results in being labelled enlightenment fundamentalist. The term is a contradiction in terms, but postmodern defenders of cultural relativism nevertheless do use the term. Paul Cliteur and Paul Brucker wrote very interesting texts about it. They are never mild about religion and are not willing to stop thinking. Women have to do the same. Women are inclined to be too empathic for positions and experiences of others, and so become the victim of their own feelings of sympathy.

Secondly, we have to practice all over to have an opinion instead of leaving all options open. If we have an opinion we can also (hopefully) express it freely. I think it is urgently needed to maintain our basic values. Publications of Paul Cliteur and Matthias Storme (respectively a humanist and a conservative) show

how already our freedom of speech de facto is already limited. I think women have to react against this limitation, for themselves as a group but also as agents for the general interest.

Third, the integrity of the body has to be claimed again. This is the struggle against violence on women, but also a fight against a conviction that accepts the pan-sexualism of boys and men.

Fourth, we have to learn all over to formulate statements. How can we claim and defend our values? We are hardly able to do so and it is no (longer) part of our education. Studying the plans for diversity policies (for employers, school boards, teachers, civil servants, associations) I saw that the manuals never support the strength to formulate your opinion. On the contrary. They constantly focus on tolerance, respect, understanding the other, integrate the otherness within the local, not stigmatizing, accepting other cultures (even if in these cultures men are in principle allowed to use violence against women, even if women are not equal to men). There is no training in resistance if one finds that certain values need to be defended. There do exist assertivity training for women, but not for atheists and rationalists. The curriculum in that type of training would include many things, managing fear and violence, claiming equality, resisting dominance and oppression would be part of it. Tolerance alone is not enough.

Fifth, we need a platform where we can be clear about atheism, rejection of religion and about freedom for women. A platform also offers protection against the ongoing discourse that believing the strangest things is an option. A platform can offer examples in formulating arguments against religions. A platform can formulate tolerance in a way that it does not only mean the acceptance of people, but also the rejection of (their) religion. Being reluctant in the rejection of irrationality for strategic reasons is abdicating reason and humanism.

## 7. For a militant atheist feminism

In controversies about religion women often stand in the middle of the attention. When dogmatism wins over rationality women are the most vulnerable. This is not only the case for muslim women, but also for atheist and christian women. If we do not learn techniques to formulate and defend our values, we are victims of the extreme right, of religious fundamentalists, and of postmodern value relativists. We are forced to resistance, says Ephimenco (2005). I agree and I think that women are too often absent in that resistance. Together we have to learn to be alert in the new context that has emerged. We have to do that on an interpersonal level, in small groups and on a structural level.

We do have atheist and humanist organizations but I miss attention for freedom from religion. The advertisement on London busses 'God (probably) does not exist' (Spring 2009) is one of the rare public affirmations of atheism. Authors like Herman Philipse ('Atheist manifest'), Richard Dawkins ('God the Delusion'), Christopher Hitchens ('God is not great') try their best. We still have to translate their ideas into daily practices. We must not think that these practices already exist. Most of the time civil society speaks only of tolerance, active pluralism and diversity. Not hostile, not aggressive, not political but still atheist statements are more needed than ever. Also and foremost for and by women. At the start of the second feminist movement women supported each other in formulating and clarifying opinions, at speaking at important gatherings and in the media, in resisting the pressure of important opponents. We'd better refresh that practice.

Prof. dr. Magda Michielsens

<http://www.moh.be> [m.michielsens@moh.be](mailto:m.michielsens@moh.be)

Lecture at 'Humanism and Gender. An International Conference'

European Humanist Professionals

Haus der Demokratie und Menschenrechte

Berlin 04-07-2009

## NOTES

[1] In this article we will not speak about the complex layers of gender. See for example for further information Michielsens (2008a) or Michielsens (2008b), or Butler (1999) for a more theoretical elaboration of the gender concept.

[2] In a conference on the occasion of the 8th of March 2007, 'Womens Rights, the Veil and Islamic and Religious Laws' Sonja Eggerickx, as the president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, clearly formulated her opinion about the importance of education. The video can be found on You Tube.

[3] Here, we do not go into the fact that the term humanism is also used to point at the revival of the knowledge and values of the classical antiquity.

[4] Zie Michielsens (2008a)

[5] Geert Van Istendael (2008) (to acknowledge a male fellow traveller instead of the many female authors who have written about it) describes perfectly well what religion meant in the lives of women in the fifties of last century.

## Literatuur

Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. NY: Routledge.

Brucker, Paul (24/01/2007). Enlightenment fundamentalism or racism of the anti-racists? Op de website signandsight.com:  
<http://www.signandsight.com/features/1146.html>

Cliteur, Paul (2007). *Moreel Esperanto*. Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers.

Cliteur, Paul (2009). Is de Verlichting een pijler van onze beschaving? Lezing 19 maart 2009, [http://www.liberaalarchief.be/Paul-Cliteur\\_Verlichting.pdf](http://www.liberaalarchief.be/Paul-Cliteur_Verlichting.pdf)>

de Beauvoir, Simone (1949). *Le deuxième sexe*. Pairs: Gallimard.

Eichler, Margit (1988). *Nonsexist Research Methods. A Practical Guide*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Ephimenco, Sylvain (2005). *Gedwongen tot weerbaarheid: islamkronieken*. Antwerpen: Houtekiet.

Fallaci, Oriana (2002). *The Rage and the Pride*. New York: Rissoli.

Fallaci, Oriana (2006). *The Force of Reason*. New York: Rissoli.

Giroud, Françoise & Lévy, Bernard-Henri (1993). *Mannen en Vrouwen*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.

Hermsen, Joke (2008). Hermsen, Joke (red.). *Simone de Beauvoir. Alles welbeschouwd*. Kampen: Klement/Pelckmans

Hirsi Ali, Ayaan (2002). *De zontjesfabriek. Over vrouwen, islam en integratie*. Amsterdam: Augustus.

Hirsi Ali, Ayaan (2006). *Mijn Vrijheid. De autobiografie*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Augustus.

Hitchens, Christopher (2007). *God is not Great*. London: Atlantic Books.

Israel, Jonathan (2006). *Enlightenment contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*. Oxford: University Press.

Kruithof, Jaap. (2001). *Het humanisme*. Antwerpen: Epo.

Lévy, Bernard-Henry (2000). *Le Siècle de Sartre. Enquête philosophique*. Paris: Grasset.

Michielsens, Magda (2005). *175 jaar vrouwen. Gelijkheid en ongelijkheid in België 1830-2005*. Brussel: Raad van de Gelijke Kansen voor Mannen en Vrouwen.

Michielsens, Magda (2006). Autonoom individu of heteronome samenleving. In: *Eenzaam in het netwerk. Hoe afhankelijk is onze onafhankelijkheid?* Cultuurcahiers van de Hogeschool Gent X.

Michielsens, Magda (2008a). *Zien Werken v/m. Beeldvorming van arbeid in informatieve programmas op televisie*. Brussel: RoSa.

Michielsens, Magda (2008b). Gender en gendermainstreaming. In: Ravesloot, Saskia & Wuïame, Nathalie (red.). *Handelingen van de seminariecyclus Gendermainstreaming een nieuwe uitdaging voor de federale regering en administratie*. Brussel: IGVM, 20-30.

Michielsens, Magda (2008c). Een vrouw. In: Hermes, Joke (red.). *Simone de Beauvoir. Alles welbeschouwd*. Kampen: Klement/Pelckmans, p. 111-128.

Michielsens, Magda (2009). Alle soorten vrouwen. Analyse van de reëel bestaande diversiteit. In: Demoor, Marysa, Vandenbussche, Liselotte,

Vandermassen, Griet & Van Durme, Debora (red.). *Verslagen van het Centrum voor Genderstudies UGent*, Nr. 18, Gent: Academia Press.

Moller Okin, Susan (1999). Is Multiculturalisme bad for Women? In: Cohen, Joshua e.a. (eds). *Is Multiculturalisme bad for Women? Susan Moller Okin with respondents*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 7-24.

Philipse, Herman (2004). *Atheïstisch manifest*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.

Pinxten, Rik (2007). *De strepen van de zebra. Naar een strijdbaar vrijzinnig humanisme*. Antwerpen: Houtekiet.

Provoost, Anne (2008). *Beminde Ongelovigen*. Antwerpen: Querido.

Rushdie, Salman (2008). We Have Been Wimpish About Defending Our Ideas. SPECTATOR.co.uk, 9 april 2008.

Sanctorum, Johan (red.). *De islam in Europa: dialoog of clash?* Leuven: Van Halewyck.

Stevaert, Steve (2005). *Ander geloof: naar een actief pluralisme in Vlaanderen*.

Leuven: Davidsfonds.

Van Istendael, Geert (2008). Het masker van de dwang. In Sanctorum, Johan (red). *De islam in Europa: dialoog of clash?* Leuven: Uitgeverij Van Halewyck.

Van Rooy, Wim (2008). *De malaise van de multiculturaliteit*. Leuven: Acco.

Verhofstadt, Dirk (2006). *De derde feministische golf*. Antwerpen: Houtekiet.

Zwagerman, Joost (2007). *De schaamte van links*. Amsterdam: Querido.