

**THE CONCEPT OF GENDER AND ITS  
ACCEPTABILITY AS A CATEGORY OF  
ANALYSIS IN ECONOMICS: AN ISLAMIC  
PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract**

Changes in the understanding of gender are making it complicated to use gender as a category of analysis. Previously, it was generally accepted that gender is a binary category, comprising of male and female, based on clear biological distinction. Then came the idea that gender is a sociocultural construct. More recently, gender is said to be based on each person's personal conception of himself or herself. These novel ideas have detached the meaning of gender from its biological foundation and have consequently made the concept of gender ambiguous and subjective, with theoretically infinite possible interpretations that can formulate an indeterminate number of genders. Such arbitrariness is unsuitable for scientific analysis. Accordingly, mainstream economists, in their aspiration to be scientific, have largely ignored these semantic developments and have continued to use the biologically defined binary categorisation of gender, presumably because of its practicality when used in economic analysis. From an

Islamic perspective, economists are right to use such definition of gender, not because it is practical to do so, but because it conforms to reality and truth (*haqq*) as revealed by religion. This article discusses these ideas as well as their history and interactions to show that from an Islamic perspective the number of genders is not indeterminate, nor is gender only practically binary, but it is really and truly binary in line with the worldview of Islam.

**Keywords:** Economics; gender; *ḥaqīqah*; *ḥaqq*; Islam; reality; religion; sex; truth.

### **Khulasah**

Perubahan faham gender telah merumitkan penggunaan gender sebagai kategori dalam penganalisan. Sebelum ini, diterima umum bahawa gender itu terbahagi kepada dua kategori iaitu lelaki dan perempuan berdasarkan perbezaan yang nyata dari segi biologi. Kemudian muncul idea bahawa gender itu binaan masyarakat. Baru-baru ini, diperkatakan bahawa gender berasaskan tanggapan peribadi setiap individu. Idea-idea baharu ini memisahkan makna gender daripada biologi yang menjadi sumber asas maknanya, mengakibatkan konsep gender menjadi subjektif dan tidak jelas. Keadaan ini telah membuka ruang pentafsiran tanpa batasan yang berkemampuan menghasilkan konsep gender yang tidak dapat ditentukan bilangannya. Faham sembarangan seperti ini tidak sesuai untuk penganalisan saintifik. Disebabkan itu, ahli ekonomi yang ingin mencapai mutu saintifik dalam kajian mereka yang melibatkan gender secara lazimnya memilih untuk tidak mengendahkan idea-idea baharu itu. Mereka kelihatan lebih selesa menggunakan takrif gender yang merujuk kepada biologi yang menetapkan bilangan gender adalah dua, berkemungkinan kerana konsep gender yang difahami sedemikian mudah digunakan dalam penganalisan ekonomi. Dari sudut pandangan Islam, tindakan ahli ekonomi menggunakan takrif gender

tersebut adalah tindakan yang betul, bukan kerana ia mudah digunakan, tetapi kerana ia menepati kebenaran (hak) menurut agama. Makalah ini membincangkan idea-idea tersebut serta sejarah perkembangan dan pertembungannya bagi menunjukkan bahawa dari sudut pandangan Islam, gender bukanlah sesuatu yang tidak dapat dikira bilangannya, ataupun diakui bilangannya adalah dua hanya kerana tanggapan begitu akan memudahkan penggunaannya, tetapi patut diakui bilangan gender adalah dua kerana itulah kebenaran yang mencerminkan hakikatnya yang sebenar selaras dengan pandangan alam Islam.

**Kata kunci:** Agama; ekonomi; gender; hak; hakikat; Islam; jantina; kebenaran; realiti.

## Introduction

Economics and gender studies are two established independent fields of study, meaning that one can study each field without getting too involved in the technicalities of the other. Yet, economics and gender are not mutually exclusive subject matters. Historically, they do overlap. Indeed, gender studies has always had an economic dimension, even since its early history.<sup>1</sup> In comparison, economists were not initially welcoming of the subject of gender,<sup>2</sup> one reason being that "economists [were] traditionally focused on market transactions and, traditionally, most married women were primarily engaged in nonmarket activities".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Giandomenica Becchio, "A Note on the History of Gender Economics and Feminist Economics: Not the Same Story", in *Contemporary Global Perspectives on Gender Economics*, ed. Susanne Moore (Hershey, Pennsylvania: Information Science Reference, 2015), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Lourdes Beneria, "Toward a Greater Integration of Gender in Economics", *World Development* 23, no. 11 (1995): 1839.

<sup>3</sup> Francine D. Blau, "Gender, Economics of", in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 2nd ed., ed. James D. Wright (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015; first published in 2001), 757, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.71051-8>.

Since the market was a domain traditionally overrepresented by men, it was lacking in sufficient gender diversity for meaningful economic analysis of gender. Statistics show, however, that "[a]ll over the world, labor force participation among women of working age [has] increased substantially in the last century".<sup>4</sup> As more women have entered the paid labour force and have become more involved with the market, interests on gender issues have grown among economists.<sup>5</sup>

Benería identifies two approaches that have developed among economists in the study of gender. The first approach involves the application of mainstream neoclassical model of economic analysis to the study of gender, which includes the works of notable economists like Jacob Mincer and Gary Becker, while the second approach employs alternative non-traditional methods to the study of gender, such as using a "Marxian or institutional framework" as well as making use of interdisciplinary methods.<sup>6</sup> The first approach roughly corresponds to what has come to be known as *gender economics* and the second to *feminist economics*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Sandra Tzvetkova, "Working Women: Key Facts and Trends in Female Labor Force Participation", in *Our World in Data* (Oxford Martin Programme on Global Development and Global Change Data Lab, 2017), <https://ourworldindata.org/female-labor-force-participation-key-facts>.

<sup>5</sup> Blau, "Gender, Economics of", 757.

<sup>6</sup> Benería, "Greater Integration of Gender in Economics", 1841.

<sup>7</sup> See Ingrid Robeyns, "Is There a Feminist Economic Methodology?" (2000), [https://www.academia.edu/621278/Is\\_There\\_A\\_Feminist\\_Economic\\_Methodology](https://www.academia.edu/621278/Is_There_A_Feminist_Economic_Methodology). Italian translation published as "Esiste una metodologia economica femminista?", in *Gli studi della donna in Italia: Una guida critica*, ed. Paola Di Cori and Donatella Barazetti (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2001). Citations refer to the unpublished English version. See also Giandomenica Becchio, "Gender, Feminist and Heterodox Economics: Interconnections and Differences in a Historical Perspective", *Economic Alternatives*, no. 1 (2018), 5-24.

Regardless of methodological approaches, it is evident that gender has become a subject of interest among economists, particularly with respect to its function as a category of analysis. However, developments in the understanding of gender are affecting the acceptability of gender as a scientific category of analysis. Where once gender was understood and accepted clearly as a binary category comprising of male and female, which was based on obvious biological distinction, that understanding is now being challenged and debated in a capacity more intensely than ever before.

Feminists are passionately claiming that gender is not biological but a social or cultural construct. Sexual and gender minorities (SGMs) are zealously asserting that gender is what each person says it is, which theoretically means that there could be an indeterminate number of genders based on each person's subjective interpretation of it. In response, conservative activists can be seen mounting a vigorous campaign against these novel alternative views of gender.

In effect, these new ideas about gender are making the concept of gender less clearly defined and more difficult to study scientifically. Mainstream economists however appear to be largely apathetic to the debates on the understanding of gender, despite their apparent interest in gender as a category of analysis. For the most part, they have remained silently content with treating gender the way they have always treated gender, as a simple binary category,<sup>8</sup> suitable for quantitative analysis and devoid of complexity that would complicate scientific inquiry.

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<sup>8</sup> See Robeyns, "Is There a Feminist Economic Methodology?", 10, as well as Lourdes Benería, Günseli Berik, and Maria S. Floro, *Gender, Development, and Globalization: Economics as if All People Mattered*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016; first published in 2003), 74-75.

From a purely economic perspective, it is the practical thing to do. From an Islamic perspective, focusing on practicality should not be a distraction from the more important concern of reality and truth (*ḥaqq*)<sup>9</sup>. In Islam, gender is understood to be binary, not because it is practical to regard it as such but because it is true, meaning that it accurately reflects the actual reality or true nature (*ḥaqīqah*)<sup>10</sup> of gender.

This article is organised into three core sections. The first section describes the semantic development of gender to give an overview of how the meaning of gender has undergone changes over time. The second section shows how economists deal with these changes. The third section gives the Islamic perspective on the contents from the previous two sections. Basically, each section builds upon the previous section(s). It is hoped that this article can provide some clarification that would not only be beneficial to Muslims but also to non-Muslims seeking to better understand the Islamic perspective on the concept of gender as well as the Islamic perspective on the acceptability of gender as a category of analysis in economics.

Since the main object of study in this article is gender, it is important to first provide clarification on the concept of gender. In Islam, gender is clearly defined in binary terms. In mainstream economics, gender is similarly treated in a straightforward simple manner.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the topic of gender when discussed on its own can be

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<sup>9</sup> On *ḥaqq*, see Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2001; first published in 1995), 126.

<sup>10</sup> On the difference between *ḥaqq* and *ḥaqīqah*, see al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 131.

<sup>11</sup> Robeyns, "Is There a Feminist Economic Methodology?", 10; Benería, Berik, and Floro, *Gender, Development, and Globalization*, 74-75.

anything but simple. On the official website of the World Health Organisation, it is specified that the understanding of gender "varies across different cultures and over time".<sup>12</sup> In other words, gender can mean different things to different people at different times, which makes it a complicated topic to discuss.

It can be said that gender is perhaps one of the most contested concepts in history. It has gone through various stages of conceptual development and periodic disagreements. In order to better understand gender and its acceptability as a category of analysis particularly in economics as well as the corresponding Islamic perspective, it is essential to look at the historical development of the term gender and its historical relationship with sex since the terms gender and sex have had "a long and intertwined history".<sup>13</sup>

### **Semantic Development of Gender**

Up until the 15th century, gender was solely a grammatical subclass,<sup>14</sup> meaning it was a term used to classify nouns when talking about grammar rather than having anything to do with human traits. "In the 15th century" the meaning of gender expanded "to join sex in referring to either of the two primary biological forms of a species",<sup>15</sup> namely male and female or synonymously man and woman. By the 20th century, the meaning of sex grew to include the act of sexual intercourse while retaining its aforementioned meaning, and gender came to refer to the

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<sup>12</sup> World Health Organization, "Gender, Equity and Human Rights", accessed 30th January 2020, <https://www.who.int/gender-equity-rights/news/factsheet-403/en/>.

<sup>13</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "gender", accessed 5th November 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gender>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

"behavioural, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with [a respective] sex".<sup>16</sup>

According to Muehlenhard and Peterson, the distinction between sex and gender was first made by "John Money and his colleagues in the 1950s".<sup>17</sup> It was then popularised by feminists in the 1970s who wanted to distinguish the "'socially constructed' aspects of male-female differences (gender) from [the] 'biologically determined' aspects (sex)"<sup>18</sup>—a distinction which, in the opinion of Judith Butler, made it "no longer possible to attribute the values or social functions of women to biological necessity".<sup>19</sup>

While this was something that feminists generally celebrated as emancipatory, the removal of biology from the meaning of gender was not without consequence. A particular corollary was that it made the term gender "a source of ambiguity".<sup>20</sup> Without a solid anchor in biological reality, the meaning of gender also became highly subjective and open to personal interpretation. "By the end of the [20th] century, gender by itself was used as a synonym of gender identity"<sup>21</sup> which can be understood as "someone's personal and intimate sense of their own gender".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Charlene L. Muehlenhard and Zoe D. Peterson, "Distinguishing between Sex and Gender: History, Current Conceptualizations, and Implications", *Sex Roles* 64 (2011), 791, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9932-5>.

<sup>18</sup> David Haig, "The Inexorable Rise of Gender and the Decline of Sex: Social Change in Academic Titles, 1945–2001", *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 33, no. 2 (2004), 87.

<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex", *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Francesca Bettio and Alina Verashchagina, eds., *Frontiers in the Economics of Gender* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), xiii.

<sup>21</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "gender".

<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International UK, "Gender Identity for Beginners: A Guide to Being a Great Trans Ally", accessed 6th July 2020,



Based on this personal understanding of gender, theoretically, any person can arbitrarily identify with any notion of gender at any moment independent of his or her biological traits or social expectations. As something that is purely subjective, it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable.<sup>23</sup> If each person is the sole determiner of his or her own gender, then no one else has the right to say otherwise.

For the last few decades, the decidedly subjective interpretation of gender has been increasingly gaining in acceptance, particularly in the West and especially among scholars of gender. British sociologists Ekins and King, for example, in their book entitled *The Transgender Phenomenon*, have gone as far as to claim that it is not only possible to transition between genders, but also to live "in between genders" and "beyond gender".<sup>24</sup>

Correspondingly, in the public sphere, there is a loud and vocal movement primarily coming from the LGBTQ+<sup>25</sup> community, collectively known as sexual and gender minorities (SGMs), who have been actively advocating the idea that gender is a spectrum with an indeterminate number of possibilities rather than a rigid binary category—an idea that has captured the attention of supporters of liberal inclusivity.

For instance, in 2014, in an effort to be more inclusive, social media platforms started to offer *custom* gender as an alternative option beyond the customary *male* and *female* gender options, starting with Facebook initially offering 56 choices of predetermined custom genders

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<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/LGBTQ-equality/gender-identity-beginners-guide-trans-allies>.

<sup>23</sup> Lucy Griffin et al., "Sex, Gender and Gender Identity: A Re-evaluation of the Evidence", *BJPsych Bulletin* (2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjb.2020.73>.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Ekins and Dave King, *The Transgender Phenomenon* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), xiv.

<sup>25</sup> LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and others.

which was later changed into a freeform text field where users can designate their gender any way they choose.<sup>26</sup>

To a lesser extent than gender, the conceptual validity of sex as a binary category has also been challenged,<sup>27</sup> but its biologically grounded binary definition, with obvious physical manifestations in the forms of male and female genitalia respectively tied to a unique reproductive function,<sup>28</sup> has proven to be more resilient to conceptual challenges compared to the concept of gender which has been detached from biology. Of course, there are rare instances of people born intersex, having both male and female characteristics simultaneously; however, these are abnormal occurrences and are not representative of normal healthy human beings.<sup>29</sup>

Normally, human beings are clearly divided along binary lines in terms of biological sex. It is a fact that "[h]umans are sexually dimorphic".<sup>30</sup> Godman nevertheless argues that it is possible to sidestep the subject of biological sex and discuss gender independently of sex.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the modern relative and subjective definition of gender makes arguing about gender possible without needing to base the argument on biological sex or even make any connection to it.

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<sup>26</sup> Rena Bivens and Oliver L. Haimson, "Baking Gender into Social Media Design: How Platforms Shape Categories for Users and Advertisers", *Social Media + Society* (2016), 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672486>.

<sup>27</sup> For an example, see Claire Ainsworth, "Sex Redefined", *Nature* 518 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1038/518288a>.

<sup>28</sup> Griffin et al., "Sex, Gender and Gender Identity", 3.

<sup>29</sup> Georgi K. Marinov, "In Humans, Sex is Binary and Immutable", *Academic Questions* 33 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-020-09877-8>.

<sup>30</sup> Griffin et al., "Sex, Gender and Gender Identity", 3.

<sup>31</sup> Marion Godman, "Gender as a Historical Kind: A Tale of Two Genders?", *Biology & Philosophy* 33, no. 21 (2018), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10539-018-9619-1>.

In summary, the semantic development of gender can be roughly divided into four stages of conceptual development: linguistic, biological, sociocultural, and personal. Gender was initially known as a linguistic concept before being established as a biological concept synonymous with sex.<sup>32</sup> There was no ambiguity with the meaning of gender up to this point. Gender, when referring to the biological reproductive aspect of human beings, was clearly defined as binary. When feminists started to reject the biological basis of gender, it became popularly accepted as a sociocultural concept,<sup>33</sup> which is culturally or socially relative. This reconceptualisation inadvertently introduced ambiguity into its meaning.<sup>34</sup>

The denial of a biological connection by which to tether the meaning of gender also opened the door to subjectivity. SGMs took the opportunity to claim the concept of gender as their own. In their hands, gender went from being considered socially or culturally constructed into something personal, inherently unique to each individual, synonymous with gender identity. As a personal concept, anyone could determine his or her own gender arbitrarily, independent of both biological and sociocultural constraints. It was at this stage that gender began to be perceived as a spectrum rather than a binary category.

It is important to note that even though gender has acquired different meanings throughout its semantic development, the previous meanings have not disappeared into obscurity; they are still being used, with different people subscribing to a different conception of gender and rejecting competing conceptions for various reasons. Generally, the linguistic concept of gender has never been

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<sup>32</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "gender".

<sup>33</sup> Haig, "Rise of Gender and the Decline of Sex", 87.

<sup>34</sup> Bettio and Verashchagina, *Frontiers in the Economics of Gender*, xiii.

an issue. What has been contested and is still being debated is the concept of gender as it relates to human traits, with competing stakeholders utilising and promoting a particular conception to serve their respective ambitions.

For example, feminists have been promoting the sociocultural concept of gender in lieu of the biological concept because they want to emancipate women from being subdued by "biological determinism or the view that biology is destiny";<sup>35</sup> they believe that only when women's destiny is not associated with biology can women freely transcend the social limitations traditionally imposed on them based on their sex.

Similarly, SGMs and their ideological allies have been advocating the personal concept of gender because they want to give every person the opportunity to be whatever he or she personally identifies as, free from any biological and sociocultural constraints; they believe only when there are no predefined expectations and impositions based on gender are gender minorities (people who identify as transgender, agender, pangender, genderqueer etc.) totally free to entertain and fully embrace their atypical gender identities.

Both of these examples demonstrate how concepts can be easily shaped and appropriated to serve particular agendas. It is important thus, in order to mitigate confirmation bias when evaluating a particular concept or determining its meaning, to have reliable objective criteria to avoid arbitrariness stemming from sole reliance on the vagaries of subjective inclination. This is especially vital for such a contested concept as gender.

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<sup>35</sup> Mari Mikkola, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed., Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/feminism-gender>.

## **Gender is Practically Binary in Economics**

In mainstream economics, the acceptability of a particular concept is dependent upon practicality, in the sense of being "suitable for a particular purpose"<sup>36</sup> which in this case means being suitable for use in economic analysis. If a concept is deemed unsuitable, it will either be reformulated in a narrow manner so that it can be used in economic analysis or it will be dismissed as something that does not belong in economics and passed on to other disciplines.<sup>37</sup> This reductionist approach to filtering concepts is necessitated by the limitation of economics as a science that cannot accommodate conceptual complexity.

According to Mathis, reductionism is one of the criticisms against economics, whereby it is said that "the economic approach reduces reality to a small number of purely economic parameters"; however, economists do not view this reductionism of reality as worrying.<sup>38</sup> The rationalisation behind such agreeable attitude towards reductionism is concisely articulated by Richard Posner, a renowned expert in the economic analysis of law, who argues that "abstraction [i.e., reductionism] is of the essence of scientific inquiry, and economics aspires to be scientific".<sup>39</sup>

In the context of modern science, being scientific means having to "reformulate everything in the language

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<sup>36</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed., ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; first published in 1998), s.v. "practical".

<sup>37</sup> See Robeyns, "Is There a Feminist Economic Methodology?", 10.

<sup>38</sup> Klaus Mathis, *Efficiency Instead of Justice? Searching for the Philosophical Foundations of the Economic Analysis of Law*, trans. Deborah Shannon, Law and Philosophy Library, vol. 84 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 27, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9798-0\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9798-0_9).

<sup>39</sup> Richard A. Posner, *Economic Analysis of Law*, 6th ed. (New York: Aspen Publishers, 2003; first published in 1973 by Little, Brown and Company), 17.

of numbers".<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, economics has become more mathematical.<sup>41</sup> Essentially, in the quest to be scientific, economics has become reliant on mathematics and economic analysis has been reduced to mainly quantitative analysis.

Correspondingly, it has become necessary for concepts that are to be used in economics to possess the characteristic of being quantitatively analysable. It is possibly for this reason that economists appear to have been fairly resistant to the proposed changes to the conception of gender by feminists and SGMs that added complexity to the otherwise simple and quantifiable binary definition which, Robeyns contends, is the definition of gender that mainstream economists almost always rely on.<sup>42</sup>

To better understand how the limitation of economics affects the acceptability of gender as a category of analysis, it is helpful to start with a brief exploration of the fundamental elements of economics. At its core, the discipline of economics is based on the dual interconnected premise that resources are scarce and human wants are unlimited. Human beings would therefore have to make choices on which resource(s) to consume in order to maximise their satisfaction. In order to study these choices scientifically [which means quantitatively], complex concepts need to be reduced into manageable variables.<sup>43</sup>

A human being for instance is stripped of its complexity into what is aptly called the economic man or

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<sup>40</sup> Piotr Jaroszyński, *Science in Culture*, trans. Hugh McDonald, Value Inquiry Book Series, vol. 185 (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 117.

<sup>41</sup> Julie A. Nelson, "Sociology, Economics, and Gender: Can Knowledge of the Past Contribute to a Better Future?", *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 69, no. 4 (2010): 1128.

<sup>42</sup> Robeyns, "Is There a Feminist Economic Methodology?", 10.

<sup>43</sup> Mathis, *Efficiency Instead of Justice?*, 14.

*homo economicus*<sup>44</sup> who is "a self-interested economic agent".<sup>45</sup> The economic man is a reductionist concept of human beings assumed to be "consistently rational and narrowly self-interested agents who usually pursue their subjectively defined ends optimally".<sup>46</sup> As the economic man, human beings are seen as manageable variables that can be quantified, measured, and analysed.

This same reductionist outlook applies to gender as well. In order for gender to be analysed quantitatively, it needs to be defined simply. The binary categorisation of gender into man and woman along biological lines (also known as sex difference) fits this criterion. Each of the two genders can be precisely measured against the other leading to meaningful scientific conclusions. In comparison, the ambiguous sociocultural concept of gender lacks the conceptual simplicity for such an elegant quantitative analysis.

Likewise, the subjective personal concept of gender, with its acknowledgment of an indeterminate number of possible genders, lacks the measurability for any sort of quantitative analysis. On the other extreme end, when there was only one gender (men) that dominated the market, there was a lack of comparability for meaningful quantitative analysis. It is unsurprising, as such, that economists have continued to rely on the conceptually simple, measurable, and comparable binary categorisation of gender, clearly divided according to biological differences (sex) due to its practicality.

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Donald Rutherford, *Routledge Dictionary of Economics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002; first published in 1992 as the *Dictionary of Economics*), s.v. "homo economicus".

<sup>46</sup> Marian Iszatt-White, "I, Leader: Becoming Human through the Emotional Grounding of Leadership Practice", in *After Leadership*, ed. Brigid Carroll, Josh Firth, and Suze Wilson, Routledge Studies in Leadership Research, vol. 10 (New York: Routledge, 2019), 46.

In an effort to better accommodate non-traditional interpretations of gender in scientific research, the American Psychological Association (APA) has been promoting alternative systems of gender categorisation that would, theoretically, be systematic enough to be a viable practical alternative for economists as well as other social scientists and natural scientists who want to conduct quantitative analysis of gender.<sup>47</sup> In particular, the APA proposes gender categorisation to include "more common non-binary identities such as genderqueer and gender fluid, as well as an option to write in 'other gender identity' " in addition to male and female along with transgender.<sup>48</sup>

Relatedly, in an article recommended by the APA;<sup>49</sup> Tate, Ledbetter, and Youssef suggest dividing gender into male, female, transgender, and genderqueer; with the last one (genderqueer) being represented by 17 other more specific descriptors including two-spirit, genderblender, and postgender.<sup>50</sup> These novel systems of gender categorisation, although they may appear convoluted, are technically practicable in quantitative research. However, whether they would be considered practical enough to be widely adopted by economists remains to be seen. For now, economists appear to be mostly content with the more elegant binary categorisation of gender.

It should be noted that the arguments thus far refer to mainstream economic analysis and its application in the

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<sup>47</sup> Arielle Webb et al., *Non-binary Gender Identities: Fact Sheet* (American Psychological Association, 2015), <https://www.apadivisions.org/division-44/resources/advocacy/non-binary-facts.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Charlotte Chuck Tate, Jay N. Ledbetter, and Cris P. Youssef, "A Two-Question Method for Assessing Gender Categories in the Social and Medical Sciences", *Journal of Sex Research* 50, no. 8 (2013), 769, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2012.690110>.



study of gender—which Robeyns calls *gender economics*.<sup>51</sup> Many of the facts and arguments above would not be entirely applicable to *feminist economics*. While gender economists work solely within the methodological constraint of mainstream (neoclassical) economics, feminist economists employ a broader interdisciplinary approach to the study of gender.<sup>52</sup> This lack of methodological restriction allows feminist economists to welcome the ambiguity of the sociocultural concept of gender and accommodate the subjectivity of the personal concept of gender, along with the indeterminate number of potential genders and infinite possible interpretations of gender that come from these abstract conceptions of gender.<sup>53</sup>

However, they have to draw upon methodologies external to mainstream economics to deal with such complex concepts. When working within the confines of mainstream economics, they are bound by the same methodological constraint as gender economists. In such a situation, the arguments above, about the practicality of the binary categorisation of gender to economists, would technically apply to feminist economists as well. Hence, it can be said that within the confines of mainstream economics, gender is practically binary.

### **Gender is Really and Truly Binary in Islam**

One common characteristic of the various groups mentioned above (feminists, SGMs, and economists) in their approval of a particular concept of gender that sets them apart from an Islamic approach is their general disregard for religion in evaluating what is right and correspondingly what is wrong. This secular orientation—

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<sup>51</sup> Robeyns, "Is There a Feminist Economic Methodology?", 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-12; Becchio, "Gender, Feminist and Heterodox Economics", 5.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Benería, Berik, and Floro, *Gender, Development, and Globalization*, 74.

according to the eminent Malaysian Muslim scholar, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas—is a significant feature of Western philosophy and science.<sup>54</sup> Owing to Western cultural hegemony, this secular scientific and philosophical tradition has been exported to other parts of the world, making it unduly influential in mainstream intellectual discourse, especially in the humanities and social sciences which include gender studies and economics.

Without revealed knowledge, which can only be acquired through religion or more specifically the religion of Islam,<sup>55</sup> to function as an authoritative determiner of what is right and what is wrong, conceptual evaluation in the secular West has become a purely subjective and arbitrary process,<sup>56</sup> relying only on human reasoning in its capacity to engage in philosophical speculation.<sup>57</sup> Right and wrong is determined subjectively by each and every member of society by means of philosophical speculation, with some people sometimes forming loose philosophical agreements that may arbitrarily change from time to time. Even scientific facts are interpreted arbitrarily and subjectively through philosophical speculation.<sup>58</sup>

This lack of recognition for a stable higher authority with regard to knowledge is why the concept of gender is

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<sup>54</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978; repr., Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 36-28, 48.

<sup>55</sup> On Islam being the only valid revealed religion, see al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 9-10. On the distinction between revealed religion and religion based on revelation, see al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 27-31.

<sup>56</sup> For an explanation about the evaluative criteria used in Western science, see al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 116-117.

<sup>57</sup> See al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 135 and *Prolegomena*, 86-87.

<sup>58</sup> Al-Attas contends that "[m]odern philosophy has become the interpreter of [Western] science" in *Prolegomena*, 113. Also see pages 116-117 for an explanation about the evaluative criteria used in Western science.

still being disputed in the West. No one faction, be it feminists, SGMs, or economists, has been able to conclusively claim that the concept of gender they approve of is the right one or represent the only certain truth about gender at the exclusion of competing claims. As stated by al-Attas, "[t]here can be no certainty in philosophical speculations in the sense of religious certainty based on revealed knowledge understood and experienced in Islam".<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to the secular Western intellectual tradition described above, Islam delineates authority clearly.<sup>60</sup> Al-Attas contends that with respect to knowledge, Islam does not recognise the common people as authoritative,<sup>61</sup> but rather authority in Islam is entrusted to specific individuals identified as the keepers (*ahl*) of trusts who "must possess moral integrity and authentic knowledge of what is entrusted in order to be worthy of that trust".<sup>62</sup>

Correspondingly, on matters pertaining to religion, it is the genuine Muslim religious scholars who exemplify these traits. It is they, by virtue of their knowledge and demonstrated integrity, who are the true keepers (*ahl*) of revealed knowledge, functioning as qualified interpreters of divine revelation, and as such have the proper authority to speak for Islam and effectively guide the laity. This is an important point to make because there are many who claim to speak on behalf of Islam when they are clearly not qualified to do so according to the aforementioned criteria.

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<sup>59</sup> Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 135 and *Prolegomena*, 86-87. See the footnotes in both sources for information on *yaqīn* (certainty).

<sup>60</sup> See al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 107.

<sup>61</sup> Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 31.

<sup>62</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Sūrah al-Nisā' (4):58 and Sūrah al-Mu'minūn (23):12-14* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM in collaboration with Akademi Kenegaraan, 2015), 15.

On the matter of gender, there is a general consensus of opinions (*ijmā'*) among authoritative Muslim scholars that gender is binary, divided clearly along biological lines determined primarily according to genitalia at birth which is not allowed to be changed. To our knowledge, there are no diverging views among the authoritative Muslim scholars on this matter. There may be some deviant teachings concerning gender that might have appeared sporadically, but they are not authoritative and typically ignored by the mainstream Muslim population. In its practical application, the religiously established position of binary gender distinction is strictly enforced by the *Sharī'ah*, which is the Islamic code of conduct that regulates every facet of a Muslim's life throughout his or her lifespan.

Consequently, it is very difficult to lead a pious life as a Muslim in conformity with the *Sharī'ah* without being categorised into one of the two genders. In Islam, gender is not a matter of personal choice nor is it subject to personal or societal validation; it is something ordained by God and cannot be modified. Whichever one of the two genders one is born as, that is the gender he or she will live and subsequently die as. There are no allowances in Islam to change a person's gender at any point in his or her life. In the rare cases of those born intersex (*khunthā*), possessing both male and female genitalia, they are judiciously designated as either male or female whenever possible according to certain established criteria in the Islamic legal system.<sup>63</sup> They are not allowed to arbitrarily choose their gender.

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<sup>63</sup> For a detailed explanation, see Zulkifli bin Mohamad al-Bakri, "Irsyad al-Fatwa Series 202: The Rulings Regarding Intersex (Disorders of Sex Development, DSD)", (2017), <https://muftiwp.gov.my/en/artikel/irsyad-fatwa/irsyad-fatwa-umum-cat/751-irsyad-al-fatwa-series-202-the-rulings-regarding-intersex-disorders-of-sex-development-dsd>.

From an Islamic perspective, the biological arguments about gender are clear. Biology however is not the only aspect of discussion on gender. Khalif Muammar and Adibah argue that the binary gender distinction in Islam extends beyond biological difference and include psychological or behavioural distinction as well, reflecting each of the two gender's unique inherent natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) as determined by God.<sup>64</sup> This is not a denial of environmental affectability on disposition that could theoretically produce dispositional variation, but rather an argument establishing the existence of a *natural* disposition for the two genders respectively. Environmental factors, like how a person is raised or sociocultural pressures, can certainly influence and shape a person's disposition, but where such forces lead to deviation from the natural state, it is considered a corruption of natural disposition, and as such mandates a corrective response.

For example, a man who is sexually attracted to a woman conforms to his natural disposition, whereby a man who is sexually attracted to another man deviates from his natural disposition.<sup>65</sup> The one who deviates should strive to return to his natural state. A person's natural disposition is believed to strictly correspond to his or her biologically determined gender or biological sex.

With regard to the different conceptions of gender explored in this article that pertains to human traits (biological, sociocultural, and personal), it can be said that Islam accepts the biological concept of gender, since from an Islamic perspective a person's gender is primarily

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<sup>64</sup> Khalif Muammar A. Harris and Adibah Muhtar, "Konsep Kesetaraan Gender Menurut Perspektif Islam dan Barat" [The Concept of Gender Equality in Islam and the West], *Afkār* 21, no. 2 (2019), 38-39, 51-56, <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol21no2.2>.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

determined according to naturally formed genitalia, which is a biological organ.

While it cannot be denied that every individual or culture or society can, as in able to, have their own subjective and arbitrary conceptions of gender, any conceptualisation of gender that does not conform to biological sex, and the natural disposition that corresponds to it, is considered wrong from an Islamic perspective. As such, the sociocultural and personal concepts of gender are meaningless in Islam, because whatever conception of gender a particular society or culture or person comes up with, it would only be valid if it conforms to biological sex. Hence, only the biological concept of gender is meaningful, and biology dictates that gender, in its normal natural manifestation, is binary. A normal person is either a male or a female, and this elegant binary categorisation conforms to reality and truth (*ḥaqq*), which makes it appropriate to say that gender is really and truly binary.

While the position taken in Islam on the binariness of gender seems to be in agreement with the position taken by mainstream economists, the criteria that have led to that position being adopted differs. Whereas economists may have been primarily concerned with what is practical, Muslim scholars have been more concerned with what is right. As this applies to concepts, it is about determining the right meaning of a particular concept, and right meaning in Islam is not a matter of subjective personal opinion or arbitrary societal endorsement.

According to al-Attas, right meaning in Islam is "determined by the Islamic vision of reality and truth as projected by the Quranic conceptual system"<sup>66</sup> which has been "formulated into a worldview by tradition and articulated by religion".<sup>67</sup> It is according to this vision that gender is revealed to be binary, reflecting the actual reality

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<sup>66</sup> Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 134.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

and true nature (*ḥaqīqah*) of gender based on the infallible *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah*, and this understanding of gender has been faithfully preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next by authoritative Muslim scholars in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

It should be stressed that Islam does not reject practicality, for Islam does not merely dwell in the realm of ideals.<sup>68</sup> When Muslim scholars exercise *ijtihād* (legal reasoning) in the issuance of *fatwá* (legal rulings) for example, practicality is part of the consideration. What they do not do is employ practicality as the sole evaluative criterion, which would push aside the greater concern of what is right. This is not to say that being practical and being right cannot coexist; they are not mutually exclusive. Take for example, economists' acceptance of the binary categorisation of gender. It is practical and from an Islamic perspective also right. However, this is a coincidence. Even if a particular categorisation of gender was not right, merely practical, economists might still accept it because their central criterion of evaluation appears to be practicality.

An example scenario that reflects this argument is the potential acceptance by economists of the quaternary categorisation of gender suggested by Tate et al.—comprising of male, female, transgender, and genderqueer.<sup>69</sup> The quaternary categorisation possesses all the qualities that would make gender practical as a category of analysis for economists—specifically it is conceptually simple, measurable, and comparable—making the categorisation acceptable in economics. However, when viewed from an Islamic perspective, the categorisation would be unacceptable because it would be wrong as it contradicts the Islamic vision of reality and truth which reveals gender as binary and not quaternary.

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<sup>68</sup> See al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Tate, Ledbetter, and Youssef, "Assessing Gender Categories", 769.

In Islam, practicality needs to conform to reality and truth; practicality cannot abrogate reality and truth.

It is a truism that economists aspire to be scientific, whether in dealings with gender or otherwise. In the modern world, being scientific is typically understood as being able to provide evidence that is quantitatively verifiable; however, being scientific need not be defined so narrowly. After all, the meaning of science used to be broader. The origin of the word *science* can be traced to the Latin word *scīre* meaning *know*,<sup>70</sup> which is why the archaic sense of science is "knowledge of any kind".<sup>71</sup>

There is no reason why this broader definition of science cannot be appreciated today. According to such definition, that science is knowledge, being scientific should be about fulfilling the essential purpose of knowledge, which is to find the truth; Islam provides the path to certain truth.<sup>72</sup> Economists, or anyone and everyone for that matter, can certainly benefit from that. Practicality should not be the sole determiner of conceptual acceptability. Rather, concepts should be accepted based on what they really and truly are, and gender is really and truly binary.

## Conclusion

It has been established that without religion to determine what is right and what is wrong, the evaluation of the concept of gender is dependent on subjective human preference, wherein each person or culture or society can have their own interpretation of gender with no objective basis to ground their understanding. Reliance on human preference alone has led to some unconventional ideas about gender including the idea that there are an

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<sup>70</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. C. T. Onions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), "science".

<sup>71</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. "science".

<sup>72</sup> On certainty in knowledge, see the footnotes in al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 135 and *Prolegomena*, 86.



indeterminate number of genders that can be anything conceivable.

Unbounded subjectivity and arbitrariness have resulted in an ongoing debate about the concept and definition of gender with no agreement being reached. Lacking definitive consensus in the debate on gender, mainstream economists have come to rely on the definition that is most practical to them, that gender is clearly divided along binary lines where it can be used effectively as a quantitative category of analysis which fits the methodological constraint of neoclassical economics that dominates the field.

However, as previously demonstrated, practicality is not the best criterion to determine conceptual acceptability because practical concepts can still be wrong. A more dependable criterion is reality and truth (*ḥaqq*), and this is the measure used in Islam to evaluate the concept of gender. In Islam, gender is binary, not because practicality deems it so, but because that is the actual reality or true nature (*ḥaqīqah*) of gender. Generally, any concept, including gender, that is correctly evaluated based on *ḥaqq* will always be right without ever needing re-evaluation of its meaning because it already accurately reflects its *ḥaqīqah*. Such consistency makes *ḥaqq* the most dependable criterion in the conceptual evaluation of gender or any other concept.

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