

# Gendering Science : a threat to a sustainable world?

This crossed interview particularly highlights the role of social sciences in steering scientific projects and guiding the future of research as a whole. Gender studies shed light on the blocking points in our current societies and open the way towards sustainable solutions for the societal challenges we face today.



**Carol Gilligan** is the author of *In a Different Voice*, the “little book that started a revolution”. Her most recent book is *Why Does Patriarchy Persist?*, written with her former student Naomi Snider. A member of the Harvard faculty for over 30 years, she held the university’s first chair in Gender Studies. Recognized by *Time* magazine in 1996 as one of the 25 most influential Americans, she is currently a University Professor at New York University.

**Sandra Laugier** is a Professor of Philosophy at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, member of the University Institute of France (Institut Universitaire de France) and Principal Investigator of the ERC Advanced Grant DEMOSERIES Program (2020-2024). Translator of de Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond’s research work, she is the introducer of feminist care ethics in France, she has developed feminist research, especially at CNRS where she created the Gender Institute <https://institut-du-genre.fr/>. She is author of many books, such as *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, *The Principle Democracy - Le principe démocratie* (La Découverte, 2014), *Politics of the Ordinary, care, ethics, and forms of life*, Peeters, 2020, *La société des vulnérables*, co-written with Najat Vallaud Belkacem, Gallimard, 2020. She is a columnist for the French journal *Libération*.



Clara Devouassoux • **What has led you to put the question of gender at the center of your reflections?**

**Carol Gilligan** What led me to put the question of gender at the centre of my reflections was the discovery that gender was at the center of theories of psychological development and no one was talking about it. Listening to women speaking about moral conflict and choices they were making, I came to the realization that it was common practice among psychologists, including leading theorists such as Freud and Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg) and well-funded researchers such as Daniel Offer and his wife Judith, to study boys and men only as the basis for theorizing about humans. As if the omission of girls and women was inconsequential. In his “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” Freud writes, “the sexual life of men alone is accessible to our research;” in *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, Piaget includes “girls” but not “boys” in the index because “the child” is assumed to be male. Daniel Offer’s research on teenagers, lavishly supported by the National Institute of Child Development, led to a book, coauthored with his wife Judith, titled: *The Psychological World of the Teenager: A Study of 175 Boys*. My work made this invisible gender bias visible, in part by showing what could be learned about human development and the human condition by listening to women and studying girls’ development.

**Sandra Laugier** For me, it is first of all a consideration of ordinary language, which grew thanks to Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell’s research work. Taking the perspective of ordinary life is from the outset a subversion and a decentering of ethics and moral philosophy. This introduces a break from a dominant tradition in ethics.

Care ethics affirm the significance of care work and the attention paid to others, especially those whose lives and well-being depend on an individualized, continuous and daily attentiveness. It is based on an analysis of historical conditions that favored a moral division of labor under which care activities have been socially and morally devalued. The assignment of women to the domestic sphere has reinforced

the rejection of these activities and concerns outside the public sphere, reducing them to the rank of private feelings devoid of moral and political significance. It is because the work and activities of care have traditionally been assigned to women that care is a women's business first, which has become massively apparent during the COVID pandemic.

The feminist ethic of care has disrupted philosophy for me. It draws our attention to the ordinary, to what we are unable to see, to what is right before our eyes and which, for this very reason, is invisible to us. It is an ethic that gives voice and care to humans who are undervalued precisely because they perform invisible, unseen tasks and take care of basic needs. And, more often than not, these humans are women, and often non-white women.

**By paying attention to the activities and feelings of care-taking, which are traditionally neglected or despised (think of the expression: "I'm not your maid!"), we choose to take into account the most vulnerable, a whole world of invisible people who make the lives of others possible. This has interested me for a long time, but it was the discovery of Carol Gilligan's work, especially *In a Different Voice*, that allowed me to analyze these phenomena. The "voice" discovered by Gilligan is the ordinary female voice. Her work marks for the first time the need to make women's voices heard in human conversations.**

**CD • To what extent do social hierarchies (in the Greek sense : class, race, gender...) lead to a hierarchy of scientific fields ?**

**Carol Gilligan Fields gendered masculine (physics, math,) have higher status and are considered more rigorous and as "hard" sciences in contrast to fields that appear softer and more "feminine" such as biology and the other human sciences.**

**Sandra Laugier What remains of the different voice is not just an ethic of**

attentiveness. It is a new epistemology: care obliges us to pay attention to neglected realities and thus to what we value, or not, as human activities. We see that established social hierarchies have led to the neglect of realities. We see here the articulation of research issues and societal issues: research in the social sciences brings a critical and reflective point of view on the sciences, and has pointed out the risk of error in **not taking sex into account in knowledge**. We have thus learned to take gender into account in historical, demographic and social analysis: knowledge of gender and of the stance of women in society, in history, in space, has been built with consideration of the gender variable; for example, that work cannot be reduced to professional or productive work, but includes domestic work, that the so-called “universalist” vision of human rights excludes women and other minorities, that women were part of the Resistance. Feminism starts from a critique of the androcentric point of view (*malestream*), which ignores itself as such, which generalizes from the particular masculine case, which usurps its title from an objective point of view. However, this point of view is not only rife in the social sciences and humanities, it leads to omissions, to erroneous generalizations: whether we’re thinking about the under-evaluation of heart disease in women or the current neglect longhaul covid, the symptoms of which are first considered “psychosomatic.”

CD • **How does reconsidering these fields, which could have been considered of no interest and thus left behind in favor of more popular sciences, drive change in subjects of research and innovation?**

**Carol Gilligan One has only to look at the work of Antonio Damasio in neuroscience or Frans deWaal in primatology or Sarah Blaffer Hrdy in evolutionary anthropology or the new studies of infant development to see a major reconsideration of what had been unquestioned and taken as fact. Put simply, Damasio’s research shows that what had been considered the *sine qua non* of rationality (the separation of reason from emotion) is in fact a manifestation of brain injury or trauma. Similarly, the separation of the self from relationships once seen as signifying the achievement of autonomy has**

**come to be understood as a residue of trauma. Research on care ethics and care work, has been marginalized because caring has been gendered feminine and seen as women's work or the work of immigrants and people of color; reconsidering this marginalization of caring would allow scientists to recognize and address the costs of carelessness to ourselves, to other species, and to the planet.**

**Sandra Laugier A major finding of gender research is precisely that the importance and support we give to this or that research work is often correlated with the real social importance we give to the object, or subjects, of this research. But also, that the development of research and training of excellence in a field, such as women or gender, can play an essential role in the place it is granted in our societies and open up new fields of research.**

**CD • Beyond this hierarchy of treated subjects, how could a new approach, one that is understood as "feminine" by the social majority, push knowledge forward and nourish the sciences?**

**Carol Gilligan Of greatest significance at this moment and of genuine urgency is an approach that takes on the gendering of caring as "feminine". It may well be crucial to saving our planet as a habitable home. As long as caring is gendered feminine and the earth is seen as "mother earth," it is hard to marshal support for those activities which are increasingly recognized as essential to preventing catastrophic or irreversible climate change. Oil and gas and the extraction of fossil fuels are considered "masculine" and thus take precedence over the more "feminine" because more passive sources of energy (that don't involve drilling) such as wind farms and solar panels. An approach that takes on this gender hierarchy may be key to saving the planet.**

**Sandra Laugier The inclusion of more diverse points of view is not only a moral and political asset. It is also a way to do better science. The field of gender studies is one of the most fertile fields of research today and many young researchers are involved in it. It is also a very interdisciplinary field.**

**Taking the gender dimension into account in research concerns all of the sciences in fact; all areas where it makes a difference to take gender and sex differences into account in research: this is the case in health but also in environment, in technologies. The value of taking gender into account is attested to by numerous data from international literature in areas as diverse as alcohol consumption, sport, cardiovascular risks, women's access to natural resources, sustainable development policies, automobile safety, artificial intelligence.**

**CD • Today, what difficulties might people who do not identify as part of the majority representation of legitimate scientists face in the scientific domain?**

**Carol Gilligan Obtaining funding, gaining lab space, publishing work in first rank journals, winning prizes, having their work and their opinions engaged with and taken seriously by colleagues.**

**Sandra Laugier One often hears attacking gender studies as being a "theory." But **gender is science**. Research on gender, which is primarily scientific, also raises political questions: it reveals an unpleasant reality, that of unjustifiable inequalities that affect a group of citizens or humans who are in principle equal. This is the root cause of the persisting attacks on gender. This research questions the traditional organization of the family, patriarchy and heteronormativity, prejudices about sexuality and transgender people, in short, gender-related inequalities that seem less and less "normal." In this, they intersect with issues of race.**

Research on gender and race (intersectional) shows that we do not want to see to what extent the world, but also the academic world and the world of Science, are still steeped in inequalities and stereotypes. Developing research on gender means fighting for the recognition of inequalities and against their causes, and also against prejudices that undermine Science itself, as we have seen in a recent period when gender and science were assaulted.

**CD • What advice would you like to give to all young women who feel out of place, who are not finding their role, or who do not dare to seek it?**

**Carol Gilligan Get in touch with your 11 year old self—the girl who says what she really thinks, who pays attention to what she actually feels, who says what she sees and listens to what she hears and knows what she knows on the basis of her own experience. Read coming of age novels written by women-, notice how many begin with a 10 or 11 year old girl: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, TsiTsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*; watch the Saudi Arabian film *Wadjda*. Listen within yourself for the voice that says not what others want you to think and feel and know but what you really or actually think and feel and know—the voice that responds to the phrase (taken from the diary of Anne Frank): "If I were to be quite honest, I must admit...". And then seek out others who listen to you and take you seriously, who know you and encourage you, and who will stay with you when the chips are down, when you run into obstacles or lose heart.**

**Sandra Laugier For these young women, I would tell them above all not to believe that equality is guaranteed. They are at the mercy of the patriarchy and they will inevitably have to suffer it, certainly where they do not expect it. So you have to be ready. You also have to have role models (who are women, not men!), and you always have to show solidarity with other women, which is certainly the most difficult thing in a competitive universe.**

I would also recommend frequenting popular culture for finding a voice, which has been much more inclusive and feminist than classical culture or mainstream cinema: TV shows like *The Handmaid's Tale* or the recent *Maid* have done more to raise awareness of revolting inequalities between men and women than many scientific works. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2004) is a classic work intended to morally transform mixed teenage audiences, showing a seemingly ordinary young girl who can fight. TV series have accustomed viewers to seeing women (of all ages, sexualities and origins) in a position of power. They thus have a lasting presence in

the lives of male and female viewers, essential to the transformation of gender representation in society: I am thinking of *Orange is the New Black*, *Better Things*, *Big Little Lies*, *Unbelievable* or *The Queen's Gambit*.

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