



# In the Colours of the Rainbow

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book review

## Renata Ziemińska

*Niebinarne i wielowarstwowe pojęcie płci*  
(*Non-binary and multilayered concept of sex*)

Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa, 2018

Since the second half of the 20th century, and mainly influenced by the development of feminist theories, the issue of sex/gender diversity<sup>1</sup> has become the topic of broader interest. Available publications on this subject however, are mostly limited to the one field represented by the researcher, whether it is biology/medicine, psychology/psychoanalysis or sociology/anthropology. The work of Renata Ziemińska is unique in this respect – it includes combined disciplines approach to the subject.

The author in very clear, orderly, though not simplifying way, presents and explains complicated issues related to sex/gender diversity. In her book she refers to the latest medical, biological, psychological, legal and the other works. Apart from the references to published researches results, she also uses her own research, conducted at the University of

Leads, and the University of Chicago, during the years 2015–2017. Particularly valuable and interesting is her proposition of a new conceptualization and categorization of the sex/gender phenomenon.

The main intention of the author of the work is to scientifically demonstrate the inadequacy of stereotypical binary sex/gender division, which despite the undeniable findings, still dominates in the social consciousness. The most vivid evidence to deny the prevailing opinions is the existence of relatively large group of people who do not fall within the division. Their status, history and experience are still treated as marginal, “unnatural” and in need of psychological intervention or radical medical correction. Scientific analyses regarding those issues however, are published in strictly professional journals, intended for a group of specialists, and do not reach a wider audience. In the consequence, lack of adequate knowledge leads to the perpetuation of dangerous, because hurtful, opinions and reactions.

The book has been divided into five chapters. In the first chapter Ziemińska presents seven basic layers of sex/gender differentiations, including five regarding biological

<sup>1</sup> In the English language, due to the double meaning of the term “sex”, the term “gender” became commonly used instead, while the term “sex” is reserved for the strictly biological/medical issues. In Polish the problem doesn’t occur, and the choice of the terms depends on the author of the text. In this review, because of Ziemińska complex understanding of the subject of her book, I use combined term: “sex/gender”

characteristics and two psychological. Reproductive roles, sexual orientations, as well as linguistic issues, as not necessary conditions for sex/gender, though closely related, the author describes as secondary layers. And because of the already detailed and demonstrated in scientific researches findings of mosaic, or hybrid nature of the human brain, she does not include this indicator (sex of the brain) in her list of layers of sex/gender differences.

The second chapter discusses the issues of intersex people. In the medical language until recently such people were called DSD (*disorders of sex development*), however, according to the author, in response to numeric protests coming from the directly interested persons, in 2017 the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a statement in which the term "differences" was used in the place of "disorders". When presenting the practices of treating people with unusual sexual characteristics Zieminska introduces, initiated by Miranda Fricker. A useful research tool as well as conceptual framework (mainly for feminist and sociological research) a concept of "*epistemic injury*". According to the Fricker, this phenomenon affects many people due to the multiple racial, gender and age differences, be it in the form of undermining the credibility of their words because of prejudices of the listeners (*injustice of witnessing*), or by ignoring information about their life and experience (*hermeneutic injustice*) depriving those people in this way of their rightful place in culture.

The third chapter has been devoted to the transsexual persons, that is those who feel the incompatibility between their sex/gender identity and the sex/gender assigned to them at birth. This condition in medical terminology is referred to as GID, gender identity disorders, (i.e. still as a mental disorder), although APA has already deleted GID from the list of disorders and in DMSN-5 in its place a less stigmatizing term has been adopted: GD (*gender dysphoria*).

The particularly vital, thought debatable due to its inversible consequences, is the surgical correction of sex (*reassignment*). Such treatments, which are mainly a consequence of adopting stereotypical sexual/gender division, have currently strong supporters as well as strong opponents. Presented by Zieminska the history of sex correction practices in infants and young children gives us a deeper insight into the problematic nature of such interventions undertaken in different countries, both at the explicit request of the child's parents and only on the basis of doctors' assessment.

The fourth chapter discusses sex exams of women in sport, and the history of segregation of players in this respect. New technologies and methods of testing did not provide the expected unquestionable criteria for establishing the boundaries between the sexes, which should also contribute to undermining the common beliefs in its dichotomy.

In the last chapter prof. Zieminska proposes her own conceptualization of sex/gender, which is somehow the realization of Sureja Monro postulate (2005), and complimentary to her theory replacing dichotomous division, by theory of plurality of sex/gender identity. The author of the reviewed book agrees with Monro (and with Judith Butler, among others) that despite of some voices supporting the "world without gender" model, we still need the categorization in this sphere, even if for strategic (political) purposes only.

The poststructuralist feminist/gender theory of the end of 20th century has created an innovative critical position against the tradition of treating a human being as a natural and unchangeable being an approach introducing the model of socially constructed subject (ultimately rejecting essentialism and biological determinism). Focusing on the cultural aspects however, it ignored the adoption of more nuanced considerations taking into account more complex solutions. First of all, it didn't

pay much attention to the materiality of the body<sup>2</sup>, and consequently, didn't construct any sex/gender categorization (a sit opposed to the idea). In spite of the effort made, it did not lead to changes in general public awareness in this area as effectively as be expected.

Until the beginning of the 21st century the biological explanations of gender/transgender was among the feminist questionable and very unpopular. All references to biology/nature were considered as a return to already eliminated (with so much of difficulty) conservative philosophical tradition. The result of such a position was however, omitting or even disregarding the results of researches in natural sciences as not being of the interests of those theoreticians. This situation caused peculiar lack of communication between the natural and social sciences. On the other hand, Zieminska devotes a lot of attention to biological findings, closer to the proposals of New Feminist Materialism.

Zieminska notices the need to build a sex/gender model that would include its diversion on every level, and not only on the level of representation and discourse, as was the case with the feminists' poststructuralists. She states that she decided to simplify the concepts of sex/gender identity pluralism proposed by Monro to three categories: two binary – male and female, and one non-binary – understood as a mix of both. Adopting Monro's pluralism, she makes an adjustment to binary division and includes intersexual individuals of different varieties. As previously mentioned, each of three categories has been divided into layers: seven basics, including five biological and two psychological and social. The non-binary category includes people from

the spectrum of masculinity and femininity. Additionally, typical categories of women and man have been supplemented by two atypical ones, justifying and documenting the nature of the sex/gender phenomenon as process, spectrum or continuum.

The author achieved the intended goal of her book. By presenting and explaining the findings of the latest scientific research, she documented the inadequacy of the dichotomous, simplification of division of sexes, groundlessly precluding people who don't fulfill typical criteria and social norms in the area of anatomy or psyche.

Knowledge about the factual human condition presented in such a substantive, impartial and reliable manner as it is done by Renata Zieminska, has a considerable chance to spark positive changes. For that reason, her work ought to be placed on the list of obligatory lectures for secondary schools.

Due to the rich and extensive bibliography, the engaged reader will find also here the information about the latest researches in natural and social sciences.

Zieminska's work is a valuable position especially for Polish readers who have for the last years almost exclusively over simplified and distorted information on this subject used for government, (and the Church), political purposes.

In summary, I highly recommend the presented book. 📖

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<sup>2</sup> The feminist corporeal philosophy of two Australian theorists E. Gross and M. Gatens has been more widely recognized and widespread only in the last decade of the 20th century.