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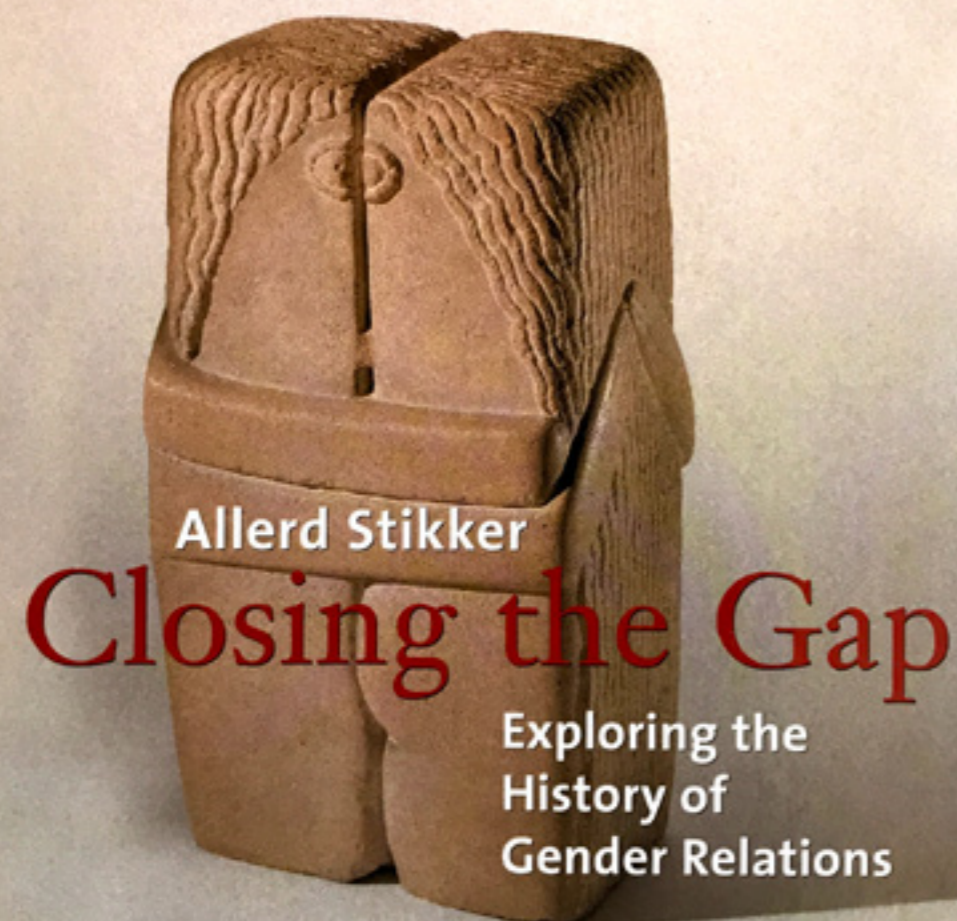


GENDER

Closing the gap

Exploring the History of Gender Relations

2002, uitgeverij Amsterdam University Press



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Information about the book

The development of the patriarchal society, still evident today, has its roots in antiquity. Originally, there was a matrilineal basis to early societies, but as the various ancient civilizations developed around the world, men gained in importance and power. Women were relegated to subordinate positions in the hierarchy. Natural dualities such as male/female may be perceived as radical opposites. In fact, most of them exist because of each other. They are born from unity and need interaction, not isolation. The separation of male and female over the centuries resulted in the loss of coherence and integrity. A male-dominated structure does not offer us the best solution for all the world's current ills - power sharing between men and women is essential. The natural dualities, which have become separated over time, must return to a state of balanced interdependence: female and male, nature and culture, ecology and economy, if we want to preserve a sustainable human society on our planet. Although at several instances in human history such a return seemed feasible, but failed, the author argues that in our present world an irreversible process towards a better balance is on the way.

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Introduction

For the past fifteen years I have been involved in industrial and commercial projects linking technology, economy and ecology. I have been impressed by the great amount of time and energy it has taken the political and industrial world to begin to accept that ecology and economy are closely linked and cannot do without each other. An economic activity cannot survive without resources, be they financial, human or natural.

Acceptance of the fact that ecologically responsible management is also economically responsible in the long run (and often in the short term as well) is a change in mind-set that does not come easily to male-dominated political and industrial leadership. There appears to be a strong link between the traditions of culture having dominion over nature, male over female and economy over ecology. Changing the simplistic perceptions of masculinity and femininity in our political and social structures and in our personal roles could turn out to be the most vital factor of all in our bid to achieve a sustainable future for human society.

A company that presents a relevant case on this subject is Deloitte & Touche, America's third largest accounting, tax and consulting firm in the early nineties. They published their findings in the December 2000 issue of Harvard Business Review. When the CEO of the group concluded that an in depth investigation was necessary to find out why so many women were recruited and trained and so few eventually stayed, he launched an Initiative for the Retention and Advancement of Women. After several years of searching, through internal workshops, it was discovered that a great number of erroneous assumptions that existed in the male culture about career women, was the overriding reason for wasting women's talents and their high turnover. When these assumptions were corrected, the number of women partners rose over the years from 4% to 14% and the trend continues today. Accepting flexible working hours and removing the myth that more than 60 billable hours per week were a requirement for promotion, were among these corrections. Also the unwritten rules that women were evaluated on their performance and men on their potential, that women were passed over for certain assignments, assumed to be too tough for them, and that travel puts too much pressure on women, were recognized and removed.

By these measures and many others, taken over years of culture change, performance and productivity of both male and female partners increased, while substantial savings were realized on recruitment and training costs.

The purpose of this volume is to explore whether the relationship between male and female and that between feminine and masculine in human society and within individual human beings, as we experience them today, are exclusively natural 'facts of life' or whether they result from attitudes, choices and habits developed during human history. If the latter were to be the case

we could in principle choose to change the relationships if they did not seem appropriate for a sustainable future. Change would be no easy task, but if our quality of life is at stake, it would be worth the challenge.

Why might the present relationship between male and female in today's world not be appropriate for a sustainable future for mankind?

I am of the opinion that the male dominating mode that prevails in most cultures on our planet is to a great extent responsible for the suppression of female qualities, for the destructive abuse of natural resources and for the forces of demonic aggression evident in conflicts between peoples.

In the history of mankind the perception has developed that female is to be identified with nature and male with culture, that culture is superior to nature and that as a consequence nature and women are of a lower order than culture and men.

Abuse of nature has a long history, but a new element is that the scale of magnitude of the world population and its rate of growth reach proportions far beyond any level experienced in the past. With today's world population standing at about 6 billion and still growing by about 80 million per year, wars over depleting uncontaminated resources are likely to increase in intensity and geographical spread. The demographic consequences of the resulting massive migrations are awful to contemplate.

Although great efforts are being made to restrain warfare, to limit damage to the environment and to tap natural resources only within the limits of their renewal, it seems to me that in the end they will all be of no avail if we do not investigate and solve the underlying, fundamental issue of male dominance in our social structures and individual roles.

The suppression of women also has a long history, and two feminist waves, one in the late nineteenth century and one in the mid-twentieth have initiated changes, but the emphasis has been on either radical difference or perfect equality between male and female, while still taking man as the measure. Unfortunately, there are still conflicting and confusing views on what constitutes woman and man and on the overall concepts of masculinity and femininity.

The process of gender balancing, however, is now capable of assuming a new dimension and a new momentum in the context of sustainable development; the whole idea implies a fundamental change in our attitude towards nature and culture.

Is the male/female relationship subject to cycles? Is the present male domination an unavoidable and irreversible model, or did we ourselves set the rules and can we therefore change them? Those will be the questions to be addressed. The answers will not be black and white, given the great variety of models in different cultures, but searching for answers may give us a clue as to whether and how we can change these models in order to secure a sustainable future. The present models will probably be revised by political, economic and technological innovations, but although these factors are vital and essential, they alone will not suffice. First and foremost, attitudes will have to change.

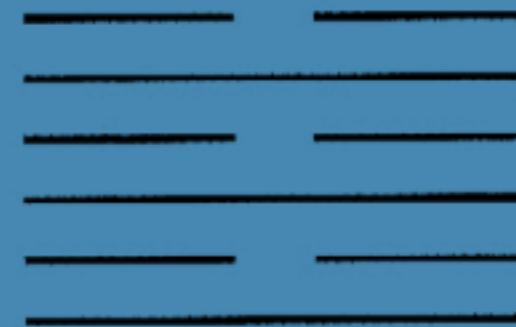
In the following pages I shall attempt to shed some light on how male/female phenomena emerged in the history of nature, how perceptions of feminine and masculine emerged in the history of human civilisations, and whether it can be argued that there is a link between the resulting male dominance and the ecological and gender issues in our present world.

I think it is important to point out that this book does not mean to deal primarily with the position of women in society. It is equally concerned with the position of men. It is all about rediscovering the human being in women and in men, and redefining their roles based on the assumption that all human beings have, in varying degrees, masculine and feminine characteristics, be they more masculine in men and more feminine in women.

In the Chinese Book of Change (I Ching), the trigram for feminine-related water consists of two outer yin lines and one inner yang line, whereas in the trigram for masculine-related fire it is the other way around. This symbolism implies on the one hand that feminine is predominantly yin but also contains yang, whilst masculine is predominantly yang but also contains yin. The combination of the two trigrams form a hexagram which is the symbol for perfection, for completeness when the water trigram is at the top and the fire trigram at the bottom. In this combination they represent a perfect balance, with a subtle hierarchical primacy of the feminine. In other words, in this perception of feminine and masculine there is a distinct difference but no radical distinction between woman and man, whilst in combination they represent integrity. This is a very essential concept; a concept we have to rediscover as it seems to have gone lost in the course of human history.

As the subject of this book and the time span it covers are both vast, I have chosen to limit the texts to summarizing various findings in primary and secondary sources in the literature and my own interpretations as to their interconnectedness. Ariadne's thread if you will, rather than any attempt to repeat what has already been written on the subject and related issues in a great number of excellent and relatively recent publications. I have tried to present a bird's eye view of trends in relationships between male and female and masculine and feminine over the ages, first in the evolution of nature and then in the evolution of human civilisation and the human individual. I offer my personal interpretation of these trends and some speculative thoughts on future options. I hope that this book may contribute to a more general awareness of the history, the present and the future of gender relations and its impact on sustainable development.

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