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# (Un)Doing Gender for Achieving Equality at Work: The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility

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# (Un)Doing Gender for Achieving Equality at Work:

# The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility


## Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) research has been largely interested in answering the question of why more women at work is good for business, leaving unattended the question of how to achieve this, and how feminist theories can be integrated with this purpose. This paper puts forward some conceptual propositions for advancing these questions by examining the linkages between the doing and undoing gender concepts from the feminist organization studies, and the role of CSR. The paper follows a conceptual approach to develop and support propositions. We propose that gender strategies will vary in organizations according to what CSR orientation they assume (compliance or proactive CSR), and how they navigate the un/doing gender continuum. By doing so, a two-axis model is portrayed and four specific gender strategies identified. The model can support research aiming at exploring how CSR can be a tool for achieving gender equality at work, and managers looking at implementing or evaluating their gender responsible strategies.


*Key words*: Corporate social responsibility, proactive CSR, compliance, doing gender, gender equality, feminist organization studies, gender strategies.

## Introduction

There has been a growing interest about the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on gender equality as a key issue to achieve sustainable development (Grosser, 2009; Thompson 2008; Yasser *et al.*, 2017; Warth, 2009). In the last few years a number of company CSR initiatives related with gender have emerged such as the Women's empowerment principles promoted by UN Women and UN Global Compact, and the Gender Equality Seals promoted by the UN Development Programme in collaboration with governments in Latin America. In this respect, from the variety of ways that CSR has been defined (Dahlsrud, 2008), the concept can be understood as "policies and practices of corporations that reflect business responsibility for some of the wider societal good" (Matten and Moon, 2008: 405). These policies and practices are usually driven by the organization's acknowledgement of its moral responsibilities, by the expectation that some competitive advantage will accrue to them, and by the overall legal framework (European Commission, 2011; Maon *et al*., 2010; McBarnet, 2009).

However, research has mainly taken a business case approach focusing on the impact of female directors on corporate sustainability outcomes (e.g. Ben-Amar *et al.*, 2017; Galbreath, 2018; Glass *et al*., 2016; Li *et al*., 2017). Only few studies have explored the impact of sustainability strategies on gender (e.g. Karam and Jamali, 2013; Kato and Kodama, 2018), and offered guidance on how to better integrate feminist theory on CSR research (e.g. Grosser and Moon, 2017). As such, CSR research has been largely interested in answering the question of why more women at work is good for business (Calkin, 2016), leaving unattended the question of how to achieve this, and how feminist theories can be integrated with this purpose.

This paper puts forward some conceptual propositions for advancing these questions by examining the linkages between the activity of doing and undoing gender in organizations, and

the role of CSR. ‘Doing gender’ has become a broadly used concept within feminist organization studies (FOS) (Nentwich and Kelan, 2014; Pullen and Knights, 2007). Doing gender is understood here as the interactional process of producing differences based on gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987). This implies a differentiated view of the role of men and women in gender issues including traditional policy efforts to achieve equality (Lorber, 2000; Mensi-Klarbach, 2014). Gender policies with this focus have improved the position of women in society. However, their impact has been also limited due to the emergence of more subtle forms of gender discrimination (ILO, 2003), and a public debate that has widely regarded gender equality as “women’s business” (Connell, 2005: 1805).

Stepping forward in the fight against gender inequalities calls for complementary strategies based on an inclusive view of gender in society and organizations. The ‘undoing gender’ approach is in line with this idea by focusing on the mechanisms that reduce gender differences (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009). If the form in which people do gender supports and reproduces the division between men and women, thereby supporting gender inequalities, the step forward should consider the use of frameworks which help to neutralize differences. This does not mean that a traditional gender standpoint in national and international policy is dispensable (Ertürk, 2004). In the absence of such a baseline, the actual chance of people having control over their lives and resources is vague, and inequalities become inevitable (Hopwood *et al*., 2005).

Responsible business strategies should aim at facilitating a gender-inclusive approach and complementing existing policies. We propose that gender strategies will vary in organizations according to what CSR orientation they assume, and how they navigate the un/doing gender continuum. By doing so, we portrayed a two-axis model where four specific responsible gender

strategies are identified. The model can support research aiming at exploring how CSR can be a tool for achieving gender equality at work, and managers looking at implementing or evaluating their gender responsible strategies. The paper is divided in two main sections. The first section presents the conceptual basis of the model by discussing the intersection between CSR and FOS with particular focus on the concepts of doing and undoing gender. The second section elaborates the model by explaining how companies navigate the un/doing gender continuum from a CSR perspective.

## CSR, Gender, and Organizations

The role of the private sector has been identified as crucial for sustainable development, poverty reduction and gender equality (Sachs, 2012). Businesses are moral agents who reflect and reinforce social values and, as such, they have the duty to adopt social expectations as a part of their social responsibilities (Utting, 2008; Wettstein, 2010). However, businesses have different reasons to integrate social issues within their strategies. At least two contrasting perspectives can be found in the CSR literature (Branco and Rodrigues, 2006; Sharp and Zaidman, 2010). On the one hand, the economic perspective emphasizes the possibility of furthering a company's economic success by paying attention to social issues (Swanson, 1995). Here the focus is on the business case, where only social concerns that will report an economic benefit for the firm are included as a part of the strategy.

By contrast, the moral or ethical perspective suggests that a firm should behave in a socially responsible manner because it is morally correct to do so (Lantos, 2001; Swanson, 1999). Porter and Kramer (2006) call this perspective 'responsible' as companies here intend to improve their relationship with the interested parties by focusing also on what matters to their

stakeholders. This duty-aligned perspective proposes that business responsible behavior should be integrated in the core business, and evaluated with respect to agreed ethical standards (Fortin and Jolly, 2015). In these terms, behaving responsibly should have a strategic value for a company success, but be assessed beyond a purely business case perspective (Bule and Tebar-Less, 2016). In contrast, a duty-aligned perspective goes beyond a simple market transaction directed toward achieving purely business objectives, to underline corporate social impact and stakeholder expectations.

From this perspective, CSR represents an opportunity for the effective incorporation of gender social priorities into the business strategy (Karam and Jamali, 2013). However, CSR research has largely explored gender issues from an instrumental standpoint (Calkin, 2016). Research has been particularly interested in the impact of female representation in managerial positions on a variety of CSR outcomes such as social performance (Boulouta, 2013), environmental performance (Glass *et al*., 2016), and sustainability reporting (Fernandez-Feijoo *et al*., 2014), among others. As such, CSR research has been largely interested in answering the question of why more women at work is good for business, leaving unattended the question of how CSR can become a tool for gender equality.

The integration of feminist theory into CSR is a necessary step forward. FOS re-conceptualizes organizations from gender-neutral and gender-absent to processes in which gender is universal (Calas and Smircich, 2006). Although there are many varieties of feminist theory (for a review see Gottfried, 2006; Grosser and Moon, 2017; Martin, 2003), they share at least two general objectives: (1) reveal obvious and subtle gender inequalities and, (2) reduce or eradicate those inequalities. Within this tradition, the ‘doing gender’ concept has become “a

widely used concept for theorizing and researching gender in organizational studies" (Nentwich and Kelan, 2014: 121). We review this concept in more detail in the following section.

**Gender as a Thing We Do**

The concept of doing gender implies that gender can be partly explained by the way people behave in their social interactions. Its proponents, West and Zimmerman (1987), differentiate between sex, sex category, and gender to understand this idea. Sex is determined by what biologically means to be male or female, while sex category is established by "the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category" (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 127). Placement in a sex category happens through the application of the biological criteria, but on a daily basis, the sex category depends on the recognition of external identifiers of sex such as clothing, facial hair, and so on (Mavin and Grandy, 2012).

On the other hand, gender is the activity of managing conducts in line with "normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 127). Therefore, gender is not what a person is, but what a person does in interaction with others. The concept of doing gender focuses on the sex category and the interactional component as central aspects. In fact, doing gender implies the fundamental idea of being accountable to one's membership in a sex category (West and Zimmerman, 2009). The relationship between these concepts is summarized in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

The notion of being accountable takes place in social interactions where each person's behavior is open to interpretation and assessment by others. The display of certain actions will be subject to evaluation by others as appropriate or inappropriate for being a man or a woman. In these terms, the concept of gender itself supports a system of inequality (Kelan, 2018). When people do gender appropriately, they sustain and reproduce the institutional and normative arrangements that are based on sex category. However, if people fail to do gender as expected, they, not institutions or social norms, will be questioned.

Doing gender is therefore the ongoing process by which the gender binary is enacted. In a review of empirical research Nentwich and Kelan (2014) found that the application of the doing gender concept in organizational studies has been largely used to describe how gender differences are constructed and preserved. This implies that gender inequality is invariant and that the degree of inequality is frequently irrelevant. The concept itself has predominantly been used to demonstrate stability rather than change in gender relations, making it difficult to understand how gender inequality could be changed (Deutsch, 2007).

**From Doing to Undoing Gender**

Gender equality aims to develop a social context in which women and men enjoy equal opportunities and treatment in organizations. However, the way in which gender is done severely bifurcate the structure of sexes in society. Several scholars (e.g. Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009) have called for a shift in focus where what matters is not how people do gender, but find ways for people to 'undo gender'. As doing gender implies that gender is constructed, undoing gender proposes that it should be possible to deconstruct gender by looking at how social interactions may become less gendered, or in which instances, gender may become

irrelevant. Unlike the doing gender concept, undoing gender implies that gendered institutions can change to a more neutral state, and the social interactions that support them can be deconstructed to reduce differences.

Regarding this, doing and undoing gender are frequently seen as opposite concepts. On the one hand, while people are continuously held accountable for their membership to a sex category, gender cannot be undone. For West and Zimmerman (2009: 118) gender is not "undone, so much as redone" in ways that reflect changes to gender accountability structures but do not undermine the gender order. As efforts to bring equality will not deconstruct gender, they can only provide a basis to question existing gender arrangements by improving awareness, and by offering a network of social support. In this respect, a study by Brenton and Elliott (2014) found that narratives of men and women reveal a process of doing, and, at times, redoing, rather than undoing gender. Similarly, Mavin and Grandy (2012; 2013) argue that instead of undoing gender, gender can be done well and differently through multiple enactments of femininity and masculinity.

On the other hand, gender can indeed be undone and what matters is understanding how this can happen. This means that some people in different situations do gender, some others undo gender, and another group do even both. For example, Chan *et al*. (2010) in a study with police officers found that some interviewees reinforced the notion that male and female officers are different and, therefore, should be treated differently (doing gender). Some others either contested or resisted discriminatory treatment because of gender (undoing gender), and another group recognizes that women are different but wants female officers treated equally regardless of difference (doing and undoing gender). Similar findings have been found in studies about how organizational cultures equip men to do and undo gender in dangerous work (Ely and Meyerson,

2010), the impact of doing and undoing of gender in legal settings (Jeanes, 2007), and the process of doing and undoing gender for women in male dominated jobs (Pilgeram, 2007).

Kelan (2010) using the idea of logic identifies two forms in which gender could be undone: multiple logic and unitary logic. The concept of logic in Kelan's conceptualization implies a system of reasoning which structures social assumptions and constructions of gender. Thus, multiple logic happens when options greater than two are offered to people. This means enacting gender in forms that go beyond orthodox parameters showing the multiplicity of options that people have available. For example, a multiple logic is implemented when people's actions challenge gender binaries and hierarchies such as the exposure to women in leadership positions, women in male dominated job, sectors or companies, and vice versa (e.g. Powell *et al*., 2009).

A unitary logic, on the other hand, is implemented when only one option is offered, and this option is more important than the sex category itself. Gender is undone here by breaking the mismatch between the sex category and gender to the extent to which the association between belonging to the female sex category and enacting masculinity or belonging to the male sex category and enacting femininity is unsettled. In practice, a unitary logic is implemented when women or men perceive their role as a worker or parents, as being more important than their sex category. Summarizing these ideas, gender can be undone, on the one hand, when the gender binary is destabilized by broadening the parameters of how gender is enacted (Butler, 2004; Kelan, 2010), or, on the other hand, when it loses its importance or is forgotten (West and Fenstermaker, 1995a, 1995b; Hirschauer, 1994 in Kelan 2010).

## From Compliance to Proactive CSR: Navigating Un/Doing Gender

As mentioned in a previous section, CSR research has given little attention to the question of how responsible business strategies can facilitate achieving gender equality. We propose that CSR could be a useful tool to counterbalance the gender division in organizations when integrating FOS insights such as those in the doing and undoing gender concepts. A business responsible behavior should be part of the core business, and evaluated with respect to agreed ethical standards. This implies that how responsible a company is can be assessed by looking at the policies and programs concerning relevant social issues and stakeholder expectations.

However, business organizations are not passive entities and, as such, the social issues, and especially the degree of organizational interest in them, are always in a state of change. According to Pedersen (2010), managers tend to have a traditional view of the firm's societal responsibilities focusing primarily on issues concerning the external environment, general employees' well-being, and the quality of products. Therefore, corporate response towards social expectations can move from one extreme where they do nothing or deny their responsibility to a more positive extreme where they do much or are proactive (Carroll, 1979; Clarkson, 1995; Maon *et al*., 2010). The level of social responsiveness will depend on a number of issues including, but not limited to, how aware a company is about its responsibility, the level of managerial discretion, and its internal capacity to respond (Wood, 2010).

However, companies cannot deny their responsibility towards gender issues at work considering the strong international, regional and local policy initiatives currently in place. Concerns about women's position in society have led to both the development of several international treaties and conventions, the inclusion of non-discriminatory clauses in broader

economic agreements, and the creation of women departments and offices within countries and international organizations. In this respect, companies can no longer do nothing when it comes to gender, but at least comply with what is locally required.

We therefore propose that companies can implement two CSR approaches when it comes to gender issues. On the one hand, they can take a basic CSR compliance orientation by admitting and doing all what is required by local regulations and industrial standards. On the other hand, companies can implement a proactive CSR strategy by doing more than what is formally required by implementing more voluntary initiatives and following ethical standards. This is the same as implementing initiatives within and beyond the law. Although complying with the law can be seen as the very minimum and, therefore, outside the CSR realm, when addressing gender issues this is not completely accurate. For example, every industrialized country in the world has passed laws mandating equal treatment of men and women at work. However, women continue receiving lower wages than men, and suffering from occupational segregation (ILO, 2016).

If we assume that companies can take any of these orientations, we can also assume that gender issues will be addressed differently when complying than when being proactive. This will also depend on how companies navigate the doing and undoing gender continuum. Companies navigating this continuum can do gender by reproducing socially constructed differences or undo gender by moving towards the neutralization of these differences. As doing gender focuses on the differences between men and women, initiatives from this perspective are likely to be based on the socially constructed gender duality. Moving towards undoing gender implies the need of questioning not only social interactions and institutions, but also policies that focus on women or men separately. These ideas are summarized in Figure 2. Figure 2 also proposes four categories

of strategies business can implement depending on how they navigate the un/doing gender continuum and their approach to CSR.

[Figure 2 about here]

**CSR Compliance: From Respect to Diversity**

If a company takes a CSR compliance orientation, the model proposes that they will navigate the un/doing gender continuum by simply respecting the normative framework (respecting) and/or facilitating female/male representation in non-traditional jobs/sectors (diversity). Companies implementing a gender strategy focusing on respecting will take a minimum standards perspective. They will therefore integrate any legal obligation into their internal policies, as well as any industry/market prerequisite related with gender (e.g. non-financial reporting commitments). For these companies gender is not an internal concern, but an external requirement.

Doing gender focuses on being accountable to one's sex category. Men are women are always accountable in front of others so gender cannot be deconstructed. Initiatives framed within this perspective are likely to target men or women, but not both. This is the case of, for example, common legal initiatives to assure equal employment opportunities (EEO). EEO uses specific regulations (e.g. affirmative/positive action) to require organizations the implementation of measures to increase the representation of historically underrepresented groups (Sterba, 2009). For gender issues this implies focusing on women's rights and opportunities as they have been historically prevented from fully enjoy them.

This focus is indeed necessary, but not enough on its own. A major risk of this approach is that gender issues can be regarded as a "women's business" (Connell, 2005: 1805), while men

tend to be perceived as oppressors, gatekeepers, perpetrators of male domination, and as obstacles for equality (Cornwall, 2000). This limited conception results in solutions that do little to broaden men's opportunities to participate at home or to relieve men and women of the burdens they face in traditional masculine roles (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). It can also result in the development of more subtle and, as such, pervasive forms of discrimination (Masser and Abrams, 1999). Unlike traditional or explicit sexism, this contemporary form is characterized as a covert expression, which emerges as a consequence of the social efforts to build an egalitarian society (Swim and Cohen, 1997; Tougas *et al*., 1995). Discrimination is therefore manifested in a resistance to women's demands and a lack of support for gender related policies (Martínez and Paterna, 2013). By disagreeing with gender policies, people with sexist beliefs are provided with a subtle, and consequently more "acceptable", means of opposing women's aspirations (Campbell *et al*., 1997).

Implementing a diversity strategy, while still complying with the minimum requirements, could help to deconstruct gender and reduce some of the unexpected impacts of a pure respecting strategy. In order to achieve this, companies can apply Kelan's (2010) multiple logic by supporting people to pursuing goals that are incompatible with a feminine or masculine role. The main goal of a diversity strategy is to increase the representation of men and women in non-traditional jobs/sectors and raising gender awareness. Although representation is frequently associated with female empowerment (Fukuda-Parr, 2016), taking an undoing gender standpoint requires also facilitating male workers entering fields largely considered as female jobs.

However, if companies decide to focus only on female representation in non-traditional jobs/industries, it will not imply that they are doing gender. Companies can deconstruct gender by telling to their workers that women can be, for example, successful managers, IT

professionals, or engineers when these are male-dominated positions within their workforce. In contrast, organizations will do gender when they focus on increasing female representation in jobs where they are already overrepresented, or where the actual share in decision making and power is still limited. Undoing gender implies that the actual opportunities that women have to exercise power and industrial sectors should be also taken into consideration when representation is the issue being addressed.

Now, this strategy can also result in unexpected employee reactions. Sexist beliefs are developed by individuals who believe that changes in the equilibrium between men and women would lead their group to lose more than they may win (Martínez *et al*., 2010; Tougas *et al*., 1995). Therefore, a diversity strategy could also be counter-productive if it is used alone. It was proposed that making women/men available in non-traditional jobs would be a way to challenge the gender division. However, at the same time, research has shown that when the representation of female managers increases in organizations, the feeling of threat amongst male managers also increases (Beaton et al., 1996), and the process of recognizing inequalities against women is obstructed (Martínez et al. 2010).

**Proactive CSR: Moving towards Transforming**

When organizations take a proactive orientation towards social issues, the model proposes that they will focus on building internal capabilities to tackle gender issues (caring), and/or adapting their internal environments to deconstruct gender (transforming). The main idea behind both strategies is going beyond the minimum requirements related with legal/industry standards and local pressure for gender diversity. Proactive companies not only align themselves to higher standards, but also question the gender component of any internal or external initiative.

In this respect, caring companies voluntarily integrate regionally and internationally agreed ethical standards. These standards are not a market requirement to compete, but a voluntary commitment with the global agenda for gender equality. As such, companies can guide their socially responsible gender strategies by observing, for example, the ISO 2600 regarding non-discrimination, the GRI standards for sustainability reporting on gender issues, and the UN Global Compact's network. This alignment also involves implementing an internal gender infrastructure that can include a gender policy, a budget, a gender unit of technically skilled people and a gender committee.

Now, caring companies do not necessarily question the form in which gender is understood by the voluntary commitment they assume. For example, managers joining the HeforShe campaign promoted by UN Women may want to make public on their websites how their companies empower female employees and women in their local communities (heforshe.org). This would be right as long as their statement do not victimize women or see them only as subjects of help (Ertürk, 2004). However, without questioning the social production of gender differences, it is likely that initiatives will end up validating the gender division and, in turn, this ongoing validation results in reproducing gender inequalities.

Only transforming companies will analyze the requests made by policies and initiatives with the purpose of questioning their gender understanding. The internal focus of CSR can play a central role to undo gender. CSR activities within organizations can be aimed at adapting the public policy framework to better account for organizational purposes as well as social requirements when complying with and going beyond the law. Policies and external requirements can be broaden and made accessible to men and women equally if they are do not address a biological condition (e.g. giving birth, breastfeeding, etc.) (Maume, 2016).

A transforming strategy is based on Kelan' (2010) unitary logic. Gender is undone here by breaking the match between the sex category and gender. The goal is to make gender irrelevant by focusing on a higher-level role. This process could help to develop an organizational policy for workers/employees, in which the condition of being a male or female do not matter beyond biological characteristics. As such, traditional policies which affect, for instance, human resources management practices should be extended to men (e.g. child and health care, shared parental leave, work-life balance, etc.) (Figart and Mutari 1998); goals and culture features should disrupts conventional masculinity in their workplace (Ely and Meyerson, 2010).

By focusing on a higher-level role, companies should also assess their own CSR role from the employee's perspective. In this respect, deconstructing gender involves being perceived as a fair and responsible organization. This idea accepts that how employees perceive the firm's CSR efforts may actually have more direct and stronger implications for employees' subsequent reactions and, consequently, the success of the company's policies and initiatives (Aguilera *et al*., 2007; Lee *et al*., 2013). Under this view what really matters "is not the firms' objective socially responsible behaviors but rather employees' perceptions of their employer's CSR" (Rupp *et al*., 2013: 897). Employees' perceptions are therefore a central mechanism linking policies and employee subsequent attitudes and behaviors.

A CSR provides a supportive framework to undo gender by signaling that an organization intends to act in a fair and equitable manner for all. CSR initiatives are likely to gain support from employees as long as they are perceived as fair. Any gender initiative based on such approach can increase its likelihood of being viewed as fair for both women and men, and limit the perception of unfavorable or differential treatment between both groups. In order to achieve

this, companies should make sure that their CSR initiatives are well understood and implemented (procedural justice), that the outcomes from these initiatives are not gendered biased (distributive justice), and that individuals within and outside the organization are treated fairly (interactional justice) (Aguilera *et al*., 2007). By focusing on these dimensions, socially responsible companies are likely to be viewed as ethical organizations and should generate similar employee responses towards the social issues their companies are addressing (De Roeck *et al*., 2014; Rupp *et al*., 2006).

## Concluding Remarks

CSR research has been largely interested in gender issues from a business case approach (Calkin, 2016), leaving unattended the question of how CSR can be a tool to address gender issues at work, and how feminist theories can be integrated with this purpose. This paper puts forward some conceptual propositions for advancing these questions by examining the linkages between the doing and undoing gender concepts, and the role of CSR. We propose that gender strategies will vary in organizations according to what CSR approach they assume (compliance or proactive CSR), and how they navigate the un/doing gender continuum. By taking this perspective, a two-axis model was portrayed and four specific gender responsible strategies identified.

By moving towards undoing gender, these gender responsible strategies aim at rethinking how men and women are included in the gender equality agenda, and how CSR can become a supportive framework to question current gender divided policies and initiatives. As such, the model and its propositions represent an opportunity for research exploring how CSR can be a tool for questioning the link between gender and the sex category, as well as for managers

looking at implementing or evaluating effective gender responsible strategies. Therefore, the model goes beyond the discussion of the business social obligations related with gender, to focus on what their actions are and how they implement them.

This paper does not propose CSR as a substitution of hard regulation or of a degendering movement in policymaking. CSR represents an opportunity at the organizational level only when complementing current policies setting the minimum standards. Treaties and conventions related with gender have become the primary international vehicle for equality, and their ratification has stimulated progress toward granting formal rights in several areas of women's lives by facilitating legislation either where it did not exist or where existing laws were discriminatory and needed to be overturned (World Bank, 2012). It is therefore unquestionable that gender policies, EEO and laws have narrowed the gender gap; and, what is even more important, prevented women's lives from worsening.

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Figure 1. Doing gender in relation with gender and sex category

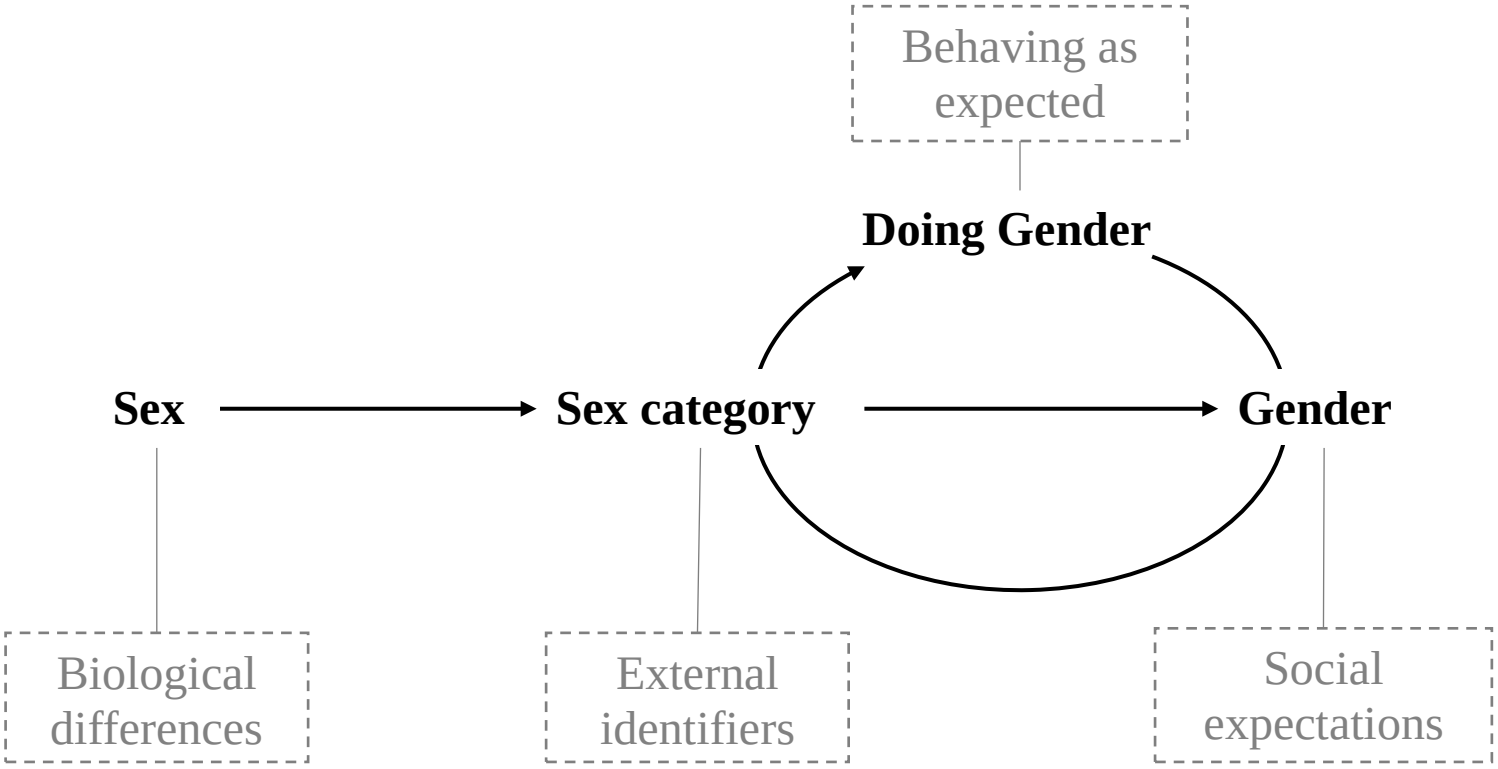


Figure 2. The CSR approach to un/doing gender

