



INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY
Initiative in Education & Lifelong Learning

Certificate Programme

Understanding Gender in Society: Concepts and Trends

Unit 1

Gender Debates and Dialogues

Understanding Gender in Society: Concepts and Trends

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Units of Understanding Gender in Society: Concepts and trends

Unit 1: Gender Debates and Dialogues

- Sex and Gender: Distinction and Significance
- Understanding gender
- Ending Gender Inequality: Two Schools of Thought
- Why do we need to talk about gender

Unit 2: Roots of Gender Discrimination

- Gender stereotyping
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Unit 3: Mainstreaming Gender

- Historical Trends
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- Gender Mainstreaming within Institutions
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Introduction

What is gender? While in the contemporary world, people may identify through various channels of caste, class, religion etc., gender seems to be one of the most influential identities in determining how people shape themselves into the roles they play in society. Gender organises our identities and concept of self, structures our social interaction and more often than not forms a basis on which power and resources are allocated.

All sociologists are clear that gender shapes people's perceptions of themselves and others, and greatly influences people's behaviour. However, the way, in which gendered characteristics and behaviour are acquired through a process of socialisation to become an intrinsic part of the personality, is still a matter open to debate.

Social identities are of course both products of and influences of social interaction. It is in the setting of these varied social interactions that gender emerges, is enacted and perpetuated. Finally, gender also organises social institutions – both the 'personal' social institutions: marriage, family and parenthood, as well as the larger more formally organised 'public' institutions: education, religion, work, politics, sports, the legal and the health systems; however, the social institutions vary in the degree to which they are 'shaped by gender. However, one needs to orient oneself to perceive the role of gender in shaping social as well as public institutions.

Learning objectives

Upon completion of this unit, you should be able to:

- Distinguish between sex and gender;
- Comprehend gender by exploring theories on gender and socialisation, issues of gender transgressions and sexuality; and
- Understand the concern on the need to talk about gender

1.1 Sex and Gender: Distinction and Significance

1.1.1 Distinguishing between sex and gender

In popular discourse, sex and gender are perceived to be the same. But, through the development of gender studies, academic enquiry has attempted to differentiate the two concepts.

Despite disagreements on this differentiation itself, most contemporary sociology regards sex as biological where gender is socially constructed.

Sex refers to chromosomes, hormonal profiles, internal and external sex organs and sex categorisations based on the more visible physical organs – penis and vagina. These features divide most of the population into male and female. However, it may be noted that a few of us are born with both male and female genitalia, and are technically referred to as hermaphrodites. While such a category exists, in this discussion of gender, the focus will be primarily on the binary classifications of male and female.

While sex as an identity is rooted in biology, gender has its roots in culture and social norms. Gender refers to the social and cultural aspects associated with biological sex as an identity.

Gendering then needs to be understood as a social 'process'. One may be born a female, and their entire life can be spent living up to the socially prescribed ideals of being a 'woman'. It is these expectations of being female (a human with certain physical features like vagina, mammary glands etc.) and therefore being a woman (a human who is gentle, caring etc.) that forms the basis of the confusion between an individual's sex and the expected gender roles to be played out. Thus, the social and the cultural expectations associated with our biological sex become our gender roles.

What constitutes gender may vary from culture to culture, from one social group to another and over different periods of times. For example, the movements of a girl belonging to a city or town may be confined to her home and school but on the contrary,

the movement of a tribal girl living in a remote village may not be so limited and she is free to roam around in the jungles or climb trees. They are both girls, but because of the difference in their upbringing, they each develop very different capabilities, aspirations and dreams, in spite of the fact that their bodies are similar.

Everyone interacts with gender on an everyday basis. The manner in which social roles and expectations of behavioural patterns are passed on to men and women, based on their sex is known as 'gendering'. Breaking away from stereotypical expectations and norms of behaviour and having common patterns of the same for both men and women is known as 'engendering'.

Sex	Gender
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex is biological and refers to visible differences in genitalia and related differences in procreative functions. • Sex is constant it cannot change • Sex is universal it is the same across the world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender is socio-cultural. It is defined by society. • It refers to masculine and feminine qualities, behaviour patterns, roles and responsibilities etc. • Gender is variable; it changes across time, -across societies, cultures and even individual families.

In other words, it is neither sex nor nature that is responsible for the inequalities that exist between women and men. Yet, it is important to understand this distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', because the subordination of women has been fundamentally justified on the grounds of the biological differences between men and women. Gender divisions have always been hierarchical, with, for men most cases, having the upper hand over women.

Margaret Mead, an American anthropologist, was one of the first to empirically ground the distinction between the biological and social characteristics of men and women. Through her study of the conceptions of masculinity and femininity among the Arapesh, Mundugamor and Tchambuli societies in the New Guinea Islands, she demonstrated that what is understood as masculinity and femininity varies across cultures. In 1935, she brilliantly points out that not only do different societies identify a certain set of characteristics as feminine and another set as masculine, but also, these characteristics are not the same across different cultures (Mead, 1935). Thus, there is no necessary co-relation between the biology of men and women and the qualities that are thought to be masculine and feminine. Rather, it is child-rearing practices across different cultures which establish and perpetuate certain differences between the sexes.

THINK TANK

Please read and think about each of these statements carefully. Then write 'G' against those statements that you think are related to gender and 'S' against those, which you think refers to sex.

1. Women give birth to babies
2. Most construction site workers in India are men.
3. Little girls are gentle, little boys are tough.
4. Men can bottle feed babies
5. Men's voices break at puberty,
6. Women are more emotional than men.
7. Amongst Indian agricultural workers women are paid 40-60 per cent of the wages paid to male workers.
8. Women are unclean when they menstruate.
9. The male XY chromosome is responsible in determining the sex of a child during conception.
10. Women are good cooks.
11. In many Indian societies, a girl's birth is met with sorrow and silence, while a boy's birth is celebrated with pomp and grandeur.
12. Men are better automobile mechanics than women.
13. Generally girls are weaker in mathematics.
14. Biologically women are weaker,
15. Men have greater sexual desire than women.
16. Small children are dependent upon their mothers; therefore it is negligence, if mothers give importance to their careers.
17. Men need more nutrition due to the active life they lead.
18. It is natural for women to live longer than men.
19. Women are less corrupt than men
20. Men don't cry.

The distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', which came to dominate theorisation in the sociology of gender in the 1970s, is premised upon the idea of universality of 'sex' and variability of 'gender'. Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* made the sex-gender distinction very popular in sociology. For Oakley, sex is 'a word that refers to the biological differences between males and females: the visible differences in genitalia and the related difference in procreative function' (Chakravarti & Gill, 2001).

"Gender", however is a matter of culture, it refers to the social classification of males and females into "masculine" and "feminine" beings (Oakley, 1972). The present subordination of women arises, therefore, not from unchangeable biological differences (sex), but from social and cultural values, ideologies and institutions that ensure the material and ideological subordination of women (gender). Thus feminists view questions of sex-differentiated work, the sexual division of labour, and more fundamentally, questions of sexuality and reproduction, as issues to be extricated from the realm of "biology", which is understood to be natural and unchangeable. The feminist agenda is to relocate these issues in the realm of the "political", which suggests that they can and must be transformed (Menon, 2014).

In the statements given in the Think Tank above, only 1, 4, 5, 9 and 18 refer to sex, while all the others are based on gender and the roles associated with it. It is true that only women can bear children and breast-feed them as part of her biological sex role (Statement 1). It is also true that while men cannot give birth to children, they can definitely bottle-feed them (Statement 4).

Statement 9 reveals that it is the male chromosome that is responsible in determining the sex of a child. This is biological and cannot be changed. Similarly, in statement 18, medical research has shown that women's chromosomes have more resistance than men's and can therefore live longer than their male counterparts.

NOTE BANK

In some families in far Western Nepal women who menstruate are made to sleep out of the house in small cells with no doors. These cells are just large enough for her to crouch or lie down in, and are often placed in the middle of the fields. Many of these women have become victims of attacks by wild animals.

All other statements are gender assigned roles and assumptions. For example, statements 2, 7, 10 and 12 are about the sexual division of labour. There is nothing "natural" about the sexual division of labour. The fact that men and women perform different kinds of work both within the family and outside has little to do with biology. The sexual division of labour extends even to the "public" arena of paid work, and again, this has nothing to do with "sex" (biology) and everything to do with "gender" (culture). Certain kinds of work are considered to be "women's work", and other kinds as "men's"; however, more important is the fact that whatever work that women do, gets lower wages and is less valued.

Coming to statement 8, a woman menstruating is indeed a biological reality. But in some families and societies, women are not allowed into temples and certain spaces even within their own homes are restricted to them during this period as they are considered to be unclean. That she is unclean during her menstrual cycle is based on societal attitudes. Menstruation, a biological fact, becomes unclean due to social perceptions and not due to its inherent character.

Consider the statement 10 that women are good cooks. Why are women better cooks? Not because of their sex but because of the roles defined for them by the society and the fact that they do more cooking than men in their daily schedules. In reality, the world's most renowned chefs are men.

Think about statement 11 and honestly answer whether if in your family a boy's birth is a much-awaited event. Is there an expectation that there should be at least one son in the family? Are women who produce sons regarded as having achieved a higher status within the family?

Consider statement 20. Societies generally value "masculine" characteristics more highly than "feminine" ones, while at the same time ensuring that men and women who do not conform to these characteristics are continuously disciplined into the "appropriate" behaviour. For instance, a man who expresses sorrow publicly by crying would be humiliated by the taunt, *why are you crying like a woman?*

The statements 3, 6, 13, 17 and 19 refer to gender attributes. The sex-specific qualities (for example, bravery and confidence as "masculine" and sensitivity, emotional and shyness as "feminine") and the value that society attributes to them are produced by a range of institutions and beliefs that socialise boys and girls differently. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, "One is not born, but is made a woman." (Menon, 2014)

Consider statement 14. Women are supposed to be physically weak and therefore unfit for heavy manual labour, but both within the home and outside, they do the heaviest of work - carrying heavy loads of water and firewood, grinding corn, transplanting paddy, carrying head loads in agriculture, mining and construction work. However, at the same time, when the manual work that women do is mechanised, lighter and better-paid, then it is men who receive training to use the new machinery, and women are edged out, on the basis of their lack of physical strength.

Statement 15 reveals that gender roles guide and constrain people's behaviour in intimate relationships. Attitudes towards traditional sexual roles are linked with increased sexual passivity for women and decreased passivity for men.

Statement 16 demonstrates that cultural beliefs about gender channel men and women in making different career decisions.

These statements are very clear indicators that there are few roles that can or cannot be played because of the sex of a person. For most other activities, we learn our behaviour from our role models who could be our parents, family members, teachers and/or other members of society. The behaviour has nothing to do with being born as male or female. After birth, social and cultural traditions, starts the process of 'gendering' that slowly transforms a male or female into a man or a woman, with prescribed qualities and roles to suit a specific society. Therefore, while sex is biological, gender slots men and women into pre-determined social and cultural classifications and these may evolve and change over a period of time.

For example wearing trousers and jeans was considered appropriate for men alone: however over the years this has evolved and now it is common to see women wearing these clothes. Similarly, it was women alone who were responsible for the rearing of children in a family; now it is becoming more common for men to play out these roles and has also given rise to the concept of 'paternity leave', and the expectation that men too have the capabilities of playing out these roles.

Understanding the difference between sex and gender is essential to comprehend how socialisation processes in every society affect men and women and lead them to play different roles, have different needs and face different constraints (Alkazi, Farrell, & Jain, 2004).

1. 2 Understanding gender

1.2.1 Some Key Theories

There is considerable disagreement among scholars about the nature of socialisation processes and the important factors that influence it. Three major theories that have been discussed in this regard are:

- Psychoanalytic theory
- Cognitive theory
- Social learning theory

The notion of 'identification' is central to each of these three theories. They share the perspective that gender is expressed in individuals, as opposed to interactions or institutions. They also perceive sexual differences (male and female) as the basis for gender reasoning. This premise though is challenged in the interactionist or institutional models, which state that gender, can vary from place to place, situation to situation and group to group.

i) Psychoanalytic theory

Sigmund Freud, considered the father of psychoanalysis, did his major work in explaining how adult personality, including one's sexual orientation and sense of identity, is constructed through a series of developmental conflicts, in which the role of gender within the family is central. Freud saw both men and women as being bisexual, and that masculine and feminine currents co-existed in each one of us. This implies that for both men and women, being masculine or feminine is a complex and at times precarious construction. His view of the development of the super-ego within each of us, the unconscious agency that judges and censors our behaviour in keeping with prevailing social norms, is an important step towards understanding the patriarchal organisation of culture. Freud's overall thesis is that adult sexuality and gender is not fixed by nature but constructed through a laborious conflict ridden process.

The chief psychoanalytic theory, in the area of gender and socialisation, is presented in Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* and according to her, gender identity is formed early in childhood (Chodrow, 1978).

The bond with the parent allows the child to learn what it is to be male or female through identification with a parent of the same sex. Gender identification gives children information of what it means to be a male or a female, and also motivates the child and sustains his/her interest in this aspect of themselves. This identity remains significant to people throughout their adult lives and is a powerful force in shaping their behaviour.

This psychoanalytic theory of gender differs significantly from the other two theories in that it focuses on learning gender through reinforcement or imitation. It is also a theory exclusively concerned with gender and gender identity

ii) Cognitive theory

How people internalise gender meanings from the outside world and how they use those meanings to construct an identity that is consistent with them is the basic thrust of the cognitive psychological approach to gender. The key word here being cognitive, meaning is connected with mental processes of understanding.

The principles of cognitive development spelt out in the early 1930s by the famous child development expert from France, Jean Piaget, reveals that a child's thinking develops as it grows. Kohlberg, who further built on Piaget's cognitive development stages in the 1960s, stated that learning about gender forms part of a child's intellectual maturation. Once children are clear about whether they are male or female, they 'seek out' gender appropriate behaviour. Children will tend to attach greater value to those experiences and behaviour that are more positive rather than gender inappropriate behaviours. As they grow and develop, their ability to be more sophisticated in relation to gender cues increases.

A further development of this theory by Sandra Bem in the 1980s, argues that in cultures such as America, where gender distinctions are strongly reinforced, children learn to use gender to make sense of their experience and to process new information. Through this process, they acquire personality traits consistent with their understanding of self as a male or a female.

iii) Social learning theory

The social learning theory builds on the premise that gender roles are learnt through positive and negative reinforcements which children receive for behaviour that is seen as being gender-appropriate or gender-inappropriate. This theory, in comparison to cognitive theory, emphasises the importance of the environment, external forces, or outside influences.

It further suggests that learning takes place through observation and modelling. Reinforcements could be in the form of rewards or punishments; rewarding a girl who is prettily dressed and is conscious of her appearance, or rewarding a boy who excels in sports. Reinforcement could also be through observation—a girl ‘models’ her mother’s skills in the kitchen or on the sewing machine. The differential treatment given to boys and girls by their parents and other agents of socialisation (grandparents and teachers, for example) creates gender differences in behaviour. All these reinforcements are not necessarily at a conscious level, yet all have their consequences.

A gender stereotype can in this way be learnt and continually reinforced – the boy told not to cry, over time comes to believe that crying is inappropriate for him, whereas the boy encouraged to shop and cook learns to see such activities as acceptable and beneficial.

1.2.2 Gender and Sexuality

“Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical and religious and spiritual factors (WHO, 2014).”

In addition to us all being human beings, we also are all sexual beings! Sexuality is not one defined thing, but a combination of many aspects of our lives. Our sexuality includes not only sexual behavior but also our genders, our bodies and how they work, and our values, attitudes, beliefs and feelings about life, love, and the people our lives touch. Who we are as men and women influences how sexuality changes and grows throughout our lives. Sexuality includes sexual behaviors, sexual relationships, and intimacy; how we choose to express ourselves as males and females (including the way we talk, dress, and relate to others); sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual), values, beliefs and attitudes as they relate to being male and female. (Planned Parenthood , 2014) By belonging to a particular gender, an individual is in a sense gendered and sexualised by adopting gender specific behaviors through internal and external socialisation processes. Sexuality can therefore be considered to be something that involves the thoughts, actions and agency of every individual, since it is seen as something that influences the core of one's identity.

It has been argued that like gender, sexuality is also political. Like gender, it also organises, creates hierarchy and power structures that reward some or punishes those who defy the norm.

The main reason for this is that in some societies, such as those in Asia, the mystery that shrouds the idea of sex and sexuality is projected as negative rather than positive. Further, most people confuse sex with sexuality and true to eastern prudishness and a false sense of modesty, with regard any discussion of the issue, is considered as scandalous. Although the act of sexual intercourse is only a part of sexuality, they are often perceived as synonymous with each other. Therefore, in societies where talking about sex is taboo, any discussion on sexuality is also shunned and looked down upon.

Patriarchy is a social system of power relations where the man is considered the powerful and dominant. Men head patriarchal families, and the control of the economic transactions lies with men. Patriarchal attitudes promote biological and social subservience of women to men. A further elaboration of patriarchy is hetero-patriarchy. This would imply that, in addition to all the gender stereotyping seen as typical in any patriarchal society, one would also witness in any patriarchal society, that heterosexuality is also viewed as the norm. Such a system would not just straitjacket a man and a woman, but also have deeply embedded rules on how the relationship should be between the sexes and amongst the sexes also. This would mean that homosexuals, transsexuals, bisexuals and people of other alternative sexualities would be branded 'abnormal', 'unnatural' etc. and could be at the receiving end of harassment, for going against socially prescribed norms.

People express their sexuality through both positive and negative attitudes and behaviours. Sexuality expressed positively, through consensual, mutually respectful and protected relationships, enhances well-being, health and quality of life. Sexuality expressed negatively, through violence, exploitation or abuse, diminishes people's dignity and self-worth and may cause long-term damage to both individuals and society as a whole.

The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing) Platform for Action put forward the ground breaking concept that the right of women to control their sexuality – the basis for sexual rights – is an indivisible part of their human rights, and that without it, women cannot fully realise their other human rights.

Sexual rights embrace human rights that are already recognised in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus statements. They include the right of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to:

- The highest attainable standard of sexual health, including access to sexual and reproductive health care services
- Seek, receive and impart information related to sexuality
- Sexuality education
- Respect for bodily integrity
- Choice of their partner
- Decide to be sexually active or not
- Consensual sexual relations
- Consensual marriage
- Decide whether or not, and when, to have children and
- A satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life.

The responsible exercise of human rights requires that all persons respect the rights of others. At the same time, the global success of various groups dealing with women's issues in using the language and structures of international human rights has led the world of rights to expand to include many more aspects of the person, including sexuality.

NOTE BANK

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, initially formulated by the British in all their colonies in 1860, deemed all sexual intercourse against the order of nature (heterosexual sex) as illegal. This rule remained valid even in post-independence India, thus making homosexuality a criminal act.

In 2nd July 2009, the High Court of Delhi declared that, with regards to consensual sex among adults, homosexuality could no longer be a criminal act.

However, in December 11, 2013 was recriminalized after the Supreme Court Hearing against the 2009 Delhi High Court decriminalizing Section 377.

Movements that advocated measures like provision of contraception, equality within marriage and protection from domestic and sexual violence has taken the issue of sexuality out of the realm of the private sphere and a matter of public debate and discussion.

1.2.3 Gender and sex transgressions – beyond the binary gender system

Transgressions from the prescribed norm can either be a transgression from a sexual norm, or a gender norm. In this section we will explore what these are. Thus so far, we have studied about how gender lays down certain norms based largely on the social assumption of the existence of only two sexes in which the male or the female is considered as the norm. Hence, every gender characteristic corresponds to any one of the two sexes. It lays down strict rules and guidelines norms for each to behave appropriately to become fully functioning members of society. It includes learning to be different in terms of appearance and dress; activities and pastimes; behaviour; emotions that we show; responsibilities; intellectual pursuits and the roles that we perform in our daily lives. But, what about that group of people who are born neither male nor female? Thus, such transgressions can relate to either sex or gender.

The above scheme of recognising only two sexes and genders is also known as the binary gender system or hetero-normativity. The assumption being made in such a classification is that:

- Female genitalia translates to female identity; therefore expressing female behavior that entails desiring a male partner or
- Male genitalia translates to male identity; therefore expressing male behavior that entails desiring a female partner

Challenging the gender norm in a way that makes society sometimes uncomfortable is the existence of the third gender, who do not identify at all with the 'male' or 'female' genders they are assigned to at birth.

Society shapes and limits our sexuality and while behaving in a manner the society wants us to, we as individuals are also compelled to compartmentalise people according to their sexual orientation. The term *third gender* was used from the late 19th century to describe people who did not fit into the then existing gender categories. Third gender may include (in Western terms):

- *Transgender* people- any individual whose internal gender identity differs from their physiological gender.
- *Intersexual* people- any individual who is born with genitalia determined as neither exclusively male nor female.

A far greater range of human sexuality and gender identities exist than have been traditionally identified in Western culture. The only way to determine how many distinct classes exist, however, is to list them in terms of those classes which are mutually exclusive, partially exclusive, or inclusive.

In India, the eunuch or the *hijra* – words that are commonly used to mean a ‘sexless’ person has been defined in the dictionary as a castrated man. The term *hijra* is often translated as "eunuch" and the archetypal *hijra* is raised as a man and undergoes ritual removal of the genitals to become a *hijra*. There are also some *hijras* who have failed to mature at the time of puberty and their sexual organs are not defined into specifically male or female organs (Nanda, 1990). Similarly, some *hijras* could also be inter sexed at birth itself which implies that they are born with both male and female sexual organs, one more pronounced than the other.

1.3 Ending gender inequality: Two Schools of thought

Gender inequality is ubiquitous in its existence, and is based largely on the endurance of the hierarchies of power, prestige and income. Individuals, usually men, with more power and control, are known to hold more prestigious and powerful positions in society. We would like to make a mention of two particular schools of thought, which explains why gender inequality exists and how it has been sustained through the centuries.

The **Bio-genetic** school of thought, based on biological explanations, states that the behaviour of men and women are rooted in biology. Bio-genetics states that since males and females are biologically different, they are socially different as well, and therefore, their roles and responsibilities are also different. Men and women are not only different, but they are unequal as well. Men are biologically superior to women and their supremacy is inevitable, immutable and necessary for the survival of human kind. The strongest proponents of this theory are Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, Plato and Aristotle.

The **Bio-cultural** school of thought, on the other hand emerged mainly out of the works of anthropologists and historians such as Margaret Mead and Gerda Lerner, who found that in each society, the position of women were relatively lower than that of men and male supremacy was justified in such a way that it seemed natural to have a sex based stratification. They propounded that gender inequality occurs within the context of universal social stratification and it is important to understand the complex processes and structures of society to change these culturally produced ideas.

The way the inequality between men and women plays itself out and is expressed in different societies and circumstances is very complex. In India, there is a close link between low literacy rates of women and maternal morbidity, and even in the different salaries given to men and to women for performing the same tasks. Japan is another case, where men and women are equal as regards to educational levels, nutritional intake and health care, but seeing women in senior positions in business or in the

government is still a rarity; traditionally, women still do not accompany men even to social gatherings.

The focus on women began in the 1970's and 1980's with the idea of improving their **'well-being'** but as the women's movement has evolved, the thrust is now on women as **'agents'**, doing things, assessing priorities, scrutinising values, formulating policies and carrying out programmes.

But, one cannot so easily separate these two. The agency role must also focus on improving the well-being of women (e.g. nutrition). Similarly to improve the well-being of a woman, the agency of women to bring about this change is crucial (e.g. micro-credit). Therefore, it is clear to see that these two concepts are inextricably interconnected. Yet, despite these connections however, agency and well-being are two fundamentally different perspectives.

It is also worthwhile then to explore Amartya Sen's work, in which he distinguishes between *'well-being'* and *'agency'* as two different aspects to approaching gender. The agency aspect means the pursuit of goals and objectives that a person has reason to value and advance, whether or not they are connected with a person's well-being. People may actively choose to pursue goals other than their own well-being, as for instance, the independence of one's country, the elimination of famine, or the removal of gender inequality. This distinction between *'well-being'* and *'agency'* classifies two diverse ways in which a person's values, goals, ambitions, freedom and achievements can be understood, particularly with reference to those participating in action for gender equality across the world.

1.4 Why do we need to talk about gender

Gender is important as it has created situations where women have less power, resources, status and unequal power relations etc. It is important to understand that gender inequality is a product of a complex set of social forces in any community; it is not as simple as portraying women as victims and men as villains. Many factors guide every gendered interaction: individual choice, social expectation, composition of social groups, and structures and practices of institutions we interact with daily. These forces are not always visible, known or understood, and it is their very invisibility that makes them even more powerful. They are subtle, often unconscious, and are usually reproduced without conscious design.

What makes gender such a concern is that it determines power dynamics in society; it merges with other identities, like caste and class, to form a complex web of hierarchies that interact with each other. Thus, gender inequality cannot be reduced to men dominating women. It is decided by other factors also. However, having said that, it is usually observed that women tend to be relatively deprived due to gender stereotypes. This is not to undermine the role that gender norms have in also straitjacketing men into value-categories like being physically strong, not publicly expressing emotion etc. Most importantly, gender norms are so entrenched in the psyche that it requires a gender sensitive orientation and analysis to discern where behaviours are being determined by gender and are a social perception rather than a biological reality.

1.4.1 Why is gender important today?

The last few decades have witnessed rapid changes in our society. Both men and women have been breaking traditions and finding ways and means of building a new social environment in the home, at the workplace or within the community. For instance the *dalit* women of an Indian village have been trained by the NGO *Mahila Samakhya* with the skills to mend a hand pump; hence today even upper caste *Brahmin* men have no choice but to call these women for assistance if their hand pump needs repair.

These women have not only managed to break barriers created by caste but also the more deeply entrenched biases of gender role.

Though gender roles and responsibilities have changed, the stereotypes remain unquestioned in the family, workplace and community. Attitudes regarding the morality of women too remain unchanged, as it is deeply internalised. For example, the internalisation of social mores on women's chastity gets reflected in the attitude of a female police constable stationed outside a mall in New Delhi, for the protection of the some women. The contradiction here arises when the same constable believes that the woman she is “protecting” is actually ‘loose’ and asking to be raped because of the fact they are out at night and fails to see the right of women to be allowed to walk free and safe in the city even in the night.

We need to therefore deconstruct the multi layered realities and complexities of gender in our society, in a way that best equips us to deal with women in varied professional positions and also with the limited opportunities of growth available for women. It is important to build an understanding on gender, as it is an important analytical concept that directs our attention towards social and cultural processes and interventions in terms of their differential effects/impacts on men and women and on the relationships between women and men. Gender does not look at women in isolation, it sees men as being an integral part of the picture, and it enables differences between women and men thus disabling both women, as well as men.

1.4.2 Why women focus in gender?

Indian society being unequal and diverse, creates and perpetuates customs, traditions and norms that play a part in organising society on the basis of class, caste and gender. Feminists have argued that the difference in the norms for women of different castes exists because gender norms are responsible for the production and reproduction of not simply the gender system, but also the class or caste system.

Gender equality refers to equality between men and women. It implies equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities for women and men to pursue higher education and the freedom to pursue skilled work of their own choice. This implies that women who now pursue other roles apart from their otherwise limited roles of household work are bringing about a shift in the gender equations within the home with shared responsibilities for the care of home and children. Underlying this notion is the belief that all people are of equal value cutting across all barriers of sex, race, religion, ethnic origin, or social issues.

Therefore, there are both qualitative and quantitative aspects to gender equality. The quantitative aspect implies an equal distribution of the skills of both women and men in all areas of society, such as education, health, work, and positions of power. Today we are striving for equal participation by both men and women. The qualitative aspects on the other hand implies that the knowledge, experiences and values of both women and men are given equal importance and will be used to enrich all areas of society.

Gender inequalities impose large costs on the health and well-being of families, as well as societies and affect their inability to improve their lives. Since gender is a cross cutting theme, gender inequalities are found in all societies in all regions of the world irrespective of the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country.

There are many facets to the way gender inequality is played out in society. In this section, we will provide you with a broad base view of some of these facets; the rest will be dealt with in more detail in the subsequent units.

Inequality in survival: In some parts of the world, we see a huge disparity between men and women in relation to the simple business of staying alive. Let's just look at some of these statistics. Female foeticide accounts for half a million 'missing' female births in India. The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) in India is 254 per 100,000 live births according to Sample Registration System (SRS) Report for 2005 – 2006. This is a decline from the earlier ratio of 301 during 2001 – 2003 (UNICEF, 2014).

Inequality in the access to facilities: The perception of men as reproducers of family lines, and the consequent preference of the son over a daughter, results in the neglect of the overall growth of women. Women's identity being bound to their marriage means that their education and subsequent professional life are not taken care of or worse are often non-existent. This also means relative deprivation from access to other facilities like medical care, education etc. These unequal norms are bound to a woman's gender identity and need to be analysed accordingly.

Inequality in access to and control of health and nutrition:

The perception of the inequality also means that women's health issues are often ignored. Studies have shown that women consume lesser calories than men. This is without any regard to the fact that these women may perform more physical work in relation to their male counterparts.

A study in a Punjab village found that women's average consumption of calories was only two-thirds of that of men. This, despite the fact that almost all the women during the time period covered by the survey; were performing more than 15 hours hard labour every day, including the field work. (Kishwar & Vanitha, 1991)

NOTE BANK

Writings on widowhood

Widows in India, besides social oppression and social ostracism, are subjected to economic exploitation too. Most widows in India are poor with no property. They lack skills. Often reluctance of families to support or maintain a widow leads to her abandonment, preferably in a 'holy' place such as Vrindavan, Mathura or Kashi, under the garb of religious belief.

Contemporary studies of widows from many regions have revealed that biases, prejudices and taboos against widows still prevail. For instance, widows are responsible for the deaths of their husbands, are sexually threatening inauspicious. The ideal of the 'chaste and prayerful widow' still dominates the public imagination resulting in the denial of any form of pleasure to the widow. Denied of personhood, they are subjected to what has evocatively been described as 'linguistic oppression. Abusive and suggestive terms are used to refer to them on the one hand, while on the other hand, it is common to speak of the widow as if she were an inanimate object with no feelings

(Chakravarti & Gill, 2001).

In rural Karnataka too, a study to measure inequalities in food distribution within the family revealed that women consumed one-third fewer calories than did men, while their labour contribution was more than double that of men. (Kishwar & Vanitha, 1991)

This leads to lower living standards for women and poorer health conditions and results in a higher mortality rate for women that further contributes to a lower sex ratio (Kishwar & Vanitha, 1991).

Inequality in the ownership of resources: In most societies, property is transferred from father to sons. This, in turn, means that most of the land, money and other resources are controlled by the men themselves. This puts women in a position of disadvantage and perpetuates a vicious cycle of dependence on the men. Such norms further promote the clear demarcation of women as belonging to the private spaces and men to the public spaces. (Agarwal, 1994)

Inequality in the sharing of household tasks and benefits: On an average, a woman in a drought prone area in India walks a distance of 1500 km a year to collect fuel, fodder, and water. Within the family, in every part of the world, the gender disparity in relation to household tasks undertaken and benefits derived from them is very evident. The men in these families are found to be eating first thereby getting better access to fresher and more nutritious food than their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. In cases of widowhood, the marginalisation of women in the family is even more apparent.

Summary

This unit was an introduction into understanding what gender is and how does one analyse gender and gender discrimination. The differentiation of sex from gender becomes crucial in this context. Understanding gender as socially constructed and not inherent in the nature of human beings proves vital in our analysis.

We have also looked at some of the major theories that have been integral to gender analysis.

Briefly we also explored the two schools of thought towards ending gender inequality.

Glossary

Third sex: The terms third gender or third sex is used to describe individuals who are not considered to be either male or female.

Hermaphrodite: An organism that has reproductive organs normally associated with both male and female sexes.

Pseudo hermaphrodite: Someone having internal reproductive organs of one sex and external sexual characteristics of the other sex.

Gross Domestic Product: It is one of the several ways of measuring the size of the economy. It records the output of goods and services produced in a country through labour.

Dalit: The word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit root word *dal* which means “broken, ground-down, downtrodden, or oppressed.” “Dalit” refers to one’s caste rather than class; it applies to members of those menial castes which have borne the stigma of “untouchability” that stemmed from the traditional Indian caste system. One out of every six Indians is Dalit, yet due to their caste identity Dalits regularly face discrimination and violence which prevent them from enjoying the basic human rights and dignity promised to all citizens of India.

Mahila: A Hindi word that means “woman”

Required Readings

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