



**Knowledge is Power**  
**PRIA**

**Understanding Gender**

Gender is defined as the roles and relations between men and women that are not biologically determined. They are constructed socially through socially perceived norms. It is dynamic and changes from situation to situation since what is relevant in one society may be irrelevant in another. For instance, what is women's work in one country may be man's work in another. Many factors such as age, class, caste, economics, and geographical and political environment affect how gender roles and relations are formed.

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sex is biological. It refers to visible differences in genitalia and related differences in procreative function.</li><li>• Sex is constant.</li><li>• As a natural process, sex remains constant.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gender is socio-cultural. It is defined by society. It refers to masculine and feminine qualities, behaviour patterns, roles and responsibilities etc.</li><li>• Gender is variable; it changes from time to time, culture-to-culture and even family-to-family.</li></ul>

(PRIA International Academy, 2008)

At the same time, it is important to remember here that gender is not only about women. Rather, it is about the relations between women and men and how it affects their lives. Gender attempts to understand the differences between men and women that are influenced by conditions that are induced.

Did you know that in the 21st century:

- Only 3.5 per cent of the world's cabinet ministers are women?
- And women hold no ministerial positions in 93 countries?
- This means that half the world's national policies are made without the participation of 50 per cent of the population.
- And if one is to take the world as a whole:
  1. Men sit in over 90 per cent of the parliament seats
  2. Leaving less than 10 per cent for the remaining 50 per cent who are women.

(Bhasin, 2010)

But, even though gender recognises that both men and women are restricted by these social conditions, gender also recognises that women are the vulnerable group due to their subordinate status in a patriarchal society. It also recognises that the rights, desires, needs and the experiences of women have been side-lined for decades.

Gender also recognises that not all women are alike. Women may share the same experiences, strengths and obstacles, but race, class, ethnicities, and caste are some of the factors that make women different from each other. So, we also find that there are some women who are more vulnerable than others. Hence, to bring about gender equity, it is imperative that experiences and problems of all women are the focus of all development projects, and give extra support to women in solving those problems is the strategy.

Gender, as mentioned above, changes with situations, and between cultures and regions across the world. This is important for us because we now know that even gendered perceptions can change. We can address and change the inequalities that are caused by these differences.

Both men and women work to maintain their households and communities, but the nature of their work differs. This difference is based upon gender relations that are reflected in its values, roles and responsibilities.

Women contribute to the emotional and social well-being and care of their families which contributes to development. But most often, women's work in the household is not valued as highly as men's work and they often receive less pay for the same amount of work. Women's contribution in terms of their roles, tasks and responsibilities and contributions to development is also often completely ignored at the time of development planning. All the roles that men and women perform can be broadly categorised into three types:

**Productive Role:** This refers to paid work or the production of goods in exchange for an income. Because of the gender division of labour, men get paid more for their work because it is assumed that the work men do is more skill oriented and complex in nature. While women's work in the home such as cooking is undervalued, the same when done by men outside the home is a very highly paid profession.

**Reproductive Role:** This refers to the work that is done primarily by women inside the house, such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing and household maintenance. Child bearing and breast feeding are biological and can only be performed by women, but men can participate in other activities such as child rearing, household maintenance, cooking etc.

**Community Role:** This refers to the participation of men and women in community organisations such as marriages, religious festivals etc. Here, both men and women are seen to participate equally in community activities.

We have seen so far that there are differences that exist between men and women due to certain gendered perceptions. Even the roles that men and women perform in

their lives are influenced by these perceptions. These differences in roles, responsibilities and behaviours between men and women are caused by our socialisation process. When these differences create situations by which one group (usually the male) is superior to the other (usually the female), it results in discrimination. Gender discrimination cuts across discriminations caused due to class, caste, and economic differences.

### ***Patriarchy***

Gender discriminations have their roots in patriarchy. The word patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or the 'patriarch'. Today, it is used to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterise a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways.

'Patriarchy' refers to a social system where the father controls all members of the family, all property, all economic and other major decisions. This is based on the assumption that men are superior to women, and that, as man's property, women should be controlled by men.

The subordination that women experience on a daily basis, regardless of the socio-economic class they might belong to, takes various forms – discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence – within the family, at the place of work, or in society.

### ***Family***

In a patriarchal system the role of the father is complete and the men are seen as being superior and dominant to the women. In a patriarchal family, the father has absolute power over the other members of the household, in exchange for the obligation of economic support and protection that he owes to the family. Every patriarchal family 'socialises' its young members into its own values, perpetuating patriarchal ideology through gender-biased socialisation (which includes caste, class and religious socialisation) in which women play both the roles of the socialiser and the socialised.

In most families of Asia, a man continues to be considered the head of the household despite 40 per cent households being headed by women. Boys are given a higher value than the girls and socialised to carry on as 'bread winners'. Though the male child's subordination to his father is temporary (until he grows up to be the head of the household), the subordination of the female members of the family are lifelong. The daughters of the household are placed under the protection of her husband and her father-in-law after her marriage.

In contrast, matriarchal families are those in which the mother is considered as the head of the household. Here, the family property is inherited by the daughters from their mothers. But this factor alone does not reflect a matriarchal family. In many communities the property is passed on from mother to daughter. But the family (and hence even the property, quite often) was controlled by the mother's brother. Such families are matrilineal yet patriarchal. But there are also cases where the husband moves away from his family of origin into the wife's home rather than vice versa.

### ***Religion***

Most contemporary religions are patriarchal, defining male superiority as supreme. There is also sufficient evidence to show that almost every religion considers women to be inferior, impure and sinful. Thinkers across all major religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, etc. – and with a few exceptions, all prophets and concepts of God are male. Religious texts continue to glorify certain images of women (e.g. Sita, Draupadi etc.), perpetuating stereotypes for women in society and recognising women as carriers of moral values and cultural practices.

### ***Media***

Media holds another stranglehold over popular perceptions and right from the Mahabharata and Ramayana to today's soaps on television, newspaper reports, and advertisements, women are projected as a caring wife, nurturing mother, obedient daughter, dutiful and submissive daughter-in-law, sexy partner, glamorous executive, enticing temptress, God fearing subject etc.

Messages about male superiority and female inferiority are reinforced in every medium. As in all other sectors, women are highly underrepresented in the media as a profession and even where they exist, they are seen as best being in charge of women and children's issues, rather than in political, economic or even sports reporting (Commonwealth Foundation, 2004).

### ***Legal system***

In most countries across the world the legal system favours men in its laws in relation to marriage, inheritance and family. The man is considered the head of the household for all legal transactions, the natural guardian of children and the chief inheritor of property.

## References

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