UNIT 1:BASIC CONCEPTS:SEX,GENDER AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objective
1.2 Introduction
1.3 Understanding Basic concepts: Sex and Gender
1.3.1: Meaning and definitions of the term Sex and Gender
1.3.2: Gender differences: Biology and Culture
1.4 Sex -Gender system
1.5 Social construction of Gender
1.6 Variation of gender roles
1.7 Socialization or process of gendering
1.8 Let us sum up
1.9 Further Reading
1.10 Answer to Check Your Progress
1.11 Model Questions

1.1 LEARNIING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- understand the meaning and difference between sex and gender
- understand the sex-gender system
- understand the social construction of gender
- understand the variation of gender roles
- understand how gender socialization takes place

1.2 INTRODUCTION

While filling application forms for taking admission in school or college we often come across a criteria asking either the sex or gender of the applicant. These two terms are often used interchangeably though its connotations are very different. This unit shall introduce you to the meaning and differences between these concepts. Every bird or animal is born as a male or female. Similar is the case of human beings we are born as either

male or female and it determined simply by looking at our sex or genitalia. In other word sex is given and is a biological aspect. But every human culture has its ways of valuing male and female and accordingly assign them different roles, responsibilities and attributes. All the social and cultural "packaging" that is done for a male or a female from birth itself is called "gendering". We will discuss about these basic concepts in this unit.

1.3 UNDERSTANDING BASIC CONCEPTS: SEX AND GENDER

1.3.1 Meaning and definition of the term sex and gender:

Gender refers to the way in which societies distinguish/defines men and women and assign them social roles. The distinction between sex and gender was introduced to deal with the general tendency to attribute women's subordination to their anatomy.

Sociologists use the term sex to refer to the anatomical and physiological differences that define male and female bodies. Gender, by contrast concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females. Gender, is linked to socially constructed notions of the social classification of men and women into 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Ann Oakley, who was among the first few feminist scholars to use this concept says that "Gender is a matter of culture; it refers to the social classification of men and women into 'masculine' and 'feminine'. According to Kaufman and Kimmel (2011:53), Gender refers to our ideas of femininity and masculinity. It has to do with the relations of power between and within the sexes. It is the result of how we raise boys and girls to be men and women.

According to West and Zimmerman Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do.

1.3.2 Gender differences: Biology and Culture

According to some scholars the biological differences among men and

women determine their differential traits. Geddes and Thompson are one of the advocates of the biological determinism . They argued that social, psychological and behavioural differences in traits between man and woman is caused by metabolic state. Women generally conserve energy (being 'anabolic') and this makes them passive, conservative, sluggish, stable and uninterested in politics. Men expend their surplus energy (being 'katabolic') and this makes them eager, energetic, passionate, variable and, thereby, interested in political and social matters. These biological 'facts' about metabolic states were used not only to explain behavioural differences between women and men but also to justify the social and political arrangements that withhold women from attaining political rights accorded to men. According to Geddes and Thompson, it will be unsuitable to grant women political rights, as they are simply not suited to have those rights. They further argued that it would also be pointless since women would simply not be interested in exercising their political rights due to their biology. The feminist scholarship has rejected the biological determinism and argued that the behavioural and psychological differences have social, rather than biological cause. For example Simone de Beauvoir had argued that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, and that "social discrimination generates in women moral and intellectual effects so deep that they appear to be natural" (Beauvoir 1972 [original 1949). In other words life behavioural traits associated with women and men are not the result anatomy or chromosomes. They are culturally learned or acquired traits. In the everyday life we find ample evidences where women have shown exemplary physical strength and mental ability. Thus, it is argued by the feminist scholarship that different traits and abilities are not sex specific but distributed across different sexes. But when society imposes a particular set of traits to favorable for one sex and another set of traits to be favorable for another sex then it is called gender.

Therefore sex indicates only the biological aspects of being either female or male but gender includes the psychological, social, cultural, and behavioral characteristics associated with being female or male. Gender is defined by one's recognition with the fact that one is either male or female

based on both biological and psychosocial considerations, and the internalization of this gender concept into one's self-identity. Gender role is largely a product of the way in which one was raised and may not be in conformance with one's gender identity. The development of gender differences is a complicated issue including elements of both nature (biology) and nurture (socialization). Far from being straightforward, research has found that these two factors are interrelated in complex ways. Much more research is needed before the relationship between the two factors and the influence of the relationship on gender is completely understood.

1.4 SEX-GENDER SYSTEM

Gayle S. Rubin is an American cultural anthropologist. She is a renowned activist and theorist of sex and gender politics. She has worked on a variety of subject like feminism, sadomasochism, prostitution, pedophilia, pornography and lesbian literature, as well as conducted anthropological studies and traced histories of sexual subcultures. In her works she had especially focused on urban society. According to Rubin 'Sex-gender system' is an institutionalised system which allocates resources, property, and privileges to persons according to culturally defined roles of different sexes.Thus, it is sex which determines that women should be child bearers and it is the sex-gender system which assures that they should also be child rearers.She argued that historical patterns of female oppression have constructed this role for women even in capitalist societies. By analyzing the historical patterns of the sex/gender system, she argued that "Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes".In many societies' men are considered as the bread winner as well as the custodian of the family therefore woman are not given any share in the family property. Since woman become economically dependent, this dependence becomes a tool of her oppression.

1.5 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Before trying to understand how gender is socially constructed, let us understand the concept of social construction. Now every day we observe

various objects, experience a lot of events and we engage in diverse social interactions. As we engage in diverse interactions every day we develop an image of the society or the world and how things function in that world. In fact, we filter everything that happens to us everyday through the lens or screen/ norms/values of the social group of which we are a member. This everyday exercise of making sense of the world or thing through the 'common sensical' notions developed in a society is called social construction of social reality. For example for some it is commonsensical to eat non-vegetarian food. This commonsense is shaped by the belief system of a particular social group. On the other hand it may be commonsensical for some to have vegetarian food which may have emanated from the belief system of the group to which one belong.

The fact that gender is not given category but a society decides/ determines what is proper for a male and what is proper for a female is called the social construction of gender. It describes about the relationship of gender with various institutions like caste, kinship, marriage and so on. From the perspective of gender theories, the process of constructing gender can be explained in relation to the aspects of women's life like property, work, decision-making, honour killing, and the notion of autonomy and freedom. The gender construction operates both at the macro and micro level and very much embedded in the institutional arrangements of a society.

- **Gender norms:** Gender norms refer to the rules that indicate the socially acceptable ways of acting or behaving for a man or woman. We are socialized about the gender norms from our birth onwards.. We learn what is expected from us through what our parents teach us, as well as what we pick up at school, through religious or cultural teachings, through the media, and various other social institutions. For example girls are expected behave in certain way, dress in particular way. It is often told to little boys that they should not cry like girls. Though crying is associated with out emotional state of mind, it is attributed as a feature of girls. On the other hands girls who laugh openly are often rebuked.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1 State the difference between sex and gender?

2. How gender is socially constructed?

1.6 VARIATION OF GENDER ROLES

The world is made up of different groups of people and every group observe different cultures. And as you might know that cultures are made up of different elements or aspects depending on various factors such as geographical location, religion, ethnicity backgrounds, educational backgrounds, etc. Take for example a continent like Africa. Africa is quite large, made up of different countries, different cultures, and different levels of education. Now, let us take a quick example of one African country, Kenya. Kenya, a country in East Africa, is made up of different tribes, languages cultures, religion, and levels of education. Still in Kenya, women are not treated the same way in among different Kenyan communities. Early marriage may occur in one Community and not in the other. Same applies to female circumcision. Not all Kenyan females undergo genital mutilations. Again in India several communities reside who follow different cultural practices. Among some communities practices like female foeticide, honor killing, dowry system is evident. Some experience domestic violence, some girls are denied the right to education, some are forced to polygamous marriages, dress codes may be imposed etc.But some communities are more progressive with their approach to girl child. Atrocities against women or discrimination against girl child cannot be understood or explained on the basis of one's biological aspects but on the basis of the roles that is determined by society.For example discrimination against girl child in her natal family is justified with the fact that a girl is supposed to play the role of caretaker in someone else's home. Therefore, too much investment on her is considered as futile.

Thus, societies might vary but every society determines the role for the male and the female members.Gender roles vary so much between cultures that they cannot be based on or explained by sex alone .If biology

alone determined our roles, every woman in the world would should be cooking, washing and sewing but this is clearly not the case because most professional cooks, launderers and tailors are men. On the other hand woman in some societies are required to do most of the agricultural work. According to some scholars in every the society the work which is considered to be inferior is relegated to woman or the work which woman do is relegated as inferior even if they put equal effort. Often debates regarding unequal remuneration for similar work has been a matter of concern.

Thus, according to feminist scholars neither sex nor nature is responsible for the variation of gender roles as unjustifiable inequalities exist between men and women. They further argue that the roles allocated as well as the inequalities between sexes are historical constructs and therefore they are required to be questioned, challenged and changed. A woman may well have children but that should be no reason for her inferiority and subordination; nor should it determine her education, training or job opportunities. Correspondingly man too should be allowed to 'choose' their roles based on their ability and interest.

1.7 SOCIALIZATION OR PROCESS OF GENDERING

In the previous section we have discussed about the variation in gender roles and since it is said gender roles are socially constructed, it means one is not born to play a gender role but is gradually taught to play the gender roles. This means we are socialized about the gender roles. Before embarking into the meaning of gender socialization let us try to understand the meaning of socialization.

The following are the some important definitions of socialization by well known sociologists.

- Macionis says,"The life long process by which as individual becomes the proper member of society and develops human characteristics," is socialisation
- According to Horton and Hunt "It is a learning process in which groups interact and learn social norms also develop his/her self."

- Socialization according to Ogburns; " is the process of learning the norms of the group and society "
- According to Maciver: "It is the process through which social beings develops relationships and association with each other."
- According to Bogardus: "A process of learning to live and work together is called socialization."

What are the Functions of Socialization in the Society :

- It converts humans from biological being to social being
- It contributes in personality development
- It helps to become disciplined
- It helps to perform different roles
- It establishes knowledge and skills
- It contributes in the stability of social order
- It transmits culture from one generation to other
- It creates right aspirations in social life.

In other words socialization is a process of internalizing the norms and ideologies of society. Socialization encompasses both learning and teaching and is thus "the means by which social and cultural continuity are attained". It fundamentally represents the whole process of learning throughout the life course and is a central influence on our behavior, beliefs, and actions as adults as well as of children.

Therefore gender socialization refers to the process of learning the behaviour and attitudes that is considered appropriate for a given sex. A male child is required/expected learn to be a boy and a female child is expected to portray the behavior as well as develop likes and dislikes that the society considers appropriates for the girls. What is considered to be appropriate for a girl and a boy is learnt through various agents of socialization. The behaviour that is seen to be appropriate for each gender is largely determined by societal, cultural and economic values in a given society. Thus, as we have discussed in the previous section like gender roles,gender socialization can therefore vary considerably from one society to the other based on the values it cherish. The family is undoubtedly important in reinforcing gender roles, but so are groups including friends,

peers, school, work and the mass media. Gender roles are reinforced through "countless subtle and not so subtle ways".

Thus gendering is the process of associating something with one gender or something with another gender. For example the pink color is associated with one gender. When the process of gendering has taken effect, many things can be subjected to gendering. In most cultures of the world, if not all, various objects and various behaviors are gendered. In other words, they are associated with one gender. These are not necessarily natural associations. Instead, they are associations that are created by society and that can differ from one society to another.

In some countries, smoking is seen as a male thing to do. In most societies caring for children (as in a daycare) is a female activity, nursing is associated as a female activity, even scooty is associated with woman or girls but generally motor bikes are associated with man or boys. These things become gendered through the process of gendering.

Gendering, then, is the process by which a society associates a particular thing or behavior with one gender or another. When society accepts this process, the thing is gendered in that society.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What do you mean by gender norms

3. What do you mean by gender norms?

4. Define the process of gender socialization. Give some definitions of socialisation.

5. Define Gender as given by Ann Oakley.

6. Describe how gender roles vary from one culture to another.

7. Write true or false

i. Sex is manmade.

ii. Gender roles are constant.

iii. Socialisationisthe process of internalizing the norms and ideologies of society.

iv. Socialization doesn't contribute in personality development.

v. Gender includes the psychological, social, cultural and behavioural aspects.

vi. Gender is social interpretation of sex.



1.8 LET US SUM UP

- Sex is given and is a biological aspect.
- But every human culture has its ways of valuing male and female and accordingly assign them different roles, responsibilities and attributes.
- All the social and cultural "packaging" that is done for a male or a female from birth itself is called "gendering.
- Gender refers to the way in which societies distinguish/defines men and women and assign them social roles.
- The distinction between sex and gender was introduced to deal with the general tendency to attribute women's subordination to their anatomy.
- Sociologists use the term sex to refer to the anatomical and physiological differences that define male and female bodies.
- Gender, by contrast concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females.
- Gender, is linked to socially constructed notions of the social classification of men and women into 'masculine' and 'feminine'.
- The fact that gender is not given category but a society decides/ determines what is proper for a male and what is proper for a female is called the social construction of gender.
- It describes about the relationship of gender with various institutions like caste, kinship, marriage and so on.
- Gender norms refer to the rules that indicate the socially acceptable ways of acting or behaving for a man or woman.

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