UNIT 1 : GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to,

- Know the meaning of gender .
- understand what is social construction of gender

1.2 INTRODUCTION :

You must have often come across application forms where the applicant's sex or gender is asked. These two terms are often used interchangeably. But they are different. In this unit we will learn about the difference between these two concepts.

1.3 MEANING OF GENDER

The distinctions between men and women are more social than natural. The conceptual distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' seeks to capture this matter. Gender became a key sociological concept owing to the impact of feminism. Thus, arguing that 'anatomy is not destiny' and that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.Simone de Beauvoir questioned the assumptions behind such formulations in her feminist classic

The Second Sex. At least in the social sciences, there is now unanimity in accepting that distinctions between men and women are more social than natural. This clearly projects gender is a social construct, not an outcome of the biological difference. There is a conceptual distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. They are not one and the same.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. She argued this through her study of the conceptions of masculinity and femininity among the Arapesh, Mundugamor and Tchambuli, three societies in the New Guinea Islands. On the basis of this study, she argued that masculinity is often equated with aggression and hand femininity with nurturance on the other. This association of traits have no intrinsic relation with biological sex. Mead's study contributed significantly to the shaping of the concept of gender in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles of and relations between men and women. Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/time, specific and changeable.

In simple terms, gender explains the differences between men and women. Gender is an analytical category that is socially constructed to differentiate the biological difference between men and women. The term gender is also used to describe the differences in behaviour between men and women which are described as "masculine" and "feminine". Feminist writings focus on this aspect and claim that these differences are not biological but are social constructions of patriarchal society. But some theorists suggest that the biological differences between men and women also result in their mental and physical differences. They argue that biologically, men are physically and mentally superior to women. Other theorists suggest that the biological difference between men and women are exaggerated. The differences are socially constructed by the patriarchal

system of society by which men are described as superior to women. Therefore women become subordinate to men in the society.

Gender is defined by FAO as "the relations between men and women, both perceptual and material. Gender is not determined biologically, but is constructed socially. It is the central organizing principle of societies, and often governs the processes of production and reproduction, consumption and distribution. Gender issues focus on women and on the relationship between men and women, their roles, access to and control over resources, division of labour, interests and needs. Gender relations affect household security family well-being, planning, production and many other aspects of life. Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context".

The distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', which came to dominate theorization in the sociology of gender in the 1970s, is founded on the idea of universality of 'sex' and variability of 'gender'. Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) made the sex-gender distinction very popular in sociology. For Oakley, sex is 'a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible differences in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. "Gender", however is a matter of culture, it refers to the social classification into"masculine" and "feminine".' She defines the concept "Gender" as a product of culture. It refers to the social classification of men and women into masculine and feminine.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1) In which year Sex Gender & Society was written?

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Q2) Who is the author of the book Sex Gender & Society?

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1.4 BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM OR SOCIAL COMPULSION

Biologists and sociologists often contradict each other on the issue of sex and gender correlation. Often the Biologists say that gender differences are determined by biology. To them, primary sex characteristics and secondary sex characteristics define the physical distinctions between males and females. Puberty further defines the differences between males and females: males develop more muscles and a lower voice and gain more body hair and height, while females develop breasts and form more fatty tissue and broader hips. Also according to biologists, sex is inherited (fertilization determines our sex). Furthermore, socialization and social institutions merely reflect – and sometimes exaggerate – inborn tendencies. Biology leads males and females to different behaviours and attitudes. Thus, according to them gender has a biological root.

The biological stand point advances the argument that there are some natural differences in the physical, cognitive and emotional make up of men and women and accordingly, these are reflected in their self-concept, attitudes, perceptions, relationship and activities. The fundamental biological/physical differences between the gender groups are:

- Genetic difference – girls “XX”, boys “XY”
- Hormonal difference – testosterone (aggression) and androgen are higher in males while estrogen is higher among females.
- Gonadal difference – Ovaries in females and testes in males
- Genital difference – penis/clitoris
- Reproductive difference – women are endowed with reproductive capacity by nature.

The fundamental cognitive and attitudinal differences between males and females on the basis of biology are:

- Musculature – women are physically weaker than men.
- Brain function –Women are more verbal, whereas men are action oriented.
- Style – women are more diplomatic, men are more direct.

- Affection – women are more sympathetic, caring and affectionate, while men are straight, task oriented.

It is commonly argued that biological differences between males and females determine gender by causing enduring differences in capabilities and dispositions. Higher levels of testosterone, for example, are said to lead men to be more aggressive than women; and left brain dominance is said to lead men to be more rational while their relative lack of brain lateralization leads women to be more emotional.

Sociologists, on the other hand, argue that gender is learnt through socialization. Every culture asserts the behaviours and attitudes that are appropriate for one's sex. The sociological significance of gender is that it is a device by which society controls its members. Sociologists reinforce that the types of work men and women do in each society are determined not by biology but by social arrangements. Biology "causes" some human behaviour, but they are related to reproduction or differences in body structure. Sociologists are of the opinion gender roles and gender identity are more fashioned by nurture. Conventional wisdom, culture create and sustain gender identity and gender roles in a society. Gender appropriate behaviours are learnt from the people around who play a significant role in gender socialization. For example colors. A girl or a boy may not be born to like or dislike a particular color. But it is seen often little boys and girls are told that 'pink' is girl's color. Culture takes whatever difference that exists at birth and exacerbates them. Different cultures have different values and expectations placed on gender and gender socialization teaches us the societal expectations and directs our behavioural expressions. The fact that it is society which decides and teach us what kind of attitude, behavior, likes and dislikes we must develop on the basis of our sex is called **social construction of gender.** Every society constructs what a girl/woman or boy/man should be like. Therefore the expectations of a society from girl/woman or boy/man vary. In some society woman are associated with the agricultural work and in some society man are associated with agricultural work. Again, the common perception is that woman are physically weaker but woman like Hima Das, Mary Kom as well as common woman who

climbs hills and trees to collect fodder show exemplary strength and endurance.

1.5 SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES ON GENDER

There are four major sociological theories on gender. They are the Functionalist Theory, the Symbolic Interaction Theory, The Conflict Theory and The Feminist Theory. Let us describe the main propositions of these theories regarding gender.

- Functionalist theorists argue that men fill instrumental roles in society while women fill expressive roles, which works to the benefit of society. Instrumental roles comprise of the need for leadership and fulfilment of the task on the one hand and the expressive role refers to need for morale and cohesion on the other. Further, it is our socialization into prescribed roles that is the driving force behind gender inequality.
- Symbolic interaction theorists look at gender from the micro perspective and examine gender stratification on a day-to-day level. For example, men are more likely to interrupt women in conversations and in their workspaces which generally reflect greater power possessed by the males. These theorists also focus on how gender roles are internalized by males and females.
- Conflict theorists view women as disadvantaged because of power inequalities between women and men that are built into the social structure. For example, from this viewpoint, wage inequalities that exist between men and women result from men's historic power to devalue women's work and benefit as a group from the services that women's labour provides.
- Feminist theory emerged out of the women's movement and aims to understand the inferior position of women in society for the sole purpose of improving their position in society. There are four major frameworks that have developed out of feminist theory: liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, and multiracial feminism.

- Liberal feminists argue that gender inequality results from past traditions that pose barriers to women's advancement. Socialist feminists, on the other hand, argue that the origin of women's oppression lies with the system of capitalism.Because women are a cheap supply of labour, they are exploited by a capitalist, which makes them less powerful both as women and as workers. Radical feminists see patriarchy as the main cause of women's oppression and argue that women's oppression lies in men's control over women's bodies. Finally, multiracial feminists examine the interactive influence of gender, race, and class, showing how together they shape the experiences of all women and men.

1.6 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SEX AND GENDER

The English language distinction between the words sex and gender was first developed in the 1950s and 1960s by British and American Psychiatrists and other medical personnel working with intersex and trans-sexual patients. Since then, the term gender has been increasingly used to distinguish between sex as biological and gender as socially and culturally constructed. The term sex, since classical times, has been used to designate matters related to biology. The term gender has generally been used in social or cultural contexts. Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex.

Sex is based in a combination of anatomical, endocrinal and Chromosomal features and the selection among these criteria for any task is based very much on cultural beliefs about what actually makes someone male or female. Thus the very definition of the biological categories, and people's understanding of themselves and others as male or female, is ultimately social.

The fundamental differences between sex and gender can be presented as follows:

Sex	Gender
Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. It also includes genetic differences.	Gender refers to the socially constructed roles behaviour, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.
Biological sex is determined by genetic and anatomical characteristics.	Gender is an acquired identity that is learned, changes over time,and varies widely within and across cultures.
From the aforesaid perspective sex is fixed and based in nature.	From the aforesaid perspective gender is fluid and based in culture.
Sex is a more scientific term that explains physical traits and sexual preferences.	Gender carries a more social tone. It refers to the different activities, career choices, and positions people hold in society.
Sex refers to biological differences; chromosomes, hormonal profiles, internal and external sex organs.	Gender describes the characteristics that a society or culture delineates as masculine or feminine.
Sex categories include “male” and “female”.	Gender categories include “masculine “and “feminine”.
Aspects of sex don’t vary substantially between different human societies.	Aspects of gender vary with societies with varying cultures.
Sex is imbibed identity; it is one’s biological identity and is biologically assigned.	Gender is acquired identity, socially learned expectations and behaviour culturally transmitted.
Some sexual manifestations can be found from the reproductive abilities of women and physical features.	Some gender manifestations can be found through the activities women are expected to perform in the society.

Thus, Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do, something we perform. Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. Gender builds on biological sex, but it exaggerates biological difference, and it carries biological difference into domains in which it is completely irrelevant. Sex is based in a combination of anatomical, endocrinal and chromosomal features, and the selection among these criteria for sex based assignment is depedent on cultural beliefs about what actually makes someone male or female. Thus the very definition of the biological categories and people's understanding of themselves and others as male or female, is ultimately social. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) sums up the situation as follows: labelling someone a man or a woman is a social decision.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3) Mention two theoretical strands in sociology

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Q4) Who distinguished between the word Sex & Gender for the first time?

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

- The distinctions between men and women are more social than natural.
- The conceptual distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' seeks to capture this view of the matter. Gender became a key sociological concept owing to the impact of feminism.
- Thus, arguing that 'anatomy is not destiny' and that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.Simone de Beauvoir questioned the

assumptions behind such formulations in her feminist classic *The Second Sex*.

- At least in the social sciences, there is now unanimity in accepting that distinctions between men and women are more social than natural.
- Biologists and sociologists often contradict each other on the issue of sex and gender correlation.
- Often the Biologists say that gender differences are determined by biology.
- To them, primary sex characteristics and secondary sex characteristics define the physical distinctions between males and females.
- Sex is based in a combination of anatomical, endocrinal and Chromosomal features and the selection among these criteria for sex assignment is based very much on cultural beliefs about what actually makes someone male or female.



1.8 FURTHER READING

1) Kausal, Rachana(2000) Women and Human Rights in India, Kaveri Books

2) Aswal, Balam Singh(2013) Readings in Women's and Girls' Rights, Cyber-Tech Publications

3) Mc Neese, Tim, Mountjoy, Shane(2009) The Women Rights Movement: Moving Toward Equality, InfoBase Publishing

4) Chawla,Monica (2006) Gender Justice Women and Law in India, Deep & Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd.

5) Saikia, Nandita(2008) Indian Women A Socio-Legal Perspective, Serials Publications

5) Ray ,Raka(2000) Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India, Zubaan

6) Ray, Raka, Katzenstein, Mary Fainsod(2005) Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power, and Politics, Rowman & Littlefield

1.9 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q1) In the year 1972 Sex Gender & Society was written.

Answer to Q2) Ann Oakley is the author of the book Sex Gender & Society.

Answer to Q3) In the year 1950 & 1960 Sex & Gender word was first developed.

Answer to Q4) British and American Psychiatrists first distinct between the word Sex & Gender.

1.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Short Questions (Answer within 150 words)

QA1) Describe the proposition of conflict theory to explain gender.

QA2) What is meant by social construction of gender.

Long Questions (Answer within 300-500 words)

QB1) Discuss the difference between sex and gender.

QB2) Explain the difference between the biological and sociological understanding of gender.