

Social Construction of Gender

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This paper is an overview of how gender is socially constructed. It discusses how the biological basis to the differences between the sexes does not explain their lived differences and inequalities. The paper looks at the sex-gender distinction and the different explanations that have been given for the near universal inequality between men and women. A discussion on gender regimes in different domains of social life follows one on how religion and kinship shape particular constructions of gender. Finally the paper discusses how various dimensions of social stratification articulate with and construct gender.

The differences, inequalities and the division of labor between men and women are often simply treated as consequences of 'natural' differences between male and female humans. Such a view informs most commonsensical understandings of what it means to be a man or a woman in any society and has been intrinsic to worldviews prevailing across different societies throughout much of human history. The idea that natural differences between the sexes are the source of all that makes men and women distinct has also been deeply embedded in scientific discourses.

The sheer variability of the roles and relations of men and women across different societies and social groups presents itself as one of the first evidence against this crude biologically determinist view. If there is no constancy between how different societies expect men to be men and women to be women, then there must be something other than natural differences that underlie their makeup. Further, most of us have experienced incongruence between what is expected of our 'sex' and what we are. This mismatch between what 'we are' and what 'we should be' is another clear indicator that something more than natural differences are at stake in constituting us as men and women. That gender is a social construct is obvious from the fact that it has a variety of manifestations and that it has more to do with institutions than with individuals.

Because the naturalization of sex differences has been more detrimental for women than for men, these constructions have been more often questioned by women. Gender even 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*. De Beauvoir's

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famous assertion is equally true for men. At least in the social sciences, there is now unanimity in accepting that distinctions between men and women are more social than natural. The conceptual distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' has sought to capture this view of the matter. It will be useful to have a brief overview of the intellectual trajectory of these and related concepts which have given a tremendous boost to a sociological understanding of one of the oldest forms of differentiation in human societies.

Masculinity and Femininity: Sex and Gender

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 did this rather dramatically through her study of the conceptions of masculinity and femininity among the Arapesh, Mundugamor and Tchambuli, three societies in the New Guinea Islands (Mead 1935). On the basis of this study, she argued that the western equation between masculinity and aggression on the one hand and femininity and nurturance on the other is but one among a number of possible permutations of traits which have no intrinsic relation with biological sex. Between them, the three non-western societies studied by Mead displayed other possible combinations of these variables. Mead's study, though contestable on several grounds, contributed significantly to the shaping of the concept of gender in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The functionalist notion of 'sex role' was also a crude precursor of the concept of gender. It suggested that men and women are socialized into sex-specific roles, namely 'instrumental' and 'expressive'. These roles were regarded as the basis of a complementary relation between men and women, which along with the sexual division of labor, contributed to a stable social order. Scholars have questioned the focus of this conceptualization upon 'individual' men and women who are socialized into sex-specific roles. They suggest that gender is something more than roles performed by men and women just as economy is something more than jobs performed by individuals (Lorber 1984). Critics have also pointed out that socialization is always a precarious achievement and that agency, interpretation and negotiation are a part and parcel of how gender identities are actually constituted.

The distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', which came to dominate theorization 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* (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" (p.18). The terms (i.e., sex and gender) can be traced back to Robert Stoller, an American Psychiatrist, who used them to deal with cases of individuals whose biological 'sex' did not match their 'gender'.

Criticism of sex-gender distinction

The sex-gender distinction is no longer treated as an unambiguous sociological breakthrough. This conception is primarily questioned for its treatment of 'sex' as a binary category given in nature and for positing gender as resting on this binary category. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2002) have traced one of the challenges to sex-gender distinction to the work of Garfinkel, an ethnomethodologist. In his *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967), Garfinkel shows how and to what effect Agnes, a male to female transsexual,¹ uses feminine cultural symbols to 'pass' as a female. This case study suggests that sex, and not just gender, is a social achievement and performance. West and Zimmerman (1987), who follow Garfinkel's approach, suggest that sex is a 'socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males' (p.127).

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) has also used instances from queer contexts² to question the binary character of the categories of sex and gender. She argues that both sex and gender are socially constructed. Using the linguistic notion of performativity, she treats femininity and, by implication, masculinity, as being established in a normative and regulative manner.

Michel Foucault's critique of the assumption that sex is a biological fact (Foucault: 1989) has also underpinned the growing discontent with the sex-gender distinction. For him 'sex' owes its existence to particular scientific and non-scientific discourses. He demonstrated how the idea of sex took 'form in the different strategies of power...[by grouping] together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and [how] it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere' (ibid.:152-154).

These criticisms suggest that gender is not merely a social construction tethered to 'sex' which is a given and fixed. Rather, sex is itself a construction. Thus for instance, a study of medical management of children born with physically ambiguous sexual traits shows that cultural understanding of gender informs the management of such cases (Kessler 1990).

Gender inequalities and differences

Alongside these theoretical concerns regarding the veracity of distinguishing sex from gender, a nagging problem that has occupied social anthropologists is that,

¹ This term refers to a person who displays a strong desire to belong to the opposite sex. The Hijras of India can be treated as transsexuals. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transsexual> for a discussion of this concept.

² The term queer is used to refer to a variety of sexual orientations that depart from conventional heterosexual orientations. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer> for a general discussion of the usage of the term.

notwithstanding the myriad variations in gender constructs, the subordination of women comes close to being a social universal. How does one account for this near universal without resorting to biologically determinist arguments? For the Marxist thinkers, gender relations are located within systems of production and reproduction that characterize different societies and which have historically evolved to take the presently dominant form of capitalism. In his classic work, *The origin of family, private property and the state*, Engels (1948) traced the changing trajectory of gender relations through history. He locates the source of women's subordination, not in biological differences but in the emergence of private property and in women themselves being rendered as a form of property.³ In this view then gender inequality is not universal and arises under particular socio-historical situations. Another anthropological view that rejects universal subordination of women argues on a different plane that subordination and domination arise contextually and women are not powerless under all conditions in a society. Thus women may exercise considerable influence within the domestic domain while the same is usually true for men in the public domain.

There are other scholars who have nevertheless attempted to find some explanation for the near universality of subordination of women. One of the most celebrated anthropological responses to this problem is Sherry Ortner's article 'Is male to female as nature is to culture?' (1974). Ortner's argument is that nature is universally devalued by culture; because of their role in reproduction, women are closely identified with nature; therefore, women share in the universal devaluation of nature by culture. Though enormously influential in anthropological discourse, it is arguable that Ortner's idea that nature is devalued by culture hardly withstands the test of universality and is, in the least, a deeply Euro-centric position.⁴ Rosaldo's argument that female subordination is rooted in the division between domestic and public spheres along with a consistent devaluation of the former is open to criticism on similar grounds (see Rosaldo 1974).

This brief overview of the theoretical attempts to conceptualize and explain gender differences and inequalities has hardly led us to consensual view of the matter. But they all point towards the importance of understanding gender in social rather than biological terms. In what follows, I shall discuss what are the major contours along which gender constructions can be located in different societies.

Gender, religion and kinship

The particular manner in which gender is socially constructed in a society is closely related to the religious and kinship organization of the society. Although, as I shall argue later, neither kinship nor religion are a privileged site of gendered

³ See V. Geetha 2002, chapter 5, for a discussion of Engels' theory and its criticism.

⁴ Also see Moore 2002.

relations, both tend to bear strongly upon the particular characteristics of gender differences and inequalities which prevail in a society at any given time.

The religious approach has almost universally naturalized gender differences, treating them as immutable. Women are treated as inferior to men in their mind and bodily attributes and almost invariably men are treated as the normative human beings of whom women represent a deviation. But most religious worldviews also embody an ambiguity towards women. On the one hand women are treated as inferior and dangerous and on the other hand they are venerated. Thus the fact that in Hinduism women are equated with animals on the one hand and on the other worshipped as goddesses is characteristic of the religious ambiguity towards women.

There are of course varying consequences that different religious worldviews entail for gender relations. Some religions ordain a very strict segregation between the sexes while others may curtail their reproductive rights. This may manifest itself in practices of seclusion or in laws curtailing abortion rights. The practice of secluding women is prevalent in more than one religious systems of the world. Similarly many religions treat women's bodies as impure and defiling and thus women remain excluded from several spheres of social life. Such beliefs and consequently practices have severe implications for relations between men and women as also for the life chances of women. Thus the curtailment of reproductive rights disadvantage women far more seriously than men. Many such religious views have crept into seemingly secular worldviews and continue to shape gender relations and identities in apparently modern contexts. But, in contemporary times, a number of other competing perspectives (of the modern state and law and of the representatives of oppressed groups) also jostle with the religious worldviews and none of them enjoy an unambiguous superiority over other perspectives.

The kinship organization of a society also plays a significant role in shaping gender relations and roles in most societies. The system of descent followed in a social group has direct consequences for the construction of gender relations in the group. Anthropologists have shown that whether the descent system of a society is predominantly patrilineal, matrilineal or bilateral has major implications for the construction of gender identities and relations of a society. This is because the descent system is very often the basis of group membership, entitlement to valued resources, ownership of property and patterns of residence.

Societies that are strongly patrilineal are very widespread. Such societies are usually among those that are most unfavorable to women as they tend to markedly differentiate between the sexes. In a patrilineal system, descent is reckoned in the male line and usually women move to their husband's home after marriage, a practice referred to as patrilocal residence in anthropological parlance. In such a system, there is a high value placed on the male offspring and men largely inherit property. Women are treated as temporary members of their natal

household and their incorporation into their husband's household is always fraught with uncertainties. In an insightful essay on socialization of girls in Hindu India, Leela Dube has shown how the temporariness of a woman's relation with her natal kin is a recurring theme in folk songs and forms the underlying motif of many religious celebrations which enact the brief return of a daughter to her father's home.⁵

Patrilineal societies are also the most likely to place a high premium on female chastity which leads to strict vigilance of female sexuality. Seclusion of women is also a part of the complex of institutions which are geared towards control of female sexuality. In deeply stratified and heterogeneous societies such as found in India, this can result in strict curtailment of individual choice in matters such as marriage and employment.

While discussing how kinship constructs gender, we should consider the case of matrilineal societies even though their actual prevalence has always been marginal. As against the popular view, matrilineal societies are not the mirror opposites of patrilineal societies. They are also far from being 'matriarchal' in the sense in which most patrilineal societies are 'patriarchal'. In other words, women do not occupy the same position in matrilineal societies that men occupy in patrilineal societies. Thus while descent is traced through women in matrilineal societies such as the Nayars of Kerala and the Khasi of North East India, men continue to hold an important position in their mother's/sister's household.⁶ In fact, in a matrilineal society, the brother sister unit is as important, if not more, as the husband wife unit. The absence of a common conjugal residence is not uncommon in matrilineal societies. Men may periodically visit their wives to sustain the marital relationship while they continue to be residential members of their mothers'/sisters' kin group.

Matrilineal societies are not resistant to sharing property with men but are not well-disposed to sharing the same with the men's children who belong to their matrilineal group. Patrilineal societies usually show resistance in sharing property with the daughters as also their children, neither of whom are likely to retain membership of the daughter's natal family. Matrilineal societies do not value virginity and chastity of women in a manner comparable to patrilineal societies. This does give a certain amount of sexual freedom to women unheard of in strictly patrilineal societies. The practice which allowed Nayar women to enjoy relationships with several 'visiting husbands' is highly incongruous with the possibilities offered by a patrilineal society where this would be treated as akin to prostitution. Anthropologists have also shown that there is far greater variation in organization of matrilineal societies and this system of descent is combined with

⁵ See Dube 2001, chapter 2, for a detailed discussion of the implication of women's separation from their natal families in Hindu India.

⁶ See Gough 1994 and Nongbri 1994 for a discussion of two variants of matrilineal societies in India.

different patterns of marriage and residence, thereby entailing different consequences for men and women.

In bilateral societies, both male and female children derive their identities from both their parents. Again, there may be many variations in the manner in which bilateral systems of kinship, sometimes also referred to as cognatic descent systems, are actually organized. Thus among the Iban of Borneo, studied by James Freeman (1958), it is at the time of marriage that one decides whether to retain the membership of one's parents' group or one's spouse's parents' group. A child may be born into a family which is made up of mother father along with the mother's parents or one may be born into a family of parents along with the father's parents. In American kinship system, studied by David Schneider (1968), again the child is seen as deriving its identity equally from the mother and the father. The question of group membership however does not present itself in the manner described for the Iban of Borneo as there is no general pattern of sharing parental residential property, as is the case among the Iban. There are other possible variations of this system of descent that I shall not discuss here. What should be evident from this brief discussion is the fact that such systems are least likely to distinguish sharply and systematically between men and women. Thus the bilateral societies of South East Asia do not sharply distinguish between the affiliation of women with their natal and affinal families as patrilineal and matrilineal systems do. Such systems are also likely to allow the individual a greater element of choice in relating to their kin. It is not difficult to see why such choices lend a different shade to gender relations in such societies.⁷

Gendered character of different domains of social life

A question which presents itself at this stage is does gender manifest itself more often in some social domains than in others? Are there a set of 'gender institutions'? In earlier writing on gender, family, kinship and the domestic sphere were somehow treated as the prime locations of gender relations. But in more recent times, social scientists have cautioned against such privileging of particular institutions in gauging the gendered character of society.

R.W.Connell (2002), for instance, warns against treating gender as a separate and isolated sphere of social life. He argues that gender permeates all aspects of social life and suggests it is not desirable to treat it as confined to particular spheres of social life. He uses the concept of 'gender regimes' to refer to 'the state of play in gender relations' in any social institution such as a school, a market, a workplace or even a street. Thus for example, a public street has a gender regime. How should boys and girls or men and women carry themselves in such places? With whom and how should they talk? Who can legitimately hang around where, for how long, in what dress pattern? Answers to these

⁷ See Dube 2001, chapter 6, for a comparative study of three types of descent system in south and south-east Asian systems and their implications for construction of gender relations in these societies.

questions hinge on the gender constructions at play; they can vary significantly across different public locales and they may also change from day to night and from one occasion to another. Similarly, you can imagine that a adolescent get together or a college canteen also has a gender regime which may be significantly different from that of a family get-together or a public restaurant. It might be a useful exercise to try and identify such gender regimes in different sectors of one's life (the public transport, the college, the road, the home, neighbourhood, family events, workplace, market, malls, cinema halls and so on).

Connell's framework is particularly relevant for an understanding of social construction of gender in modern complex societies for he recognizes the possibility of a simultaneous co-existence of many gender regimes. Moreover, these regimes may complement, contradict or merely run parallel to each other. Thus the gender regimes of the family and the workplace may complement each other in contexts where the women are expected to take up low paid part time work in order to fulfill gendered obligations within the household. Alternatively, these gender regimes may contradict each other when the household division of labor is highly gendered while the demands placed on men and women in the workplace remain undifferentiated. Connell also argues that there is nothing static about gender regimes nor anything singular about the direction in which they change. Thus it is perfectly possible that in certain spheres of social life, gender differences and inequalities are increasing rather than decreasing. This is a very crucial point to remember as it cautions us against the commonsensical assumption that the past was always more unequal than the present and that all change implies social progress.

Social stratification and construction of gender

In a discussion of social construction of gender, we also need to ask how gender articulates with class, caste, race and ethnicity structures which, in different degrees and combinations, shape all societies? It does not require much effort to see how gender is inextricable from these vital determinants of any social organization. To be an urban middle class woman implies holding a different social position than that occupied by a urban middle class man. But the position of an urban middle class woman is also significantly different from and also unequal to one occupied by a poor rural woman. The class distinctions permeate gender distinctions in a manner that may sometimes obliterate the possibility of gender consciousness to rise above class consciousness.

A society stratified along class lines also sustains different patterns of gendered relations across different classes with complex social ramifications. Thus the position of a well off middle class housewife as also of a professional woman from the same class in urban India is dependent upon her poor counterpart, i.e., a domestic worker, who is very often, though not always, a woman. This possibility does much to mitigate the need to negotiate an equitable division of

household labor between the husband and wife, or rather, men and women. Similarly, sexual harassment in a complex stratified society cannot be understood apart from the class dynamics within which such behavior is often a means by which alienated men of the working class direct their resistance towards women of other social classes and often, other caste and ethnic groups.

Gender also significantly intersects, in most Indian settings, with caste and, in the multicultural settings of the west, with race and ethnicity. In India, the life chances of dalit women are significantly different from the life chances of a Brahmin woman and the former may actually have more in common with the dalit man than with a Brahmin woman. A lot has been written about the racial divide between men and women in the west. Thus there is a huge social gulf between a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male and a migrant black muslim woman which cannot be accounted only on grounds of gender but nonetheless has significant implications for construction of gendered identities. The divide between the black and white men and women has been a particularly sharp one in the modern west and has led to sharp divisions within the feminist movement as well.

However, one should avoid both, the pitfall of assuming that women among the marginal groups are necessarily more oppressed in the domain of gender relations than the women in dominant groups are or of going to the other extreme of romanticizing the formers apparent freedom. It is nevertheless possible that a poor dalit domestic worker has relatively more personal autonomy and volition than the middle class and upper caste housewife for whom she works. The women from the dominant groups are often expected to become the harbingers of social respectability and honor for their families and communities in ways in which the women from marginal groups seldom do. But this caveat should not let us undermine the reality of class and caste privileges which are enjoyed by both men and women from dominant groups.

Thus the intersection of gender with other structures of difference and inequality can result in extremely complex social configurations which we cannot discuss exhaustively in this brief overview. But it is very crucial to take into account these different axes of social stratification in order to understand how gender takes its material form in any society.

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