

Block

3

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

UNIT 1

Socialisation and Gender Roles

5

UNIT 2

Embodiment and Gender

21

UNIT 3

Gender and the Life Course

36

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BLOCK 3 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Introduction

Gender is a commonly used word that becomes complex when we use it as a theoretical tool. The word gender came to replace the term sex as a biologically given category. Gender implies that we are dealing with a concept that is not fixed and not naturally given like sexual organs, but something that arises because humans live in a constructed world of meanings. We live in this world as gendered persons, which have a social and not merely a biological relevance. Such gendering is partly an integral aspect of our subjective constitution, mostly through enculturation/socialisation and partly individual. It is as individuals that we may sometime question a given gender identity or at least its stereotypical representation.

Most of gender theory has looked upon gender as a constituted category in which culture is seen as playing an important role and also as a performance when our actions in real life situated in specific social situations mark our identity. We not only learn to behave as men and women we also reestablish this identity at every point of time by our social actions. The body is seen as playing a central role in gender analysis as the gendered identity is embodied. Thus clothes, body language, ornaments and all that is part of the very aesthetics of the body are significant in how it is perceived and accepted. To negotiate a particular gendered identity, people play around with the body and establish either a normative or an innovative image of how they want their identity to be perceived. For example most women politicians prefer the conventional image while artists and performers may play around with it. How one presents one body is closely linked to how one wants to or needs to use it?

Thus gender is both a given as well as a negotiable category. It provides people with a given identity but its very cultural stereotyping leaves open a scope for reenactment. For example if there were already given standards for a gendered image there would be no necessity to establish an alternative image. Moreover gender often breaks through the barriers of hetero-normativity or the bisexual model. Although many societies accept the binary model but it is certainly not universal; many have more than two gender models and even where it does not exist, many persons may want to live outside of it, like transsexuals and homosexuals.

Apart from its representative value, gender also provides every social actor with a societal resource base and situates them in a power hierarchy. Just like the bodily image, power is also a negotiable category and intersects with other social dimensions like race, class and caste. It is also modified and is also used to emphasise the transitions that a social person makes in the course of a life. In the lessons inside this block you will understand some of these aspects in a more detailed manner and most importantly understand that the social reality is not a monolithic construction but constituted from multiple sites, of which gender is one.

UNIT 1 SOCIALISATION AND GENDER ROLES

Contents

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Socialisation: Definition and Basic Terms and Concepts
 - 1.2.1 Gender Socialisation
- 1.3 Theoretical Approaches
 - 1.3.1 Feminist Contribution to Socialisation Theories
 - 1.3.2 Countering Socialisation
- 1.4 Agents of Socialisation
- 1.5 Parents and Family
 - 1.5.1 Role of Father
 - 1.5.2 Kinship and Cultural Repertoire
 - 1.5.3 Children's Literature: Story Books and Text Books
 - 1.5.4 Toys and Games
- 1.6 Peers
- 1.7 School
- 1.8 Media
 - 1.8.1 New Media and Self-socialisation
- 1.9 Summary
- References
- Studies with Experimental and Original Data
- Suggested Reading
- Sample Questions

Learning Objectives



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

- understand the process of socialisation in a theoretical context;
- critically evaluate the specific nature of socialisation for gender roles, i.e., masculine and feminine roles as defined by a given society and culture ;
- identify and describe the functions and agents of socialisation and the mechanisms and materials deployed; and
- analyse the ways in which socialisation can be resisted and subverted.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit defines and describes the process of socialisation and analyses the specific nature of socialisation for gender roles. It then discusses various theoretical approaches and how far they are able to explain gender socialisation. This includes approaches that conceive of socialisation as a dynamic two-way process in which those who are socialised may reinterpret, resist or subvert it.

Next, the agencies of socialisation, including gender socialisation are described. The main agencies are parents and family, peer group, school and media. The mechanisms of socialisation including learning by reward and punishment, observation and imitation, and by being immersed in a culture are discussed. Illustrations are given of materials that are deployed for socialisation like children's literature, toys and games, rituals and ceremonies and linguistic devices.

1.2 SOCIALISATION: DEFINITION AND BASIC TERMS AND CONCEPTS

The structure and content of the gender division in society is not arbitrary or random, but reflects a fundamental systemic feature, termed as 'patriarchy' in feminist discourses. Gender socialisation is a key process in maintaining and reproducing it efficiently.

Socialisation is the process by which members of a group or collectivity— family, school, caste, religion , nation and so on - are taught to subscribe to the shared beliefs, norms, values, culture and ethos of that group (collectively referred to as 'norms' in this lesson), translate them appropriately in their behaviour and transmit them to others. Gender socialisation is specifically oriented towards differences, hierarchies and identities based on gender, i.e. what it means to be masculine or feminine in a given society and culture.

The success of socialisation leads to norms being internalised; i.e., they are not merely learnt and reproduced consciously but are absorbed and become part of the structure of the individual personality. The appropriate behaviour is thus expressed automatically, as though it is part of the natural order. Agents are those people and institutions that function as conduits of socialisation. They influence our attitudes, preferences and world views by imparting norms which go to build our personality and affect our behaviour. Devices and mechanisms used in socialisation are many including touch, language, play, rituals, ceremonies, etc.

Primary socialisation is the term used to describe the process of socialisation during childhood. The agents of primary socialisation are mainly the family, and also community, school, and peer group. Secondary socialisation is the term used for the later phases of life. Religion, media, workplace are conventionally identified as secondary agents

Childhood is considered to be the most important life phase for socialisation since the child's personality is relatively unformed, and amenable to moulding. The impact in this stage goes deep and is enduring. But socialisation happens in later phases too. The 'life course approach' takes cognisance of the different phases of life - childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age - and also specific arenas like occupation, religion, sports, etc., and examines the nature, agents, mechanisms , devices and effects of socialisation in all of these.

1.2.1 Gender Socialisation

Gender is a fundamental category of human cognition, based seemingly on physical-biological features to which social and cultural characteristics are attributed. The process of categorising in terms of gender is both habitual and

apparently automatic and conveys a sense of being based on a natural and dual division. Such categorisation, which is the basis for gendered identity, is associated with compartmentalisation of physical spaces, spheres of activity as well as psychological, personality-related and cultural arenas, even in cultures which relatively free of gender discrimination. Its transmission is mainly through the process of socialisation. Within given conditions of patriarchy, gender difference is framed hierarchically with differential powers and privileges given to men and women that pervade virtually every aspect of life and living also transmitted through socialisation. Thus gender socialisation encompasses both these dimensions: difference and hierarchy. Gender socialisation begins the moment we are born, from the simple question “is it a boy or a girl?” as Gleitman et al (2000: 499-500) put it, while citing the classic example of the experiment done with babies that were introduced as males to half of the study subjects and as females to the other half. The participants behaved differently according to the sex they had been told, offering a rattle or hammer to the ‘boys’ and doll to the ‘girls’.

Before we elaborate on the agencies, we will briefly discuss theoretical approaches to socialisation in general as well specifically to gender socialisation.

1.3 THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Socialisation as a field of inquiry is interdisciplinary, drawing on the disciplines of psychology, anthropology and sociology. Pedagogical science or Education has also engaged intensively with the topic. Questions pertaining to socialisation also arise in the ‘nature v/s nurture’ dialogue between natural and social sciences. Broadly, one can say that the social sciences have taken an interactionist approach stressing on ‘nurture’ in contrast to evolutionary biologists who espouse the ‘nature’ approach to development of human personality.

Dominant approaches in psychology have been characterised by a conflation of ideas from both the ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ camps. Psychoanalytical theories as well as cognitive developmental theories do stress on early childhood experiences as crucial for personality formation, thus acknowledging the significance of socialisation. But the former emphasises on instinctual drives and the latter on the innate unfolding and maturation of human reasoning through the different stages of childhood and thus both these approaches within psychology tend to universalise early human personality formation rather than see it as contingent on social context.

Social/cultural anthropologists and sociologists do not subscribe to biological determinism. Nor do they accept that all future actions are determined by early socialisation and are more attentive to various other social factors that can influence a person’s actions in later life. Social learning theory – best exemplified by Albert Bandura’s landmark book of the same name- goes into actual mechanisms of transmission. It has been the dominant socialisation paradigm in sociology/social anthropology as well as non-Freudian psychology, but in contrast to the latter, the former stresses on macro forces that affect the content and form of socialisation: such as ecological, economic, political and moral structures.

Elaborating further on the implications of the above theoretical positions, in the Freudian view, identification with the same sex parent is the psychological

mechanism by which children incorporate their parents' gender role behaviours into their own identity system. Over the last seven decades, this basic Freudian postulate has undergone some modifications, primarily on the precise psychodynamic processes that motivate identification.

In contrast, social learning theorists question the need for a global construct like identification and argue that role appropriate behaviours are learnt by reinforcements like reward and punishment, praise and blame. In addition, early reinforcements also include messages that lead children to modify behaviour in anticipation of reward and punishment. Observation and modelling one's behaviour on a person are also important ways of learning. But individuals do not imitate all the behaviours that they observe, rather they are likely to imitate another person of the same sex.

Social cognitive developmentalists argue that children are not passive observers but play an active role in their own socialisation. Specifically with reference to gender, a child's knowledge of his or her own gender and its implications is termed as 'gender identity'; As they observe the world, children look for structure and are driven by an internal need to fit into this structure. They start organising available information according to gender as a social category, create a model of what it is to be a good girl or good boy in that society and strive to reach that ideal — not just in anticipation of rewards and fear of punishment but because they want to become 'good' members of society. Developmentalists further argue that the rigidity of gendered identity is greater in young children, until they develop the cognitive capacity to imagine a different schema and opportunity to observe gender role transcendence. Once again in early adolescence, physical changes and social norms force children to move from sex-segregated to heterosexual worlds with a pressure to conform and it is only after crossing that stage can individuals resist socialisation based on stereotypical gender models.

Anthropology's emphasis on cultural transmissions between parent and child and between culture and the individual has been an important contribution to our understanding of socialisation. Anthropologists like Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead demonstrated the influence of the whole culture on the individual personality through their ethnographies. Studies of child rearing are a popular genre in anthropology, and Peggy Froerer's article gives a good overview of the rich documentation of the learnt and acquired nature of the human personality in its formative stage.

Early questions in sociology and anthropology were: how is the self made by internalising the impressions of others? How are social roles acquired? Early scholars C.H.Cooley and G.H. Mead have made fundamental contributions to this question. Cooley famously gave the analogy of the 'looking glass' self i.e. the self developed through social interaction. Mead's proposition was that the individual self is a social creation. There are two parts to the self: 'I' and 'me'. The former is the primordial part, dominant in children, initially unaffected by socialisation. The latter emerges through social interaction, and internalises and assumes the attitudes of others.

Functionalism was for many decades the dominant theoretical paradigm in both sociology and social/cultural anthropology and the Parsonian framework is its best representative. It has been centrally preoccupied with the problem of social

order for survival and stability of social systems with shared norms as the basis. These are maintained through the process of socialisation by internalisation by the individual and transmission from one generation to another. The emphasis is on the faithful reproduction of norms without deviation. Functionalism did not engage with individual interpretation and choices. Unlike Freudians, who conceived of society as imposing its will against the instinctual drive, for functionalists, there is no struggle between the individual's desires and the requirements of the social order. This position has been critiqued, and subsequent approaches have included the reception of socialisation - interpretation, resistance, subversion as part of the problematique.

The proponents of theories of identification, social learning and cognitive development, even when discussing gender socialisation, make no specific reference to the patriarchal structures of society that provide both context and content of socialisation. While sociology and social anthropology are sensitive to external factors in moulding personality, they too were largely silent about structural patriarchy until feminist theorisation raised it.

1.3.1 Feminist Contribution to Socialisation Theories

Feminist engagement with the distinction between sex and gender was the first step towards understanding the specificity and pervasiveness of gender socialisation. After all, gender socialisation aims not only at transmitting gender differences but also at making gender hierarchy accepted as natural and normal by both men and women. The elaboration of this principle into concrete practices of discrimination towards women is part of its project. In contrast to other approaches, feminism starts with the assumption of virtually universal patriarchy, documents its varied expressions and proceeds to take a social constructionist view of gendered socialisation.

In common sense thinking, sex and gender were and to some extent, continue to be coextensive. Until the 1960s, 'gender' was used solely to refer to masculine and feminine words. However, in order to explain why some people felt that they were 'trapped in the wrong bodies', the psychologist Robert Stoller in his book *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* began using the terms 'sex' to pick out biological traits and 'gender' to pick out the amount of femininity and masculinity a person exhibited. The distinction enabled 'second wave' feminists to argue that many differences between women and men were socially produced and, therefore, changeable. In this approach, which is a counter to biological determinism, sex denotes biological femaleness and maleness; 'gender' denotes socially accepted roles, positions, behaviours and identities associated with femaleness and maleness. Ann Oakley was among the earliest feminists to present data from ethnographic, psychological and neuro-medical fields to argue systematically for the cultural construction of gender. Of course, much earlier, in 1935 itself, Margaret Mead had presented ethnographic data in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* that showed that conventional definitions of femininity and masculinity were not borne out in the Pacific Islands. In two of the three cultures she examined, there was no sharp polarity between masculinities and femininities, and in the third, they were. Mead was implicitly building a case for the feminist distinction between sex and gender, although she herself saw these cases primarily in terms of the impact of cultural diversities on the human personality.

The sex – gender distinction, which amplifies Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion in *The Second Sex* that one is not born but rather becomes a woman, immediately suggests the role of gender socialisation: females become women through a process in which they acquire feminine traits and learn feminine behaviour. Other feminists have elaborated on the distinction, using the concept of patriarchy, and its discriminations. Gayle Rubin uses the phrase ‘sex/gender system’ in order to describe a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention, arrangements which are the locus of the oppression of women (Rubin, 1975: 159 – 179). However, since gender is social, it is mutable and alterable by political and social reform that would ultimately bring an end to women’s subordination. Distinguishing sex from gender also enables the two to come apart: in that one can be sexed male and yet be gendered a woman, or vice versa and this has provided a fruitful take-off point for the articulation of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) issues. This is nowadays denoted by the phrase ‘social and cultural construction of gender’. But which social practices construct gender, what social construction is and what being of a certain gender amounts to are major feminist controversies, without a consensus as yet.

Some feminists have interacted with and critiqued but also adapted Freudian and social learning theories, which deal with the mechanisms of social construction. For e.g., Nancy Chodorow in her 1978 work *Reproducing Mothering* has criticised social learning theory as too simplistic to explain gender differences. Instead, she holds that gender is a matter of having feminine and masculine personalities that develop in early infancy as responses to prevalent parenting practices, specifically ‘mothering’, since mothers or other prominent women tend to be the primary caretakers of young children. Chodorow differs from the classic Freudian approach, in that she espouses a position that both gender and mothering are socially learnt. She sees the child’s gender identity emerging through the process of breaking away from the mother to form a unique identity. For a boy, the mutual perception of difference leads to a violent breakaway, and to well defined and rigid ego boundaries. For a girl, the process is more fluid because of the identification with the mother, leading to flexible and blurry ego boundaries. Rather than penis envy in girls, it is masculinity experiencing loss of the maternal bond that is the key to differential personality development in males and females. Childhood gender socialisation further reinforces these unconsciously developed ego boundaries finally producing feminine and masculine persons.

1.3.2 Countering Socialisation

A critique of conventional approaches from feminists as well as cognitive developmentalists is the formers’ inability to accommodate resistance to and subversion of gender socialisation. The traditional social learning theories for example emphasise childhood processes and micro level factors making the messages received appear uncontested; further, they do not take cognizance of the complex relationship among micro, meso and macro variables. Gender socialisation should be defined in a more complex way to refer to “ongoing, multi level processes of social expectations, control, and struggle that sustain and subvert gender systems” (Ferree & Hall, 1996: 935). In this conceptualisation, gender is not a characteristic of individuals but of societies. Multiple institutions impact on gender formation. As renowned social scientists like Pierre Bourdieu

and Anthony Giddens have repeatedly averred, institutions simultaneously shape and are shaped by individual agency. Thus, the process is both dynamic and subject to change. Socialisation is not a unidirectional process whereby the socialisation agents are all-powerful in moulding and shaping the individual as a passive recipient. It is instead a dialectical process in which agents transmit dominant information in the ongoing process of defining our social identities, and we, as members of society, conform to or resist the process and the agents, as we engage in critical analyses of the messages.

The content of socialisation can change with larger changes in society. Sue Sharpe's work in 1976 on a group of mainly working class girls in London found that concerns of girls like 'love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs, and careers in that order, were unlikely to encourage them to attach great importance to education. Almost three decades later Sharpe's repeat research found that girls' priorities had changed, due to the women's movement, equal opportunities programmes and improved job market.

1.4 AGENTS OF SOCIALISATION

Socialisation is a lifelong process and agents for socialisation in general are also agents for gendered socialisation. Early childhood socialisation or primary socialisation, including moral socialisation, is mainly by parents who transmit the basic norms of the culture, religion, as also class, gender, racial and ethnic identities. Sociologist Andre Beteille has noted that in contemporary India, where caste as a system is on the wane, family plays a role in socialising children to reproduce caste values. Socialisation literature in the west holds that community and neighbourhood are particularly prominent as agents among poorer inner city groups. In kinship and community oriented societies like India, the role of extended family, caste, ethnic and religious groups is also strong, drawing from a ritual, linguistic and cultural repertoire. Early childhood socialisation is largely anticipatory socialisation: preparing the child for future gendered roles. When the child is older, the role of peers, teachers, and the school environment itself become significant. The role of the peer group is especially important for adolescents, influencing behaviour – both conforming and deviant - in a wide variety of arenas including life style, educational and career path, performance at school, sexual behaviour. Schools are formal agents of primary socialisation. Emile Durkheim, saw the school as the main transmitter of social norms, a task that he thought was too overwhelming for the family unity. The variety, pervasiveness and power of media and its nexus with the market in contemporary society render it into a significant agent of socialisation in all the life phases.

Gendered adolescent socialisation and adult socialisation are also noteworthy as during these phases the individual has to actually enact specific gendered roles that she/he has only learnt in theory. All agents do not inevitably or necessarily reinforce each other, as experiments show that there is room for 'differential socialisation', which allows the individual some choice of selection and interpretation. Materials like clothing, picture books, text books, toys and games, films, etc. aid the process. Mechanisms refer to specific micro processes that get deployed consciously or unconsciously by agents and include social learning through reward and punishment, observation, imitation of role models, absorbing a culture's gender stereotypes by being immersed in its everyday ethos and so

on. 'Agents' i.e., those with agency to act, draw on these materials and mechanisms for socialisation. Thus even though films are 'materials' they are also part of the institution of media which in its totality is an 'agent'. What follows in this section is a discussion of agents of socialisation along with the materials and mechanisms they deploy, citing studies and experimental data. Also included is a discussion of studies that suggest that socialisation is not a rigid and fixed process. Its content may change over time due to larger societal changes. Gender stereotyping may also be resisted or overcome through conscious action.

1.5 PARENTS AND FAMILY

Parents have an overriding influence beginning with how they interact with sons versus daughters. When parents have been asked to describe their 24-hour old infants, they have done so using gender-stereotypic language: boys are described as strong, alert and coordinated and girls as tiny, soft and delicate. Parents' treatment of their infants further reflects these descriptions whether they are aware of this or not. Some socialisation is more overt: children are often dressed in gender stereotypical clothes and colours. For instance, in the West boys are dressed in blue, girls in pink. Parents tend to buy their children gender stereotypical toys. They also, intentionally or otherwise, tend to reinforce certain 'appropriate' behaviours. While the precise form of gender socialisation has changed since the onset of second-wave feminism, even today girls are discouraged from playing sports like football or from playing 'rough and tumble' games. Division of household work between male and female adults are both a powerful model and when sex-specific tasks are allotted to children, it becomes socialisation through action.

Ann Oakley in her 1972 book *Sex, Gender and Society* identifies four central mechanisms in early gender socialisation: manipulation, canalisation, verbal appellation and activity exposure. Through manipulation of the child's body, parents encourage sex-specific behaviour in their children. For example, mothers fuss over the hair and skin of baby girls much more and spend energy on dressing them elaborately in feminine clothes. Canalisation or directing the child's attention and interests towards appropriate games and toys is another non-verbal method. For girls, dolls, soft toys, miniature domestic appliances are popular and for boys, bricks, guns and trains. Verbal appellation refers to the use of language to label children in a way that reinforces appropriate gender identification. For example, pet names like 'Guddi' or 'Dolly' for girls do not seem to have male equivalents. Another example is how certain adjectives are applied differentially 'my brave little boy' versus 'my beautiful princess' highlighting qualities desirable in boys and girls. Different activity exposure happens as children grow a little older and can help out in the house. Girls are often allotted domestic chores like serving or looking after the younger sibling, and boys are encouraged to participate in outdoor activities like running errands to the shop.

1.5.1 Role of Father

The role of mother (or a woman who plays mother-surrogate) in early childhood socialisation is universally recognised and been subjected to scholarly scrutiny. But several theories of sex-role development emphasise the importance of fathers as well. For example, social learning theorists assert that one primary component

of sex-role socialisation is reward for children's sex-appropriate behaviour and punishment for sex-inappropriate behaviour. A study by McCandless *et al* (1976) demonstrates that the patterns of differential treatment among fathers, mothers, and peers suggest that socialisation pressure for sex-typed behaviours may come most consistently and effectively from fathers. Further, it suggests that a finely tuned system of socialisation exists in which fathers, mothers, and peers each make unique yet complementary contributions. The interactive nature of the socialisation process may mean that a single social agent's impact may vary as a function of the presence and influence of other social agents, and thus the impact of differential socialisation on children's subsequent sex-typed behaviours needs to be recognised.

1.5.2 Kinship and Cultural Repertoire

Even in highly advanced industrial societies, the historical legacy of patrilineal kinship and patriarchal ideology persists as an undercurrent, surfacing now and then in the form of folk wisdom about male and female nature. In many societies including India, the link with history and tradition is more active and live, and the deep seated patriarchal structures of society find contemporary expression in a host of ways – through beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, customs, proverbs, as also through kinship practices, creating a pervasive ambience that socialises children, adolescents and adults for gender roles at a sub liminal level.

Writing on the linguistic metaphor of seed and earth to represent human reproduction, Leela Dube documents vividly how in virtually all regions, castes and communities in India, ethno-reproductive beliefs compare mother's role in reproduction with the soil or earth or land and that of the father with the seed. Just as the crop carries the identity of the seed, and belongs to the owner of the seed, so too children belong to the father's line, and the mother's role is that of the patient, nurturant earth, not transmitting her own identity to her children and not claiming any rights over them. This message negating a woman's rights and claims on her children has deep seated acceptance among people as reflecting the natural order.

In another article "Socialisation of Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India", Leela Dube chronicles in detail, proverbs and sayings, rituals and ceremonies that highlight son-preference, devaluation of daughters, the temporary nature of a girl's residence in her natal home, her eventual and inevitable destiny of marrying and moving into another household, and the need for her to know how to be flexible and how to please. In particular, many wedding ceremonies including the highly emotional 'Bidai' ceremony as the bride leaves for her marital home, emphasise her disconnecting from natal responsibilities and assumption of new role in another household. With their colour, grandeur and emotion, they are also performing anticipatory socialisation of the young unmarried girls who attend the wedding and re-socialising adult married women into accepting their destiny.

Kamala Ganesh's article on "Patrilineal Structure and Agency of Women: Issue in Gendered Socialisation" also highlights the other side of gendered socialisation, which involves training not to be just a victim, but to use the patrilineal structure to one's own advantage, and make a space for oneself within it by 'adjusting', playing the right cards, and stooping to conquer (248 – 49).

Highlighting the role of kinship systems in creating gendered personalities is a comparative study of competitiveness among women of two communities - the patrilineal Maasai of Tanzania and matrilineal Khasi of Northeast India - by a group of economists (Gneezy et.al 2009). The study uses an experimental task to explore whether there are gender differences in competitiveness across these societies. The innovatively and rigorously designed experiment consisted of a simple, gender neutral activity (throwing a tennis ball 10 times into a bucket set three metres away) with a first option of monetary incentive for success in the task and a second option of a higher monetary incentive for outperforming an anonymous partner in the same task. Competitiveness was evaluated on the basis of which of the two options was exercised.

The Maasai represent a textbook example of a patriarchal society whereas the Khasi are matrilineal. In the experiment, Maasai men opted to compete at roughly twice the rate as Maasai women. This result was reversed amongst the Khasi, where women chose the competitive option considerably more often than Khasi men, and were slightly more competitive than Maasai men too. The interpretation is that competitiveness as a quality is socially inculcated rather than innate, and that matrilineal societies socialise women to be more competitive than men. The conventional attribution of weak competitive personality to women comes from their being socialised in patrilineal societies, which encourage submissiveness in women, as the case of the Maasai demonstrates.

1.5.3 Children's Literature: Story Books and Text Books

Children's literature has a role in inculcating gender identity and self esteem. Story books are especially powerful materials for gender socialisation, since the messages are transmitted through a highly enjoyable activity. Children's stories and fairy tales are replete with use of sexist violence and imagery of female subordination. Illustrated books, in particular, tend to significantly affect gender development at a very early age. The development of preschoolers' sexual identities often occurs concurrently with their desire to repeatedly view their favourite picture books. Picture books also encourage young children to learn about the lives of those who may be quite different from themselves. The message in these primers is rather clear: Boys live exciting and independent lives, whereas girls are primarily auxiliaries to boys. Glenys Lobban (1974) has analysed the content of stories for children and found that girls and women as heroines are less in no. than heroes, and that they are almost exclusively portrayed in domestic roles, and that joint activities are portrayed with males taking the lead, she says: this reinforces the already learnt lesson of male superiority and dominance and damages girls' self-esteem. This has not changed substantially over the decades, with a few exceptions. Text books prescribed by the school curriculum also have a role in reinforcing gender stereotypes. For example, John Abraham's research into maths text books in 1986 demonstrated that they were extremely male dominated. Moreover male and female agency was extremely stereotyped. There were many more males represented in active roles. Women tended to be shopping for food or buying washing machines, whilst men tended to be running businesses or investing" (1995: 113).

While content studies cumulatively do indicate the gender bias in children's literature, they do not tell us what effects to such books have on children. As

several analysts have noted, children are not simply passive recipients but are actively involved in shaping their own conceptions of what it is to be masculine or feminine.

One way to address gender stereotyping in children's books has been to portray females in independent roles and males as non-aggressive and nurturing (Renzetti and Curran 1992: 35). Some publishers have attempted an alternative approach by making their characters, for instance, gender-neutral animals or genderless imaginary creatures. However, parents often undermine the publishers' efforts by reading them to their children in ways that depict the characters as either feminine or masculine. Fairy tale fracturing is also an approach used to alleviate those biased images. Set in contemporary text, this often involves changing the gender of characters in well-known fairy tales.

1.5.4 Toys and Games

Toys and games are important materials for gender socialisation, in which the cumulative perceptions and ideas of parents, other adults, schools and market collaborate. As Renzetti and Curran (1992: 66) point out, "Toys not only entertain children, but they also teach them particular skills and encourage them to explore through play a variety of roles they may one day occupy as adults" The example of dolls and miniature kitchen sets as gifts for little girls and trains sets and mechano and other building oriented toys for little boys have been discussed extensively in the literature on gendered socialisation. Not only do dolls encourage little girls to express nurturing qualities and see a future for themselves exclusively as mothers, but dolls like 'Barbie' also present models of how to be attractively feminine, resulting in sexualising girl children precociously and setting impossible standards of body proportions. Several researches, for example by Dittmar et al (2006) have noted that Barbie's impact on little girls include damaging their body image and causing eating disorders and weight cycling. Research into relative performance of girls and boys at school finds that conditioning and sex stereotyping begin before school, through games and toys. Different sets of aptitudes and attitudes can be developed. The kind of toys girls are gifted could result in their coming to attach less value to education than boys.

Not only toys, but games – both indoor and outdoor, including board games help transmit race, class and gender identities, argue Glasbergand and others but these can also be reinterpreted and resisted by children. They conducted an experiment by asking sociology students to actually play board games, and that process itself helped the students to identify certain biases on race, class and gender. "We found it useful to conclude the exercise by reminding students that toys, games, and recreational activities do not so much cause or result in our unquestioning internalisation of conventional gender, race, class, and political identities. Rather, toys and games are one of several agents that together reinforce conventional or dominant norms and values concerning those social identities.....we are not passive recipients of such information in the socialisation process, such that we become transformed into clones of one another. Instead, how we interpret the rules of the games, and how well we notice the dominant images in the construction of the game pieces facilitates resistance and reinterpretation of our social identities."(1998: 138)

1.6 PEERS

Peer groups are an important socialisation agent throughout the life course because people in the same generational cohort see each other as benchmarks or reference points for their own social standing, professional achievement, personal qualities, etc. From consumer taste to political and ideological orientations to socialisation into old age, they function as guides and influencers. Peer groups are especially important for adolescents, as, in this age group the influence of family and parents starts decreasing. Vigilant and Williamson enumerate the common features of the peer group including (1) similar age cohort or social position (2) members with different levels of power and influence within the peer group and (3) social concerns that are unique to its members. They exercise power by techniques of inclusion and exclusion. Exclusion can be through *out-group subjugation* by bullying and harassing outsiders, and *in-group subjugation* by picking harassing lower ranked members; by *compliance* or not challenging the behaviour of more powerful group members; *stigmatising* through labels and derisive comments; and by *expulsion* from the group. Peer group influence among adolescents can cause deviance from or resistance to the norms acquired through family or school; and control theorists see such deviance as resulting only if the latter's social control weakens. On the whole, the connection with deviance is still not established unequivocally, also because the relative influence of peer socialisation is hard to gauge.

For girls and women, the female only peer group exerts tremendous pressure on markers of conventional femininity such as dress, romantic and sexual behaviour, skills in home-making, hospitality and entertainment, choice of career, etc. The mixed sex peer group exerts pressure too, where male ideas of what being an attractive girl/woman is, plays a role in socialising for gender roles and vice versa.

The concept of sisterhood used extensively in second wave feminism was, in effect, a peer group creation. The technique of sharing personal experiences and political ideas in intimate sessions (termed conscientisation) played an important role in creating a feminist consciousness and building resistance to traditional notions of femininity.

1.7 SCHOOL

Gender studies and gender sensitive policy have focussed considerably on the arena of education, including primary education, in terms of gender disparities in literacy levels, admissions, dropout rates, choice of subjects, academic performance, etc. Even though these trends have to do substantially with factors outside of the school itself, some prior to entry into school, do suggest that schools have yet to become major engines of gender transformation. This has led to some re-thinking on schools themselves as agencies of gender socialisation. Research focused on the micro social processes that take place daily in classrooms and schools, dynamics commonly understood to be in the realm of socialisation suggest that the school is a major agent in teaching and reinforcing cultural expectations for males and females. A multi country study by Nelly Stromquist for UNESCO identifies five dimensions of the gender socialisation process in schools: (1) Teachers' attitudes and expectations and their interactions with

students in the classroom exhibit different patterns toward boys and girls, generally to the disadvantage of girls. (2) Within the formal curriculum, sex education continues to miss important aspects of sexuality affecting adolescent students, despite changes in social mores and thus perpetuates some gender stereotypes on sexuality. (3) The school environment contains aspects of gendered violence that contribute to polarised conceptions of femininity and masculinity. Single-sex education is found to play a positive role if designed with explicit gender transformational objectives. (4) Peer influences play a significant but not easily visible gate-keeping role in reproducing gender ideologies. (5) Teachers—key actors in the everyday life of schools—do not have access to training in gender issues and, consequently, tend not to foster gender equity in their classrooms.

Yet, despite its role in reinforcing gender stereotypes, school is also seen as a site with considerable degrees of autonomy to produce new and progressive identities. How pupils interpret the socialisation is another question. Abraham's ethnographic study of a mixed sex comprehensive school *Divide and School* shows that despite teachers communicating gender stereotypes, pupils were actively creating their own subcultures that did not always conform to expected notions of masculinity and femininity.

1.8 MEDIA

Although media is conventionally considered to be a secondary agent by theorists of socialisation, in contemporary times its variety, technological sophistication, global spread and reach and its connection to the market, renders it a significant agency that supports and reinforces gender stereotypes and sometimes creates new ones. Even young children have access to media. Upwardly mobile middle class homes with disposable incomes possess many innovative gadgets for accessing media. Public space is also saturated with media products. Further the socialising agents: parents, community members, teachers and so on are themselves highly influenced by media images and stereotypes which are passed on to children. Sometimes children are directly impacted upon, without adult supervision.

The range of media - television, movies, video games, music, magazines, hoardings and posters, internet, comic strips, books and so on - are especially important to adolescents as parental influence begins to diminish.

There is considerable research on the gender role stereotypes and violence against women that are perpetrated in the mass media, more intensive and concerted now than ever before - a result of what some feminist scholars have called 'feminist backlash'. From internet games, to commercials for alcohol, cars, and other products used largely by male consumers, to feature films and magazines, women are portrayed in one of two contrasting and stereotypical roles: self-sacrificing wives, mothers and home-makers or as sex-objects.

But whether there is a unidirectional link between violence and sexism in the media and actual behaviour is still a contested issue. There are studies that indicate that people are not only affected by the media but also actively select and affect the media they encounter. Research on media socialisation therefore has to observe both sides, the mediated messages as well as how they are perceived and acquired by the user, a position that is also favoured by British cultural studies.

1.8.1 New Media and Self-socialisation

New media which are internet based are highly interactive, allowing the viewer/reader flexibility in using, giving feedback and reshaping information and images received. In some ways, these media also allow for self-socialisation. Johannes Fromme's writing on this topic are prescient. Our present socio-cultural world is characterised by plurality. Media have contributed to this pluralisation, and the world of media itself has become immense. Fromme argues that so-called new media have not substituted the old ones, but have been added to the existing media collection. Its size exceeds the processing abilities of any individual. This forces the user to make choices and this in turn renders the concept of socialisation too narrow to adequately capture the phenomenon of learning outside educational settings (2006). This is why there is so much interest currently in so-called informal and self-directed learning, which in a way can be placed between the spheres of socialisation and education. Therefore, the growing up of children today may no longer be described as a predominantly original process of socialisation. Especially in the leisure domain, children are not only allowed, but also expected to make their own choices. A different approach is necessary in addition to socialisation research concentrating on the more casual and involuntary aspects of acquiring social norms and values with and through media. Such research should also study processes of informal and self-directed learning with and through media. The existence of gender stereotypes as well as ways and means to combat them is both part of the socialisation process, be it through media or other agencies.

1.9 SUMMARY

Socialisation for gender roles is the process by which the biological distinction between male and female is converted into social and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity and internalised and enacted by men and women who treat it as part of the natural order. Identification theories inspired by Freud and social learning theories are used by socialisation theorists, the former by psychologists and the latter by both psychologists and sociologists/social and cultural anthropologists. In addition, anthropology, which is antithetical to biological determinism, emphasises the fundamental role of culture – through language, rituals and ceremonies and ethos – in moulding the individual's personality. Feminist interventions bring in structural patriarchy as the macro framework within which various socialising agents and mechanisms operate. They along with cognitive developmentalists and others question the notion that gender socialisation is always successful in its intentions, and argue instead for a more dialectical understanding of the process whereby those who are being socialised find ways of reinterpreting or resisting.

The agencies of socialisation in general are also involved in socialising for gender roles. In general they create and reinforce sexual and gender stereotypes. Parents and family are primary agents, as also peer group and school. Media although classified as a secondary agent, is powerful and pervasive today, affecting all age groups. Here too, the receiver is not passive and plays a role in shaping the received information and messages. In particular, the new media, i.e., internet based media are inherently interactive and hold tremendous possibilities for the individual to make informed choices and thus indulge in self-socialisation.

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Sample Questions

- 1) What are the main agents for socialisation? Analyse the new media in terms of its role in gender socialisation.
- 2) How is gender stereotypes transmitted in early childhood?
- 3) What are the main features of the anthropological approach to socialisation?

UNIT 2 EMBODIMENT AND GENDER

Contents

- 2.1 Introduction
 - 2.2 Gender and Embodiment
 - 2.3 Embodiment and Feminist Theory
 - 2.4 Living the Female Body
 - 2.4.1 Creating Gendered Bodies in Childhood
 - 2.4.2 Emergence of Sexual Bodies in Adolescence
 - 2.4.3 Sexuality and Beautifying the Body
 - 2.4.4 Bodies after Menopause
 - 2.5 Disabled Bodies
 - 2.6 Transsexual Bodies
 - 2.7 Summary
- References
- Suggested Reading
- Sample Questions

Learning Objectives



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

- comprehend about the concept of gender and embodiment;
- explain feminist approach to embodiment; and
- understand about living the female body through different stages of life.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with the discourse relating to gender and embodiment and examines how bodies bear the imprint of gender inequalities and efforts to control or contain bodies to reflect gender politics. In trying to explore these themes in this lesson, a wide range of substantive topics have been covered including gendering of bodies in childbirth, menarche, menstruation and menopause, disabled bodies, notion of beautifying the bodies, transsexual bodies etc.

Once the province of medical science and certain schools of philosophy, “the body” emerged in the late 1970s as a central site from which scholars across the humanities and social sciences questioned the ontological and epistemological basis of almost all form of inquiry. In anthropology, “the body” became such a central concept and significant object of study that by mid- 1980s, the study of “the body” blossomed into a fully formed subfield: “the anthropology of the body”. For many anthropologists at the time, it was clear that the question of power and oppression that were on the agendas of many scholars could not be addressed without first challenging ideologies that naturalised sex, gender and racial difference through discourses and representations of the body. At the same time, medical anthropologists, revealed how conceptions of the body were central to understanding both epidemiology and other health related issues and the body

was not a given but a constructed reality. Anthropological works have shown that there is something like ethno-physiology in which different cultures have different perceptions of the body. The body could be used as a metaphor or a symbol. The works of Mary Douglas has shown that the body forms the most basic of all symbolic systems; Right, left, up and down are all symbols drawn from the body as are also enclosures and openings.

The body has proved a fertile site from which anthropologists have mounted their criticism of abstract, universalising models and ideologies and instead discussed the various ways in which power has been inscribed into the body and how various marginalised groups have questioned and contested the stigma placed upon their bodies like impurity, primitiveness and colour. Bodies cannot be divorced from their lived experiences, requiring a focus on embodiment that can be defined as a way of inhabiting the world as well as being the source of personhood, self and subjectivity, and laying down the preconditions of intersubjectivity (Mascia-Lees , 2011) .

Ortner (1974) talked of universal subordination of women's body in "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture" where she argues that a woman's body and its functions keep her closer to nature more than a man's physiology, allowing him more freedom to work in culture. The purpose of culture, in one sense, is to rise above nature; therefore, if women are more aligned with nature then they fall socially below cultural men. Ultimately, both a woman's body and her social position create a different psychic structure for her. She takes a structuralist approach to the question of gender inequality taking the relative positions occupied by men and women understood as a dialectical opposition.

She was one of the early proponents of feminist anthropology who constructed an explanatory model for gender asymmetry based on the premise that the subordination of women is a universal, that is, a cross-cultural phenomenon. Her notion reflected Levi-Strauss' influence on her work. The binary opposition of nature and culture originated with Levi-Strauss, and Ortner borrowed them in her structural analysis of male dominance. In the late 1970s many feminist anthropologists were beginning to question the concept of universal female subordination and the usefulness of models based on dichotomies. Some anthropologists argued that there existed societies where males and females held roles that were complementary.

To understand how patriarchy is naturalised and perpetuated through various institutions, there is a need to understand the basic construct of a person's being: her sexuality as it is laid down in creation of gender. This brings in the concept of masculinity and femininity. While masculinity is always deemed as a powerful, demanding, aggressive and assertive, femininity is constructed as functionally complimentary to it and submissive, yielding and compliant.

2.2 GENDER AND EMBODIMENT

Embodiment in its most simple understanding means the lived experience of human beings, an experience which bridges "the natural" and "the cultural". By the close of the twentieth century the body had become a key site of political, social, cultural and economic intervention in relation, for example, to medicine, disability, work, consumption, old age and ethics. The body has emerged in recent

years as a key challenge in the social sciences, for example, new social movements struggle for citizenship and emancipation in the name of excluded bodies (Nicholson and Seidman, 1995). These particular developments, which spell out the presence of the body in social, moral and political life, have had a profound impact on sociology and social theory.

Embodiment may be defined as the ways in which cultural ideals of gender in a given society create expectations for and influence the form of our bodies. There is a bidirectional relationship between biology and culture; by embodying societally determined gender roles we reinforce cultural ideals and simultaneously shape, both temporarily and permanently, our bodies, which then perpetuates the cultural ideal (Connel, 2002). While there is actually more variation in body type within the male and female sexes than there is between the two sexes, embodiment exaggerates the perceived bodily differences between gender categories (Kimmel, 2011). Social embodiment, for both men and women, is variable across cultures and over time. Examples of women embodying gender norms across cultures include foot binding practices in Chinese culture, neck rings in African and Asian cultures, and corsets in Western cultures. Another interesting phenomenon has been the practice of wearing high heels, which shifted from a masculine fashion to a feminine fashion over time.

In the United States, the ideal body image and dimensions have changed for both women and men, with the body ideal female body shape becoming progressively slimmer and the body ideal for men becoming progressively larger (Bordo, 1999). These differences are epitomised in the example of children's toys; G.I. Joe dolls depict the physical ideals for boys and Barbie dolls embody the ideals for girls. Beauty myth, as discussed in Naomi Wolf's book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used Against Women*, refers to the unattainable standard of beauty for women, which sustains consumer culture. In contrast, men's bodies are also "dictated" by cultural ideals of gender, as is evident in consumer culture—especially beer commercials—in which men are portrayed as outdoorsy, tough, strong, and "manly" (Buysse, 2004)

Bodies may be our friends or enemies, a source of pain or pleasure, a place of liberation or domination, but they are also the material with which we experience and create gender. During the past decades, feminist sociologists and anthropologists have increasingly explored the relation between bodies, culture, and subjectivity (Dellinger and Williams 1997; Gagné and McCaughey 2002; Lorber and Martin 1998; McCaughey 1998). Scholars appear to be coming to terms with how people "embody gender," which refers not only to how people use or mould the body to signify gender but also to how such bodywork is intertwined with subjectivity (i.e., cognition and feelings).

Every society has different 'scripts' for male and female members to follow. Thus members learn to carry out their feminine or masculine role, much in the way as every society has its own language. From the time of infancy till old age one learns about and practices the particular ways of being masculine and feminine that the family and society prescribes. However, these roles can change and do change over time, place, region, class, caste and geographical location. Our gender defines us and pre-exists us, we are born into it just as we are born into our families, and it operates at a level beyond our individual intentions. What kind of men and women we are required to be are already prescribed in the culture

into which we are born. For this we experience our gender roles as true, natural and good (Mosse, 1995).

People are born male or female, but learn to be boys and girls who grow into men and women. They are taught what the appropriate behaviour and attitudes, roles and activities are for them and how they relate to other people. Their learned behaviour is what makes up gender identity, and determines gender roles.

2.3 EMBODIMENT AND FEMINIST THEORY

Body has always figured in one way or another in the field of feminist theory; from discussions of motherhood, pregnancy and abortion, of pleasure and sex, of eating disorders, masculinity and femininity, and the incorporation of disciplinary regimes to theoretical discussions of embodiment and individuation of bodies, feminist thinkers have played a key role in forming different ideas and understanding of the body in a multidimensional manner.

Feminist theorists have focused on the female body as the site where representations of difference and identity are inscribed. Conboy, Medina, Stanbury, (1997) explored the tensions between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body which included rape, pornography, eroticism, anorexia, body building, menstruation and maternity.

Feminism has been critical in forcing social sciences to engage with the body as a social and cultural reality. Since the late 1980s, the dominant voices in the feminist theorisation of the body have been post-structuralist. Such theorists (e.g. Butler, 1993; Bordo, 1987) seek to understand how gender as a discursive and also as a performative reality shapes the actual political and social implications of being gendered.

Theorists of embodiment' such as Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, Margrit Shildrick, Raia Prokhovnik, Moira Gatens and Rosi Braidotti employ diverse theoretical approaches. However, they may be linked by the view that bodies are not simply 'pre-given' in biology, nature, or culture but are continually produced and differentiated through complex historical, social and political relations of power. Interrogating the sex/gender distinction has been of particular theoretical importance to many of these thinkers, who have perceived it to be intimately intertwined with a host of other oppressive dualisms (i.e. mind/body, nature/culture, male/female and heterosexual/homosexual).

In underscoring an overarching patriarchal, hetero-normative system, the sex/gender distinction obscures recognition of how bodies (as opposed to being purely a product of nature) are constituted dichotomously as 'sexed' and/or gendered' through power-imbued grids of intelligibility (Prokhovnik, 2002; Gatens, 1996; Butler, 1999/1990, 1993). Rejecting the notion of a pre-given biologically 'sexed' body upon which gender is deterministically inscribed, they have emphasised the impossibility of ever having 'direct, unmediated access to some "pure" corporeal state' (Shildrick, 1997:14). As Moira Gatens (1996) asserts, one of the key questions feminists need to be asking is 'how does culture construct the body so that it is understood as a biological given?' Sex/gender is of course not the only paradigm through which relations of power function to produce particular forms of embodiment. Critical feminist theorists of embodiment are also

concerned with how bodies are constituted differentially through the heterosexual matrix of power (Butler, 1999/1990, 1993, 2004a) and through processes of racial and cultural 'othering' (Butler, 1993; Ahmed, 2000, 2004a).

While Butler rejects theory grounded in ontology of the body, she still finds something fundamental about bodies: bodies, for Butler, are vulnerable. A body is both dependent upon others and subject to violation by another. Through our bodies we always remain exposed to others and our very vulnerability ties us to others (Chambers, 2006).

2.4 LIVING THE FEMALE BODY

With the publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir, feminist theorising about the relation between the body and the self took center stage. Along with other phenomenologists, particularly Merleau-Ponty, and, of course Sartre, Beauvoir recognises that “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world” (Beauvoir, 1953). What was central to her account was that such bodily existence and the point of view was lived differently for men and women. Beauvoir’s attitude to embodiment has been the subject of much controversy for later feminists. She seemingly asserts the lack of significance of biological facts and rehearses such ‘facts’ in a problematic way. She also presents an account of the phenomenology of female embodiment which has shocked later writers by its almost unmitigated negativity. Nonetheless her account still provides the starting point for contemporary work on the relation between bodies and selves. Here she is explicitly offering her narrative as an account of lived experience, the body in situation, and not as part of the data of biology.

Contemporary theory and research on embodying gender echo Beauvoir’s (1961) classic notion that the body is a situation. Beauvoir’s position is that subjectivity is always embodied, the body is always part of one’s lived experience, and personal experience is shaped not only by biographical, historical, cultural, and interactional contexts but also by how one uses his or her freedom or agency. Writing before the invention of the sex/gender distinction, Beauvoir critiqued both biological determinism and the scientific view of the body as detached from subjectivity. Moi (1999) argued that Beauvoir’s view of gender as embodied avoids problems that arise from conceptualising gender as distinct from sex as well as postmodernist attempts to collapse the sex/gender distinction.

2.4.1 Creating Gendered Bodies in Childhood

In childhood the young girl’s body is experienced in a different way from that of the young boy. He is encouraged to climb trees and play rough games. She is encouraged to treat her whole person as a doll, “a passive object... an inert given object” (Beauvoir, 1953), and learns the need to please others. Here is the beginning of her account of the way in which women live their bodies as objects for another’s gaze, something which has its origin not in anatomy but in “education and surroundings” (ibid). The consequence of living a body as an object of another’s gaze is an inhibited intentionality, her spontaneous movements inhibited, “the exuberance of life... restrained”, “lack of physical power” leading to a “general timidity” (ibid). Beauvoir’s descriptions of the way in which women live their bodies in such an objectified way, internalising the gaze of the other

and producing their bodies as objects for others, has been one of her most important contributions to a phenomenology of female embodiment, and anticipated the work of later feminists such as Bartky and Marion Young. Sha has also described the following phases of life including puberty, sexual initiation, marriage and motherhood.

2.4.2 Emergence of Sexual Bodies in Adolescence

Puberty

Anthropological literature documents the social significance of menarche as a girl's social transition into emergent womanhood and sexual majority (Ram 1992; Dhuruvarajan 1989; Kapadia 1996). This is a time when gender roles seem to be strongly emphasised as physical changes occur dramatically on the bodies of girls and boys. These physical changes are used to emphasise what society is going to expect in the sexual behaviour and practices between young women and young men.

As the girl enters puberty Beauvoir describes the way in which her body becomes to her a source of horror and shame. "This new growth in her armpits transforms her into a kind of animal or algae" (333), her menstrual blood a source of disgust. These negative descriptions are continued in her account of sexual initiation, marriage, and motherhood. Her description of the maternal body has been especially controversial. "ensnared by nature the pregnant woman is plant and animal ... an incubator, a conscious and free individual who has become life's passive instrument ... not so much mothers... as fertile organisms, like fowls with high egg production". These descriptions have been a source of criticism, particularly when later feminists sought to celebrate the female body as a source of pleasure, fertility, and empowerment (see below) as well as the fact that it represents only one point of view not necessarily endorsed in every culture. . However it is important to recognise that what she was offering was a descriptive phenomenology of female bodies as lived in specific situations namely of Europe in the twentieth century. It is these situations which her writings hoped to highlight and change; in other words she fought her own social battle. In complete contrast to what Beauvoir says, Margaret Mead in *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1973 {1928}), exhibits that girls who have attained puberty in Samoa are free from mental stress (unlike their American counterparts) in the absence of conflicting values, expectations and shameful taboos. Attainment of puberty is represented by many rituals however life after that is not filled with much stress due to sex and marriage being down played. The view towards premarital sex in Samoa is more acceptable which reduces societal pressures after one attains puberty.

Menstruation

According to Kapadia (1996) based on her work on an untouchable community in South India, the perception from the point of view of the Pallars, an untouchable caste group in South India, is that a girl who does not menstruate does not reach "full" womanhood but continues to be perceived as "unfinished" and ungendered whereas the gendering of men as well as their sexual potency is considered automatic. Moreover, a girl's first menstruation marks the beginnings of a state of openness and, thus, her readiness for marriage, sexual relations, and childbirth (Lamb 2000). It illustrates the female generative power, feminine energy, i.e., *sakti* which is both sacred and dangerous and should be therefore controlled (Kapadia 1996). Some cultures view women as unclean and shameful during

their periods. Accordingly, women are restricted from entering the temple, going to the religious place, performing religious rites or entering the kitchen. In addition to the secrecy this imposes, it frequently means that it is difficult for women to express their need for rest or treatment when experiencing premenstrual tension or during a difficult period. In some communities certain ceremonies take place when girls have menstruation like in Assam and many parts of the South of India. In south Indian communities girls begin tying half saree. The puberty ceremony is a prevalent custom in South India. Usually it includes seclusion for seven days, feeding special food by kinswomen, a ritual bath after the seclusion and finally a function where a girl is dressed in jewellery and in an expensive sari for the first time and given special gifts by kins (Ram 1991). According to Ram's (1992) study on Mukkuvar women in Tamil Nadu, puberty ceremony is highly auspicious and celebratory: maturation in a woman – her enhanced status and her potential availability in marriage – is a pleasurable and important event. However, it also marks the containment of female body which is replayed over and over in metaphors and social practices of cooling, binding and secluding female body (ibid). After the puberty ceremony, the adult woman binds her hair in tightly coiled cone-shaped knot and transits her free containment of girlhood to the binding garment of womanhood, a sari – stress on binding hair and covering sexual parts of body can be interpreted as key points of transition to womanhood (Ram 1992). The sari signifies the girl's new identity of a sexually mature woman (Kapadia 1996). It is also a way of controlling symbolically her sexuality.

There are taboos related to menstruation as in tribal communities too. The Kharia women, cannot touch a plough nor can they participate in roofing of a house. The Oraon women are also prevented from touching a plough. The Todas of Nilgiri Hills do not touch a menstruating women for fear of destruction of harvest. In certain tribes only the males can participate in ancestor worship (Satyanarayana and Behera, 1986). The Toda and Kota women in southern India cannot cross the threshold of a temple. The Santal women cannot attend communal worship.

Marriage and Child birth

Gendered transformation of wifehood results from marriage. The women's 'fluidity' and 'permeable' quality (Busby 1997a; Daniel 1984; Fruzzetti et al. 1992; Trawick 1990, 133; Säävälä 2001, 105) facilitate the transformation of their personhood which is necessary in order to incorporate them into their husband's families and to become full personalities of first, auspicious wives and later, blessed mothers (Fruzzetti 1982, 31). Moreover, it is also a step towards adulthood – a necessary requirement of the mature adult status of both a woman and a man (Osellas 2000, 81) but it is even more urgent and absolutely essential for a woman, in order to achieve her social identity as a "full woman" (Kapadia 1996, 17). The female body has been the site of contest since the very beginning as the social and moral norms never allowed her any freedom or agency to experience her sexuality purely as a human body. Her body has been further negated and put under strict vigilance under the institution of marriage. Marriage still is the vital juncture of a women's life. In most cultures the status of the woman's body transforms after marriage. Among Hindus a wife is seen as *ardhangini*, half her husband's body and among the Christians the wife's body and husband's body are seen as merged, they "become one". Thus a symbolic transformation of the body as now 'belonging to someone else' takes place. For this she is kept under constant watch lest she should explore her sexuality and realise her own body.

Among Hindus the woman's regenerative power *sakti* is seen as powerful and dangerous and marriage is the only way to keep it in check, through regular sexual intercourse (Kapadia: 105). Thus a young widow has a large amount of taboos heaped on her as she no longer has a husband to tame in her energies. The very recognition of the power of the feminine is one of the reasons that Hindus both married girls early and also regarded widows as dangerous especially if they were in the reproductive age.

In most societies across the world marriage is seen as the means towards reproducing the society with legitimately produced children who then fill in the various roles vacated by older people as they die. Thus marriage is not simply the union of two persons but a means towards an end, namely social reproduction.

A married woman's body becomes a vehicle for producing the progeny that will replenish her group. Thus pregnancy and childbirth are seen natural processes that should transform the married woman's body. The theories that specify the birth of children also determine or are predetermined by the gender inequalities. Kapadia points to the differences in this respect between North India and South India. In South India, it is the mother's blood that is seen as the primary component of a child's body and the link between it and its mother's brother is viewed as stronger than that between it and its paternal side. This strong matrilateral bias is less in North India where the paternal influence on the child is stronger. Yet even in North India a lot of emphasis is placed on the 'mother's milk' and all, who have drunk the milk of the same woman are seen as closely tied to each other. Also the transfer of masculinity through the mother's milk is strongly emphasised in this culture.

Yet patriarchy often denies the women the right over their own reproductive power. It is only among relatively egalitarian societies like that of hunters and food gatherers that women can decide upon their own offspring.

2.4.3 Sexuality and Beautifying the Body

Gender is not about women alone, but about women and men and their relationship in society. We usually think that sexuality is only "natural" or "normal" in which we cope with our biological needs. In fact, sexuality really tells us what our society regards as normal rather than biologically normal.

Sexuality involves the way in which the mind and body interact. In the case of women, many ideas about sexuality teach them that their bodies are objects to please or satisfy. A lot more pressure is put on women especially in urban areas to spend a great deal of time and money making their bodies and faces acceptable and attractive.

Research on how women embody gender focuses on how they experience changing demeanour, fashioning appearance, or modifying the physical body. McCaughey (1998) showed how women who learn to subvert feminine demeanour in self-defense classes redefine womanhood and feel more assertive and confident in their everyday lives. Dellinger and Williams (1997) showed that makeup provides women opportunities for bonding and that women can experience makeup as both empowering and constraining. Gagné and McCaughey (2002) showed how women who undergo cosmetic surgery view themselves through the male gaze and feel more confident and liberated as their bodies become more palatable to the patriarchal imagination.

2.4.4 Bodies after Menopause

In most societies, menopause marks major disruption. Research has shown that menopause is subject to a wide degree of interpretation on the part of women who experience it. For example, Kaufert (1988) interviewed Canadian women and found that they tended to define themselves as menopausal if there had been a change in their accustomed pattern of menstruation. For these women, menopause was not an event but a process based on perception and interpretation. Some of these women even went as far as calling themselves menopausal, regardless of the status of their cycle.

A group of women living in a small village in South Wales believes that menopause is a threat to their feminine identity and is seen as a disadvantage because they are aging and losing control over their bodily processes (Skultán, 1970). Kaulagekar (2010) conducted a study to explore the experiences of postmenopausal women with specific reference to perceived effect of menopause on femininity and subjective description of feeling about attaining menopause. This was a cross-sectional study based on in depth interviews of the purposively selected 52 postmenopausal urban women from four different sites from the city of Pune, Maharashtra, India. Average age of the women at menopause was 47.6 years. Findings revealed that majority of them had a traumatic menopausal phase hence final relief was appreciated positively. Sixteen respondents thought their femininity was affected because of menopause. Opinions expressed about loss of femininity were all part of individual's perceptions, changing notions about social role and own circumstances but majority urban women viewed menopausal transition from socio-cultural perspective and dissociate reproduction from femininity.

In a study in rural North India, 558 women aged 35-55 were enlisted for research on menopause. Of the women in the study, 27 percent had attained menopause, 7 percent were in the transition phase, and 4 percent had a hysterectomy (Singh & Arora, 2005). The study showed that the majority of the women welcomed the attainment of menopause and considered it a rite of passage into a new found stage of womanhood. They considered themselves "cleaner" after menopause, as they felt themselves relieved of the "filth" associated with menstruation. Importantly, among many Indian women who embrace menopause; most of them considered menopause socially advantageous because they had highly structured rules of conduct and rituals associated with it (Singh & Arora, 2005).

2.5 DISABLED BODIES

Addlakha (2007) highlighted that historically in India as elsewhere in the world, there has been a deep-rooted cultural antipathy to persons with disabilities. Sexuality at core is about acceptance of self and acceptance by others. Disabled persons are expected to reject their bodies as asexual. Throughout the ages the disabled have been looked down upon with disdain, almost as if they were sub-human. They have been portrayed as medical anomalies, helpless victims and a lifelong burden for family and society. While today there is a general recognition of the need to enhance educational and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in order to promote economic self-reliance and independent living, their sexual needs, dreams and aspirations are more or less rendered invisible.

Sexual and reproductive rights are considered irrelevant for persons with disabilities in India. Gender emerges as a key analytical category in perceptions of sexuality among young men and women with visual and locomotor disabilities. While able-bodied persons may legitimately claim aspirations for the body beautiful and an exhilarating sex life, too many people think that disability automatically excludes those so afflicted from any hope of love and sex. The social construction of the disabled identity is more often than not that of an asexual being precariously perched on the margins of society. Indeed, many disabled persons and their parents are convinced that sexual experience does not lie in their destiny. The situation is more complicated in societies like India where sex is a highly tabooed subject. Even under normal circumstances, sexuality is considered socially threatening more in need of control than encouragement and enhancement.

While both men and women with disabilities are disqualified from performance of conventional adult roles, there is reinforcement between traditional notions of disability and womanhood as both are characterised by innocence, vulnerability, powerlessness and sexual passivity (Fine and Asch 1988). So while dependency needs in males are extremely stigmatising, the same tendencies may to some extent be endearing in a female. This disjunction between traditional notions of what it means to be a man- aggressive, strong, self-reliant and providing financial security and social status to the family - and being a man with a disability in need of assistance - has led some researchers to opine that the fate of men with disabilities is worse than that of women with disabilities (Shakespeare 1999 and Tepper 1999a and 1999b).

A woman with a disability is considered incapable of fulfilling the normative feminine roles of homemaker, wife and mother. Then, she also does not fit the stereotype of the normal woman in terms of physical appearance. Since women embody family honour in the Indian context, disabled girls are more often than not kept hidden at home by families and denied basic rights to mobility, education and employment. Parents become more protective and restrictive, especially after the adolescent girl reaches puberty. Being nurturing and caring are core components of normative constructions of femininity, but women with disabilities are themselves in need of care. This inversion reduces them to the status of being lesser than women (Addlakha, 2007). Absence of a sense self-assurance and confidence in the functioning and attractiveness of the body is one of the major stumbling blocks in the lives of persons with disabilities. Disabled bodies do not fit the cultural ideal of the healthy, strong, independent and beautiful body. The disabled body is not valued as a source of pleasure or value (it cannot work, reproduce or be attractive).

Body image not only influences overall self assessment of a person but is definitive in determining a person's sexual self-esteem. Sexual self-esteem is an individual's sense of self as a sexual being and may be rated as appealing and unappealing, competent and incompetent. It describes a person's sexual identity and perception of sexual acceptability. When persons have a positive body image, they are likely to have high levels of sexual self-esteem as well. But factors like abuse and disability are injurious to sexual self-esteem. When sexual self-esteem is damaged, it can lead to mental ill health; since it results in a damaged view of oneself, diminished satisfaction with life and capacity to experience pleasure, willingness to interact with others and develop intimate relationships. As social

attitudes towards physical differences are largely negative, body image and associated sexual self-esteem are a problem area for persons with disabilities. (ibid).

2.6 TRANSSEXUAL BODIES

When we talk of gender and embodiment, it is important to discuss it in the context of transsexuals. Since most of society is based on a dual or heteronormative model of gender anybody that straddles the divide causes cultural dissonance and faces rejection. Schrock et al (2005) after having in-depth interviews with nine white, middle-classes, male-to-female transsexuals examined how they produce and experience bodily transformation. Interviewees' bodywork entailed retraining, redecorating, and reshaping the physical body, which shaped their feelings, role-taking, and self-monitoring. The authors conclude by exploring how viewing gender as embodied could influence medical discourse on transsexualism and have personal and political consequences for transsexuals.

Studies have focused on various dimensions of transsexuality, looking upon how the body is viewed and also reconstructed to fit in with a redefined view of gender construction.

Recent research by Rubin (2003) and Namaste (2000) moves transgender scholarship toward understanding the link between bodies and subjectivities. Namaste analysed how transsexuals cope with violations of and threats to their bodies from police and discriminatory health care providers. Rubin examined female-to-male transsexuals' experiences of feeling betrayed by their birthed bodies and growing into their desired bodies. For example, Rubin's interviewees said that using hormone therapy and mastectomies to masculinise their bodies affirmed their identities as men, which evoked feelings of authenticity. Schrock et al (2005) shows how transsexuals' bodywork shapes feelings of authenticity, but our interviewees expressed more contradictory feelings and also indicated that their bodywork shaped role-taking, self-monitoring, and practical consciousness (which refers to be taken for granted knowledge about how to do things; Giddens 1984, 41-45).

Transsexuals are accepted in some societies that stretch the model of gender construction to include more than two models of gender. The classic anthropological work on the Comanche have shown how the *berdache* is an accepted gender category among these warring tribes that describes a man who does not want to be masculine but dresses up in women's clothes and performs women's tasks. Such a man is not treated as a social outcaste but has a perfectly socially acceptable position as a transsexual. Thus in many societies the stigma of 'not being born into the right kind of body' is taken care of culturally.

2.7 SUMMARY

Embodiment in its most simple understanding means the lived experience of human beings, an experience which bridges "the natural" and "the cultural". Embodiment may be defined as the ways in which cultural ideals of gender in a given society create expectations for and influence the form of our bodies. It shows how bodies bear the imprint of gender inequalities. In the present unit, wide range of substantive topics that span the life course were covered , including

gendered bodies in childbirth, menarche, menstruation, menopause, notion of beautifying the bodies, disabled bodies etc. During the past decades, feminist socio-cultural anthropologists and sociologists have increasingly explored the relation between bodies, culture, and subjectivity. They appear to be coming to terms with how people “embody gender,” which refers not only to how people use or mould the body to signify gender but also to how such bodywork is intertwined with subjectivity (i.e., cognition and feelings). Feminist theorists have focused on the female body as the site where representations of difference and identity are inscribed. Conboy, Medina, Stanbury, (1997) explored the tensions between women’s lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body which included rape, pornography, eroticism, anorexia, body building, menstruation and maternity.

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Sample Questions

- 1) What do you understand by the term embodiment?
- 2) Describe embodiment and gender.
- 3) "Living the female body"-explain this with examples.

UNIT 3 GENDER AND THE LIFE COURSE

Contents

- 3.1 Introduction
 - 3.2 Life Course Approach
 - 3.2.1 Life Course and Life Cycle
 - 3.3 Gender and the Life Course
 - 3.4 Different Life Courses and their Implications
 - 3.4.1 Girl Child
 - 3.4.2 Menarche: Beginning of the Reproductive Life Course
 - 3.4.3 Married Status
 - 3.4.4 Motherhood
 - 3.4.5 Widowed Women
 - 3.5 Empowerment and Life Course
 - 3.6 Changing Scenario Affecting Life Courses
 - 3.7 Summary
- References
Suggested Reading
Sample Questions

Learning Objectives



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

- comprehend about the life course approach;
- understand gender and the life course perspective;
- know about the different life courses and its implications from gender perspective; and
- learn about the changing scenario affecting life courses.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The unit discusses the gender and life course perspective. Clarity of the concept of gender is very important to understand the life course in a gendered perspective. Gender is often defined as the socio-cultural meanings attributed to the physical and biological differences between the sexes, and how those meanings are manifested both symbolically and materially in societies (Mascia-Lees and Black, 2000). Gender is a relational concept that anthropologists have found to be useful for elucidating the dynamics of socio-cultural systems that invest meanings, role expectations, and positionalities in female and male as well as alternatively gendered persons. Gender as a concept refers to differences, hierarchies, rankings, etc., which exist between two sexes. It explains cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity that inform various roles that are played by women and men in the society. Gender constructs have significant influence on physical, social and psychological growth and development. As individuals grow from infancy to childhood and then to adulthood their gender and age along with a

host of other factors influence their personality and behaviour. From the moment of birth a child is conditioned by the cultural constructs that inform the manner in which it is handled by early care givers, and later grows up learning its gender specific mannerisms and fulfills gender specific role play. In most instances the systematic, unfavorable denial of opportunities, rights and resources is based on gender although these vary from one society to another. These may also change over time, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly. Throughout the world men and women live in different worlds in terms of the ways in which they experience various life situations during the journey from womb to old age.

3.2 LIFE COURSE APPROACH

The concept of life course was first developed in sociology in the 1960s. Glen Elder Jr., a sociologist, was one of the early authors to write about a life course perspective, and he continues to be one of the driving forces behind its development. Elder Jr., defined life course as “a multilevel phenomenon changing, ranging from structural pathways through social institutions and organisations to the social trajectories of individuals and their developmental pathways”. The life course perspective is a theoretical model that has been emerging over the last five decades, across several disciplines. Sociologists, anthropologists, social historians, demographers, and psychologists—working independently and, more recently, collaboratively—have all helped to give it shape. The ‘life course’ has made it possible to analyse the way in which personal life interacts with social institutions such as education, family, marriage, and labour market and also the other way around. Van Gennep (2004[1909]) delineated a structure for transformative ritual practices he considered universal and common to all cultures. Although they vary greatly in intensity, specific form, and social meaning, rites of passage are ceremonial devices used by societies to mark the passage or transition of an individual or a group from one social status or situation to another. Rites of passage resolve life-crises; they provide a mechanism to deal with the tension experienced by both individuals and social groups during ambiguous occasions including, but not limited to, birth, puberty, marriage, and death. By adopting a comparative approach to develop his taxonomy of social rites, Van Gennep noted that these social customs are used to mark specific moments of the life course. Many societies use these ceremonies to articulate events that hold significance not only for individuals and families but the larger society as well. Associated with each life stage is a specific social status and a definitive set of obligations and responsibilities that the incumbent is expected to fulfill as the individual advances the normative, sequential stages of the life course—generally from infant, adolescent, spouse, parent, elder, to deceased—taking on a new social role at each phase. Rites of passage function to accomplish status transitions; they provide a mechanism for individuals and their societies to recognise those who negotiate the rites as intrinsically different beings.

Life course perspective looks at how chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change that shape people’s lives from birth to death. Of course, time is only one dimension of human behaviour; characteristics of the person and the environment in which the person lives also play a part.

The life course approach focuses on the relationship between the ‘self’ and ‘society’ and acknowledges the temporal framework of the changes and movements which have and will continue to shape the context of particular

cultures and historical periods (Hockey and James, 2003; Dewilde, 2003). For instance, ageing as a social phenomenon can only be comprehended through contextualising physiological ageing within cultural and historical contexts (Pilcher, 1995). It is multifaceted, composed of interdependent biological, psychological and social processes.

The life course paradigm set out by Giele and Elder (1998) provides an appropriate explanatory framework within which to locate the analysis. Giele and Elder (1998:10) define three key elements: *location in time and place*, that includes the cultural background experienced by individuals; *linked lives*, referring to family norms and cultural expectations, for example with respect to women's roles concerning employment and child-care; and *individual agency* - the decisions that an individual makes and the priority that they give to different aspects of the lives, for example decisions concerning education, employment and family formation. All these are intimately linked. Social science scholars who apply the life course perspective in their work rely on a handful of staple concepts: cohorts, transitions, trajectories, life events, and turning points.

Cohort: Group of persons who were born at the same historical time and who experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age.

Transition: Change in roles and statuses that represent a distinct departure from prior roles and statuses.

Trajectory: Long-term pattern of stability and change, which usually involves multiple transitions.

Life Event: Significant occurrence involving a relatively abrupt change that may produce serious and long-lasting effects.

Turning Point: Life event that produces a lasting shift in the life course trajectory.

3.2.1 Life Course and Life Cycle

The concept of life course has also been used in relation to different stages in human life. However, the concept of 'life course' has gained popularity over 'life cycle' since the concept of 'life cycle' is perceived to imply multiple turns and a relatively fixed or inevitable series of biological stages and ages (Hapke and Ayyankaril, 2004).

Rather than viewing any stage of life, such as childhood, youth and older age, or any group in isolation the life course is concerned with an understanding of the place of that stage in an entire life continuum (Riley, 1983). An individual's social, economic and political situation is both the outcome of previous actions and the contingent result of a historical process.

The life course approach provides a framework for analysing individuals' experiences, at particular stages of their lives. Unlike the term life cycle, which implies fixed categories in the individual and assumes a stable system it emphasises the inter-linkage between phases of the life course rather than seeing each phase in isolation (Katz and Monk, 1993; Hockey and James, 1993). It permits a more dynamic approach to relations between the individual, the family, work and others (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1989). The life course approach provides an alternative framework for analysing the various influences, which

contribute to the life experience of individuals at particular stages of their lives. It indicates more flexible biographical patterns within a continually changing social system (Arber and Evandrou, 1993; Katz and Monk, 1993).

In many studies life course approach is used as a framework for analysing the life experience of individuals at particular stages of their lives. The perspective has theoretical relevance also for the structure –agency- debate since tracking multiple dimensions of life course development over an extended period of time makes it “very clear that structure and personal action determine the life course” (Kruger and Baldus, 1999, 356-359).

The early studies of life course were life cycle models that concentrated on single role sequence. For example, the life cycle of individuals was portrayed as ‘children mature, marry and have children who then grow up and start a family as the cycle continues into another generation’ (Elder et al. 2003: 7). In recent times life course studies concentrate on bridging the gap between social dispositions and individual preferences for a particular behaviour (Settersten 2003, Giele 2004). Moen (1992) and Hakim (2000, 2003, 2004) study the link between multiple roles of women – family and work – in relation to marriage and family formation in the individual life course. This reflects the changing role of women in the society from that of a traditional homemaker to that of a contributor to the household income. It is also an indication of changes in individual behaviour in order to cope with these changes.

3.3 GENDER AND THE LIFE COURSE

Here the gender and life course perspective has been explained from both anthropological and development perspectives to understand the complex phenomenon of differential allocation of tasks and resources based on sex and its relation with and impact on the life course of men and women like marriage, motherhood/fatherhood, work, power and ageing across societies.

The circumstances during the entire life course influence the situation of individuals as they advance in age. ‘Gender relations cannot be assumed to be static over the life course, since life transitions, age-based norms and physiological changes all impact on the way gender roles are constructed and gender identity experienced’ (Arber and Ginn, 1996:13). Therefore, a life course perspective has the potential to direct attention to the situation of women and men at various times in their lives.

In the context of India, a life course perspective has been adopted, for example in studies of women’s health and reproduction (Das Gupta 1996). Anthropologists like Susan C. Seymour (1999) have focused on the lives of women in detail. Her work on “Women, Family and Child Care in India: A World in Transition” is an in-depth study of twenty four Hindu families of different caste and class groups in an urbanised part of Orissa. She focused on socialisation of girls and significance of women’s role through the life cycle in a society where the patrifocal extended family is predominant. The longitudinal study also examines the impact of recent urbanisation and modernisation on groups of contemporary Indian women. Most studies exploring life courses in India focus exclusively, or mostly, on girls and women. Alice S. Rossi explored the people’s lives especially women

as they move from youth to age in her edited book *Gender and the Life Course* (1985) and *Sexuality across the Life Course* (1994).

Despite the gradually increasing interest in men as gendered subjects and in men's lives in South Asia within gender studies, the range has so far been limited to topics such as male sexuality and violence. Compared to the multiplicities of femininities in South Asian Studies, men appear in fewer studies and often in two-dimensional range, either as house-holders (patrons) or as landless labourers (clients). One of the significant works on masculinity is by Joseph Alter.

While acknowledging the regional and other diversities in the lives of men and women across South Asia, some features emerge in most studies on the life cycle of women, encapsulated by Mines and Lamb (2002, 81) as follows: In general, a woman can expect to progress over her life from being a daughter in her natal home, to a wife and daughter-in-law in her husband's and in-law's home, to a mother of young children, to a mother-in-law, and finally to an older woman and frequently, widow.

In spite of girls' structurally weaker position compared to boys (Das Gupta, 1996, 217), girls enjoy more personal freedom and autonomy in their natal homes than they do after getting married (Mines and Lamb, 2002, 81). While a daughter-in-law is at the bottom of the household hierarchy and controlled by both women and men in the groom's house, a young married woman is still cherished as a potential child-bearer (Mines and Lamb 2002; Saavala 2004, 151).

Women gain freedom upon getting older, the mother-in-law generation has more freedom in life, is less dominated by males, and has more authority than in earlier life phases (Das Gupta 1996, 217; Saavala 2006, 149; Lamb, 2002).

It has been argued that men, by contrast, do not experience as many marked transformations in their lives as women, although they too are expected to marry, to have children, to be economically productive, and finally, as the senior male in a household, to assume the role of central authority. Thus the argument that men experience fewer transformations may reflect the lack of research on male life courses rather than the actual situation. Since there is a tendency to approach different phases of life in the Indian context as static, it is important to take into account the notion that division based on the position in the life cycle are subject to change and transformation (Saavala 2006, 149). The age categories, meanings and relations are always shaped both institutionally and through everyday interactions. For example, the transition from 'child' to 'teen' is negotiated through both institutions and everyday interactions (Thorne 2004, 404).

Different phases and institutions of life such as marriage or parenthood have a central influence on other aspects of life like working life. Among the few who combined analyses of work and life course, Hapke and Ayyankaril (2004) explored the gendered livelihood strategies of fishermen and women in South India through their lives. They introduced the concept of 'work life course' which they define as "patterns of engagement of men and women in remunerative work throughout their life course". In another contribution to the discussion on work and life course, the life cycle approach is central, namely Arjan de Haan's (2003) analysis of gendered experiences of male and female labour migrants in Kolkata. He showed how young men have a relatively long period when they can move around

without (adult) supervision (*ghumma*) and try out jobs here and there. But no such option exist for young women, whose experience are confined to the household. (Mattila, 2011).

Kapadia (1998) examined the two subordinated groups—“untouchables” and women—in a village in Tamilnadu, South India. The lives and work of “untouchable” women in the village provided a unique analytical focus that clarifies the ways in which three axes of identity—gender, caste, and class—are constructed in South India. The author proves that the non-Brahmin custom of close kin marriages gives women greater protection and independence. The involvement of maternal relatives in every important stage of women’s life and the general distance maintained from paternal kin has been observed by her while describing the puberty ritual in great detail. This is quite distant from the partilineal preferences of Brahmins, who encouraged pre-puberty marriage and accorded a far lower status to women. With urbanisations, however, these protections are being withdrawn and the rights and obligations of matrilineal kin eroded. Non-Brahmin households are moving away from the traditional system of pledging girls the male members of the maternal uncle’s family and substituting the traditional bride price with the pernicious practice of dowry. There is a tendency for upwardly mobile non-brahmins to adopt the patriarchal practices of Brahmins for class mobility. The adoption of urban systems and ideas does not necessary improve the lot of women; instead it reduces the importance of women’s labour, withdraws them from economically remunerative occupations and dissolves the community within which woman’s role was respected and conceded.

3.4 DIFFERENT LIFE COURSES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

According to Banerji, “The life of a woman according to the *Dharmasastras*, has three stages, that of an unmarried girl, a married girl, and as a widow” (quoted in Puri, 1999, p. 6). Interestingly, all three stages of a woman’s life are defined in relation to her status to men, that is, pre-married, married, and post-married. Different life course have been discussed here which have a influence and implication on this other aspect of life especially in the context of women. The phase of girl child discusses the processes of a girl growing into a woman in the patrilineal and patriarchal societies like India. It will reflect on the issue of constraints that a girl faces in the process of socialising herself as a female followed by other life courses.

3.4.1 Girl Child

Evidence of the preference for and dominance of males in Indian society is found early in the life cycle. From conception, female children are regarded and treated differently than male children. For instance, if through amniocentesis the gender of the foetus is determined to be female, she may be aborted because of the preference for male children. In contrast, male children are highly valued. Males do not require dowry, they will be able to support their parents in their old age, and they are the only ones who can perform the death rituals. Males are also favoured and viewed as an investment because they receive dowry from the bride’s family. The female child receives less or poorer quality food and may experience unequal access to health care (Van Willigen & Channa, 1991). Discrimination at the early age with the girl child also affects various other aspects

of her life like education, marriage etc. As female children are not as highly valued as male children, they are often viewed as economic and social burdens which is reflected in the declining sex ratio in India and increased cases of female foeticide in many parts of India. The popular image and perception of the tribal women is that of being better off than their non-tribal counterparts. A higher social status of women was reported by Furer - Haimendorf (1943), Hutton (1921), Hunter (1973) and Firth (1946) among Tharus of Uttar Pradesh and Nagas and Garos of the North East. Rivers (1973), Dalton (1872) and Grigson (1938) however have reported low status of women among Todas, Kharies and Mariya Gonds with reference to certain taboos during certain periods and ceremonies. Majumdar (1973) has reported a higher status of tribal women on some indicators while lower on others, while Shashi (1978) has concluded that the status of tribal women varies from tribe to tribe. They are considered as an asset due to roles played by them in the society. The practice of bride price during marriages is quite common among them. In recent years as the capitalist economy is setting in, tribal women are being deprived of their traditional roles, due to which their economic value is decreasing and the practice of 'bride-price' is giving way to the system of dowry as generally witnessed in non-tribal society.

A study by Sutapa Agarwal (2005) highlights the discrimination as an active and passive elimination of girl child in different socio-economic conditions as a life course approach by exploring data from 329 ever married women in a community-based survey conducted in five villages of Haryana, India in 2003. The broad objective of the study is to investigate into the inter linkages between the different aspects of women's life course with sex selective discrimination. Active elimination of girl child has been seen in terms of abortion according to sex of the surviving children, pregnancy order, mother's childhood experience, autonomy status and marital instability. The finding suggests that autonomy, education and exposure to mass media have negative impact whereas co-residence with in-laws and no male child has significant positive impact for active elimination. In-laws play an important role in abortion under the umbrella of son preference. This present study examined the sex selective discrimination by active elimination of female foetus and passive elimination of female child leading to their death and the role of different background characteristics like women's childhood experience, autonomy, married life and sex preference and family size preference of women in it. Therefore, it can be said that there exists women's life course impact on the discrimination against girl child. Women who themselves had the worst childhood experience (in terms of discrimination in all spheres including childhood status, food, education, mobility etc.), had less autonomy in various dimensions (such as decision-making, monetary, mobility, fertility etc), felt high instability in her married life or perceived a sad married life, are more responsible for the discrimination against girl child from conception through her childhood leading to a vicious cycle of gender deprivation and gender discrimination.

3.4.2 Menarche: Beginning of the Reproductive Life Course

The onset of the first menstrual cycle is the sign that the girl has entered puberty. The first menstruation is known as menarche. Menarche also marks the beginning of the fertile years in a woman's life signifying her reproductive potential as she becomes biologically capable of bearing children. The event is often preceded by signs such as enlargement of the breasts and the uterus and the growth of

pubic hair. Hence it is related with rapid physical growth and hormonal changes which influence the behaviour pattern of pubescent girls. Menarche usually occurs between ages 11 and 13 but it may begin sooner and in others it may be delayed, but very rarely beyond 16 years of age. The onset of menarche varies with the activity level of the girls and the nutritional status of girls.

In the cultural context of India, attainment of menarche by girls is considered a biological indicator that the girl is ready for the commencement of sexual relations. This is evident from the traditional practice of *Gauna* that was commonly followed in the olden days. In this system, girls used to be married off at an early age but continued staying in the parental home without the consummation of marriage. However, when a girl attained menarche, the ceremony of *Gauna* would be performed and then the girl went to live at her husband's house where she would begin her married life. The event of menarche is also a social indicator signifying the eligibility of the girl for marriage and the initiation of the search for a suitable marriage partner (Caldwell et al. 1983). Research findings by Padmadas et al., (1999) illustrate that the two events of menarche and marriage follow each other very closely in the rural areas. Menarche initiates the beginning of the reproductive life course followed by the events of marriage and birth of the first child. In addition to this, menarche as an event has a social relevance. In many cases it is marked by the change in role of girls in their family from girlhood to adulthood like taking up responsibilities in the house, exhibiting matured behaviour, taking on *womanly* duties like cooking, learning to do the *pooja* and helping the mother in the kitchen.

3.4.3 Married Status

Because of the way in which society is organised, in most societies, parents and family members start talking about marriage of girls from a young age. In many cases, they do not welcome the girls from birth, mainly as they think that they shall have to spend a fortune on their marriage and subsequent events. Girls are seen as property of another house. Though the official age for marriage for boys and girls is 21 and 18 years, respectively, in many traditional societies in our country many boys and girls are married at a much younger age. For e.g., in Rajasthan, in some tribal communities, it is considered auspicious to marry children on *Akshey Tej* day and mass marriages take place on this occasion. From a young age women think that for them marriage is natural and logical. Many women find that they are expected to become wives and that wives are expected to become mothers. Susan's C. Seymour's (1999) long term study in Orissa on changing family organisation, child rearing practices and gender roles in India reveals a socio-cultural system where early marriages are not only considered normal for many women but also resulted in satisfying lives for them. In her study she introduces to a system of family and gender that is based upon cultural assumption and structural principles that are very different from those characteristics of most contemporary western societies.

Raval (2009) pointed out that a substantial body of literature in psychological anthropology has challenged the stereotypical depiction of South Asian women as passive subordinates in patriarchal families, and has provided accounts of these women as actors in their social world focusing specifically on situations of inter personal conflict. She analysed the narratives of Gujarati women from two cohorts, daughters-in-law in Gujarat, India and mothers-in-law in Gujarati

immigrant in Canada, to argue that these women actively engage in negotiating the conflicts between their wishes and others expectations. The mode of agency that they exercise is less egocentric and more relational. The decision making and negotiations occur within the parameter of their familial roles rather than rebellion against family structures, and their actions are driven by motivations involving the welfare of their children and grand children rather than “individualistic” desires. These narratives along with ethnographic works exploring South Asian personhood, call for the need to broaden the conceptualisation of agency and challenge the appropriateness of traditional individualistic feminism in understanding the lives of women globally.

In most societies girls and boys are prepared differently for marriage. Although the situation is changing, but in many cases it is found that boys are usually brought up to acquire working skills to be used outside home, which will bring in money. On the other hand women are more likely to be legally and financially dependent on their spouses. Therefore even if women are emotionally or physically ill-treated within marriage, they may still be better off remaining with their husbands for financial support as the society may not treat a divorced woman sympathetically. But in the changing scenario, it has been found that women with jobs prefer to get married at a later age and also prefer to have few children. The trend is fast changing especially in urban areas.

Even after marriage, women who cannot give birth to children or do not want them due to their careers, face considerable difficulties. Women who do not produce children may be divorced and face humiliation as well as economic insecurity. These social pressures affect the way infertile women are treated and add to the difficulty. This is also true for mothers who want to be professionals, sportswomen or simply enjoy life as individuals in their own right.

Marriage is an event that often brings about a marked change in the lives of most women. Marriage in all cases brings about a change in place of residence when a woman leaves the parental home to begin residing with the husband and his family. The marital status confers on women the position of a wife. Simultaneously she takes on the roles of a daughter-in-law, sister-in-law etc. Thus marriage brings about a new network of relationship, which is built around the woman in which she often has to adjust and compromise the control of women and the potential for violence are especially great when a woman leaves her natal home to become a part of her husband’s family. On moving in, the status of the daughter-in-law is often very low compared with the men and even with any older women in the household. If there are dowry related problems, it is at this stage that the likelihood of fatal violence is elevated. The abuse begins when the husband and/or his family harass the wife for more money and more goods from her family (Van Willigen & Channa, 1991). If the wife and her family do not comply, a staged accident— dowry burning—may occur. . This may not be true in all cases as Susan C. Seymour (1999) based on her study on lives of women in Orissa pointed out that in a family system that keeps sets of related men together in multigenerational house, known as “Joint Families”, by sending daughters away and bringing in outside women as wives and daughters-in-law through a complex system of arranged marriage, women are the moving pieces in an exchange system that creates extensive webs of kinship. She raised a question in the study that is this hardship for them? Yes, for they must leave the security of their own family and join a different family. Do they find it oppressive? Sometimes but not

generally as Indian women are socialised to expect a dramatic transition at the time of marriage and to assume new responsibilities in their husband's household. It emerges from a much broader socio-cultural system in which women though structurally disadvantaged are expected to fill critical family roles associated with power, authority and respect. Furthermore, this is enmeshed within a cultural system in which feminine powers are writ large: within Hindu theology and practice females are believed to possess great power (*Shakti*). Male deities cannot act without their female counterparts-their source of creative power and female deities are widely worshipped in their own right.

The patriarchal nature of Indian society is seen quite clearly when one examines the role of women. For the most part, women are viewed and treated as inferior to men (Frankl, 1986; Gangrade & Chander, 1991; Narasimhan, 1994 in Johnson and Johnson, 2001). As a result of this domination by men, women are economically dependent on men and have fewer choices in terms of occupation, education, and life course.

Part of the reason they are considered a burden is because of the dowry system. Marriage is the only socially acceptable life course option. Thus, if a woman does not marry, she and her parents will suffer socially. If a woman does marry and finds herself in an abusive situation, she probably will not return to her parents' home or divorce her husband because she and her family will be ostracised from their community. Although marriage is the only acceptable status for adult women, this constraint does not apply to men (Puri, 1999).

The earlier concept of *Stree dhan* (a woman's property) has now become distorted as dowry and underlies much of the tensions that marriage creates in India.

3.4.4 Motherhood

The event of first birth marks the transition to 'motherhood', which brings about with it a myriad of changes in a woman's life. The event usually interrupts her educational career, her participation in the labour market, personal and professional aspirations for success, imposes limitations on her physical mobility and is an invasion to the personal space of a woman. Hence the event of first birth has significant social and cultural connotations attached to it. The social connotation attributes to women the social role of mother while the cultural connotation acts both as a constraining and facilitating factor leading to her status enhancement in the society. Highly educated women have better access to information and hence have greater control over their fertility career.

In most Indian homes, it is not just the birth of a child but the birth of a son that bestows real motherhood upon a woman. In many parts of Northern India, people count the 'number of children' as 'number of boys'. Girl children are not even counted as part of the family. Thus motherhood brings its own anxieties and many women face problems in their marital home if they are unable to conceive or fail to conceive a boy child.

In the course of life also the mother of a son has the privilege of assuming the coveted role of a mother-in-law, when she becomes powerful within the family and wields considerable clout over sons and daughters-in-law. Such a position of power is never attained by parents of daughters as they remain lower in rank to the bride receivers.

Even in old age it is taken for granted that sons will take care of their parents and parents with grown up sons can hope to pass a comfortable old age. However in the modern times things may not turn out quite as ideally and often educated and earning women are capable of taking care of their parents although even today in Northern India at least, this is looked down upon.

3.4.5 Widowed Women

Thus even as a widow a woman is better off if she is the mother of sons than of daughters. In traditional times widows were subjected to many restrictions and sometimes women of the upper castes were forced to commit 'sati' or to lead a miserable life in places of worship like Benaras or Puri.

As a widow, a woman is no longer under the control and care of her husband and must either reside with her sons or in-laws. Either of these living arrangements may translate into very poor treatment, abuse, or even abandonment, as the woman is yet again transformed into a social and financial burden (Johnson and Johnson, 2001). Furthermore, mistreatment of the woman by her husband's family arises, especially when the widowed woman is without male children. Once again, the patriarchal notion of male supremacy prevails.

However menopause as such is not a stigma, rather a woman gains in status after her periods cease as her body is now considered pure. Older women are allowed such participation in rituals as are not normally allowed to women who still menstruate. But as a widow a woman becomes inauspicious and is shunned at many rituals especially those that have to do with fertility, like marriage.

The status of a widow also varies with caste. Among the lower castes there was never any restriction on widow remarriage but among the upper castes, especially Brahmins, even a child widow was not allowed to marry again.

3.5 EMPOWERMENT AND LIFE COURSE

Empowerment is 1) a process from a state of disempowerment to greater empowerment and 2) women's agency is central to the process of empowerment. Empowerment is not static, but varies by location, time, and stage of life cycle (Dyson and Moore 1983; Mason 1986; Gage 2000; Malhotra, Schuler et al. 2002). For example, in South Asia, the relative disempowerment of young, recently-married women is contrasted with the relative empowerment of mothers-in-law in cross-sectional analyses (Mason 1986; Kabeer 2001). Selected studies indicate empowerment varies by age, marital and employment status (Standing 1991; Das Gupta 1996; Gage 2000; Hindin 2002). Some researchers have theorised that women's empowerment is responsive to demographic events, with empowerment increasing over the life course as women bear children, and, in many countries, male children in particular, an idea generally—but not universally—supported by the limited research on the issue.

Women's initial empowerment affects family formation pressures following marriage, the strength of which may depend, in part, on the presence of co-residing in-laws (also affected by women's initial characteristics), with more empowered women being more capable of resisting pressures to bear children. Women's initial empowerment and family formation pressures each lead to the

size and composition of the families women form and also their work life outside the home. More empowered women and women with fewer pressures are more likely to achieve a smaller family and desired family composition while less empowered women will more likely have a more normative family formation.

Because life course theory suggests that individual's outcomes are influenced by their accumulated experiences and resources, women's later empowerment is, in turn, influenced both by their earlier empowerment and by intermediary events like again the size or composition of the families they form.

In nearly all societies, motherhood and domestic duties are regarded as important feminine roles. On this account girls from a young age help mothers in household duties and child care and are married at young age. To become a mother and bear children is considered as an important feminine role. They may also be made to discontinue education to get married. Men are considered as breadwinners for the family. Their role is to be employed and to support the family.

3.6 CHANGING SCENARIO AFFECTING LIFE COURSES

Every society in contemporary times is facing the onslaught of ongoing rapid social and cultural transformations. The consequences of such changes are visible in the behavioural and ideational changes of individuals in the society. Some aspects of sweeping social change have directly affected women's lives and what had been considered restrictive for women is no longer perceived to be so, both by women themselves as well as the social and the cultural context in which they live.

Women and higher education as well as women and paid work command the central stage in the changing lives of women through a re-structuring of their life course. Enabling women to pursue higher education and their participation in the labour force also illustrate the role of changing societal institutions in recent times. Family set-up, religious and cultural prescriptions have become more accommodative in the passage of time, which earlier spearheaded the traditional role of women as 'homemakers'. Educational, occupational and family careers no longer follow the stable, continuous and predictable course. Their respective influence on the life course is observable in the timing and sequencing of events in women's life. Hence the changing structuration of the life course indicates women's new position in today's society.

As more and more women are acquiring educational skills they are seeking jobs and getting employment in the market place. This changed situation is affecting roles of both women and men and bringing change in their lives.

Times and situations are changing fast on account of forces of modernisation, urbanisation, liberalisation and globalisation. Accordingly, the societies are acquiring different values and under going change. In modern societies, women and men are facing a situation of conflict and encountering conflicting situation about their roles and expectations both within and outside the home. Today girls are expected to receive higher education, marry, have a family, maintain a professional career and yet attend to numerous traditional household duties and chores. Therefore married women often experience role conflict and feel guilty

of not spending sufficient time in being good housewives and mothers. At the same time women's access to employment leads to higher mobility, outside the four walls of the house and neighborhood, greater participation in decision making, contribution to the family income, savings etc. All, this constitutes crucial means of becoming less dependent on male members and also exercising control and assertiveness.

3.7 SUMMARY

Discrimination and inequality faced by women on the account of sex has a profound impact on the life course of women like marriage, motherhood, work, old age etc across the societies. Therefore, a life course perspective has the potential to direct attention to the situation of women at various times in their lives. The world of men and women are different in terms of work, mobility, status, condition, position, work, wealth, education, nutrition, marriage, relations and practically everything. Understanding the concept of gender and life course is essential to our understanding of how various events, activities and processes affect lives of boys and girls, men and women, in different ways in different societies on account of which they learn masculine and feminine behaviour. In spite of girls' socially weaker position compared to boys, girls enjoy more personal freedom and autonomy in their natal homes than they do after getting married. While a daughter-in-law is at the bottom of the household hierarchy and controlled by both women and men in the groom's house, a young married woman is still valued as a potential child-bearer.

Women gain freedom upon getting older, like the mother-in law generation has more freedom in life, is less dominated by males, and has more authority than in earlier life phases. Menarche, marriage, motherhood are events that often brings about a marked change in the lives of most women. Every society in contemporary times faces the onslaught of ongoing rapid social and cultural transformations affecting women's lives and life courses

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Sample Questions

- 1) What is life course approach? Explain concepts related to life course approach.
- 2) Explain gender and the life course perspective in detail.
- 3) What are the implications of the different life courses? Explain from gender perspective with examples.