
UNIT 2 GENDER AND SEXUALITIES

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

Any engagement with sexuality demands the understanding that sexuality is socially constructed. Notions of what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘unnatural’ often come into play while talking about sexuality and sexual desires. These ideas of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ are used to describe sexualities which are not ‘normative’.

How does sexuality relate to women’s empowerment? If indeed there are such connections, what has been the nature of engagement on the part of the women’s groups, in the current context in India, with issues of sexuality and issues of same sex desire?

Towards these goals, the issues addressed by this unit include: Challenging essentialism related to ideas and identities related to sexuality, how sexuality impact our lives and how marginalization based on sexuality leads to the concept of sexual hierarchy.

An effort has been made in this Unit to draw not only upon theoretical work undertaken on the above issues but also on interactions during workshops/life stories/fictionalized accounts. Questions have been asked around these to help us to deepen the engagement with the issues being discussed.

Let us look at the objectives of the Unit.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- Know the social construction of sexuality;
- Enable learners to understand sexuality in a broad framework of patriarchy; and
- Discuss how does sexuality impact every aspect of our lives.

2.3 SEXUALITY: CONCEPT

A central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical and religious and spiritual factors (World Health Organization, Draft Working Definition, and October 2002).

2.4 SOURCE: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

Read and reflect up on the following case study.

My name is Anupama. I love food. I'd be hard pressed though to say what I liked the most. Ok if I must... my list of favourites is topped by gol guppas. For those of you who might not have had the pleasure of eating gol guppas, these are fried round balls of flour, filled with things like boiled chick peas, bits of boiled potato and spicy, flavoured water. (Apologies to those of you know and love gol guppas for this rather technical description of the thing we love.) And if you were to ask me what I hate most, its chicken biryani. Its one of the few things I don't like about my experiences in Hyderabad. It was here infact that I tasted chicken biryani or any kind of meat for that matter, two years ago, when I moved to Hyderabad from Ajmer.

As a child I was never allowed to eat non vegetarian food. My two brothers and my father ate meat, but my mother did not, and neither did she let me. even though we are Guptas... Kshatriyas, and eating meat is not taboo. My mother cooked meat at home but she did not eat it herself, nor, as I said, did she let me eat it. I've grow up feeling really angry and resentful about this.

When I got a job and moved to Lucknow (I was 25 at the time), one of the first things that I did was to start eating meat. I made a friend there and her name was Pushpa. She cooks amazing food and specially her Chicken Korma is out of this world. However, I realized I don't like Tandoori Chicken. It seems dry and tasteless to me. God knows how so many people crave for Tandoori Chicken. We normally eat at each others house. However, whenever she makes Tandoori Chicken, I go out and eat Idli, Dosa, brain curry, kebabs etc. In Lucknow, I discovered the joys of brain curry. I could not bring myself to eat it initially and it was a bit of an acquired taste, but now I love it. What would my mother think of that I wonder!

Let us reflect upon the following:

- It is commonly held that taste in food is biological, natural, instinctual and fixed. Having read Anupama's story, would you agree or disagree? Why?
- **Perhaps in your answer you might agree that taste in food is strongly influenced by gender, caste, class, religion and region i.e. it is socially constructed.**

- At Home, Anupama could not eat meat because of her gender. Her brothers and father could because they are Guptas. They might not have been non-vegetarian if they were Brahmins. It was because Anupama shifted to Lucknow that she was exposed to different kinds of cuisine. And she could try out different kinds of food in Lucknow, because she could afford to do so.
- Anupama started eating meat at the age of 25. Also, at first Anupama was reluctant to even try brain curry, and then began loving it.

Therefore, we can say that Anupama

- i) Is diverse (what I love you might hate). There are many things that Anupama loves to eat. Puspha loves tandoori chicken however, Anupama does not.
- ii) Has positive and negative dimensions

Anupama loves food. It has been a source of enjoyment and discovery for her. We also know that as a girl Anupama was very upset that she was not allowed to eat meat. This was an act of discrimination that she resented. Anupama has experienced food in terms of both an enhancement and reduction of her sense of well being.

You might wonder why you are having to read and analyze Anupama's food habits in such detail. Or perhaps you have guessed already.

Question: Do you see any similarities between the dimensions that you have explored above with and sexuality?

It could well be argued that everything that can be said about taste in food, holds true for sexuality. Let's replace what we wrote above for 'taste in food' with 'sexuality' and see whether this is indeed so.

Sexuality...

- Is strongly influenced by gender, caste, class, religion and region i.e. it is socially constructed
- Is not fixed, but changes and fluid
- Is diverse (what I might love you might hate)
- Has positive and negative dimensions

Let us read these attributes in details.

Diversity

What shape our sexual desires, who we are attracted to and how we attain sexual satisfaction varies from individual to individual. Generally, it is assumed that attraction can only happen between men and women. However, since desire is fluid, attraction can happen between any two individuals. For instance, sexual attraction can happen between two women or between two men too.

The colors of desire are varied- it's not about who you are attracted to but what kind of desire you feel. Normally, when people hear the word 'Sex', they mean a sexual act between a man and a woman. This might be because this kind of sexual act is linked to lineage, reproduction and progeny, even though we know that sex is done not only for reproduction but for pleasure and desire.

HOW WILL THE WORLD BE IF THERE WAS NO DIVERSITY

Imagine that today the government has issued an order that all women should wear yellow sarees and all the men should wear white shirt and black pants. Tell me how would the world look? Boring! Actually, it is important to understand that we should not be scared of diversity but should accept it with objectivity.

Pain and pleasure:

What are the terms which come to your mind when you think about the word sexuality? Love, desire, sexual pleasure, sexual orientation, shame, taboo, pain, sexual violence, rape, hesitation, rules, norms, societal sanctions etc.

From the above description, it is quite evident that sexuality has both positive and negative aspects. However, the positive aspects, like for example the instances of desire and pleasure are hardly talked about. Mostly, sexuality is talked about in the context of pain and violence. But it is important to acknowledge the positive aspects or the pleasure part of sexuality as well. Gayle Rubin says, “To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic like more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation”.

Fluid and changeable

Like our food habits, sexuality is also fluid and can change. However, it might not be as changeable as food habits. Though not on a regular basis, but desires around sexuality- what I like, who I like can change sometime during life.

Socially constructed

What we eat, how we eat, who can eat what and why we eat are all socially constructed. Similarly with regard to sexuality also there are norms which will prove that sexuality is also socially constructed. In considering the argument that sexuality is socially constructed, it might be useful to consider here that who, how, when, whom and why we desire are all strongly subjected to social influences. There are well defined social norms related to all these dimensions of sexuality.

Following paragraphs explain how sexuality is socially constructed:

- **With whom:** In terms of who is meant to experience desire, once again the reproductive logic prevails. Often those who are outside of the reproductive age are either considered to be asexual or their sexual desires are considered to be unacceptable or inappropriate. Linked to the reproductive logic also is the view that denies people with disabilities the validity of their sexual desires. (very well shown in the movie Margaret with a straw) Desire is also only meant to be experienced between a man and a woman, preferably of the same caste, class and religion and in certain parts of the country of a different *gotra*.
- **When:** After marriage. Relationships outside the institution of marriage are not accepted and is not considered respectable.
- **Where:** Within the privacy of the bedroom.

Mumbai Police Arrested 40 Couples From Hotel Rooms For Public Indecency. Going Too Far?¹

In a most bizarre incident, Mumbai Police conducted a raid in Madha Island and Aksa area and have arrested couples who were apparently spreading 'public indecency'.

They reached the hotel rooms and pulled the couples out of that. Around 40 couples were arrested in this raid.

Details of the raid:

- People who were caught were made to call their parents and also charged Rs. 1200/- as fine. They suffered humiliation and violation of their human rights. The incident shows how state tries to control sexuality of its subjects.
- **What:** In terms of how sexual desire is to be experienced or expressed, it is heteronormative sex that is considered 'normal' and respectable. As it is associated with human reproduction. While it would be difficult to argue that the Victorian idea of 'sex only for reproduction' still holds true, never the less the reproductive logic persists, and grants high degree of legitimacy. In fact, in many contexts, the word 'sex' is used interchangeably with heteronormative sex'. In the Indian context, other sexual acts tend to be stigmatized.
- **Why:** The reason why sex is allowed is of course for reproduction and progeny. Sex for pleasure is not accepted.

Thus, these are some of the sexual norms that seek to govern who, how, when and why we experience sexual desires. Those who are perceived as breaking these norms are 'punished' and their rights violated. Gay men are harassed by the police, older people who are sexually active are ridiculed, younger people's sexuality is heavily policed, women who initiate sexual interactions are called sluts, lesbian women are forced to get married. Adherence to sexual norms is also sought to be ensured through processes of internalization of these norms.

An important means of maintaining these norms related to sexuality are processes of socialization which make our sexual behaviour and responses seem natural. Although our desires might be experienced as perhaps the most spontaneous and deepest expression of 'who we really are', sexuality is socially constructed.

Difference between food and sexuality

As you have seen that there are so many similarities between food and sexuality. However, there is a difference too. The easy way in which we can talk about differences in food is not possible when it comes to sexuality. If I don't like tandoori chicken and you like it, it might not create much differences between you and me. However, if my desire or my sexuality is very different from the norms as decided by the society, I might have to face severe consequences for it.

2.5 SEXUALITY- AN ASPECT OF LIFE

World Health Organization (WHO) has given a detailed definition of sexuality. However, it needs to be reinstated that it is a central aspect of our lives. It is present in almost all the intricacies of our lives and it is important to address

those intricacies. We are presenting you some of the aspects of lives and you can see how sexuality is present in all these aspects.

Education: Drop-out of girls after 5th standard is a big issue in our country. The upper primary schools are located far from the village. In the context of education, we call it an issue of ‘Gender’. But is it seriously an issue of gender? If you talk to these girls’ parents they will tell you that since the schools are located far away from the villages, they are scared that ‘something’ might happen on their way to school. By something, they mean either sexual violence or some girls might explore their sexuality.

Mobility: Women are not allowed to go out at night. Mostly in women hostels, girls are not allowed to go out at night. In some universities, they have started the ‘Pinjra Tod’ Movement which calls the hostels as *pinjra* (prison). This also has linkages with sexuality because the authorities are scared that the girls might face sexual violence. The authorities will tell you that they are trying to protect the girls. But it is not merely a matter of protection. They are scared that girls might engage in consensual relationships or sex if they are allowed freedom.

Doctor’s treatment: Some parts of the body which are linked to reproduction and sexual health are called ‘private parts’ Girls are meant to feel shy about those parts. So whenever there are some health issues in those parts, girls feel shy to show them to doctors. Normally, such issues remain hidden.

2.6 SEXUAL HIERARCHY

In the mainstream society these are some of things about relationships that we always hear:

- Relationship should be between a man and a woman
- Relationships should be within the institution of marriage
- Relationships should be between a man and a woman of same caste, same religion and same class.

You must be thinking what’s wrong with these norms. It is important to understand that people who do not subscribe to these norms are penalized in their lives. They face varied forms of discrimination in the society, not accepted in and are at times might face death too. The following incident can be a case under study.

Box No. 2.1

Same Sex Couple commits suicide²

Monotosh Chakraborty | TNN | Jan 24, 2011

SONARPUR (South 24-Parganas): Two teenage girls committed suicide in a village in South 24-Parganas, apparently disillusioned about their future as a same-sex couple. Police found the bodies of 19-year-old Bobby Saha and 17-year-old Puja Mondal after breaking down a door of Bobby’s house in the Tripura Sundari area of Boral. The post-mortem report says they took poison together and lay down to die, clutching each other’s arms. “It appears that the two girls were in a relationship but they were depressed about the uncertainty of their future, which is why they committed suicide,” said police superintendent L N Meena. The victims’ families reportedly had a cordial

relationship despite facing criticism from neighbours for the girls’ “unusual behaviour”. “Bobby used to dress and behave like a man, whereas Puja was like any other girl.

Thus, the above incident shows that society does not approve any other kind of relationship except heterosexual relationship. In the earlier section, we saw how when men and women marry outside their respective castes, then they face severe harassment in the hands of the family and society.

Gayle Rubin talks about the ‘Charmed Circle’ with two conceptive circles representing acceptance and low acceptance of sexual acts behaviour. The inner circle represents sexual acts that are accepted and privileged while the “outer limits” represent non acceptable sexual behaviour that is viewed as abnormal and is often pathologized. But the boundaries are permeable and they change from culture to culture, market to market, generation to generation.

But a divergence is only acceptable under certain boundaries, e.g. homosexuality is acceptable but within the ‘inner circle’- it means it has to be monogamous, within home, within marriage, same generation etc.

People who are within the charmed circle are privileged and gain in terms of material realities. For instance, if a girl is married to a man of the same caste and religion, she will have respect in the community. Also people who are married according to societal norms get material benefits too. For instance, if I am married, then I can nominate my husband in my life insurance, or I can adopt a kid together, I can get a loan together, I can buy a house together. If I were a lesbian then I would not be able to buy a house together with my partner in India, or will not be allowed to nominate her in my insurance. But, this differs from context to context. In some countries where same sex marriage is legalized and the couples can nominate each other; however, one has to be in the charmed circle and not in the outside circle.

Coming back to the sexual hierarchy, it is clear that there is a fundamental relationship between this hierarchy and patriarchy. At the heart of the charmed circle is the heterosexual, monogamous married couple. This is precisely the unit that patriarchy requires. It is only within such a unit that the division of labour, resources and power required by patriarchy becomes possible. This also explains the severity of the punishment meted out to those who are seen to be violating the norms that maintain the sexual hierarchy. The incident of young women couple (in Box No 2. 1) feeling driven to commit suicide is an example of such punishment

Take the following exercise to assess your learning of last few sections.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below to answer the questions.

ii) Compare your answer with the Course material of this unit.

1) Define sexuality

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2) What is Sexual Hierarchy?

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In the following section, read about same sex desires.

2.7 SAME SEX DESIRES

Same sex relationships are those where men and women are in relationships with people of the same gender. For instance, if I am a woman and am attracted to a woman, or if I am a man attracted to another man, then I experience same sex desires. These relationships are also called homosexual relationships. These kinds of desires are considered ‘abnormal’ by society. Some of the human rights violence faced by people who desire people of same gender are:

- **Silence:** There is silence around these issues. One cannot talk to their closest friends about their desires because there is an assumption of heterosexuality among people
- **Family violence:** The violence around homosexuality starts within homes. Once parents find out about their desire, families pressurize people to abide by the norms. Several same sex desiring people have reported physical and mental violence from parents. In some places, there are instances of ‘corrective rape’ from family members.
- **Educational institution:** There is no mention of such relationships in text books. Friends taunt when they get to know about other’s sexuality.
- **Work place:** If you are in a workplace and your family is invited for a party, what if you are a same sex desiring person. Will you be able to present your partner as your family? You won’t be able to do that.

The only reason same sex desires are called abnormal is because they challenge patriarchy to a large extent. Think about a household which has two women as partners. Who will do the work outside of home, or who will take care of the household work. Either both will take care of both sides or one of them will do particular work. And since both of them are women, power is not unequal as in the case of a relationship between men and women. Same sex desires are also outside of reproductive logic. They do not have sex for procreation but for pleasure. Therefore, such relationships are stigmatized by society.

2.8 GOOD WOMEN AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH SEXUALITY

According to societal norms, there are two kinds of women- good women and bad women. It is usually expected that a woman will be a good daughter, good

wife, good mother, good sister etc. What is the definition of ‘good’ and ‘bad’? Why are we also so scared of becoming the ‘bad woman’?

What does a ‘good woman’ look like? She abides by all the norms of the society. She wears what is considered ‘appropriate’ by the society, she eats after feeding everyone, she listens to everyone, she cares for everyone without thinking about her own self. She has sex with her husband whenever her husband desires, she will never make the first move with regard to relationship or sex. On the other hand, a ‘bad woman’ according to society is one who does what she wants, she wears the clothes she wants, she eats when she is hungry. So let’s say, she has freedom to do whatever pleases her without taking other’s freedom. Normally it is assumed that since the ‘bad’ woman does whatever pleases her, she might be irresponsible. However, doing what one likes does not make her irresponsible. The norms of the good women are directly linked to sexuality. For instance, a ‘good’ woman will never say ‘no’ to her husband for sex, she will not talk to other men, she will wear what society insists that she wear. Therefore, these norms are directly linked to sexuality.

2.9 SEXUAL PLEASURE AND EMPOWERMENT

There are complex reasons why many women, including feminists, have tended to be anxious around sexuality. Several of these reasons have been powerfully captured by *Carole Vance*.

“Women - socialized by their mothers to keep their dresses down, their pants up, and their bodies away from stranger – come to experience their own sexual impulses as dangerous, causing them to venture outside the protected sphere.” Continuing with the theme of how the external control and internal processes of socialization come together to impact women’s sexuality, Dr. Vance writes that “The horrific effects of gender inequality may include not only brute violence, but the internalized control of women’s impulses, poisoning desire at its very root with self-doubt and anxiety.” Much of what Carole Vance writes applies to feminists in particular such as the following striking piece of analysis, “Sexuality also raises the fear of competition, as we recognize our own wishes to compete for attention and for loved objects. Whether women are lesbian or heterosexual, the competitors are other women, an unsisterly prospect.”³

“...(In a) workshop on gender and sexuality conducted by Nirantar with non formal education teachers in rural Rajasthan (a western state of India), we had a discussion on a scene in a documentary film in which a group of young boys talk amongst themselves about their sexual experiences with girls. One of boys comments on girls’ responses and says that even when girls say ‘no’ they actually mean ‘yes’. This was a comment which resonated strongly with the male teachers in the workshop. One of the women teachers however said that if a woman says ‘no’ to a man who makes a pass at her, it is common for him to dismiss this by saying ‘when a woman says no, she actually means yes.’ And if a woman says ‘yes’ to a man who has expressed interest in her, she will immediately be labeled a ‘loose’ woman. Women don’t have the space to say yes, even when they want to. This opens up the space for men who are rebuffed to invalidate women when they say no. The discussion concluded with the learning that women will have the right to say ‘no’ only if they have the right to say ‘yes’.⁴ An important linkage between sexuality and empowerment is related to bodily integrity in

terms of women's ability to express their sexual desires and also to be able to say 'no' to unwanted sexual attention.

Finally we can say, Sexual Empowerment is

- The ability to think about one's own happiness, recognize the importance of sexual desires and to be able to express them
- Understanding the role of sexuality in why and how women are oppressed and its relation with oppression of women.
- Recognizing and striving to overcome barriers related to sexuality to the acquisition of rights
- Questioning judgmental attitudes towards each other and thereby strengthening collectives

2.10 SUMMING UP

In this unit you learnt what is distant nature of the categories such as sexuality and sex understood by sexuality and how it is different from sex. Sexuality is also socially constructed hierarchical in nature and controlled by patriarchy. Also other than hetero-normative types of sexual desires are not accepted by society. The unit ends with a discussion on sexual empowerment.

2.11 KEY WORD

Diversity: Varieties, range of different things.

2.12 REFERENCES

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2.13 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Define sexuality
- 2) Explain how sexuality is socially constructed.
- 3) How does society differentiate between a good and a bad woman.
- 4) What is sexual empowerment?