
UNIT 6 GENDER, YOUTH IDENTITY AND SEXUALITY*

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6.1 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Know the concept of gender identity and its link with gender socialization;
- Critically examine gender roles, changing gender roles, and the gender stereotypes prevalent in our social and cultural contexts; and
- Elucidate the importance social and cultural change in reference to gender equity and national developments.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

Gender is central to our experience of living, our dreams, aspirations and the quality of our lives. What is gender? How do we learn who we are in terms of gender? In this Unit we will discuss how gender is about understanding personal and social power and not just about being born a woman or a man. Socialization process plays a crucial role in what we can do/cannot do in our lives by influencing our perception and expectation of us. However, with changing times, gender roles are changing. Sexuality and gender are closely related, yet different ideas. Adolescents usually have misconceptions about sexuality which results in unhealthy relationships and many a mishaps also. Hence it is important to discuss about healthy sexuality in adolescents.

6.3 GENDER AND IDENTITY

The first question perhaps, every person asks, when a child is born – Is it a boy or a girl? Then, the question is asked – Is the child and the mother alright? Thus, we see that being a boy or a girl is central to who we are – in the eyes of the others around us. However, identity keeps getting larger, always including gender within it. When we grow up, we keep asking the question –Who am I? and we keep getting different answers –all correct through our life time.

We are told – you belong to India, you are an Indian; you belong to Punjabi/ Assamese/Marathi/Odia, this is your rich linguistic heritage etc. So your language, literature, poetry and songs are who you are, part of your identity. When you go to school, you are a student of a particular class of a school/ college or institution. In all these identities, gender remains the central identity.

So, let us first understand ‘Identity’ a little more. Among Psychologists, three overlapping terms are used – Personality, Self and Identity. Personality is understood as certain fixed, ‘trait’ like qualities and characteristics, which make us unique and different from each other. If you are a BA Hons. Psychology learner, you must have learned about personality in BPC-103:Psychology of Individual Differences. It includes our openness to experience, our basic approach towards people – whether we are extraverted or introverted, our capacity to adapt and cope or be neurotic. Personality traits remain more or less constant throughout life span, but there is a scope to develop and enhance our personality.

Self is a term mostly used, when we ourselves recognize who we are and articulate it. We develop a sense of self as we grow and become self-aware. We start understanding our self-worth and develop our self-confidence. We regulate our self in expressing emotions and thoughts etc. Thus, self is centered on our awareness and articulation of our personality characteristics on one side and its interaction with society, socialization, norms and our interpersonal and social experiences on the other.

Identity is the most outward form of that articulation, where our self ‘gets identified’ with certain characteristics and has most impact on interpersonal and social behaviors. We get identity as Hindu or Muslim or Christian or atheist. We may say, I am born in a traditional family but I ‘identify’ myself with modern values and so I am a modernist. We may also feel, I was born as a girl, but I feel, I am a boy, or vice versa. Thus, our identity is what we fully accept and own. It deeply impacts our interpersonal and social relationships. We get an identity as a woman or a man or a transgender. We may change our identity, when we grow up. Of course, changing one’s identity will be extremely difficult and traumatic in many cases such as gender identity, but it is possible. It is easier to change in some cases-say your political identity. You may shift from being a non-interested citizen to an interested voter or even further to a deeply committed member of a party. You may change/shift political thought as well.

So, the point is – Identity is the most externalized of the three concepts that we discussed earlier. Now, here issues get very interesting! Because, identity is most externalized and social, we may have several identities that are either socialized in us or those that we have chosen. For example, what it represents to be a man or a woman is an identity that impacts our future, right at our birth or

even before we are born. Similarly, we have our regional, linguistic, community and national identities. Accordingly, our normative behaviour, our social and interpersonal interactions and our decisions change. Secondly, because our identities relate to social structures, it's norms and rules, our identity puts constraints and enables/facilitates certain process of growing up, developing of certain thoughts, emotions, actions and behaviour. The interesting question is, when certain identities and socialization processes contradict each other or create dissonance, how does the person react or respond?

Now, what is gender and how is it an identity? Gender is a social construction. Social constructions are groups of related ideas that the societies create to describe, understand and regulate behaviour and changes in societies. To illustrate, the idea of adolescence and its related concepts such as identity crisis, did not exist about 150 years back in India, because, Indians got married as small children and social structures were so strong and rigid that changes in adolescence, even as they happened, were never studied separately. Adolescence wasn't discussed in western psychology till the 1960's. When changes in the society in the western world created the social reality of adolescence, the term-adolescence was examined, studied, discussed in greater detail to understand this new social reality. To give another example, now, as you are aware, the modern society is going through a demographic transition and is an aging society. Therefore, much research and scholarship is focusing on ageing, positive ageing, death, identity in old age etc.

Therefore, in order to understand gender as an identity, we distinguish between our biological given sex and gender as a social construction. We are assigned a biological given sex based on the primary sexual characteristics we are born with. If we are born with a penis and testicles, then we are assigned a biological sex of a man/boy. If we are born with a vagina and a womb, we are assigned a sex of a girl/woman. However, it is the social construction of 'Gender' that defines, describes, makes us understand and regulates our interpersonal and social performance as a boy or a girl.

You can revisit Unit 1 where you have learned about gender as one of the indicators of youth identity.

6.3.1 Gender Socialization and Gender Roles

The process of growing up, during which we learn from our parents, family and the larger community and society around us -what it means to be a woman or a man is called gender socialization. Society and the process of growing up creates significant rules of do's and don'ts. For example, women in India, didn't go out for work, because the society felt that women shouldn't go out for work and that it's the man's role. Even now, in Indian villages, there are rules about when, where and how women can go out in public places.

Depending on the societies and communities that we are born in, we are socialized into gender performance or specific roles assigned for men and/or women. In some societies, we are taught that boys are bold and independent; they don't cry. We are socialized that girl are not bold, they always want others approval and cry often. In other societies, it's ok for men to cry and women can be strong and bold. In some societies, the gender socialization is very strict and not

following these norms creates immediate mockery, dismissal and social rejection. In some societies, these gender norms can be slightly fluid and variations would not be punished.

Traditionally, societies assigned certain work and ways of being specifically to men and women. When work and ways of being are assigned simply by the virtue of being born a male or a female, it is called a gender role. Men have traditionally, been the 'bread winners' the 'karta' or the doers, whose role was to go out and earn livelihoods and money. Women have been assigned the role of the nurturer – the person who cooks, keeps the house clean, washes clothes, bears and rears children. This assigning of specific gender roles meant that the socialization of girls is different from that of the boys. Because, girls are expected to grow up and take care of homes, their childhood is marked by an emphasis on the activities they are supposed to do as grown up women- for example, taking care of younger siblings, helping the mother in cooking, cleaning, washing and other household chores, bringing water and serving others, especially their elders. Boy's childhood is marked by experiences that emphasize their independence, boldness, courage and capacity to have their way, because, it is a social expectation that they need to be independent in their adult role as a 'bread winner'.

As boys and girls grow up to be men and women, they become, for most of the time, adults who fit in the rules and the expectations from the society. What they have grown up learning from their elders, becomes the truth for them. It becomes 'internalized' part of their self and identity. However, we must also wonder- what happens to those attributes of the personality and self that don't fit this role assignment? Some boys are dreamy and would like to be poets and feel emotional; when they cry, people mock them. Some girls are bold in their personality, they want to jump and climb trees and don't like to cook; they get constant shoutings from their elders that they will suffer after marriage! In reality, all of us have 'personality' attributes that don't fit the rules of gender roles. Can you think of some aspects within yourself that don't fit in your gender socialization?

6.3.2 Changing Gender Roles

With changing times and changing societies, gender socialization has also changed bit by bit. During the time of freedom struggle, women have taken an active part. Our leaders such as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule fought for several social reforms such as social reform against Sati (live burning of widows) or, against child marriage. Religious leaders such as Swami Vivekananda and Dayananda fought for education of women. Our Constituent Assembly, under the leadership of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, gave women of India, the right to vote as equal to men, even before the many mature democracies of the western world.

After India became a free nation, more women started getting educated, educating their children at home and also started entering the work force. They started speaking for change. So, even though basic parameters of literacy and sex ratio, still after 70 years of Indian independence show poor numbers in some states such as Rajasthan, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh, slowly the gender roles, especially in reference to girls and women have started changing.

Census data (2011) shows that overall, the sex ratio is healthy in many states. A few states such as Haryana have abysmal sex ratio. What does sex ratio mean?

Sex ratio shows the proportion of men and women in a region, state or the country. If the women are very low in proportion to men, it indicates several disturbing trends such as female feticide and infanticide as well as increased crimes against women. So, we need to be aware of and work towards strengthening this indicator. As a society, we need to be aware of efforts that protect the unborn girl child, ensure better nutrition and health of growing girls and protection of women against crimes such as molestation, rape and violence.

Women's literacy rate has also shown improvement after independence and in most southern states, women's literacy rates are high in the present times. In Northern states, women's literacy rates are lower and need improvements. This is influenced by various factors such as social and cultural practices, regional variation etc. Why is women's literacy important? A girl or a woman, who can read and write is more aware and informed in this fast changing world. She can be independent and is less likely to get exploited. So, you can see the irony that, in spite of a bold personality, or sharp intelligence, the region where you are born and the society and administration around you, will determine, whether you will be able to use your intelligence and personality to get educated and change your destiny. For example, you may want to be an IAS officer, have the personality and intelligence for it, yet, if you are born in a region, where girls are not sent to school, beyond 10th; what would you do?

All across the country, there is an increased focus on girl's education and even though, there have been improvements, so much more needs to be done still. Girls work at home, help their mother in bringing water, washing and keeping the house clean, take care of their siblings and then – study as well. Despite challenges, educated women are entering into the workforce and many women, nowadays continue to study even after they get married or secure a job. This is a change from traditional thinking, where girl were not allowed to study, were not sent out of the house for further studies or were not allowed to study or secure a job after marriage.

Let us take a look at women's health, age of marriage and age at which the woman becomes a mother. These are key indicators for woman's health and also show changing gender roles. Across the country, census data shows that societies are changing and marriages are getting delayed till the legal age of marriage at 18 years. Marriage after 18 years, prepares the woman better in physiological, emotional and psychological terms to shoulder the responsibilities of starting a family and taking care of her children and the household. However, we still have a long way to go in terms of decision making by women. Many women, postpone to go to hospitals, even when they are sick or ill, because they feel that their health is not important, they can manage, and their health should not cause financial burden! This is ironic, considering that they work, all the time for the well-being of the family, even if they don't earn money for it. Many women have no choice, about when to get pregnant, where to go for delivery of the child etc. Thus, we need to create more awareness and action on women's health, because of this imbalance in the gender socialization process.

Just as gender roles for women are changing, ever so slowly, gender roles for men also need to change. If boy's and men's socialization, remains the same, and girls gender socialization changes, then it creates an imbalance in social functioning. Some change in men's gender roles has been seen. For example,

men, especially in urban areas are more open to help their spouses in household work or take care of young children, but much more needs to be done for changing gender roles for men, where they accept and respect equal contribution and leadership by women in their households and workspaces, without viewing it as a threat to their identity. For example, if the woman is educated and would like to work, should she not have the freedom to choose?

6.3.3 Gender Stereotyping and Social Change

One observed aspect of gender socialization is the phenomena of gender stereotyping. Gender stereotyping is to assume negative characteristics and prejudices in a person that you are interacting with, simply because, the person belongs to that identity category. Let us understand this a little more. We meet a person from a rural context in India and are happily surprised, when this person speaks with us in English and that too about a technical subject-say nutrition from green, leafy vegetables. The question is why are we surprised? We are surprised, because we never thought that a person from rural context in India can, (a) speak English and (b) talk authoritatively about the nutritional components from green leafy vegetables? So, further question is, why did we assume such impressions about a person, even before meeting the person?

The answer is given by psychologists. Psychology says, that human psyche develops a 'stereotype', say about what a rural person from India is like. We have formed an impression or an assumption that rural persons are not only illiterate, cannot speak English but also do not have knowledge on nutrition or other subjects. Thus, this stereotyping or assumptions pre-determine our approach and interaction with a rural person, even before we meet him or her. Our looking glass is colored and that is an injustice to that rural person.

Similarly, we routinely interact with people, without examining our stereotypes about caste, class, religion and race. We assume wrongly, for example, that certain people are unclean, because they belong to certain communities. This is a grave injustice. We assume that certain people are violent, because they belong to certain communities. This again, is grave injustice.

Similarly, we have several unexamined gender stereotypes in the society. For example, there is an assumption that women cannot read or understand sciences and mathematics. There is an assumption that all women, by the virtue of them being born a woman, love to cook and be a mother. So, we are shocked, when we meet a woman and she says, 'I am better than all the boys in math or I don't want to be a mother/or I don't like to get into the kitchen'. We think that it surely must be a fault in the upbringing (which is a general term for socialization). We assume that women are shy and cannot speak in public assemblies. When a woman, gets up and speaks up in a village assembly, we are surprised. We assume that, women who work late till night are asking for sexual attention or that women, who are bold/ who smoke and/or work late till night are 'loose'. We assume that when a woman says 'no' to sexual and romantic attention, she means 'yes'. All these wrong ideas, impressions and assumptions color our interactions with women within households and in public spaces, even before we get to know them better as individual human beings. With these presumptions and prejudices, not only crimes against women are increasing, but our day to day interaction with women is unjust to them and to ourselves as human beings. For instance,

beating a woman, physical torture, devaluing her, and dismissing her as a human is bad enough .

Similarly, we assume that all men are strong and bold and never feel fear. So, when a man says, I am scared, everybody laughs at and mocks that man. Psychologists will say, fear is a universal emotion, ‘even’ men will feel so. We assume that men cannot cook or are clumsy in the kitchen. But, in hotels and catering, kitchens are run by men and many famous cooks have been/are men. We assume that nursing is a domain of women, but experience shows that male nurses are equally or more caring towards the ill and the infirm.

This gender stereotyping therefore, needs to be examined, discussed and changed, if we want social change to happen. Men and women, boys and girls need to ask this question - What are the assumptions and ideas that are coloring my view, my approach and my interactions with the others who may be men or women. Am I, unconsciously, through my unexamined assumptions being insensitive or unjust to the other person? Think about it.

Self Assessment Questions I

1) We have one identity or several identities? Explain.

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2) Gender is a social construction. (Write True or False)

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3) What is gender stereotyping?

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6.4 SEXUALITY – SELF AND BODY AWARENESS

Sexuality is understood in various aspects primarily arising out of a desire for self-validation by the chosen and accepted other, intimacy and romantic

attachment as well as desire for pleasure and fulfilment. As mentioned, children are assigned their gender based on the primary sexual characteristics at birth. Primary sexual characteristics are the presence of penis and testicles among boys and the presence of a vaginal passage, the uterus and the ovaries (womb), the major and minor labia that fold the urethra and the clitoris as well as the vulva among girls. Most often, the presentation of the primary sexual characteristics is un-ambiguous and therefore, based on these visible characteristics, sex is assigned. Thereafter, a decision is taken to nurture the child as a girl or a boy based on the assigned sex.

Sexuality is closely linked to our self-awareness and self-validation. Sexuality is an important yet rarely discussed topic in social discussions. Psychologists and scientists, religious and social leaders as well as reformers have acknowledged the importance of healthy sexuality based on mutual respect and honor for both men and women. Yet, note the contradiction that, there is a great hesitation to discuss healthy sexuality in public and private spaces.

Some psychologists have stated that sexuality is at the core of human personality, whereas others have said that it is certainly an important drive but may not be at the core. Humanistic psychologists in general have stated that self is the organizing center of personality traits –that which says – “I am” and therefore, concerns and motivation of this self includes themes such as mastery, esteem, self-actualization, transcendence, self-awareness and self-worth. Clearly, human experience is complex and layered, where sexuality and self are deeply interlinked and yet self cannot be reduced to sexuality alone.

Sexuality and body awareness gains prominence as puberty approaches. Puberty is marked by the emergence of secondary sexual characteristics such as increase in body hair, including pubic hair, emergence of body hair on face (as beards and moustache) in men, the growth of breasts in women and the onset of menstruation (called as menarche) in girls, sperm production in boys and the changes in the voice, increase in height/weight for both girls and boys.

Therefore, physiologically, several bodily changes take place during puberty and awareness of one’s own body increases due to these. Hormones, specifically the growth hormone and the sex hormones production increases manifold and continues its increased circulation in the body till the onset of menopause and andro-pause in women and men respectively.

Socially and emotionally too, the adolescent girls and boys become aware of the presence of others around, the awareness of one’s self as unique and separate. Increased self-awareness means a reflective subjectivity and a desire for appreciation, approval and validation by the others, especially the opposite sex.

Complex feeling and emotions develop among adolescents about interpersonal, social and community relationships, politics, ideology and religion. Thoughts and ideas about love, friendship, loyalty, enmity, hatred, dislikes and likes, confusion, fear, adequacy, guilt etc. are tested and resolved by most adolescents, by the time they navigate through their adolescent years.

6.4.1 Sexuality, Adolescence and Body Image

Thus, we see that, body awareness, sexuality and self-awareness, develop in a deeply interlinked fashion during puberty and adolescence. Most adolescents

spend more time grooming themselves, appreciating themselves and expecting appreciation from significant others. Many adolescents also go through phases where they focus on one body part, characteristic or function and feel it is not perfect and needs some correction. For example, someone may secretly feel that their height (which is a body characteristic) is not good enough; someone may feel that they sweat a lot or their body odour (which is a bodily function) is disturbingly strong and unpleasant for themselves and others. Some adolescent may feel that their nose (which is a body part) is too crooked or the forehead too high or arms too dangly. These phases may go off on their own, in most cases and most adolescents will accept and learn to appreciate their bodies and be comfortable about them, as they grow into youth and adulthood.

In a simplest way, the positive or negative impressions that we form about our bodies, when we see ourselves in the mirror, when we groom ourselves and take care of ourselves is the 'body image' that we have formed. A positive body image means that when we see ourselves in the mirror or think about ourselves, or health or our interpersonal relationships, especially our romantic attractions, we think good, positive and comfortable about our self.

This comfort translates into self-confidence and esteem, healthier interpersonal relations and psychological and physical health. Adolescents and youth with positive body image are more likely to be responsible for their health, eating, sleeping and daily schedules. They are likely to be more comfortable in their relationships with their families and friends. Some adolescents however, develop a negative body image which negatively affects their self-esteem. They may look at the mirror and think that they are too fat and just not right. This seems to happen, mostly in case of girls, because, the society socializes the women to believe that thinness and low body weight is attractive for men. In order to address this continuing discomfort, the girl continues to eat less and less or in some cases, eats and then self induces vomiting to continue on these eat and vomit cycles. Thus, we must clearly distinguish that while going through the phases of questioning perfection in one's body parts, functions or characteristics usually fade and is a healthy part of growing up, a consistent negative body image and a negative self-esteem has serious negative impact on physical health, eating, sleeping and other daily schedules, as well as psychological and emotional health of the adolescent. This needs to be addressed by the friends, family and community around, through better awareness.

Changing societal norms, increasing influence of media that projects a certain idea of feminine beauty and emphasizes on an ideal and attractive body shape and weight, through its advertising are some of the contributory factors for this dysfunction among growing adolescents and youth.

As part of our conversations with young adolescents, we must also engage in questions such as- are we not attracted towards somebody who is cheerful, has a great sense of humor or has good general knowledge or is strong and determined, or courageous and brave? Is it that we always look at the others body shape and size to find them attractive? Are other qualities-ethical, socio-psychological and intellectual – not important?

6.4.2 Healthy Sexuality

Healthy sexuality is more than self and body image. Healthy sexuality means to respect, understand and appreciate oneself in totality. It means to respect oneself and one's view of aesthetics, sophistication and beauty that doesn't subscribe to violation and harm. Thus, healthy sexuality doesn't subscribe to self-harm or harming others. When a man proposes his romantic interest to a woman and if the woman rejects his proposal, then healthy sexuality in the man means to graciously accept that rejection and not think of violence, revenge, self-harm or such unhealthy ideas. Similarly, if a man rejects a woman, healthy sexuality means that the woman accepts that decision with maturity and doesn't indulge in self-harm. Thus, healthy sexuality implies mutual respect between men and women, in their romantic and sexual interactions. For example, if a boyfriend, fiancé or the husband approaches the woman with a desire for sexual intercourse and the woman says no, then healthy sexuality would make that boyfriend/fiancé or the husband accept that 'No' as 'No' and not force oneself on the woman.

Healthy Sexuality also accepts that people might have different sexual preferences. Thus, there is no space for violence against people who are considered as 'sexual minorities' – people who are transgender, people who think they are trapped in wrong bodies or people who experience same sex attraction.

Finally, healthy sexuality implies the appreciation of the principles of life itself. It includes engaging with life and appreciation of beauty and harmony in the process of life – of poetry, music, dance and paintings, the play of the senses of the body. Healthy sexuality is thus a healthy, fully developed and functioning self. We had mentioned earlier that the self cannot be reduced to sexuality alone; that it is certainly more than sexuality. We end with the thought that a healthy sexuality expands into a healthy self and a fully functioning person - validating the body as well as the mind and nourishing the experience of life. Thus, healthy sexuality is the expansion and transformation of emotions to include the emotions that arise from empathy, respect, beauty and harmony.

6.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we discussed the concepts of gender, self and identity. We learned how gender is different from biological sex. Our socialization process creates and perpetuates gender roles – what men and women can do or cannot do according to social norms. Many of the social representations of gender imply that we create pre-determined and biased expectations about men and women. Such pre-determined expectations and judgements are called as gender stereotypes and these affect our interpersonal and social relationships. We examined gender stereotypes and how social change needs to be brought about. We also discussed sexuality and its impact on our body awareness, body image and self-awareness. Further, we discussed about healthy sexuality.

6.6 KEY WORDS

Gender socialization : refers to the process of learning from our parents, family and the larger community and society around us – what it means to be a woman or a man.

- Gender roles** : refer to specific roles assigned to males and females by the society simply by the virtue of being born a male or female.
- Gender stereotyping** : is to assume negative characteristics and prejudices in a person that you are interacting with, simply because, the person belongs to that identity category.
- Healthy sexuality** : means to respect, understand and appreciate oneself in totality. It means to respect oneself and one's view of aesthetics, sophistication and beauty that doesn't subscribe to violation and harm. Thus, healthy sexuality doesn't subscribe to self-harm or harming others.

6.7 ANSWERS TO SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Self Assessment Questions I

- 1) We have several identities. Gender is our central identity. But we have other aspects like our country, language, college, institution or work etc. that form part of our identity.
- 2) True
- 3) Gender stereotyping is to assume negative characteristics and prejudices in a person that we interact, simply because, the person belongs to that identity category.

6.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Reflect on the learning module and write a 1000 word essay on your gendered identity (as a man, woman or a trans-person) focusing on the challenges in terms of work, family life and self awareness.
- 2) Differentiate between personality, self and identity.
- 3) Discuss the impact of globalization and gender identity in your region, village/town/city/district or state in about 1000 words. What are the special challenges faced by girls/women in your culture and region; how is globalization changing it?
- 4) Discuss three best ways in which technology can be used to help your family, neighbourhood and culture to fight gender discrimination.

6.9 REFERENCES

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Tomlinson, J. B. (1999). *Globalization and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

6.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

<http://www.bdu.ac.in/cde/docs/ebooks/B-Ed/II/GENDER,%20SCHOOL,%20SOCIETY%20AND%20INCLUSIVE%20SCHOOL.pdf>

[http://persmin.gov.in/otraining/UNDPPProject/undp_modules/Gender%20Issues%20\(Reading%20material\).pdf](http://persmin.gov.in/otraining/UNDPPProject/undp_modules/Gender%20Issues%20(Reading%20material).pdf)

http://www.ncert.nic.in/departments/nie/dse/activities/advisory_board/PDF/Genderconcerns.pdf

<http://gendermatters.in/>



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