
UNIT 8 GENDER AND CULTURE

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit the learners would be able to comprehend and:

- explain the basic concept of gender.
- infer the relationship between gender and culture.
- underline the process of gendering through socialisation and the normalisation of gender(ed) roles in different cultural fields.
- explore the notions of masculinity and femininity with reference to power relations.

8.0 INTRODUCTION

A little boy crying after a fall or over losing a toy is mostly comforted with the words “don’t cry, boys don’t cry”. What does this statement bring to mind? We instantly conjure the image of a strong boy who doesn’t cry when in pain. In doing so, in a way we have framed boys as tough human beings, not allowed to show their emotions through tears. Does this mean boys don’t feel the urge to cry? Why are boys not supposed to cry? Again, most times we associate certain colours like pink with a girl and blue with a boy. Is there a reason why a boy cannot love the colour pink or a girl cannot love the colour blue. If we contemplate on these issues, we would realise they are basically related to how gender is being constructed. Thus, in this unit we shall explore what is gender and how it is related to culture. We would also try to explain the idea of sex and gender. How does the study of gender become relevant to the understanding of culture and provide a critical account of culture and socialisation would be taken up in this unit. This unit would chart some of these important questions to understand the relationship between gender and culture. It also discusses gender stratification, the relationship between gender and sexuality.

8.1 SEX AND GENDER

Let's begin this section with an account of what biologically the term 'sex' stands for. The term 'sex' basically takes into account the biological differences between men and women, related to hormones, chromosomes and genitalia. The fact that males and females have different organs of reproduction, does not explain why male and female are different in other physical and social ways. In other words, in the case of humans, though we are generally of two sexes does not really explain why males and females look differently in many other matters; why they are supposed to behave in a particular manner and are being treated differently by society. Recent works on gender go beyond the oppositional sexual categories of men and women, but include more than two genders (such as male, female and others). In fact, no society that we know treats men and women in the same way; women generally have fewer advantages than men. Historically speaking, even in the pre-modern egalitarian societies (in which all members seemingly had equal access to resources, power and prestige) are characterised with the fact that men have greater access to economic resources, power and social status compared to women. This differential treatment is an outcome of certain cultural expectations and experiences determined by the norms and values rather than the biological differences between men and women. It is thus important to understand the cultural dimensions through which gender roles and attitudes are constructed, articulated and maintained differently in different cultural settings. In other words, gender and its attributes are not given. As Rosaldo and Lamphere conclude, 'different forms of social and cultural organisation have provided women in different places with very different positions, powers and possibilities, so one's own contemporary situation renders any "natural" ranking or differentiation of the sexes altogether obsolete' (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974: Page no)

Did you know?

In terms of organ donations like heart, cornea, liver etc. a male organ can be donated to a female and vice versa. The concept of male is to male or female is to female is also not biologically relevant.

Collier and Yanagisako (1987) defined gender as a form of social inequality, and they therefore viewed the study of gender as 'inherently a study of relations of asymmetrical power and opportunity' (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: Page no). This proposition invites us to examine how men and women are situated both in private and public spheres with an unequal distribution of power in the domains of various institutions which are governed by norms and values derived from the ideologies of patriarchy and male dominance.

In terms of gender studies by the early 1980s, the concept of 'gender' appeared to be used to designate the social construction of differences between men and women, to contrast with the notion of 'sex' which refers to their biological difference (Pine 1996). It was 'gender' as a *symbolic construct* that became a major focus of interest along with the investigations of the ways in which such constructs might variously relate to practice and experience (Strathern b1980). What we generally understand as a biological 'given' may well conflict and contrast with other peoples' ideas, lived experiences and reality (Strathern 1992; Overing 1986). In recent times, scholars like Judith Butler (1990), Benhabib (1992) Moore (1994) argue that the notion of 'sex', or the nature of the 'biological' make-up of men and women, is itself a social construction. In other words, what is recognised as a

physically distinct sexed body is not so straightforward a matter as once thought. In that sense, the taken for granted biological dimension itself is a result of a particular way of thinking about it—a product of the ‘cultural’.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What is gender?

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2. ‘Gender is different from sex’. Do you agree with this statement?

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8.2 SOCIALISATION AND GENDER STRATIFICATION

“The way you are sitting is not appropriate for a girl, sit properly”, many of the learners who are girls must have experienced this verbal expression of what is right for a girl, while growing up. As Simon de Beauvoir aptly describes “*One is not born, but made a woman*”; this path breaking proposition in feminist thought and in the project of theorising gender, draws our attention to study the process of socialisation through which particular cultures design gender roles and norms. Gender stratification is found to be the outcome of particular patterns of child-rearing practices and child socialisation carried out according to the dominant and standardised norms. This socialisation pattern tends to standardise, maintain and reproduce certain differences between sexes that eventually determine the desirable qualities for men and women.

As a result of such notions, boys and girls are trained with appropriate gender-specific roles and behaviour. This is reflected in almost all activities in which they engage, the objects they use, the places they access and the way they speak and so on. And this social engineering is constantly built over, maintained less directly, but more in subtle ways. Once a normative pattern of behaviour and roles for men and women evolve in a culture, breach of the norms by the members is treated with reactions, mostly expressed in the forms of disciplining and punishment. Here, one can observe women often become the targets of violating the norms related to the question of sexuality in most cultures. In other words, women’s bodies and their sites of sexuality are subjected for the control imposed on them by the structures of patriarchy. Sex-specific qualities thus become appropriate and desirable for men and women differently according to the norms and value system in a given society. For example, bravery, confidence and aggressiveness are considered as masculine whereas sensitivity, compassion, shyness and modesty are recognised as feminine qualities and they are in the process of making almost on a universal scale.

Basic Concepts

The idea of leadership, political authority and priesthood are most often associated with the notion of male-hood and thus identified as masculine values in most cultures. This predominant notion connotes men's greater capacity to hold positions of political power in society and thereby controlling women on the matters of sexuality, political participation and economic activities. Equal rights and opportunities in most spheres of economy and polity are thus denied to women and male dominance is assumed to be natural and normal. From a cross-cultural perspective the equation between public leadership and dominance is questionable. What does one mean by 'dominance'? Does it imply coercion and enforcement? Or control over 'the most valued'? The idea of 'control' would be a constraint for many people, as for instance among many indigenous peoples of Amazonia where most individuals of a community are fond of their personal autonomy and notably resistant to expressions of control or coercion (Overing 1986). As Marilyn Strathern has remarked, the notions of 'the political' and 'political personhood' are cultural obsessions of our own, a bias long reflected in anthropological constructs (Strathern 1980). These constructs are built up by overt and covert ways of socialisation process constantly exercised on members of a given culture. Masculinity and femininity are thus kept intact through the process of disciplining in all institutional domains. Different expressions of gender and sexuality that swing away from those ideal types are made subjects for humiliation and a sense of shame. "Crying like a woman", "fighting like a man", and so on are such verbal expressions that produce shame, guilt or make people conscious when they do things differently.

The values that are attributed such notions on masculinity and femininity are constructed by a range of institutions, beliefs, morals and other forms of cultural orientations that govern the socialisation of boys and girls in different modes. Moreover, "masculine" qualities are more highly valued than "feminine" characteristics in most cultures which are structured under the norms of patriarchy. Norms ensure that such given characteristics are performed by men and women and the failure of fulfilling them is countered with disciplining mechanisms. Socialisation process thus ensures that the men and women who do not conform to the standards of the norms are continuously disciplined till they tune themselves to "appropriate" behaviour.

Activity

Observe and make a list of the different instances when we come across gender stratification either at home or in any parks public space like while traveling by bus, train, metro, movie theatre, parks etc. Can you also identify the process?

Check Your Progress 2

3. What is socialisation?

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4. Present your view on the concept of masculinity and femininity.

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8.3 SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

“Get a glass of water for your father or brother”, “Rahul go to the market”, “A girl must learn how to cook”, “Vivek fix the tube light”. If we carefully examine these common statements that we hear often times, we see a clear cut division in term of gender roles: what boys and girls are expected to do and behave in everyday lives. How did the sexual division of labour emerge in societies? This question traces certain vantage points in the history of the shifts in economic organisations in the pre-capitalist world. Different modes of production and exchange systems designed sexual division of labour according to particular cultural, political, and environmental conditions and ideologies. All societies have a division of labour based on gender, but the particular tasks assigned to men and women differ from culture to culture. Almost universally, the average body mass index, strength and mobility of men (resulted partly from particular patterns of child-rearing and socialisation and partly by genetic and biological factors) have led to their exclusive service in the roles of hunters and warriors, whereas lactation and pregnancy tend to preclude the possibility of women being the primary hunters in foraging societies. Literature show that in most of the foraging societies, the public-domestic spheres are least separate, hierarchy is least marked, aggression is not valorised and competition is not entertained, and the rights, activities, and spaces of participation of men and women overlap the most. In that sense there is belief that relative gender equality is most likely the ancestral pattern of human society.

Feminist anthropologists thus argued that there is no necessary correlation between the biological differences of men and women and the cultural expressions and behaviours which are thought to be corresponding qualities of masculine and feminine. The fact that men and women perform different tasks inside and outside the domestic sphere has nothing to do with biological aspects. The actual process of pregnancy can be singled out as the only biological factor in this regard. Technically, all other work that women do like cooking, washing, cleaning, child-rearing and other domestic labour can be equally done by men also. However, these types of work are culturally labeled as “women’s work”. This pattern of division of labour based on the criterion of sex gets extended in the public sphere when it comes to paid work. This process has nothing to do with sex (biology), but an outcome of *gender* (the culturally constructed difference).

The sexual division of labour, with no rationale, makes women’s work less important and inferior compared to men’s work that ultimately reduces the wages paid to women even though their contribution is equal.

The studies that were conducted among the horticulture societies have shown a different pattern of gender based distribution of labour. Martin and Voorhies (1975) had undertaken study of 515 horticultural societies to understand how gender roles and stratification varied according to economy and social structure. In their study, Martin and Voorhies observed that women were the major

contributors for the economy through their active engagement in the process of production. They further demonstrate that in half of the societies, women did most of the cultivating work; in a third of the societies, men and women made equal contributions to cultivation and in only 17% of the societies did men do most of the work. Women dominated horticulture in 64% of the matrilineal societies and in 50% of the patrilineal societies. The account also shows that among the South American corn farmers, women tend to be the main producers in horticultural societies (Martin and Voorhies 1975).

However, the predominance of women’s participation and contribution to the economy in horticulture societies does not correspond with their access and participation in other spheres of the public. Women do most of the cultivation, cooking, and raising children, but are structurally denied the public domain. Men dominate the public domain such as politics, feasts, warfare.

By making a comparison in different economic systems, Martin and Voorhies (1975) found that women’s participation is only 15% of the agricultural societies, down from 50% of the horticultural ones. They further note that men dominated the cultivation in 81% of the agricultural societies, up from only 17% of the horticultural ones. Martin and Voorhies attribute this shift is due in part to the increase of heavier labour that characterises agriculture and the increase in the number of children in families. However, this argument cannot explain or represent the reasons for women’s structural subordination in other spheres of life apart from the domain of agriculture. When agriculture expands and begins to yield more and more surplus, it becomes a source for commerce rather than just for subsistence. When technology and commerce are closely attached to the idea of cultivation, men found it to be a viable space for increasing surplus for the market and thereby earning more income, power and prestige. Fredrich Engels, in his path breaking work “*The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*” (1884) demonstrates how the increase in private property has become a site for producing more and more gender inequality in society.

Social change that accompanies agriculture also functioned to reduce the status of women. As women’s labour mostly confined within the domestic spheres and thus does not yield returns through exchange, is treated to be inferior. Moreover, men’s participation in domestic labour often tends to be identified as ‘extra-labour’ and this belief pushed women to the margins of the economy or made them remain as domestic labourers to serve the male members in the family. In this backdrop, the question on the determining factors of gender variations points to the patterns of division of labour and the corresponding unequal distribution of power and prestige.

In the rarely found economies where both sexes contribute more or less equally as in the case of foragers, matrilineal cultivators, there is relatively little gender stratification. On the contrary, the sites of increasing competition for resources, warfare, patriarchy, patrilocality and patrilineality characterise and correlate with high gender stratification.

Check Your Progress 3

- 5. Make a list of the activities which are culturally labelled as “women’s work”.

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6. Who authored the work “*The origin of the family, private property and the State*”?

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8.4 GENDER AND CULTURE: UNVEILING A RELATIONSHIP

Is there a relationship between gender and culture? Are they really two separate things and do they discretely exist? Let’s examine the second question first and well apparently the answer is no. Gender is a cultural construct that defines how men and women should perform their assigned roles differently in both private and public spheres of life. Culture, among its many definitions, represents different social formations of human groups and institutions based on particular criteria. Functioning of these groups along with the norms and values are monitored, maintained and perpetuated by the functioning of different institutions and their ideologies. Gender and the processes of gendering (assigning ideal roles and tasks for men and women differently) are part of norms and value orientations of every culture. In that sense, both gender and culture occupy common territories with overlaps. In short, we can say that a study of culture will be incomplete without studying gender and the processes of gendering, from a critical viewpoint that can expose the structures of power that eventually made women into subordinate positions in a given culture.

In the discipline of anthropology, we can see a shift in recent years to focus more on the question of gender in the study of culture which was otherwise a complete absence. Here, one can observe a trend in making gender a residual category (it might actually reflect on this unit also) that gender can be separated out from all other aspects and institutions in culture. Apparently, we can see recent text books in anthropology and sociology are represented with a chapter solely discussing on the issue of gender along with other exclusive chapters on marriage, family, kinship, and religion, economic and political organisations and so on. And since there is a separate chapter on gender, we will find other chapters exist ‘free from gender’ or silent on gender as the attempts to understand family, marriage, religion and other such topics are discussed without connecting to issues and themes related to gender. This makes an impression to students that we can study gender as a totally separate topic which is unrelated to marriage, family, kinship, economy and religion. In fact the conventional approaches to the study of kinship, family and marriage within a functional or structural functionalist lines, did not offer any room to investigate the question of power that determined the gender relations. The structures of power within social institutions like family, marriage and kinship were by and large remained unexposed within the conventional frameworks of ethnographic research.

Rapport and Overing (2003) in their work illustrates that all those kinship structures through which men established important relationships with each other through the exchange of their ‘silenced women’, which became the model of ‘society’; all those ‘political’ authority and statuses through which men who controlled the

political domain became the knowledge-holders of their culture—these were the topics that once were recognised as primary anthropological concerns and there were little critical engagement beyond this framework. They further argue that the recognition by gender studies and the significance of allowing the authorship of a multitude of voices has led to energetic debate over the epistemological foundations of anthropology, which in turn has transformed the question, the subject matter and the methodology of the discipline—and in the end its own self-image as having the right of authorial privilege for women. In the later studies, there occurred a shift in anthropological focus mainly from the feminist scholars to problematise all those norms that govern the structures of kinship, family and marriage, where women were made to be confined within the household and the sites of the ‘private’ as ‘muted subjects’ (this needs a bit of explaining as the learners have not read Rapport and Overings work).

Feminist scholarship recognises gender as a site of struggle for legitimacy, power and control. In that context, a feminist approach to the study of culture essentially needs to locate gender not as a category in isolation, but a concept that inhabit almost all social institutions. Studying gender as a separate and residual category then will not yield any desired outcome for a feminist project towards exposing the structures of power in the domains of social institutions. Feminist anthropologists like Henrietta Moore and Sherry Ortner challenged the dominant notion of constructing knowledge on gender as a residual content (Ortner 1974, Moore 1988). Taking this critique into our consideration, this unit suggests studying all institutions and practices in a culture (whether it is on marriage, family, kinship or a ritual or an exchange system) by essentially locating the relations of power determined by gender norms. This approach suggests undertaking a micro level investigation about the access, participation and practices of men and women with specific roles and what make them to perform those roles and actions in a given culture.

Margaret Mead (1901-1978), a student of Franz Boas, was the pioneer of gender studies within the discipline of anthropology, from the American School of cultural anthropology. She conducted ethnographic fieldwork on Samoa and Manus (in the Pacific), with Mundugamor and Latmul (Papua New Guinea) and on Bali (Indonesia). Mead was interested to study childhood, adolescence, sexuality and the relation between personality and culture. Her most significant contribution was her study of adolescent sexuality among the Samoans. She attempted to question the universally regarded idea of adolescent trauma, which she argued was just a construction of the American cultural fabric. In her account, it is mentioned that the Samoan girls engage in casual sexual relations with their boyfriends without having a sense of guilt feeling or inhibitions of sharing such experiences whereas those expressions are found to be universally forbidden. However, Mead’s account on Samoan sexuality was charged with the allegation that the adolescent girls were sharing their sexual fantasies with her and she took those views as truth without any verification. Derek Freeman’s “*Margaret Mead and Samoa*” (1983) reveals this aspect with the help of another ethnographic study conducted in Samoa. However, Mead’s work produced the female subject as a potential agent to represent and speak about their culture with reference to gender and sexuality.

Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and other anthropologists of their time used to generalise their views on gender, sexuality and other adolescent traits. On the contrary anthropologists of the contemporary period tend to focus on specific members of the community and their experiences in a given cultural context. These scholars give more space for representing the views and experiences of their female informants, and sometimes they are quoted in length. Lila Abu-Lughod’s study on the Bedouin women is a good example for such an ethnographic account (Lughod 1986). Providing a methodological shift in undertaking anthropological fieldwork, Lughod argues that researches should allow women to speak for themselves and represent their experiences without male mediators; it becomes a point of recognising women as individuals and their agency to express about themselves and the world around them. Lughod emphasises on the diversity of women’s multiple social roles that they simultaneously perform both in the private and public domains. As men and women differently share the different spheres of culture and in turn differently constitute and shape their experiences, it is imperative to understand the gender based distribution of power, prestige and access to resources. This gender specific question leads us to think about the confinement of women in the domain of the ‘domestic’ and their limited access or denial in the spheres of economy and polity.

A more recent and critical engagement with the question of gender and woman subjectivity suggests to go beyond the universal construction of the idea of ‘woman’ itself. Drawing from the ideas of the Third World feminists (Hooks 1981, Mohanty 2003), the sex/gender distinction comes from locating “gender” in a cluster of identities - class, caste, race, ethnicity, religion, region and so on. This implies that the biological category of “woman” does not necessarily have shared interests, life-situations, experiences or common goals. This kind of understanding has arisen from the political practice of women’s movements from different parts of the world, which has increasingly demonstrated the fact that “women” do not exist as a pre-existing category which can simply be mobilised by the women’s movements. In other words, women identify themselves not only, and not even necessarily primarily, in terms of their gender, but as black, or Adivasi or Muslim, or Dalit, or peasant and so on. This framework of understanding the gender question in the context of culture, places it in a complex interface and overlap of multiple identities and thus questions the idea of ‘universal sisterhood’ — as there exists a universal woman subject which is a homogenous entity.

Check Your Progress 4

7. Name some of the anthropologists who have worked on gender issues.

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8. “Women” do not exist as a pre-existing category which can simply be mobilised by the women’s movements. Share your views on the above statement.

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8.5 SUMMARY

In this unit we have seen how gender and sex are differently situated in the making of a culture and thus produce masculinity and femininity in uniquely oppositional ways. The unit has introduced key issues in the areas of division of labour, gender stratification and the role of socialisation in bringing particular patterns of gendered behaviour. The discussion on the relation and interfaces between gender and culture opens up the concerns of integrating the concept of gender in studying all aspects and institutions within a given culture rather than studying it in isolation. All these themes illustrate the myriad ways in which male dominance and female subjugation get normalised in society along with the symbolic constructions of masculine and feminine features, norms, values and practices around the question on gender.

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8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Refer to section 8.1
2. Refer to section 8.1
3. Refer to section 8.2
4. Refer to section 8.2, however, please try to give your own opinion after reading the section
5. Refer to section 8.3
6. Friedrich Engels
7. Refer to section 8.4
8. Read section 8.4 and give your opinion