
UNIT 2 CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITIES

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you have read about the difference between sex and gender. In this unit, our effort is to understand how construction of gender and sexualities shapes in everyday life.

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 often 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? To answer these questions, this unit addresses issues that challenges essentialism related to identities related to sexuality, discusses how sexuality impact our lives and how marginalization based on sexuality leads to the concept of sexual hierarchy. The unit draws upon the theoretical work on the above issues and the interactions during workshops/life stories and fictionalized accounts. Questions have been asked around these to help deepen the engagement with the issues being discussed. Let us look at the objectives of reading this unit.

2.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to :

- Understand the social construction of sexuality;
- Know sexuality in a broader framework of patriarchy; and Discuss how sexuality impacts 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, October 2002).

2.4 CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

Sexuality...

Is strongly influenced by gender, caste, class, religion and region. i.e. it is socially constructed

is not fixed, but mutable and fluid

is diverse (what I might love you might hate)

And has positive and negative dimensions

Each of these attributes can be analyzed further.

Diversity

What shapes our sexual desires, which 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 desires are fluid, attraction can happen between any two individuals, both men and women.

The forms of desire too are varied. It's not about whom you are attracted to but what kind of desire you feel. Normally, the word 'sex' implies sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, presumably because of its links to reproduction. But even between a man and woman, the purpose of sexual act is not restricted to reproduction. It is also to satisfy pleasure and desire.

Pain and Pleasure:

The terms that come to one's mind with the word sexuality are love, desire, sexual pleasure, sexual orientation, shame, taboo, pain, sexual violence, rape, hesitation, rules, norms, societal sanctions etc. Some of these are positive emotions and others negative i.e. some gives pain and other pleasure. It is however the painful aspects of sexuality that is often talked about in public i.e. violence, rape, shame, taboo etc. The pleasure or positive aspects are rarely discussed in public. It is for this reason that questions of sex and sexuality is most misunderstood and shrouded in mystery, taboo, guilt, shame

and other negative emotions. While authors like Gayle Rubin suggests that for some problems with sexuality are low on the hierarchies of the real-world problems such as poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation.

Socially constructed

The following explains how sexuality is socially constructed.

Who experiences sexual desire: This issue is strongly influenced by the reproductive and eugenics logic. Those outside reproductive age are either considered to be asexual or their sexual desires are considered to be unacceptable or inappropriate. Similarly, the reproductive capacities of differently able people are considered undesirable and their sexualities are negated. Socio-culturally, desire is supposed to be expressed 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 (sub caste).

When: Sexuality is supposed to be expressed only after marriage. Sexual relationships outside the institution of marriage are not accepted and are not considered respectable.

Where: Within the privacy of the bedroom.

What: Heteronormative sex i.e., penetrative sex of penis into a vagina is widely considered to be the only acceptable expression of sexual desire because of its association with reproduction. The Victorian idea of 'sex only for reproduction' holds true in many parts of the world and certainly in India giving it an unprecedented legitimacy. In fact, in many contexts, the word 'sex' is used interchangeably with heteronormative sex'. In the Indian context, other sexual acts are stigmatized and considered unnatural.

Why: The acceptable purpose of sex is reproduction and perpetuation of progeny. Sex for pleasure while routinely engaged in is looked down upon.

These are some of the sexual norms that set the norms of who, how, when and why of the expressions of sexual desires. Those perceived as breaking these norms are 'punished' and their rights violated. Gay men are regularly harassed by the police, sexually active senior persons are ridiculed, sexuality of younger persons, particularly girls & women are heavily policed, women who initiate sexual interactions are called sluts and lesbian women are forced into heteronormative sex through marriage. The sexual norms are internalized through social units of family and communities; and enforced through legal enactments and institutions to ensure obedience of these norms.

Socialization is thus an important means of maintaining norms related to sexuality which makes sexual behavior and responses seem 'natural.' At an individual level, desires are experienced as spontaneous and deepest expression of 'who we really are', sexuality is socially constructed.

Mumbai Police arrested 40 couples from hotel rooms for public indecency. Going too far?

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

They reached the hotel rooms and pulled the couples out of there. 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.

<http://www.storypick.com/mumbai-police/>

2.5 SEXUALITY -AN ASPECT OF LIFE

Sexuality is central to a person's life and influences all aspects of it. Some of these aspects are discussed below that demonstrates the centrality of sexuality to life.

Education: There is evidence to show high drop-out rates of girls from school. Parents refuse to educate girls beyond 5th grade for fear of sexuality. Schools beyond primary are often located far from the village and the parents worry that as the girl hits puberty she will explore her sexuality or that she will be sexually attacked on her way to school. Because the honor of the family vests in the sexual purity of its daughters, such exploration of sexuality or an attack on it are both to be prevented, even at the cost of her education and personal development.

Mobility: The restriction on women's mobility in families, hostels and other institutions have similar basis as above. Women are not allowed to go out at night and if they do they have to be accompanied by a man. Women's hostel around the country have curfew beyond a certain hour in the evening. Such measures, though couched in language of protection and welfare of women, are in fact imposed out of fear of women seeking expression of their sexuality or fear of sexual violence. Authorities are perennially concerned that girls might engage in consensual relationships or sex if they are allowed freedom.

Doctor's treatment: Genitals are called 'private parts,' and children grow up to be ashamed of their genitals. So much so that girls shy away from consulting doctors even when it concerns their health.

2.6 SEXUAL HIERARCHY

In the mainstream society we learn about some of the norms about sexual relationships:

Sexual relationship should be between a man and a woman.

Sexual relationships should be within the institution of marriage.

Sexual relationships should be between a man and a woman of same caste, same religion and same class.

Those who subscribe to the above view find nothing wrong with them. The problem however is severe consequences on those with alternative sexuality that do not conform to these sexual norms. These consequences range from discrimination, name-calling, harassment, and public shaming to life-threatening ones like suicide. The following incident can be a case under study.

Box No. 2.1

Same sex couple commits suicide Monotosh Chakraborty | TNN | Jan 24, 2011

Two teenage girls committed suicide in a village in South 24-Parganas, apparently disillusioned about their future as same-sex couples. Police found the bodies of 19-year-old Bob by 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 the police. The victims' families reportedly had a cordial relationship despite facing criticism from neighbors for the girls' "unusual behaviour". "Bobby used to dress and behave like a man, whereas Puja was like any other girl.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Lesbian-couple-commits-suicide/articleshow/7351197.cms>

Gayle Rubin writes about the 'Charmed Circle' and explains it with two concentric 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 often pathologized. But the boundaries are permeable and they change from culture to culture, market to market, generation to generation. A divergence is only acceptable within 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 within the charmed circle are privileged and gain interims 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. Those that marry according to societal norms get material benefits too. For instance, marriage with a man allows a woman to nominate her husband in life insurance, adopt a kid together, get a loan together or buy a house together. Such privileges are available only in counties where same sex marriage is legalized. Thus, there are privileges to be gained from conforming to social norms of sexuality and being inside the charmed circle. A move to the outer circle causes one to lose all privileges.

At the heart of the charmed circle is the heterosexual, monogamous married couple, a unit that patriarchy thrives upon for maintaining division of labor, resources and power. It is also the reason for the severe consequences for

those who violate 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 consequences.

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

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) *Define sexuality and sexual hierarchy?*

On the following section read about same sex desires.

2.7 SAME SEX DESIRES

Same sex relationships are those where men sexually desire other men and women sexually desire other women. Such same sex relations are called homosexual relationships. Men in same sex relations are called gay and women in same sex relations are called lesbians. Same sex desires are regarded 'abnormal' and against nature by society. Some forms of human rights violation on those in same sex relations face are:

Silence: Homosexuals are forced to maintain silence and remain in closet about their same sex desires. They are unable to talk to even their closest friends about their desires because of the general assumption that most people are heterosexual.

Family violence: The violence against homosexual's begins at homes by their own families. Once parents find out about their children's 'unnatural' desires, families exert pressure on them to be normal and abide by the norms. Several same sex desiring people have reported physical and mental violence from parents and other family members.

Educational institution: Young children and adolescents discovering and experimenting with their sexuality are often teased and taunted for displaying sexualities or tendencies that do not conform to the sexual norms or their gender.

Workplace: Workplaces are far from recognizing same sex partners as family and extend benefits to them. Such lack of recognition prevents persons with alternate sexualities to live fulfilling lives.

Same sex relations are considered abnormal because they challenge patriarchy. In a household with two women as partners, who works outside the home and who cares for the household? Either both share the same work or one or the other takes responsibility each of the household task. Since both are women, power relation between them is not the same as between men and women. Same sex relations are also outside reproductive logic and sex is purely for pleasure and not procreation. Such relationships are therefore stigmatized by society.

2.8 GOOD WOMEN: RELATIONSHIP WITH SEXUALITY

Societal norms have classified women in moral categories of good women and bad women. Women are expected to be a good daughter, good wife, good mother, good sister etc. What is 'good' and 'bad' women?

'Good woman' abides by all the norms of the society. She wears what is considered 'appropriate' by the society, she eats after feeding everyone, she obeys everyone, she cares for everyone without thinking about her own self. She has sex with her husband when he wants it and will never make the first move to initiate sex with her husband. A 'bad woman' on the other hand is one who thinks for herself, is independent in her actions, does not care about others' opinions on the clothes she wears, and is sexually autonomous. A 'bad' woman is not respectable and is regarded as irresponsible. However, exercising her will and choice does not make her irresponsible. The definition of a 'good women' is linked to sexuality. For instance, a 'good' woman will never say 'No' to her husband for sex, she will not talk to other men and she will wear what society insists that she wear.

2.9 SEXUAL PLEASURE AND EMPOWERMENT

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

Women are socialized by their mothers to keep their dresses down, their pants up, and their bodies away from stranger. Women come to experience their own sexual impulses as dangerous and afraid to venture outside the protected sphere. External control and internal processes of socialization together severely impacts women's sexuality. 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.

Box No. 2.2

“...(In a)workshop on gender and sexuality conducted by Nirantar with non-formal education teachers in rural Rajasthan(a western state of India), there was 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 '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'. 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.

Source: Author's personal account

Sexual Empowerment is

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

2.10 LET US SUM UP

The unit discussed what sexuality is and how it is different from sex. Sexuality is socially constructed, hierarchical in nature, and controlled by patriarchy. Sexualities that are not heteronormative are not accepted by society. The unit ends with a discussion on sexual empowerment.

2.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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

2.12 REFERENCES

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2.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

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