
UNIT 1 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SEX AND GENDER

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we will be looking into how sex and gender are differentiated and what are the current debates on this issue. You will also learn about how these concepts emerged and their importance for gender discourses. This unit will familiarize you with sex and gender as a system, roles of gender, and criticism of sex-gender as a binary division. You will also learn how gender is constructed as a paradox and how sexing of the body takes place.

1.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Define the concepts of sex - gender in relation to the sex-gender system;
- Describe the various gender roles and patterns existing in society;
- Understand sex and gender in relation to the body; and
- Discuss the feminist critique of sex-gender binary opposition.

1.3 CONTEXTUALIZING SEX AND GENDER

What is the difference between sex and gender? In the English-speaking world, the sex-gender distinction is one of the most important contributions of feminism. Those with even a bit of familiarity with feminism and in women's studies have certainly come across these terms. At one level, they are easy to distinguish – sex refers to the biological differences between male and female bodies, while gender refers to the social and cultural.

This unit is structured to help you understand the questions of sex and gender from the concepts of feminist theory. The actual terms – sex and gender – exist only in the English language. No other language – French or German, Tamil, Hindi or Chinese — has two terms that refer to the biological and social differences of the two sexes. The distinctions between “biology” and “social” have been compared to the distinctions between nature and culture. These two terms have played a significant role in theorizing feminism.

The unit begins with background information on the terms sex and gender. The term ‘sex’ is used casually to refer to men or women as well as to refer to sexual activity. In classic texts like Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the notion of sex is used to discuss and criticize the entire process of what makes “women” different from “men.” Today, these processes are called social construction. Wollstonecraft believed that women were raised to be the weaker sex unlike men who were granted the capacity for rational thought and political action. The famous work of the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (written in France in the 1949 and translated into English in 1955), is another classic treatise on the nature of women’s oppression in society and history. In historical writings, there are those who saw no reason to make a distinction between biological sex and social gender. They used the term ‘sex’ to refer to both.

The term ‘gender’ origins in grammar and linguistics. It is referred to the use of different genders in particular languages with no other connotations. For instance, chair has a feminine gender in Hindi, and the sun has a masculine gender. Other languages have similar patterns for uses of ‘gender.’ English is not a heavily gendered language the way German and French languages are. Among the Indian languages there is considerable variation in the grammatical use of gender in language.

In the 1950s, American psychologists and sociologists used the term gender to refer to the gender identity of human beings. They made a sharp distinction between the biological notions of male and female (such as genital differences, chromosomal or hormonal differences) and the way humans acquired a sense of themselves as boys and girls or men and women. Some of these psychologists argued that it mattered very little, what exact biological characteristics a particular body might have – what really mattered was how such a child was socialized by their family and broadly, by the society.

1.4 THE SEX-GENDER SYSTEM

It was these ideas of a strong difference between biological sex and social gender that feminists used since the 1970s to understand women’s oppression. One of the earliest formulations came in a 1974 essay by Gayle Rubin, in which she explained “the sex-gender system”. Rubin analyses women’s oppression by making some very plausible claims: regardless of whether we are feminist or against feminist ideas, it is what we think are the causes of women’s oppression that determine the imagination of a future society. Thus, if we believe that men are innately aggressive and violent by nature, there would be little scope for change, other than to physically alter men’s very nature or to get rid of them. But, if we believe that social and

economic relations in society play a role in women's oppression, then an alternative and more egalitarian future is possible by changing these social and economic structures.

In Rubin's theory, biological differences between men and women form the backdrop for the gender system i.e., a social structure of how kinship are formed, particularly the institution of marriage in which 'ownership' of women exchanges hands between men i.e., from father to husband. In this exchanging or "giving" of women, men have rights that women do not. There are other structural relations like labour that highlights the differences between men and women, whereby certain tasks are regarded as men's work and others as women. Rubin further theorizes that such social structures when imposed on natural differences result in exclusive gender identities that suppress any natural gender predisposition i.e., "feminine" traits in a man are suppressed just as "masculine" traits in a woman.

Rubin also emphasizes that the sex-gender system is not only about division of world into two distinct groups of people - men and women, but also that socialization and development lead to compulsory heterosexual relations, preferably through marriage. In other words, a woman must be married to a man. A critical look at the sex-gender system is necessary not only to promote a society in which men and women are equal, but also to provide tools of analysis for the LGBTQI (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex) movements. Alternate sexualities like the LGBTQI are treated as deviants and sexual minorities are adversely affected by the existing normative heterosexual social structure.

1.4.1 The Many Roles of Gender

Feminist theories evolved from the distinction between sex and gender to argue that consequences of biological differences are less adverse for women as compared to the implications of the gendering process of men and women in society. When a baby is born, the first question asked is – whether it a boy or a girl? Not how the mother is? Or whether the child is healthy? Once the sex of the child is determined, the social construction process begins and takes over the life of the child. Pink and blue clothes in western societies for example announce the sex of the child. In an interesting experiment conducted in Britain, it was found that behaviour towards a baby changed based on the perception of whether the baby was a boy or a girl. A baby dressed in typical girl clothes was handed over to the relatives and friends who came to greet the newborn. The visitors held the baby softly and gently, rocked the baby in their arms, and spoke in feminine ways. The behaviour and treatment of visitors were remarkably different when the same baby was dressed up to look like a boy. They tossed the baby in the air, spoke to the baby in strong tones, and remarked, how it would grow up to be like his father. Thus, very stereotypical notions of being a girl or boy were projected to the baby in this experiment.

There are innumerable ways in which children are socialized differentially – from 'gender' appropriate toys for girls and boys, rules of play and so on, which become only stronger as the child grows older. That very few little

girls play cricket or few boys play with dolls; and how concerns are raised if a girl were to play with a toy gun all goes into shaping and consolidating gender identities.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) Conduct a Survey in your family/ peer group/ neighbourhood to see how people respond to cultural stereotypes.*

Scholars argue for an emphasis on gender rather than biological sex for two reasons: First, to explain the extent to which societies and cultures differ according to the roles assigned to men and women; and second, to understand change in the course of history. If women's roles were based only on their biology, then the wide variation and change cannot be accounted for. For example, there are several societies such as Eskimo peoples, or Native American nations, where the relations between men and women are relatively equal. In many parts of Africa, it is women who are the mainly into agricultural production and even trade, unlike the mainstream Indian society where women are invariably treated as secondary workers and the "farmer" (Kisan in Hindi) is thought of as male! Equally interesting are the norms of behaviour and dress codes for men and women in different cultures and at different historical moments. In the field of fine arts too one finds example like the paintings of Ajanta where the styles of depicting bodies of men and women are very similar making it difficult to tell apart their gender identities. Even in pre-industrial England, dress codes and behaviour among aristocratic men would appear extremely feminine to a modern person. Such men were dainty in appearance, wore high heeled shoes, wigs, colourful clothing and used makeup.

Several scholars, including anthropologist Henrietta Moore, offers interesting examples to explore of gender differences across different societies. The works of these scholars prove the extent of variation and change in the social construction of men and women at different historical moments. While Gayle Rubin focuses mainly on women, many gender theorists focused on men and notions of masculinity and compared them with corresponding notions of femininity. They pointed out that it is not enough to look at the social construction of women in society and history, but that men were equally socially constructed despite their relative positions of privilege compared to women of their group or class. Indeed, such theorists criticized approaches that only focused on the role or oppression of women as providing an incomplete picture. However, the early works in the field of women's studies conclusively showed the general invisibility of women. Gender theorists critiqued mainstream thinkers and held them responsible for making women and their gender i.e. the unequal relations between men and women invisible.

The word "man" in most languages has a double meaning – "man" can refer just to biologically male person as well as to 'mankind' generally i.e., the

entire human race. (In Hindi words like Manush also embody both meanings.) “Woman” on the other hand has no such double meaning – the term women refer only to female persons, (including those who may wish to be included as women, such as transgender person). It is never used to refer to all of humanity. An interesting example in Hindi would be the words ‘beta’ and ‘beti’ used for small children. Little girls are routinely referred to as beta in everyday life – but use of ‘beti’ is restrictively used only to refer to girls. Calling little boys ‘beti’ is unthinkable. Other examples are “caveman” or “manpower”, that stands for both men and women. There is, thus a fundamental asymmetry in the man-woman dyad – the first moves across two registers claiming universal status while anchored in the male. The second has only a particular meaning which never includes men. It is precisely this gender asymmetry that has made it possible in much of modern history for ‘man’ to claim a false universality, to stand in for everyone, while actually excluding women (and others). A famous example here is the universality that came to be embodied in the “Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen”. The declaration claimed universality of rights but in fact excluded women and working-class men without property. Thus, the use of the word ‘man’ or pronouns like ‘he’, prior to feminist criticism of such usage, created a false impression of being universal and inclusive. In recent times, it is common to use ‘she or he’ or “s/he” to signify both genders. Another correction in common usage is the use of neutral word ‘person’ rather than ‘man’, as in ‘chairperson’ instead of ‘chairman’.

Check your Progress-2

- 1) *Define the concepts of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ within the sex-gender system, give examples in support of your arguments.*

1.4.2 Some Criticisms of the Sex-Gender Binary

The scholarship focusing on gender relations were also critiqued in the work of Judith Butler, a philosopher, feminist and a queer theorist. Her criticisms are complex and have evolved in her numerous writings but a short summary is useful to further understand gender. According to Butler, a common problem in the use of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in a manner similar to Gayle Rubin’s, is that there is an assumption of a given biological fact of sex as something fixed in the body, which is then provided meaning by social gender. To use an easy metaphor, it is as though sex is the body (like the determination of the sex of a baby), while gender are the clothes that come later. Butler questions if indeed feminists and other scholars believed that biological sex has little to do with gender, then why proceed with two sexes and two genders, with gender faithfully following sex.

Butler instead turns the sex –gender distinction on its head: There is nothing like a pre-social notion of sex fixed by “nature”. Rather “sex” is as much the

product of social and political institutions as ideas of gender, concluding that sex is the effect of gender rather than its cause. Precisely because gender is an open-ended and contingent process involving complex formations of identity (a person's sense of self in relation to others), as well as sexual desires (which may be for the opposite sex but could equally be for the same sex), it has been necessary, especially in modern western societies, to "fix" such potentially fluid identities through recourse to notions of an immutable and unchanging sex rooted in biology. Judith Butler's work has therefore looked at gender identity as a process that is constantly being created through repeated everyday acts and performances of that identity, constrained by ideas, discourses and institutions that are shaping these identities and giving them recognizable meanings. Much of Butler's work shows, where and how this happens, the roles played by both gender norms and norms of heterosexuality, and how it can be questioned.

1.5 THE PARADOX OF GENDER

Another aspect of the sex-gender binary is called the paradox of gender. Some of the major aspects in the biological distinction of the sexes – for example, are the body size of men and women that show considerable internal variation. On an average, male bodies are more muscular and taller than female bodies. Such distinctions are the basis for making different rules for men and women in the field of sports for instance. Another anatomical and physiological difference is procreation – it is women who can bear children as a consequence of sexual intercourse with men. Until the mid-nineteenth century in western societies and the middle of the twentieth century in countries like India, women had, on an average, a high rate of fertility, giving birth to many children in the course of their reproductive lives. Consequently, women under these conditions also experienced high rates of child and maternal mortality. In such situations, where everyday life was subjected to considerable uncertainties and physical hardship for the vast majority, both men and women have had to endure the consequences of their biological vulnerabilities to a considerable degree.

This condition changed substantially after the rise of capitalism and colonialism. The consequent creation of wealth in western societies in an unprecedented scale through the expansion of cities as new sites of production led to a gradual increase in standards of living. Correspondingly, western families underwent major transformations, especially among the new middle classes, so that by the end of the nineteenth century families had far fewer children and, under improved conditions of public health, mortality rates also came down. Moreover, children started attending schools in increasing numbers. The nature of work also changed – with productive labour moving outside the household into factories and offices in urban areas, and agricultural production being the province of smaller and smaller number of people. These developments are used to make an argument that the significance of biological difference – childbirth for women and physical strength for men no longer enjoyed much social significance.

It was replaced by rising significance of social differences supported by arguments that with the developments stated above, women had more

opportunities to engage in new kinds of work, married at late ages or stayed single, did not have to be worn out by repeated child birth and childcare. It has therefore said that a kind of bipolar gender regime was created during this era. In other words, precisely when the significance of basic biological distinctions was reducing, gendering was increasing.

1.5.1 Sexing the Body

The notions of the anatomical body and physiological body, are the basis of 'sex' and by extension, regarded as nature and therefore essentialist. In the feminist theorizing on the distinction between sex and gender, less attention was paid to sex as compared to questions of gender which was considered culture and therefore more prone to change and transform. Feminists argued that while women's biological reproduction made them child bearers, this had no consequences on their general capacities. Women are as capable of working, thinking, taking political decisions as men are. Feminists interested in the field of science were keen to investigate ideas of sex and their possible relationship to gender. Common understanding of the anatomical differences of sex is that it is fixed. Biological female has one or more of the following — female genitals, an XX chromosome structure and female hormones. Men, on the other hand, are biologically identified by male genitals, an XY chromosome and male hormones. Sexing the body is about understanding what all this means how have scientists discovered and theorized these various aspects, whether all women and all men have these characteristics and in the same way and are we in fact indisputably divided into two sexes.

These aspects inevitably take one into the realm of science. However, science is not as objective and neutral as it may seem. Scientific research has exerted tremendous influence on the understanding of biological theories about sex and what is regarded as the natural development of men and women in society. Anne Fausto-Sterling, a biologist and a feminist argues that despite what scientists believe, it is impossible to separate purely "scientific" or "biological" characteristics of men and women. They are invariably entangled and embedded in social ideas, that is to say, our notions of gender. According to contemporary science, a combination of external genital characteristics, chromosomes and hormonal balance determines the sex of a person. But there are no clear answers to what exactly this combination is and how does it work or does not.

These concerns gain prominence in situations where the combination of scientific determinants of bodies are not obvious – such as the bodies of those who are intersex (with different combinations of male and female characteristics), or when external genitals are not matched by the corresponding male or female chromosomes. Thus, how can the sex of a person be determined if for instance, a particular body has the XY chromosome but not the corresponding male genitalia. The functioning of hormones, for instance is also quite complex, since men and women have, in fact, both male and female hormones in their systems. Fausto-Sterling has shown quite convincingly how scientists as far back as the 18th century onwards believed that it was necessary to maintain a clear distinction between two sexes and that indeterminate sexes should be "normalised" as

far as possible, and brought as close as possible to male or female sex. This belief grew stronger over the years until 1990s and has only been more widely criticised in very recent years.

In other words, one can see that scientists have been guided by social norms, especially by ideas of deviance or abnormality, rather than any ideas of pure science.

Fausto-Sterling believes that there is no hard and fast line to be drawn between sex and gender, and the early line drawn by both feminists and certain psychologists was quite premature. Sex and Gender are far more entangled. In fact, it would be a mistake to believe that there are two distinct kinds of processes -one guided by genes, hormones, and brain cells and the other by the environment we live in, experience, learning and social forces more generally. Nor is it prudent to displace biology entirely and claim that everything is shaped by social processes. These are false dichotomies and looking for answers purely in the natural sciences or exclusively in the social sciences provides an incomplete picture.

The sex-gender distinction is still used by various feminists, social scientists and scientists but no definitive conclusions can be drawn. The above debates on the sex-gender distinction has led to greater open-mindedness and acceptability in the variations of identities of human beings. Feminists have long argued that distinctions of sex and gender have been largely used against the interests of women. Various scientific theories have been used to justify women's unequal status with claims that the nature of women's brain constrains their capacity to think or reason as men do; or those certain genes make a man or a woman heterosexual or homosexual. Such theories are used to reinforce gender asymmetries, or to fix sexualities of people. There are a growing number in the larger society that are more sensitive to and open to alternative gender identities of men and women. A growing LGBTQI movement and their supporters have demanded taking sexual orientation out of the closet of deviance and abnormality. The rights of inter-sex people are gaining ground, as well as those of transgender persons and others to have identities that do not have to conform to one of two sexes or genders causing the sex-gender distinction to transform and experience significant change.

Sex-gender is not the only way in which women are selectively differentiated from men and pressed in society. There are other forms of discrimination and inequality in society with powerful effects on the lives of women and men. Other units of this course will be discussing issues pertaining to class, caste and race, questions of disability and so on, which are equally relevant to understanding the oppression of women and the way to realize a future with greater equality.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has discussed the theoretical and historical context of the categories of 'sex' and 'gender.' Sex-gender system, as a concept, is not as simple or obvious as it may first appear. Gender roles, the relation of 'sex' and 'gender' with the body, the impossibility of clearly defining categories of 'sex' in

scientific or biological terms; all reveals the complexity of these concepts. A brief examination of Gayle Rubin's and Judith Butler's work on these related concepts helped to view the sex-gender binary from a critical perspective. Finally, the unit touched upon how the conventional definitions of 'sex' and 'gender' negatively impacts on women and the LGBTQI+ communities.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you agree that gender roles are significant in determining the thinking about 'sex' and 'gender'? Explain with the help of examples.
- 2) Write your understanding on "sexing the body" in your own words.
- 3) Write about conventional understandings and definitions of 'sex' and 'gender'? specially in the context of women?
- 4) Describe the "paradox of gender" with the help of examples.

1.8 REFERENCES

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1.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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- The unit adopted from the course MWG-002. Modifications are done as per the requirement of the BGS-011.