

distinction between prescriptive construction of gender and individual reflections of these constructions. Prescriptive construction of gender refers to those images which are socially, historically, culturally determined. For example, socializing a girl child to become a homemaker in future is deep rooted attitude in the society and manifested through dress code, appropriate conduct, and women's engagement in care giving or nurturing activities. Individual inflections are made by the interaction of an individual psyche with socio-political or cultural or historical norms. For example, if a boy/girl undergoes sex reassignment surgery, there may be couple of questions that need analysis such as: How do societies respond to variations in an individual's expression of gender identity? To what extent do members of societies internalize various gender roles and behaviours? This point brings us to the discussion of "doing gender" as a concept. Doing gender involves a complex set of socially governed perceptual, interactional and micro-political activities that cast a particular action as an expression of masculine or feminine nature (West and Zimmerman 2002). Therefore, gender is inherent to social situations, i.e., it is both 'product of' and 'produced by' social arrangements. The newborn only carries the sex identity that is imposed upon the individual by the society. Eventually, through continuous interaction with the parents or primary caretaker, the infant accomplishes gender identity. Doing gender is a process that legitimizes this fundamental gender division in the society.

Box No. 4.1

The Case of Agnes: A Transsexual Boy West and Zimmerman discuss the three analytical categories such as sex, sex category, and gender to understand the notion of doing gender. Garfinkel's case study of Agnes, a transsexual boy would be an apt example for understanding gender construction. Agnes adopted a female identity at the age of seventeen and underwent sex reassignment surgery some years later to understand gender construction. She possessed male genitals and required to project herself as a woman. She was obliged to learn the feminine features and analyze the conception of femininity within the socially structured situation. She did not possess the socially agreed attributes of the biological category to be classified as the female sex. More central to this argument is Kessler and McKenna's position, i.e., the biological criterion (sex) is hidden from the public perception and the individual continues to behave according to the socially agreed criteria of male or female. Male or female are the products of the gender attribution process and form an important part of gender accomplishment/activities. For example, if a child sees a picture of a person with suit and tie, immediately the child connects the picture with the image of a man. The sex category is socially situated and acquired by the individual through everyday interaction. People perceive the activity of an individual and deduce the category of sex. In this context, gender is understood to be the product of culture and society (refer West and Zimmerman, 2002).

The above-mentioned example shows how the categories of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and the gender identity can only be established in confirmation with the biological categorisation.

4.3.3 Gender Socialization

Socialization is the process by which the child transforms into a social being by adhering to social values, norms, and socially desired behaviour. Sex role

socialization is a means to women's oppression in the larger context. Stanley and Wise argue that sex role is often understood as gender role, i.e., expressing attributes of femininity or masculinity. Family as an institution supports in internalizing gender socialization and gender roles across cultures. Mother or primary caretaker responds differently to the child on the basis of sex categorization. The differential attitude includes touching, caring, and ideas about autonomy of boys and absence of autonomy of girls. The more parents display differential behaviour like exposing children to specific types of toys, exposing to various books where pictures identify the role of mother in kitchen, projection of gender roles and behaviour in televisions more the child will express gender stereotypes in daily life. Family and parents are seen primary agencies through which gender stereotypes are communicated to the children (Stanley and Sue Wise).

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

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

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

1) What is Social Construction?

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2) What is Cultural Construction of gender?

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4.3.4 Construction of a Girl Child

The construction of a girl child discusses the process of socialising a girl child in patrilineal and patriarchal societies like India. This section highlights constraints that a girl faces in the process of socializing herself as a female. Dube (2001) refers to the process of socialization as form of gender socialisation in which women and men are produced as gendered subjects. These gendered subjects are created through the medium of language, rituals, ceremonies and practices. In Indian families, the notion of gender difference begins with the sphere of reproduction – both mother and father share different roles in relation to procreation. It is culturally considered that the father is the provider of seed and mother symbolises with earth who receives the seed and nurture it. These role differences are culturally imagined, and continued through family, marriage, and kinship. Therefore, family and kinship are central to the understanding of gender socialization.

Girl Child and the Natal Home

The construction of femininity is a continuous and complex process and is conveyed through language, proverbs, and rituals. The context of natal home for both married and unmarried daughters is widely used in the form of proverbs in the process of socialization. The desire for a boy child is explicit in the day-to-day conversation in forms of ‘speech’ ‘saying’. For instance, parents who are having only daughters are often perceived in a situation where the ‘future is black as they are not having any support’ (Dube 2001: 90). Similarly, the parental home is always referred to as a temporary shelter for girls. Therefore, girls grow up with the notion of having their own home in future after marriage. Proverbs and rituals give the realization of this inevitable fact of transferring the girl’s membership from her natal home to the home of her husband. Dube documented some of the proverbs spoken in various parts of India. In Odisha, there is a saying that equates ‘daughter with ghee’. The meaning of the proverb that is both are valuable; however both start to stink if not disposed of in right time. Similarly, there are festivals like Durga puja and Gauri puja which reiterate the idea of ‘home coming’ in the context of the goddess. These festivals are full of rituals which convey the message to young girls of their reality to leave their mother’s home and that they will be invited to the natal home in these festivals. The construction of a girl child begins with the feeling of getting temporary membership at the parental place, and the inevitability of learning some of the ideal feminine behaviour in due course.

The process of socialization of the girl child involves cultural construction of femininity at the pre-pubertal and post-pubertal phases. The importance of pre-pubertal purity amongst the girls has been given special recognition in rituals of various regions of India like Maharashtra, West Bengal, Karnataka and other parts as well.

Box No. 4.2

Case Analysis In Navaratri, the customs of worshiping and feeding virgin girls are widely practiced across India. On the eighth day of the festival, pre-pubertal girls are invited for worship and food. The girls represent Mother Goddess and they were worshiped and offered food along with other gifts as part of the ritual. Points can be inferred for a gender analysis include: i. In this festival the forms assigned to the girls are essentially feminine in nature, ii. The consciousness of femininity is constructed through their dressing style and from the gifts offered to them, and iii. a sharp distinction can be made between the phases of pre-puberty and post-puberty, and consequently, there is a sense of purity and sacredness associated with the pre-pubertal phase of women’s lives. The construction of femininity is symbolized in these rituals and the sense of feminine features is systematically built into the minds of the girl child.

The onset of puberty is the phase, which is marked by changes and transformation in a woman’s life. This phase is associated with several pubertal rituals, dietary prescriptions and seclusion of girls for certain days and these are practiced widely across India. These pubertal rituals are expressing the significance of maintaining sexual purity for girls in the context of marriage and motherhood.

4.4 PRACTICE OF SEX SEGREGATION

Sex segregation is mostly observed and studied within occupational and economic structures, which reflects women entering into a particular kind of profession in the regime of any economic reform. Purdah or the practice of female seclusion is widely followed across countries and communities and it prescribes obvious gender segregation in rural tasks and activities. In Bangladesh, the practice of female seclusion operated according to the inside/outside divide (Kabeer 1990). The author says that the poor women in Bangladesh are subjected to a twofold process of stereotyping. Poor women are perceived to be passive and vulnerable, yet they are regarded as the potential target groups for development. These images of women have been reinforced through cultural constructions like ‘women are always in need of male protection for their survival’. For example, the notion of the inside/outside divide has curtailed women’s freedom to move beyond the premises of the household. Therefore, they perform activities within the sphere of domesticity.

In the labour market, there is a wide division between men and women in terms of differential wages, access to MGNREGS job card, nature of work and the amount of work. Traditionally, women have been perceived to be dependent as far as employment is concerned. For instance, within the family women have access to resources through their male counterparts; similarly women in the labour market go through the male channels in accessing wage and other job opportunities. Majority of women are concentrated in the unorganized sector. In the case of unorganized sector, 95.79 per cent of females are concentrated in the sector as compared to 89.77 per cent of male workers. There is segregation on the basis of gender within the labour market and this division has led to rising socio-economic insecurities for women working in the unorganized and private sectors (Seth 2001). The author indicated that the states having low female status are into low paid and hazardous employment. Similarly, women’s participation in the field of political and technical employment is very low. In the agricultural sector, women have substantial contribution; however they are mostly employed as marginal workers. In agriculture, there is segregation with regard to nature of work assigned to women and men. In most of the states in India, men are engaged in ploughing and irrigation related activities and women have exclusively engaged in tasks like sowing, nurturing of plants, and harvesting. It is seen that men are mostly associated with marketing operations of the agricultural produce, and the control of resource and surplus is considered to be the domain of men. Further, the role of women as primary caretaker made them negotiating with flexible and temporary jobs. As rightly pointed out, married women are always been considered as ‘reserve army’ which could be kept outside the labour market to be used during labour crises. Women have no formal contract as employees and are exposed to poor safety conditions and other vulnerabilities. Women as the workforce are of primary importance to the global economy and at the same time devoid of health and labour protection.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- Note:** i) Use the space given below to answer the questions.
ii) Compare your answer with the Course material of this Unit.

1) How does sex segregation help to understand gender construction?

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2) What is understood by cultural construction of girl child?

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Let us read about what is understood by division of labour and the sphere of work.

4.5 DIVISION OF LABOUR AND THE SPHERE OF WORK

Gender relations are situated within the sexual division of labour and often create gender conflict. For instance, African agriculture is often perceived to be female system of farming. Within agriculture, the sphere of work is divided along gender lines. In Africa, the separation of the sphere of work between women and men implies the social exchange of labour between women and men. However, women’s sphere of work is surrounded by a complex set of claims and obligations. As Whitehead argued, two different kinds of social environment govern women’s economic activity in Africa. In women’s sphere of work, they have access to resources like land and the produce was shared with her children, husband, and other family members. Women have the obligation to work for their husbands and other family members, but there is no direct return/benefit receive by women in exchange of her labour. Women’s labour is constructed within the social environment of rights and obligations. Women’s work in the husband’s field is conceptualized under her general rights to welfare and maintenance as a household member.

Boserup’s book on women’s role in economic development was widely acknowledged within the field of women’s work.

Boserup discussed two systems of farming such as ‘female system’ vis-à-vis ‘male system’ of farming practised in countries of Africa and Asia, respectively. African farming exhibits a trend towards female system of farming characterised by family labour with higher percentage of female labour force participation, women accessing freedom and mobility, high bride price, son preference was less featured. The plough culture of Asian farming exhibits a trend towards male system of farming characterised by higher participation of male waged labour indicating women’s exclusion from farming. This practice of women’s seclusion from agriculture was reproduced through social norms such as women’s lack of inheritance right, dowry, system of son preference, and increasing rate of female mortality resulting into adverse sex ratio in the population (refer Kabeer, 2010).

The model explicitly discussed the notion of sexual division of labour in the context agriculture. To begin with, the author describes African farming as ‘female system of farming’ that clearly relegated to periphery in the wake of modernization and economic development. As Whitehead argued to show how agriculture is gendered in nature— the cash crop sector is managed by the men folk and the food crop sector is organized through women’s labour. This model emphasized the feminine nature of subsistence farming and women’s inability to participate in the modern farming sector in the African context. However, this framework was criticized on the ground that it completely neglected women’s contribution in modern food production. Whitehead argues, to meet the increasing cash needs of the African households, women have significantly contributed in family labour for cash cropping or increased trading.

Work is often understood to be physical and mental labour. Hochschild (cited by Redfern and Aune 2010) coined the term ‘emotional labour’ that reflects a particular kind of work associated with care and nurture. Emotional labour is associated with female occupation both in the domain of family and work sphere; therefore needs to be accepted as a particular forms of skill to be paid in future. Within family, women’s unpaid work is described as a “labour of love” that has been unremunerated, however, accountable under patriarchy.

Box No. 4.4

Labour of Love Have you many children?

The doctor asked. God has not been kind to me. Of fifteen born, only nine live. Does your wife work? No, she stays at home. I see, how does she spend her day? Doctor asked. Well, she gets up at four in the morning, fetches water, and wood, makes the fire and cooks breakfast. Then she goes to the river and washes clothes. After that she goes to town to get corn ground and buys what we need in the market. Then she cooks the midday meal. You come home at midday? No no, she brings the meal to me in the fields— about three kilometres from home. And after that?. Well, she takes care of the hens and pigs, and of course she looks after the children all day. then she prepares the supper so it is ready when I come home. Does she go to bed after supper? No, I do. She has things to do around the house until about nine o’clock. But of course you say wife doesn’t work? Of course she doesn’t work. I told you, she stays at home. (source: ILO ,1977, quoted by Mitter, 2002)

This above-mentioned extract describes the nature of labour associated with females and considered not only to be feminine in nature but also invisible and unremunerated.

4.6 SUMMING UP

The Unit discusses the concept of gender while making the distinction between biological sex and social gender. The Unit contributes to the understanding of gender both as social and cultural constructions. Gender as a social division has impacted women and men differentially in the contexts of socialization, work, sex segregation, and division of labour.

4.7 KEY WORDS

Kinship: Kinship is a relationship between individuals who share a genealogical origin, through biological, cultural, or historical descent.

Honour Killing: Honour killing is the killing of a member of a family or social group by other members, due to the belief of the perpetrators (and potentially the wider community) that the victim has brought dishonour upon the family or community. Honour killings are directed mostly against women and girls.

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4.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Is gender socially constructed? Substantiate your arguments with suitable examples.
- 2) Explain gender as a product of society and culture.
- 3) How do aspects like division of labour and sex segregation explain the notion of femininity and masculinity?



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