Understanding Gender: Key Concepts Explained for Better Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

An attempt is made here to delve deep into the simple concepts of sex and gender. On studying these key concepts, it has come to light that gender is a complex phenomenon with different meanings and far-reaching effects on children's lives. Gender is a socially constructed phenomenon imposed by society, family and elders in society to control, mould, manipulate the thoughts, attitudes and behaviour patterns in such ways that may be detrimental to the welfare of the society. By this process of socializing young children to imbibe, inculcate and learn gender differences, gender inequality, gender discrimination and gender bias, society may develop men and women with distorted views of society and may hamper social change and growth. Proper gendering is necessary for achieving the goals of a society of equal opportunity for all.

Keywords: Sex, Gender, Gender roles, gender discrimination, Socialization process

Introduction

Everyone is born either a male or female and sex is determined simply by looking at the newborn baby's genitalia. But a process of 'gendering' is done by all cultures by social and cultural 'packaging' for girls and boys from birth onwards. Every culture has its own ways of valuing girls and boys and assigning them with different roles, responses, attributes (Bhasin, 2000), rights, expectations, norms, taboos, sanctions and approved behaviour patterns.

Before further explaining about the key concepts related to gender, I would draw your attention to the following statements and rate them as either 'sex' or 'gender' as you may feel and think. Read and answer all the statements.

It must have been interesting going through the above statements and rating them. You may agree with these or you may not. But to understand what gender means, this exercise would be an eye-opener for some readers. You may not argue with the above answers,

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but they are true.

Sex: In general terms, "sex" refers to

Table 1: What do think about these statements? (Please give tick √ mark.)		
Statement	**Sex**	**Gender**
1. Girls are soft and sweet, but boys are rough and rude.		√
2. Boys are strong and able bodied, but girls are delicate and weak-bodied.		√
3. Women have breasts to feed their new born babies	√	
4. Men have moustache and grow beard.	√	
5. Women are weak and so should to be protected and taken care of at all stages of her life: by her father during childhood, by her husband after marriage and by her son during her old age.		√
6. Girls should be kept indoors. If they are let out, they may get spoilt. But if we confine boys at home, they may get spoilt.		√
7. Women look beautiful with long hair and so should always be encouraged to grow long hair and not cut their hairs short.		√
8. Women and married girls should always cover their heads and learn to live in 'ghoonghat', as a mark of respect to elders in her husband's home.		√
9. Girls should be taught cooking, stitching and knitting to prepare them for marrying them off. Boys need not learn cooking.		√
10. Girls are born with a pot of water on their heads. They tend to cry on every pretext.		√
11. Boys should not cry and bear any pain, because crying is not masculine feature.		√
12. It is the privilege of boys and men to earn, do a job and be responsible to run their homes. Girls and women should not be allowed this privilege.		√
13. Girls and women should not be allowed to till the land, run ploughs and tractors. It is against the custom of society.		√
14. Men do not need tenderness and are less sensitive than women.		√
15. Caring and nurturing of babies is the responsibility of women.		√
16. Women are scared of working outside their homes at night.		√
17. Women are emotional and men are rational.		√
18. Cooking comes naturally to women.		√
19. Most scientists are men.		√
20. Women cannot carry heavy loads.		√

What is Sex and what is Gender?

Sex is different from gender although people tend to use them to mean the same. But not really. Here ate differences.

the biological differences between males and females, such as the genitalia and anatomical and physiological differences. It is natural and comes at birth and cannot be changed.

Gender: Children are born female or male, but they learn to be girls and boys and grow into women and men. From childhood, they are taught learn and follow the appropriate behaviour and develop attitudes, learn specific roles and activities as approved distinctly for boys and girls. They are taught on the ways they should relate to other people. This learned behaviour is what makes up gender identity, and determines gender roles.

Gender roles are sets of behaviour, roles and responsibilities attributed to women and men that the culture defines as appropriate for men and women. Thus, gender roles include behaviours and choices that are associated with being male or female.

Our cultural beliefs reinforce what is seen to be acceptable behaviour of males or females. This includes what we do, what we like and how we behave. The various

Table 2: Differences between sex and gender	
Sex	**Gender**
❖ Sex is natural. It has biological origin. It refers to physical and physiological differences.	❖ It is man-made, not natural. It has no biological origin. It is a socio-cultural construct.
❖ Sex refers to visible differences in genitalia and related differences (womb, breasts) in procreative or reproductive function.	❖ Gender refers to masculine and feminine qualities, behaviour patterns, sanctions, norms, roles and responsibilities
❖ Sex is constant. Sex remains the same everywhere. Sex cannot be changed.	❖ Gender is variable, not constant. It can be changed. Gender changes from time to time, from culture to culture and from family to family.

Gender refers to the learnt roles, norms and expectations on the basis of one's sex. It is a socio-cultural definition of a boy and a girl, of a man and a woman. Not only their responsibilities are set by the society but also norms, values, dress codes, attitudes, opportunities, rights, mobility, freedom of expression, priorities and even dreams are determined by the society (Bhasin, 2000). It varies from society to society and can be changed.

Gender Roles

socializing agents include parents, teachers, peers, religious leaders, and the media.

Gender roles are reinforced at the various levels of the society imbibing norms and values through socialization process, household structure, access to resources, specific impacts of the global economy, and other locally relevant factors. Although deeply rooted, gender roles can be changed over time, since social values and norms are not static.

Biological differences between sexes do not normally change unless there is a

medical intervention. However, women and men perceive their own characteristics, roles and responsibilities in a particular way which does not flow out of sexual difference.

Gender roles are assigned to children based on the perceived differences. It is a social construction. Gender roles demand that activities assigned to men and women are based on these differential perceptions. The role differences similarly lead to selecting occupations. The term "Division of Labour" enter the child's life to denote duties and roles determined by sex.

Role Expectations as determined by Gender

The society expects some specific roles from boys and girls (men and women) and gradually socialize the children to imbibe, inculcate and adhere to these sex-determined roles and duties. The role expectations for a boy child and a girl child are mentioned below.

Role Expectations from a Boy Child

- Support family economically
- Less expenses for the marriage
- Performs last rites for the parents
- Heir of family. Once he matures, he becomes head of the family in patriarchal traditions.

Role Expectations from a Girl Child

- Goes away after marriage to support her husband's family

- More expenses for the marriage (dowry, gold, bike/car, etc,)
- Takes care of household work and other siblings
- Involved in reproductive works like caring and nurturing of elders
- She is Goddess of Wealth and light of the family
- Entire family can restrict her mobility. Decisions can be taken by the family on behalf of her.

Socialization Process or Gendering Process

Unlike sex, gender is socially constructed. Let us see how this social construction happens once the baby is born. Social structures such as family, society and other socio-cultural practices determine differences based on the sex of the child.

Socialization is a process of transforming a biological being into a social being. An infant is a biological entity at the time of birth. In the process of socialization, the biological entity acquires gender traits of becoming boy or girl.

The differences include clothing, behaviour, social role, position, identity and responsibility. In this way, gender is constructed and practiced. Let us examine the terms sex and gender using examples and real-life stories. When a new born baby arrives, the entire family celebrates with enthusiasm.

Celebration differs based on sex differences of the new born baby. First the family and society determine clothes for the baby following a pattern of colour-coding. If it is a female child, they tend to buy pink clothes and toys related to cooking and dolls. At the same time, if the child is male, they buy blue clothes and toys like car and bike. The family and society also creates conditioned responses which are different for female and male children. The little girl is called a pretty little angel and the little boy is told to be brave and strong and not cry since crying is seen as a female attribute. In this way gender is constructed from the moment a child is born.

Gender is also constructed in different societies in different ways. They mainly focus on the expected roles to be played by the female and male. For imposing these roles on male and female child, the socialization process plays a significant role. The differences include productive and reproductive roles, paid and unpaid work, power relations and politics.

Gender roles and codes are questioned and existing roles and relations of men and women are also challenged and changed. Society imposes certain roles on men and women. But there are cases where women challenged the assigned gender roles and achieved what they believed in, against many odds in life.

The following case studies give you different pictures.

Late Kalpana Chawla wanted to be an Astronaut/ space scientist after completing her engineering degree in India. Due to her insistence, her parents allowed her to go to the United States (US) to become an Astronaut. Like her, Ms. Pavithra wants to be a pilot after completing her 12th Standard. She comes from lower income strata. Her father works as a bus conductor in the State Transport Corporation. She has to fight at two levels. She needs to find necessary financial resources to pursue her passion to become a pilot. Secondly, she has to convince her parents that she can also operate a flight like men. She does not want to study female centric professional courses.

The above real life case studies demonstrate how gender is constructed and how women can reverse their productive roles. Both the women struggled at multiple levels to convince family and other social structures to pursue their passion. They proved that productive roles are gender neutral. Both men and women can do all types of work. The expectations adhere to gender related behaviour, roles, identity and professions are called gender stereotyping. Let us now read some common stereotypes related to gender.

Table 3: Common Gender Stereotypes	
Female	**Male**
Dependent	Independent
Weak	Powerful
Incompetent	Competent
Less important	More important
Emotional	Rational /Logical
Implementers	Decision makers
Housekeepers	Breadwinners
Supporters	Leaders
Fearful	Brave
Docile / Peace makers	Aggressive
Cautious	Adventurous
Soft Spoken	Outspoken
Source: Prepared by Prof. Vibhuti Patel, M.A programme SNDT Women's University	

We can easily understand how our thoughts, feelings and actions are governed by the above stereotypes about men and women. It is the process of socialization that we all got from our families, friends and relatives, neighbourhood, community and society, The above-mentioned gender stereotypes can be reversed and its suitability to all human beings (men and women) depends upon their personality and bold choices women and men make.

Conclusion

Sex and gender may appear to be simple concepts, but in fact are loaded with lot of meaning and impact on women's lives. While sex is natural and cannot be changed, gender is a socially constructed phenomenon and needs to be changed for a just society. Gender has adverse effect on how children develop attitudes, behaviours and thoughts that have far-reaching effect on young minds, and adversely impact people's lives. Hence, parenting has to be done carefully in order that children – boys and girls develop into good citizens allowing all to get equal opportunities, equal rights and flourish in their lives. Socialization processes need to be monitored at all levels – at family, neighbourhood, society, school, college, university and in work places, offices and public places to provide for following good norms of gender equality and equal opportunity for all people irrespective any gender.

References

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