



Understanding Gender: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

The term Gender has become indispensable and become a part of everyday life. To ponder upon the issues of Gender is essential if a society wants to progress and no society can develop until and unless it is Gender-sensitized. However, Gender is interpreted differently by different people based on socio-economic conditions, culture, caste, class, race, place, etc. there is a lot of dynamism attached to it and keeps changing along with the societal conditions and societal settings. This paper studies the various aspects of Gender and analyses its interpretations.

Keywords: *Gender, Classification, Differentiation.*

Introduction

The dynamic nature of the study of Gender has been strengthened by the foundations of women's empowerment, enhancing the capacity of women in nation-building, skill development and training and such other factors which enrich the lives of women. Gender analysis has assumed much significance in the modern world mainly because there is competition for resources, increased education among women, and increased visibility of women in the field of science and technology, management, public relations, etc. Gender is a term which is indispensable in nature and has become a part of everyday life in society. Its classification has been made by society, based on whether one is male or female¹. Gender is a socially constructed concept and has gained so much importance that it has been ingrained in the minds of people. Thus, society decides what or how gender should be; how boys should be and how girls should be. This could have a negative connotation and could lead to an inferior position of women in society. Since Gender is based on the social construction of males and females, such a mindset of society contributes to maintaining sex inequality and perpetuates male domination. There is no doubt that there is recognition of the existence of different sexes and classification of people by their sex for the sake of either convenience or some other purposes. Under this construction, in the family structure women possesses an inferior position among the members of the family. At the family level also, there is segregation of work among the male members and the female members and it so happens that in most cases, women end up performing almost all the household chores. The men on the

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other hand play a significant role in the major decision-making of the household. Gender is seen as something which is socially produced and engraved on the individual characterⁱⁱ. Biological sex does not define Gender but depends on how society constructs it. People are compelled to adhere to such social constructions and thus endorse the cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity. A child who is born into the world is absolute, oblivious as to what she or he should be and how she or he should behave. Soon after birth, the parents or the caretakers expose the child to various norms which had been existing in society. Such social norms get inculcated in the mind of the child and grow up to be just what or how society wants the child to be. The sex of the baby determines the colours for the “boys” and the “girls”, the name of the child is given by considering the sex of the child and many other things. There are specified roles or tasks for the boys and the girls and a girl who encroaches on the boys’ tasks is considered ‘boyish’ and if a boy encroaches on the girls’, the boy is termed as ‘girlish’. Being ‘boyish’ or ‘girlish’ is not something which any boy or girl desires, which thereby compels them to behave or to perform certain roles or tasks as the social norms desire.

The word Gender is often used to differentiate between male and female and is used to assert social and cultural differences rather than biological differences. Gender issues focus largely on women in relation to men and the roles that men and women play. It does not focus only on the promotion of women but also encompasses Gender relations, which adversely affect the well-being of society, the planning process, the production process and many other aspects of life. Michael S. Kimmel defines Gender as something which means masculinity and femininity, also determining man and woman. It means a classification by which biological sex is determined, separated and socialized into equivalent sex roles. It also means the universal inequality between men and women. He further states that Gender means hierarchy, inequality and powerⁱⁱⁱ.

According to Judith Butler, Gender is a kind of doing, and the incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing and it is not something automatic or mechanical. One does not “do” Gender alone, one is always “doing” it. The term Gender is outside oneself and beyond oneself. Although being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way, there is nevertheless a desire that is constitutive of Gender itself^{iv}. She analyses the importance of social norms and how many desires do not originate with an individual person, but it is the social norms which constitute those desires. The associated behaviour or traits with that of Gender comes as a natural process and even without one’s realization, it gets internalised into an individual. Priyam, Menon and Banerjee define Gender as the relationship between men and women. According to them, Gender is based on inequality, with men having more power over women as a basic principle of society. These differences in the social structure specify roles, identities and positions of power for men and women^v.

R. W. Connell includes various aspects like race, class and sexual diversity among men and women in the study of Gender. Like Michael S. Kimmel, he also believes that power plays an important role in understanding Gender. It is no longer possible to study Gender

relations without giving attention to global processes and inequality. Just like femininity, masculinity is also a social construction and not a fixed biological essence of men. Masculinity and femininity are relational and are interconnected through other social structures like race, class and nation^{vi}.

Sex and Gender

Sex is based on Biology and determines the biological differences between males and females. Gender on the other hand is based on societal construction and determines the differences between men and women in terms of their roles and status. The classification based on human biology is termed sex and the difference between Sex and Gender is just like the difference between Biology and Culture. This means that Gender is a cultural conception and is out of the purview of Biology. Sex is a raw material upon which culture operates. Sex is something which came about prior to society and is concerned with the biological body whereas Gender is the cultural script which socializes the body and leads to the categorization of men and women^{vii}. Culture embraces sex differences to further deepen the imbalances between men and women in society. If sex is male and female, then Gender is masculinity and femininity and the categories of men and women fuse dominant perceptions of femaleness and maleness with masculinity. Along with Gender comes about the concepts of femininity and masculinity; where masculinity defines ‘maleness’ and femininity defines ‘femaleness’. Basic features of maleness and femaleness are established and thereby lead to structured differences between men and women.

To classify people based on sex is called Sex Differentiation^{viii}. It begins right at the time of birth, which favours males over females and the females are always side-lined while males take the centre-stage. On the other hand, Gender Differentiation means the social processes which compound the difference between male and female and distinguishes activities as male and female domains. They are assigned Gender specific roles and are compelled to follow the social norms as to what should men do and what should women do. Thus, Gender Differentiation and Sex Differentiation ensure that females indeed differ from males and vice versa. Chodorow argues that motherhood is the key to understanding Gender Differentiation and the subordination of women. Even though she values motherhood highly and thinks of it as a rich experience, she also points out that it becomes kind of a trap which women are not able to come out from. Girl children identify with their mothers and prepare for their future roles as mothers and boys on the other hand prepare for the roles which are played by their fathers. This leads to a lack of nurturing personality among the men. Thus, according to her, this is the basis for Gender Differentiation^{ix}.

Culture has a close relation with Gender in the sense that it is the culture which deceives people into thinking that biological sex accounts for the differences between male and female behaviour. It is the societies which reinforce the Gender Binary. The term basically means the social organization of two Genders: man and woman. The two groups are seen as polar opposites. Such a division leads to a position where there is multiple layers of meaning, wherein one term is right and its binary opposite is wrong. The term “man, male, masculinity” denotes “rational, active and strong”; whereas “women, female and feminine”

are viewed as “irrational, passive and weak”^x. Thus, femininity and masculinity have been established and certain qualities have been termed masculine and certain qualities as feminine.

There is yet another perspective which considers the concept of Binary opposites as something which is a general way of looking at women and men and understanding their relationships to the structure of society and cannot be true all the time. It is no longer a matter of two opposite categories of people as male and female, but rather a range of social relations among differently situated people. It focuses mainly on the relational character of Gender. Thus, in this regard, the relational nature of masculinity and femininity is realized, but at the same time, such relational characters are interconnected through other social structures like race, class and nation^{xi}. These social structures have become an important area in the study of Gender and the interpretation of Gender differs according to these structures. Thus, Gender should be looked at by considering social structures like race, class, hierarchy, culture, nations and other levels of development.

Gender Role in Society

In the mid-1960s, feminism began to resurface as a political and social force in the United States of America and the Women’s movement reached many people and resulted in widespread changes in women’s and men’s roles in society. During this time there was a beginning of switching roles between men and women. Men began to be more involved in household work and women, on the other hand, began to come out of the four walls of their homes to contribute to the family income and began to work. Women began to question the traditional or conventional demarcation of roles accorded to them and women began to reflect new, more liberated values and attitudes in their day-to-day activities^{xii}. It means that women gained more confidence and started to internalise their self-image of being female by gathering the courage to fight for their rights. The issues that were central to the Women’s Liberation Movement were the sexual division of labour, control of sexuality and the relations of reproduction, access to education and jobs^{xiii}. Women became more visible and demanded equality in their workspaces and equal opportunities in jobs. Another main factor which was very relevant at that time was the freedom of women to have control over reproductive capability and their sexuality. All these could be possible only when women got access to education and thus equip themselves for all kinds of developments. In the 1970s, there was a resurgent feminist movement which aimed at promoting the visibility of women and making their concerns heard. It tried to stress the things that women have in common like the responsibility of household or domestic chores, child care, fear of violence inflicted upon them by the patriarchal set-up, lack of education and not being able to complete or hold positions in offices in the managerial levels and not rationally represented in politics. However, the 1970s approach towards feminism was limited in the sense that it considered Gender primarily in terms of differences between men and women. Patriarchy has led to a dualistic perspective of male privilege and female domination. Women and men were basically cast as opposites and this was a period when the concept of Binary opposites in terms of Gender began to gain prominence. From this perspective, male control and coercion of women produced conflict between the sexes^{xiv}. During this time, a high level of male

control was prevalent and the ill-treatment that women faced in society produced conflict between the sexes. Betterment on the side of the women comes automatically through many resolutions made from different series of conflicts between men and women.

There is a growing interdisciplinary collection of studies of men and masculinity during the end of the 1980s. The horizon of the study of Gender expanded to include global processes and inequalities. Gender entered into a new stage and this is another perspective of looking at men and women and understanding their relations by taking into consideration the structure of society. Gender is no longer a matter of two opposite categories of people, that is, male and female but a range of social relations like race, class, hierarchy, etc. among the people. Thus, the base of the study of Gender is broadened. Men and women are no longer characterized as distinct categories of people, but rather the need for bringing about their comparison is necessary in order to bring about a society based on equality and solidarity. In the 1980s Gender entered a new stage, where the experiences of diverse groups of men and women in relation to the structure of society. The range of social relations among differently situated people is highlighted and brought out the relational character of Gender. In contemporary times, Gender is not merely about differences between men and women, but also takes into consideration various other social structures such as race, caste, class and place.

Understanding Gender

Many scholars have developed various schools of thought with regard to the study of Gender. Though the beliefs and strategies are different, the basic idea of emancipation of women's rights is a common thread which binds all the different views together. Liberal Feminism emphasises individual rights and equal opportunity on the basis of social justice. According to them, the main reason for the subordination of women is the discrimination against them which discourages them to participate equally in society^{xv}. Liberal Feminism believes in equal opportunities for both men and women so that their full potentialities are realized. When women are subordinated, they feel threatened to face competition and challenges and further deteriorating their conditions. Also, Liberal Feminism supports family life to have children and a right of choice by women. However, it considers the sexual division of labour as something which is not natural^{xvi}. When the division of work is done based on gender, work gets segregated into men's domain and women's domain. Consequently, men hold higher or managerial posts and women hold clerical posts, which are more routine in nature. This further deepens the inequality between men and women in society. Liberal Feminists consider sex role socialization as contributing to the inequality of women^{xvii}. Thus, the abolition of the sexual division of labour will eventually lead to equality, but this can be done only when women enjoy favourable material conditions. This should be supplemented by the application of reforms through law and public policy changes.

Radical Feminist theory, on the other hand, does not believe in the concept of family and identifies it with the oppression of women through sexual slavery and forced motherhood^{xviii}. They give maximum emphasis to the body of the women and that men should not have control over their bodies. Their views are a little extreme in the sense that it

gives maximum importance to the sanctity of women and their modesty. Radical Feminists view patriarchy as the primary cause of women's oppression and do not have any faith in legal reforms since the institutions are male-dominated. So according to them, the liberation of women is the only solution to the problem of women by creating identified communities and networks.

Social Feminists view capitalism, patriarchy and racism as the root cause of women's subordination in society. The Socialist Feminist supports the elimination of the division of labour or work based on the sex of a person and men taking equal responsibility in child rearing and other such work which are considered to be in the domain of women's responsibility. They also support reproductive freedom for women, freedom to define one's sexuality and the abolition of the categories of 'men' and 'women'.

The various schools of thought follow different means, but all have the same end, wherein every school of thought aims for the emancipation of the status or position of women in society. Liberal Feminists mainly aim for equality between men and women and this can be achieved when there is no distinct division of labour. There should not be any specific domain for men and women in the areas of work as well as in the family but should perform functions or work regardless of their sex and there should not be any kind of discrimination based on sex. Radical Feminists take the extreme stand and do not believe in the concept of family, unlike Liberal Feminists. The main reason for inequality between men and women is the existence of male dominant society or Patriarchy. The Socialist Feminists take a more comprehensive stand and consider capitalism, patriarchy and racism as the main reasons for inequality between men and women in society. Many scholars have different views on the theoretical constructions and each theory has been independently developed as a way of understanding the origin and persistence of gender inequality in society.

Gender is a very diverse and dynamic term. Its meaning or explanation varies with the changing social conditions and environment. There is no fixed meaning of the term and can be interpreted in different ways by different people or schools of thought. The only constant thing in Gender is that its attributes are influenced by various factors of society such as caste, class, race, culture, socio-economic conditions and so on. All studies of Gender aim at the upliftment of the conditions of women in particular. Emancipation of the position of women requires efforts from both men and women to do away with societal norms which are detrimental in nature. A harmonious relationship between men and women can be brought about when both work towards a common goal of attaining a society based on equality.

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