
UNIT 14 FORMATION OF GENDER IDENTITIES

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit would help in the process of understanding:

- the concepts of formation of self, body, identity etc. and
- how socialization (household, per group) Religion, Education, Culture, Media influence formation of gender identities.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

The gender is a concept which is distinguished from the biological concept of sex. Gender is constructed and expressed in many areas of social life.

Men and Women undeniably have certain physical differences. It is a subject of debate whether these biological differences also cause behavioural differences and whether biology, therefore is one of the causes of sex roles and gender-related social stratification. Biological determinism hold that biology does affect these things, but sociologists argue against the idea. For instance, from birth, a female child is received in a different way than is a male child. There are research studies which show that, the notion of women are inferior to men is stressed from the very moment a child is born. Later, it is supported by the behaviour patterns prescribed for girls and women. Hence gender discrimination and gender roles are to a large extent imposed by the society.

14.2 BODY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL CONTROL

We now turn to the area of the body and its conceptualization.

14.2.1 Concept of Body

The body is, clearly a medium of culture. In the sense, we take care of our body and maintain it, eat, dress, and adorn ourselves, communicate with others, and so on. However, the body is not only a text of culture. It is also more directly, a 'locus of social control' so

that we are not what we want to be but are made through culture. This, is what Foucault calls the 'decile body' which is regulated by the norms of cultural life.

In the Indian context, an important work on the body in contemporary times is David Arnold's *Colonizing the Body*. He emphasizes the importance of 'the body as a site of colonizing power and of contestation between the colonized and the colonizers.

14.2.2 Sociological Understanding of Body

Anthropologists and sociologists have commented on the marked nature of woman's body by caste, religious belief, social norms and practices and on how woman's embodiment and her sexuality serve as important boundary markers. The female sexuality is controlled by caste and class factors is an indisputable fact. A woman's body and sexuality are in any case under the controlling purview of men. It is an assertion not only of patriarchal power but also of social control. Woman is allowed little or no space for an independent, self-perceived articulation, definition or expression of her sexuality. Her body becomes an instrument and a symbol for the community's expression of caste, class and communal honour. Chastity, virtue and above all, purity are extolled as great feminine virtues embodying the honour of the family, community and nation. In a sense, woman's body is often no longer her body but has been taken over by the community, of both men and women, to establish and legitimize its image in society.

To the extent that woman's body is the foundation on which gender equality is built, established and legitimized, understanding the female body in different contexts, settings, and situations is important.

14.2.3 Communicative Body

Only when we view the female body as communicative or lived body that we can begin to understand the implications of both the social construction of lived experience as well as women's own perceptions and articulations of their embodiment. The gender is inscribed on woman in everyday life both socially as well as through her life experiences, perceptions, desires, fantasies. It is in this sense that gender identity is truly both constructed and lived.

The internalization of representation of the female body by women appears to be fundamental to the formation of feminine identity.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How does the sociological concept of 'body' differ from that of the biological concept? Use about 8 lines for your answer.

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14.3 FACTORS LEADING TO GENDER IDENTITIES

Let us now see how socialization affects gender identities.

14.3.1 Socialization Process

Socialization, or the process of internalizing society's values in order to adapt to one's

culture, influences how people behave as males and females in society.

At one level, women menstruate, give birth, nurse babies, experience menopause-experiences which are unavailable to men. At another level, women and men are located in cultural settings that shape their experience of embodiment differently depending on class, ethnic, religious and caste factors. These socio-spatial and other historical factors are therefore equally important in the experience of embodiment in everyday life.

Socialization practices in different cultures reflect the care and concern that goes into the upbringing of girls so that they are infact trained to conduct themselves according to social norms, values and practices. Later, women absorb social expectations and infact experience them as their own, so that power, in a sense does not operate coercively but from within.

Sociologists realized that the process of socialization, by which people learn what is expected of them from their parents, peers, and society at large, teaches men and women the norms of conduct for their gender.

Gender Socialization

The social learning process that imbibes people (notably young) into understanding the various aspects of their culture includes the process of gender socialization. Gender socialization encompasses the process of learning society's gender roles and their advantages and limitations.

In most societies, there is a clear categorization of what it means to be male or female. This categorization process and the agents of socialization that transmit knowledge about gender roles influence how individuals define themselves and other in terms of gender and sex roles.

In many societies, gender roles i.e the expected or preferred ways for people of each sex to behave are rigidly defined. For instance, men have traditionally been expected to be strong; aggressive, even dominating. Similarly, the 'big boy's don't cry' typifies one aspect of the male role. Women have been expected to be nurturing, sensitive, emotional, and relatively passive. Children are taught these values, both consciously and unconsciously, from a very early age. Toys for example are also distinguished. Boys are given large sized, noise making or violent types whereas girls are often given what might be termed gentler toys. These expressions will influence formation of self as well identities.



Gender identities are formed from tender age

Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

Agents of Gender Socialization

These include parents, siblings, peers, schools, society, religion and a variety of other institutions. For very young children, parents and family (including grand parents and other extended family members) play the central role in shaping gender socialization. They determine how the family interacts with a boy (this process is often unconscious) as well as the types of toys and clothes that the baby is given.

Gender identity itself is established by age two. Its central component is the notion "I am male" or "I am female". Sigmund Freud theorized that identification and imitation of same-sex parents leads to effective gender-identity formation. In the latency period described by Freud (ages seven to twelve), males and females tend to segregate themselves from each other. This may be considered part of the socialization process and further solidifies gender identification and role-specific behaviour. Schools and families continue to influence gender socialization throughout adolescence. During adolescence, peer influence becomes the strongest agent of gender socialization as teens form together in small social groups to facilitate their transition into adulthood and into the larger society. The socializing effects of the mass media also become powerful in teen years.

Gender identity and gender socialization can have serious ramifications for an individual's sense of self esteem.

14.3.2 Culture

Culture has traditionally been seen as of key significance in the construction of gender identity. Socialization theory has been very popular in its accounts of how boys and girls are treated differently from an early age and consequently grow up with different social-psychological characteristics. Education has been seen as an important part of this process, drawing boys and girls into different activities and achievements. The recent analysis of gender and culture has drawn heavily on literary theory, with the deconstructionism of Derrida and also on the discourse analysis of Michel Foucault. The emphasis has shifted from the individual's learning experience to the creation of the texts or representations or discourses which construct our notions of gender (Weedon). This work often speaks of difference, both between women and men, but also between women. Indeed some of the emphasis on differences between women has problematized the very concept of 'woman' as a unitary category.

In the Indian context, woman is defined as an ambivalent persona. Woman is located in myth and popular culture as both goddess and dangerous power (Shakti), as virtuous wife and dangerous evil, both pure and impure in her embodiment. Women were not only revered and worshipped but also controlled through a direct regulation of her sexuality.

14.3.3 Religion

In no society men and women experience religion in the same way. Religions are powerful social institutions that shape gender identities in society. There are sacred spaces where only men are allowed to enter and not women. Similarly, there are norms defined by which only men can perform certain duties or obligations pertaining to religious activities. Hence, religion not only defines how men and women participate in various religious activities but also reinforce and legitimize gender roles assigned to men and women in society.

14.3.4 Education

The formal education indoctrinates gender roles through which 'self' gradually gets shaped and influences gender identity. The numerous role models and examples portrayed in the schools, colleges and universities are the major sources of the formation of gender identities. The institution of education has been implied by sociologists in the process of gender socialization and the stereotyping of the genders.

14.3.5 Communication and Media

Most of our lives are in one way or another influenced by the imagery through communication and media. The visual and print media largely influences women's perceptions through the imaging of the female body as the 'perfect' or 'desirable' body. With the advent of television and the printed word in an increasingly modern urban India, the rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through

'standardized visual images'. Thus, we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behaviour are required. Some of these images are presented to us through advertisements, fashion displays, beauty contests, fashion models, through magazines particularly women's magazines and so on. Cable television has brought home the obsession with the perfect female body in the west through commercials, talk shows, etc. Many of these directly or indirectly address the desirability of the female body in one way or another.

14.3.6 Language

Gender identity is conveyed and structured by both verbal and non-verbal means. Recent interest has focused on, among other things, the manner in which gender classifications are influenced by the semantic structure of language. Thus Lakoff has suggested that generic terms in language may influence cognitive structures and attitudes towards gender. The use of generic terms reflects and helps to perpetuate attitudes of male dominance and superiority. For instance, the term 'man' means human being in general, while 'woman' refers only to females. Similarly the term 'bachelor' conserves its original meaning of single man, while 'spinster' has acquired the negative connotation of 'old maid'. Hence, language is another medium through which gender identities are imposed or reinforced.

14.3.7 Context or Social Environment

Woman's experience of her embodiment in everyday life is undoubtedly linked to her location in different settings and contexts whether these are the community, the family, the workplace, or other spaces she inhabits or frequents. This in fact is a major axis for the formation of gender identity.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What are the agents of socialization
 - a) Family b) University c) Library d) Peer Group
 - 1) Only a
 - 2) Only b
 - 3) Only c
 - 4) Only d
 - 5) All
- 2) According to Sigmund Freud, at which age gender identity is established?
 - 1) 18 years
 - 2) 25 years
 - 3) 30 years
 - 4) 2 years
- 3) How does media influence formation of gender identities? Use about five lines for your answer.

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14.4 LET US SUM UP

Woman in fact is socially constructed and the concept of gender becomes central to our understanding of the nature of women's embodiment in the everyday world. Gender and Identity is not something fixed and immutable. It is both constructed and lived, sometimes can also be transcended. It is therefore always in the making continuously in the process of communication and exchange, evolving through the everyday life experiences of women.

14.5 KEY WORDS

Gender	:	Sex refers to the biological attributes of men and women, while gender is understood to be a social construct incorporating the full range of personality traits, attitudes, feelings, values, behaviour and activities that society differentially ascribes to men and women.
Gender Identity	:	The knowledge of being biologically male or female; it is usually achieved by age two.
Gender Socialization	:	The adoption of gender roles through societal and parental expectations and the modeling of others in those roles.
Social Control	:	A term used very widely to refer to all types of forces and constraints which induce conformity to norms and customs in human society.
Socialization	:	The process of internalizing society's values in order to adapt to one's culture, influences how people behave as males and females in society.

14.6 FURTHER READINGS

Thapan, Meenakshi (ed.) 1997. *Embodiment-Essays on Gender and Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Maithreyi Krishnaraj and Karuna Chanana (ed.) 1989. *Gender and the Household Domain: Social and Cultural Dimensions*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Faith, Karlene (1994). Resistance: Lessons from Foucault and Feminism. In H. Loraine Radtke and H. J. Stam (eds.). *Power/Gender Social Relations in Theory and Practice*. London: Sage Publications.

14.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Biological concept of body underlines the physical differences between men and women. Biological determinists argue that behavioral variation between men and women and subsequent definition of sex roles, are due to physical differences. However, sociological understanding of the concept of body is diametrically opposed with that of the biological concept. Sociologists argue that body is a medium of culture. The cultural norms of each society define and shape the concept of body and to a large extent the gender roles and gender related stratification.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) 5 (all)
- 2) 4 (2 years)
- 3) Both visual and print media are the major sources of gender biased and stereotype role models propagated thereby influencing the gender identities. The classic example is the imaging of the female body as the 'perfect' or 'desirable' body through various media including the powerful cable television and magazines.