

MODULE 2 BASIC CONCEPTS OF GENDER

Session 2: Gender as Social Construct **NOTES/ REFERENCES FOR POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS**

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Mechanism of Social Control

Since gender roles are deep-seated in the culture as well as belief and value systems of the society, they are perceived as highly resistant to change. Pervasive mechanisms of social control further reinforce, maintain and sanction the gender roles.

While ideology pertains to theory or idea, social control is the practice of an ideology. Social control includes ways on which society encourages and makes people conform to its norms and expectations. It could be a social mechanism by which a group or community exercises its dominion over component individuals and enforces conformity to its norms. Or it could consist of institutions such as laws, customs, folkways and fashion that strongly influence if not shape individual behaviors so that these would conform to group demands. Far from involving only external regulation of the person's conduct, social control is in fact internalized so that society's moral demands and standards become constitutive elements of the individual's personality. Social control mechanisms ensure that most individuals in most situations like to do the things they have to do.

Among the socialization institutions or mechanisms that maintain or control gender roles and perpetuate unequal gender relations in society are the following:

Family

Throughout childhood and adolescence, parents orient their children (more often unconsciously) to certain gender role standards, behaviors and practices. The most common means of gender differentiation is in the choice of toys..... Parents also expose them to different activities bearing gender stereotypes such as housework...for girls and...working outside the house for boys. Verbal designation/appellation or telling children what they are...or what is expected of them...is also a strong socializing factor. All these processes enable children to believe, internalize the prescribed behaviors as right for them, and develop their “appropriate” gender identity.

Education/School

Like parents, teachers demonstrate attitudes and expectations that regard women and men differently. They expect girls to be more refined and polite than boys, and boys to be more misbehaving than girls. They perceive it normal for boys to excel in carpentry and gardening and for girls to be more active in cooking, sewing and religious activities.

Language

Language as a medium people use in their everyday lives to communicate their thoughts or ideas is the most pervasive institution of socialization. Sexist terms, no matter how subtle, very easily maintain gender ideology. The bias against women in language takes various forms. Most common, although efforts have been made to correct it, is the tendency to render women invisible by using the clearly male “man” (whether by itself or as prefix/suffix) and “he” to refer to both sexes. Others are the downgrading and trivializing of women, e.g. by referring to their appearance rather than ability; typecasting them in certain roles and occupations, e.g. “housewife”; associating women with certain derogatory traits; treating women as appendages of men (e.g., “President Ramos and wife Ming”), and many more.

Church

The church further reinforces the belief that “women’s place is in the home” and women’s primary obligation is to be good mothers and housewives. The church, thus, limits women’s right to shape their destiny.

Mass Media

Print media (newspapers, magazines, and comics), broadcast media (radio and television) and films are decidedly influential in shaping the minds of the people. Media has been a most effective socializing agent because it goes about its function in a subtle and often subconscious way.

In the guise of selling products, advertisements actually reinforce existing beliefs. What are the images of women in advertisements? Four can be identified: 1) as housewife who has to buy products to lighten her burden; 2) as loving mother and wife who serves her husband and children; 3) as a beautiful woman who has to attract the attention of men or hold her husband’s attention through the use of this or that product: and 4) as a sex object whose body is used as a come-on for men to buy products. (Anonuevo in Eviota, 1994)

Structures influencing/maintaining gender roles

Gender Division of Labor

Society assigns to women the responsibility of caring for children and the home because they are the ones physically equipped to bear and nurse children. This reproductive function of women supports the notion that it is “natural” for women to stay home. Reproduction includes not just the biological bearing and nursing of children, but also the other tasks associated with it: child rearing, maintenance of family members and of the home. These activities are necessary for survival and make possible the continuance of productive work, but rate lower in economic value. They are viewed as women’s sphere.

Men, on the other hand, tasked with providing income for their families, occupy the “world of production”. Production here refers to social production or the production of commodities, that is, goods and services for exchange rather than for immediate consumption. Participants in social production usually get a wage of fee in return for their labor or the product they produce. (Dionisio in Eviota, 1994)

This production-reproduction distinction is the so-called “gender division of labor” (cultural assignment of tasks on the basis of gender) which actually took pattern after the sexual division of labor (assignment of tasks based on the functions of the body, e.g. sperm-giving for men and childbearing for women in human reproduction). Generally, this production-reproduction divide is regarded as a harmonious arrangement in which women and men take complementary roles. But an emerging perspective sees the arrangement as one of gender subordination—specifically, the institutionalized domination by men of women, as well as the secondary position assigned to women vis-à-vis men in society. (Dionisio in Eviota, 1994)

Gender subordination takes its form in various systems and arena in society. Women experience disadvantages in the economic, political, socio-cultural and even in their personal/individual development spheres. Men, too, gave experiences to tell where they are denied certain advantages in society. But because the society at present puts greater attention and emphasis on things with greater economic value which is said to be under the male dominion, men are afforded fuller benefits and advantages than women of whom majority still stay on the margins of the economic world.

While childbearing will always fall on the female, childbearing and housekeeping need not. There should be shared parenting and shared housework. Division of labor should not be based on gender, but on who is capable and who is available.

Gender Division of Labor

Productive Reproductive

| Public | Private

| Office | Home

I Paid I Unpaid
I Superior I Inferior
I High profile I Low profile
Women Men
Women and Men

Traditional gender roles separate men and women from each other. In effect, women are denied access to the public world of: work, achievement, independence and power. Men are denied access to the nurturant, emotive and other-oriented world of domestic life. Further, such divide limits the psychological and social potentials of human beings.

Learning from the past

Gender as a Social Construct

For centuries it was believed that the different characteristics women and men exhibited were natural and immutable - determined by biological differences or divinely ordained. These characteristics included both ideas and values about what was masculine and what was feminine (women are emotional/men are rational); and sets of behavior, aptitudes or practices (women washing dishes/men working with machines).

Long before the Women's Decade, cross-cultural research showed that, rather than being predetermined or natural, almost all such perceived characteristics have been shaped and constructed by society. In this handbook we use the word "gender" to describe socially determined characteristics, and sex to refer to those which are biologically determined (chiefly, the ability of men to impregnate and of women to bear children).

It is people who define certain characteristics as masculine or feminine, certain activities as appropriate for men and for women, and certain norms for relationships between men and women.

The conditions of women's and men's daily lives and their relative position within their societies are embedded in social, cultural,

political and economic frameworks and institutions. Gender relations and identities are not universal, but vary from culture to culture, and sometimes from community to community. They are dynamic and change over time. People often ridicule or ignore examples that contradict established gender roles and relationships.

In a group of Tanzanian development workers in the Kilimanjaro region, both women and men insisted on seeing with their own eyes that women were operating as well as owning a local sawmill, even though the mill had received a lot of publicity. Villagers in a remote village in southern Sudan refused to believe a western development worker was a woman because she was driving the Land Rover. Men trying to increase their share of housework are often belittled by male peers and ridiculed by mothers and wives who resist having them undertake “women’s work.” This deeper understanding of how society determines and maintains what is masculine and what is feminine has led to a number of promising directions for action. Understanding gender values and practices is central to knowing how societies are organized, how they function, and the potential for social (and gender) change. Assumptions which flow from our own experience of family and household cannot necessarily be applied to other cultures, classes or age groups.

[With the exception of childbearing] only in a society where men and women constitute unequal genders is there any reason why gender should be an important organizing principle of the social division of labor... For nothing in the fact that women bear children implies that they exclusively should care for them through their childhood; still less does it imply that women should also feed and care for adults, nurse the sick, undertake certain agriculture tasks or work in an electronics factory. A society where men and women were equal would be one where the arbitrary fact of sexual difference did not mark out the possibilities and limitations of economic activity for the individual.

- Maureen Mackintosh

It is useful to separate values and attitudes from practices and behavior, since the latter may change more readily than the former, and are easier to tackle directly. Every society assigns different tasks to men and women (often called the sexual division of labour). In

most cultures, both women and men do productive work (produce goods or services for income or subsistence), although in most specific situations, productive work is clearly divided into men's tasks (ploughing, working with machinery) and women's (planting, weeding, teaching children). Women are mainly responsible for **reproductive work** (e.g: cooking, washing, cleaning, nursing, looking after children, building and maintaining shelter), to reproduce and maintain the labour force. Women and men both undertake **community work** to maintain and improve the community (judging disputes, making laws, policing, organizing labour (for) ceremonies (and) festivities as well as work around community issues or needs such as access to water). In the community, men tend to have the more public, high-status tasks (chairing volunteer boards, decision-making in councils or village courts, leading ceremonies). Women tend to do the organizing and support work.

What is socially recognized and valued as work tends to be mainly that productive work which is counted in national accounting systems (eg: GNP, labour statistics). If a farmer produces maize or kitchen garden vegetables for her family to eat, she is not defined as working. If she sells her products and uses the money to buy food, she is counted as contributing to the economy and the society. As a result, subsistence farmers are seen as less skilled and productive, so fewer resources are devoted to them than to cash crop farmers. No reproductive work done inside the household is counted as work, although anyone who has repaired a roof or scrubbed pots knows it is. Informal community work, whether by women or men, is also not counted. **We need to redefine what is counted as work and** how that is reflected in economic thinking and processes. Both women and men create and maintain this social shaping of what women and men are and do. Societies, after all, are composed of people. Men and women do, however, benefit and suffer unequally from the current situation. Therefore, **we need to portray both women and men as responsible and capable of changing themselves and society**, while recognizing that women have a greater interest in organizing for change. We tend, quite arbitrarily, to value some kinds of work more than others. We regard head work more important than body work, rational work more valuable than emotional work, strength work more taxing than dexterity and paid work more important than unpaid or volunteer work.

To address the social construction and maintenance of gender relations strategically, we need both short and long-term goals. In the short term, getting women and men to undertake what is perceived as each other's work will increase respect and lessen the pay gap. Taking on non-traditional work is easier for the rich (they may want to) and the poor (they may have to) than for working for middle class people. Such shifts should not increase women's overall workload, which is already too high. Education about our social capacity to transform gender relations can take place in the home, the school, the community and the workplace. We can encourage people to create gender relations that are empowering rather than oppressive: a positive force in the world.

In the long term, these strategies should help us redefine what work is and increase the status of labour which is now invisible and uncared. The liberating effect of understanding gender as socially determined lies in knowing that what we have created we can also change, perhaps slowly and with struggle and pain, but also with hope.

Gaining insight into the complexity and subtlety of gender as socially created helps us understand that other power relations (white/black, rich/poor, ethnic majority/minority, urban/rural) are equally complex. Reducing power imbalances appreciation of how the relationship is structured - attitudinally, socially, institutionally, politically and economically.
