

# Gender as a Social Construct

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# Gender as a Social Construct

*Applying a Social Construction Framework to Understanding Gender*

# Gender as a Social Construct

## Definitions of gender

- ❖ ‘Social organisation of sexual difference’ (Joan Scott, 1988)
- ❖ ‘...the result of socially constructed ideas about the behavior, actions, and roles a particular sex performs’ (The World Health Organisation).



# Gender as a Social Construct

## What is a Social Construct?

1. Signs - direct relationship between two phenomena e.g females and menstruation
2. Symbols – an arbitrary human assignment of a relationship between two phenomena e.g menstruation and good nurturing skills.

# Gender as a Social Construct

What is a Social Construct?

- ❖ Creation of a society
- ❖ Relies heavily on shared meanings and understandings
- ❖ Meaning repeatedly reinforced by society so that they appear to be natural and not created (e.g through socialisation).
- ❖ Meaning dependent on socio-historical location i.e time and place.

# Gender as a Social Construct

The Institutionalising of Gender as Natural (Judith Butler, 1990)

- ❖ Social articulations (i.e language )of gender (e.g bodily movements, talk, dress and public sexual orientation).
- ❖ Through the repeated performance of these social articulations, gender appears to be an identity that exists prior to the articulations.
- ❖ The importance of gender as a necessity for the understanding of the function of sex.

# Gender As a Social Construct

The Institutionalising of Gender as Natural (Judith Butler, 1990)

We make gender, and in our creation of gender, gender makes us as well:

- ❖ how we understand ourselves as men and women
- ❖ the rights and entitlements that are assigned to us
- ❖ the value assigned to men, women and their gendered characteristics.

# Gender As a Social Construct

## Socialisation to Gender

- ❖ Primary socialisation in the home : basic socialisation to gender as a system based on difference
- ❖ Secondary socialisation in institutions and agents such as school, church, peer groups, nations etc. from childhood through to adolescence learning : more specific socialisation to difference focusing on roles



# Gender As a Social Construct

## Socialisation to Gender

Each institution and agent has its own official and unofficial discourses. ( Boy Scouts and badges - implicit; listing of students on school register by sex – implicit; separate bathrooms in public spaces for boys and girls-explicit; expectations of boys and girls in classes like Literature, Mathematics, discussions around boy friendly teaching methodologies-explicit.)

# Gender As a Social Construct

## Socialisation to Gender

Having being exposed from early to this socialisation to gender, children are set upon a path of maintaining their gender identity , using the symbols of gender as a reference point.

# Gender As a Social Construct

Identity itself is a social construct e.g race, sex/gender, age. So one is no more born woman, black or Christian but rather become any or all of these. People build characteristics and expectations onto phenotypes and biological sex etc. whether these are appropriate or not.

One is socialised into discharging the requirements of all of these identities.

This is how stereotypes are developed.

# The Importance of Understanding Gender As a Social Construct

Gender issues are both personal and political : personal to so many that they reflect the systemic nature of gender built in , as it is, to so many structures of our lives.

Gender affects the lives of so many individuals on the personal level that it requires much more than individual action to respond.

Gender affects the lives of so many individuals on the personal level that it is impossible to ignore that it is caused by a society wide 'problem'- HIV/AIDS, violence against women, male under-participation in the education system.

# The Importance of Understanding Gender As a Social Construct

People are impacted regardless of beliefs: so men who do not actively participate in sexism may benefit from a sexist society:

- ❖ So men may get better pay than women for the same work
- ❖ Men may get loans more easily than women because the society may believe that men are a better credit risk even when statistics do not support this.
- ❖ For some languages 'man' is the generic term for men and women and hence, seems to exclude women conceptually such as fireman, policeman.

# The Importance of Understanding Gender As a Social Construct

Inequality also is a social construct conveyed, for example, through language as in the metaphorical meanings of black and white to people of different races.

Gender situates men and women not only as different but unequal and it is seen in the symbolic associations with the masculine and the feminine:

- ❖ Crying being feminine and, hence, weak
- ❖ Being stoic as a sign of strength and required masculinity
- ❖ Gossip being seen as feminine

# The Importance of Understanding Gender As a Social Construct

Allows us to question what is presented as natural and inevitable.

Allows us to resist what is presented as natural and inevitable.

# Gender as a Social Construct

Since gender relations are a social construct, they can be changed.

It is, therefore, within our means and our responsibility as agents of development, policy makers and state planners, to support the transformation of communities towards more democratic and equitable societies.



# Gender as a Social Construct

Applying a social construction approach to gender also facilitates our understanding of, and responding to, the ways in which our societies socially construct identities such that gender, class, race, age, sexual orientation combine to produce various outcomes for the persons who claim these identities. Some of these outcomes are very complex social configurations but all are determined by the ways in which the society assigns meaning and value to various identities.

# References

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