

## **SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION AND GENDER-ROLE ACCEPTANCE**

Denim Deka

Assistant Professor,

Department of Sociology

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon

***Abstract:** The elapse of time has been no cure for abolition of gender role which results in acceptance of such roles in unconventional way. The assumption of man being physically superior and women being biologically feeble has planted the seed of gender inequality. Branding sex and gender as two aspects of individuals, they are defined in response to sex based identity and gender based behavior. The paper is an attempt to look into the conditions evolving out of socio-cultural construction that enable the society to assign different activities to men and women, thereby inviting a distinction between the two.*

**Keyword:** gender role, inequality, men, women

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The inability of the human race to recognize woman and man as human beings may be regarded as the root cause of the differences being brought between the two. The need to perform ascribed or acquired gender roles is due to the cultural norms that have been determined since time immemorial for the benefit of society or advantage of one particular sex category. Time and again, the role of women as 'women' has come under various test and scrutiny. Women as a category of human beings and also men to an extent had been put under cultural grounds and accepted gendered behavior thereby making it a rare possibility to shift from one gender role to another. In spite of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva's (1449-1568) arduous effort in Assam to support the cause of women much before Simone De Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, John Locke, Mary Wollstonecraft etc. took it up, the position of women couldn't be raised up after a certain level. Both social and cultural conditions bear testimony to this fact that bring visible dialectical relation between women and men in respect to work and behavior.

Sex and gender stand as the binary opposite. While sex is considered to be the natural and biological division between male and female, gender is the social and cultural

construction of the division between men and women. Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex (Judith Butler, 1990).

## **II. SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER ROLES**

The system of social differentiation being socially constructed give rise to differences between man and women. The gender role gets constructed thereby making masculine and feminine characteristics pertinent which actually become an act of individual doing gender or performing gender. Human actions and interactions tend to make gender a continuous and a living process. Meanings are created for gender behavior through continuous interaction which ultimately make gender seem like legal. Age old customs and traditions related to gender are myriad. Men are said to display strong mental appearance unlike women who are feeble both in emotion and practicality. The notion of the sort seems justified with time thus restricting the exchange of gender behavior even if one desires to adopt from the opposite sex. Gender roles acquire the quality of accountability or responsibility because if deviated from accepted gender role, women and men will put themselves at risk of gender assessment.

A look into some approaches shall render us in a state to view sex and gender in the light of them and the interpretation being held within it. Brickell (2006) has referred to four perspectives viz. historicism, symbolic interactionism, ethno methodology and materialist feminism that have addressed themes of gender and sexuality. Historicist approaches have contributed a close attention to social conflict and stability, as well as shifts in social structures such as work, family and the state (Carlson (ed.), 1990; Lorber, 1994). They highlight the contingency of social arrangements and identities, demonstrating how the meaning and organization of gender and sexuality vary over time in any culture (Rahman, 2000; Weeks, 1986). Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology explain how social relationship informs the construction and deploy the meaning and the accomplishment of self in everyday life (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1992; Garfinkel, 1967). Materialist feminism which first emerged in France during 1970s, combines a radically anti-essentialist approach to gender and sexuality with a socio-structural analysis informed by Marxism (Adkins, 1996; Delphy, 1984; Jackson, 1998a). Historical construction of gender varies over time thus attributing different cultural meanings as social arrangements are set and practiced. Ethno

methodological approaches depict gender being achieved through action and everyday interaction thus forming individual identities and interpersonal relationship. Gender role or sexuality viewed through the lens of symbolic interactionism suggest that people act toward 'things' (objects, other people, institutions, ideals and activities) on the basis of meanings that things have for them (Blumer, 1969). People ought to act towards gender as the meanings of responsibility and commitment towards one's gender role has been laid out. Materialist feminism makes an analysis of oppression putting man in the productive sphere and women in the reproductive circle thus dividing their role and making gender difference natural.

West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort and gender is produced as a socially organized achievement. Even though sex is assumed to be natural and biological and gender as constructed, Garfinkel (1976) and Kessler and McKenna (1978, 2000) argue that the assumption that sex is 'natural' is not a self-evident expression of any actual underlying ontology, but is instead a socially constructed 'natural attitude'. This 'natural attitude' demands that one accomplishes either a socially acceptable maleness or femaleness (Brickell, 2006). The natural attitude make individuals perform gender role as given in the social framework. Be it assignment of separate household functions or productive work, there is a general tendency to make oneself adjustable within divided roles.

### **III. ACCEPTANCE OF GENDER ROLES**

Generation of meaning through communication of one kind or other helps to manifest gendered behavior and gradual acceptance of gender roles. A trend that is being followed since aeon. There remains no scope of choosing gender role because social conditions or settings had been already laid. The deep cultural norms bind individuals within their specific gender behavior. The fear or anxiety of being questioned at changed gender behavior instigates men and women to reproduce gender over again. The contemporary world makes a way for assimilating past and present cultural norms which recreates an active style of embracing gender roles and conforming to stereotypical notions of gender role acceptance. Gender gets embedded in the logic of social institutions and organizations (Risman and Davis, 2013). The social framework under which various social and cultural institutions are framed carry forward the justification of gender role. This is why gender role is performed again and again with no significant structure to oppose or stop the continuity. West and

Zimmerman (1987) argued that gender is something we are held morally accountable to perform, something we do, not something we are.

Weitzman et.al (1972) studied how babies assigned to the male category are encouraged to engage in masculine behaviors, offered boy-appropriate toys, rewarded for playing with them, and punished for acting in girlish ways, while babies assigned to the female category are encouraged to engage in feminine behaviors while being limited to girl appropriate toys such a dolls and easy bake ovens. This calls for sex-role socialization behavior in childhood which ultimately is developed into gender role acceptance and portrayal of the same. But the sex-role socialization of girls with girls and boys with boys during childhood cannot be held responsible for gender appropriate behavior in later stage. Differential behavioral patterns of women and men surface due to differences in structures of power and institutions that set the ground for gender inequality and disparity. West and Zimmerman (1987) drew a distinction between sex, sex-category and gender from one another in a way that illustrated the performative link between bodies and gender. Where an individual's sex is determined at birth through socially agreed upon biological distinctions, sex-category on the other hand, is used as a proxy for sex but depends upon performing gender appropriately to be accepted as claimed. Thus, in the opinion of West and Zimmerman, behaviors are enforced, constrained and policed during social interaction. This interaction and communicative process coming down to each generation and time period make gender role socially acceptable and legal.

#### **IV. EXISTENCE OF GENDER INEQUALITY**

Situations pertaining to construction of gender roles lead to the existence of gender inequality. The mentality of human beings, their conscious or unconscious indulgence in biases towards roles of women and men lead to regress of human development and inequality. This can be attributed to the fact that men's domination or women's subordination within private or public sphere has evolved out of social settings that favors power structure of man. National and international measures have not achieved much success in implementing the standards or principles of gender equality. Mason (1986) outlines multiple dimensions as well as various social locations of inequality between men and women. The varying degree of gender inequality prevail due to rigid and stereotypical mindset of people, devoid of proper health and nutrition to women, violence against women, discrimination in granting work opportunities to women and unequal representation of women's voice in fields of education,

culture, politic, economy, etc. Therefore, both material reality and cultured norms reinforce gendered identities and impel to act in ways that pave the way for gender inequality.

Gender inequality is defined as the departure from parity in the representation of women and men in key dimensions of social life (Coulter, 1989). Kate Millet (1971) observed that power relations result in patriarchy, a system of social relations which involve social structure and power differentials of male dominance over women. Thus, the dialectical relation of masculine and feminine role become a source of suffering for women which jeopardizes them physically and psychologically. To maintain progress in all domains of human development, both men and women have to be allowed to use the capacity to convert their abilities into praxis. The emphasis on reason and empiricism, the tenets of Enlightenment (an intellectual movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century), will aid individuals in making an analysis of the loopholes of gender inequality and its ramification in the society. An outlook of such can prove efficient in curbing gender inequality.

A comparison of women's situation to that of men can give a scenario of gender inequality. Human rights violation by underpinning women's voice to give space to men and their aspiration is a situation favoring men and denying women of their status as human beings. It is therefore called for maintaining the balance of social relations among men and women that can curb the existence of gender inequality. Gender systems are structured to maintain the status quo (Chafez, 1990), the call for human rights is an effort to reduce gender equality.

To quote Dixon (1976), she offered an analytical framework for measuring progress toward equality between sexes in five spheres of activity- sexuality, reproduction, socialization/homemaking, education/economic production and politics. In the opinion of Dixon, gender equality can prevail when men and women are representing themselves equally in public and private realms. Understanding gender as an organizing category that leads to different outcomes for women and men in society provides the starting point for specifying dimensions of gender quality (Young, Fort & Danner, 1994).

## **V. ABOLITION OF GENDER ROLE**

In order to abolish gender role and its acceptance, the shift from cultural situation to new grounds of accepting change in the interchange of gender behavior is necessary. Prior cultural determined scenarios which are actually human inventions and formulations are to be made free of social constraints. As Ann Oakley argues 'We need an ideological revolution, a

revolution in the ideology of gender roles current in our culture, a revolution in concepts of gender identity’.

Roles and behavior aren’t supposed to be gender specific but require flexibility in interchanging the roles at one’s convenience. Entrusting power to women and men will lessen the existent disparity between the two. Gender segregation reflects women’s disadvantageous position, therefore acceptance of the traditional system of men’s dominance in institutions of power need to be stopped and a shift is required in recognizing women as equally powerful and eligible. To embrace a gender-role free culture, a transformation of mindset from forced gender role to free gender role is the call of the hour. In the words of Kate Millet, ‘in a society without culturally defined gender roles, each individual will be free to ‘develop an entire-rather than a partial, limited, and conformist-personality’.

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