

## **Social Construction of Masculinity and Femininity**

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**Abstract:** Gender is one of the fundamental ways in which the social life of human beings is organized. From infancy onwards, parents often think that boys and girls are very different. The majority of feminists in the 1970s seemed to embrace the notion of gender as 'construct'. Thus, gender is a socially constructed concept which creates differentiation between men and women in different areas such as work, roles and responsibilities and so on. Ann Oakley's path-finding text, *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) laid the ground for further exploration of the construction of gender. She notes how Western cultures seem most prone to exaggeration of gender differences. Worldwide there are few factors that influence the lives people leading from birth to death as much as the person's sex or gender. Gender matters from the trivial to the most profound aspects of a human being's life. In simple terms, something is 'gendered' when its character is either masculine or feminine, or when it exhibits patterns of difference by gender. "Masculinity" and "femininity" hence describe gender identities. They refer to the degree to which a person see themselves either as masculine or feminine or what it means to be a man or a woman in society. So, through this paper an attempt has been made to discuss about the social construction of masculinity and femininity.

**Keywords:** Gender, Social Construction, Masculinity, Femininity

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### **(a) Culture and The Construction of Masculine and Feminine**

Ideas about what is masculine and what is feminine influence all aspects of social relations. It is through these ideas that gender is represented, and it is thus that a particular culture gets its specific notions about what is masculine and what is feminine. The conventional explanation for these differences turns to biology, differences in the structure of the body, hormones, muscles and genes. The social consequences of these biological differences are what interest theorists of gender.

Sylvia Walby (1990) identifies three broad approaches to the understanding of gendered subjectivity – socialization theory, neo-Freudian psychoanalytic theory and discourse analysis. Socialization theory argues that masculine and feminine identities are the consequence of a process of socialization that starts in childhood. This framework defines masculine as behavior characterized by assertiveness, and being action-oriented and lively, whereas femininity is conceived as being passive, cooperative and gentle. This approach contends that training in one or the other set of gender attributes starts right at birth, for example, when the babies are dressed in pink or blue. Toys, activities, language, levels of boisterousness, television programmes and reading material are carefully chosen and monitored to suit the gender. Girls are encouraged to play with kitchen sets and boys with guns in preparation for their roles in adulthood. The media further reinforces these ideas through its images of women as sexually attractive and glamorous and hence popular; the men are portrayed as successful and powerful individuals. This approach is concerned with the creation of stereotypes in the field of education as well where it is assumed, for instance, that boys would be better suited for the pursuit of science and technology. This reinforces the sexual division of labor with more girls opting for arts and other related streams. This approach holds institutions such as the family, media, and indeed, education guilty for the creation and perpetuation of masculine and feminine subjects. In Walby's opinion, this approach is severely limited by its inability to realize that gendered culture does not inhabit the specialized places of media, family or education, but is rather constructed in all areas of social life. Psychoanalytic theory seem to be arguing that unseen processes entrenched in the psyche passed from one generation to another are the basis on which gendered identities are created. Walby argues that gendered subjectivity is created everywhere. In other words, there is no privileged site for the creation of gendered subjectivity, neither early childhood nor sexuality. Thus, she argues that changing gendered relations in all sites is the basis for the generation of new norms of femininities and masculinities. It is the struggles over these norms that contribute to our understanding of change.

### **(b) Changes in Femininities and Masculinities**

While there have been important changes in what is considered masculine or feminine, the fact is that dichotomy still persists. Sylvia Walby's interesting argument is that the notion of femininity is no longer limited to domestic sphere and is today located in a far wider arena.

Education is an interesting arena for observers of changes in the definition of masculinity and femininity. While traditionally women were kept out of education, today, that is no longer the case. Today, education exhibits segregation, with boys dominating maths, physics, engineering and technology. Walby concludes her discussion of gender and culture by saying that we seemed to have moved away from justification of difference (in the context of the ideology of masculinities and femininities) to a dissimulative approach that denies the extent of the inequality. This is typical of a dissimulative approach that attempts to disguise the truth. Hence, it deliberately denies the inequality and pretends not to be able to see it. There might be a grudging acceptance of the fact that in the past, women were loudly and proudly kept out of

certain spheres of life. This would be followed by the claim that today there are no barriers preventing women but the facts prove that this is far from the truth. What, then, are the barriers that hold women back?

### © Culture, Custom and Religion

Vasudha Dhagamwar in her essay titled ‘Obstacles to Empowerment of Women’ argues that social pressures and perceptions hold women back. She argues that culture, custom and religion are intertwined in India. Answers to questions like why can’t a girl go out late at night for a stroll or plough the field might be answered with ‘it is not done amongst us’. Faced with this answer, it is difficult to challenge such beliefs and practices that, in a certain sense, form the foundation of the identity of specific communities. For most women in India, despite the fact that the identity of being a secular citizen is available, it is the identity conferred upon them by their families that is the most significant and abiding. This identity is controlled and created by putting together elements from culture, custom and religion – elements that determine what it means to be a woman (or a man), and what are the appropriate roles, activities and aspirations for the woman so defined.

## II. OBJECTIVES

This paper tries to:-

- (i) Explain the processes of gender construction in relation to the culture and ordering of the society.
- (ii) Examine the implications of gender construction in the socialization process, gender roles, gender stereotyping, division of labor and political participation.
- (iii) Examine the relationship between gender and the structural arrangements of the society.

## III. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural connotations; if the proper terms for sex are ‘male’ and ‘female’, the corresponding terms for gender are ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’; these later might be quite independent of (biological) sex (Stroller, 1968: 9).

Oakley believed that gender roles are culturally rather than biologically produced. Whatever the biological differences between males and females, it is the culture of a society that exerts most influence in the creation of masculine and feminine behavior. If there are biological tendencies for men and women to behave in different ways, these can be overridden by cultural factors. Oakley (1974) outlined how socialization in modern industrial societies shapes the

behavior of girls and boys from an early age. Basing her work on the findings of Ruth Hartley, Oakley discussed four main ways in which socialization into gender roles takes place:

1. The child's self concept is affected by manipulation. For example, mothers tend to pay more attention to girls' hair and to dress them in 'feminine' clothes.
2. Differences are achieved through canalization, involving the direction of boys and girls towards different objects. This is particularly obvious in the provision of toys that encourage girls to rehearse their expected adult roles as mothers and housewives. Girls are given dolls, soft toys and miniature domestic objects and appliances to play with. Boys, on the other hand, are given toys that encourage more practical, logical and aggressive behavior, for example bricks, guns, robots etc.
3. Another aspect of socialization is the use of verbal appellations, such as 'You are a naughty boy', or 'She is a good girl'. This leads young children to identify with their gender and to imitate adults of the same gender.
4. Male and female children are exposed to different activities. For example, girls are particularly encouraged to become involved with domestic tasks.

In addition, numerous studies have documented how stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are further reinforced throughout childhood, and indeed adult life. In recent years there has been an increased theoretical emphasis upon the differences among women, and the differences among men. It has been recognized that there are a variety of ways to be feminine and a variety of ways to be masculine. There has been less emphasis on the sex or gender differences between men in general and women in general.

Ann Oakley provides the best-known feminist view on socialization. She (1974) argued that there are distinct gender roles for men and women that derive from culture rather than from biology. Gender roles vary from society to society but in all societies they tend to maintain male dominance and female subservience. These roles are learnt through socialization during adulthood, and shape the behavior of adults. Oakley claims that processes such as the manipulation of children's self image by parents, and the canalization of boys and girls towards different objects and activities, contribute to the reproduction of differences in behavior between males and females. Some sociologists, such as Glenys Lobban (1974) and Lesley Best (1992), claim that sex-role socialization continues in school through the stereotypical portrayal of girls and boys in reading schemes. Other feminists have pointed to the influence of the media in perpetuating gender inequalities through stereotypical portrayals of males and females.

Barrie Thorne (1993) says that 'the social construction of gender is an active and ongoing process'. She argues that gender differences are complex and variable. Males and females do not behave in the same ways in different situations, and the nature of gender changes with time and context. She says 'Gender is not something one passively "is" or "has"; rather, we "do gender" in our everyday activities'. She follows R. W. Connell (1995) in arguing that there are many different ways of being feminine or masculine.

Harriet Bradley (2007) argues that the idea of socialization has largely been replaced by that of gendering – the process of doing gender and thereby creating gender differences. Gendering involves the active process whereby gender differences are produced and changed through activity. Bradley argues that gendering operates at three levels:

1. At the micro level, gendering involves individual behavior. It involves the different actions and choices of individual men and women.
2. The meso level is the institutional level. Institutions and organizations such as schools, universities and companies often have expectations about the behavior of males and females that help to shape their actions. For example, the sexual division of labor continues to influence the sorts of work done by men and women. Some institutions, such as prisons and boarding schools, separate the sexes, so that, whatever the attitudes of individuals, they are constrained by gender.
3. The macro or societal level involves wider structures in society as a whole. Bradley comments that, ‘The choices people make and rules governing social interaction and social institutions come together and coagulate into gendered structures such as the sexual division of labor which are remarkably robust and operate across the whole society’. Furthermore, some of these structures are very similar in different countries. For example, a gendered division of domestic labor is evident in a very wide range of countries, with men generally doing less housework and childcare, and the types of tasks done by men and women also vary quite significantly.

The processes of gendering means that in almost all areas of social life the gender of an actor makes a difference.

Handel (2006, first published 1978) observed that, at birth, the new born infant is not able to take part in society by cooperating with others. There are two reasons for this: first, the infant is physically immature, and second, the infant is unsocialized. As the child gets older, he or she goes through biological maturation as he or she moves towards adulthood. The child’s body grows and develops new capacities. At the same time the child undergoes a process of socialization that enables him or her to function as a member of society. In order to survive, a new born baby must receive care from one or more adults. This requires social interaction between the baby and care takers. This provides the child with their first experience of the social world. As the child develops, he or she achieves greater maturity through the interaction between physical maturation and socialization. For example, a child cannot learn to read or write until the neuromuscular system has developed sufficiently to make this possible. At the same time, socialization contributes to the mental and physical developments of the child. Mental capacities are developed as a child learns societal culture, just as children develop muscles as they experience. Handel emphasizes that while biological actors interact with socialization, humans possess considerable plasticity – they can be moulded in many different ways through socialization. According to Handel, in the process of socialization children develop the capacity that they must develop through socialization is a sense of self. Drawing on the work of the

symbolic interactionist Charles Horton Cooley defined this sense of self as ‘the ability to take oneself as an object distinct from other objects’. By distinguishing their self from others the child can begin to regulate their own conduct, evaluate their behavior and, in time, imagine how others view their behavior. Cooley argued that people come to possess a ‘looking-glass self’ – their sense of who they are becomes a reflection of others see them. The development of a self is crucial in socialization because it enables a child to start to align their behavior with that of others. Instead of simply pursuing their own desires, children start to take account of the opinion of others and to act in ways they believe will reflect well in the looking-glass that others hold up to them.

Sexual identity is a central part of human personality, and even minor changing regarding it has far-reaching implications which is further more precisely emphasized as under:-

**(a) Sex Roles:**

Sex roles are duties and obligations assigned on the basis of gender. There are different social expectations for males and females in countless social situations. These expectations pertain both to what people are supposed to do and to what they are not supposed to do. A male, for instance, is expected to work and support his wife and children; it is expected that he will not wear dresses and lipstick. Sex roles are assigned early in the socialization process. Children quickly learn that they are girls or boys and act accordingly. Most keep their sexual identity for life. Nevertheless, adult sex roles are complex, involving both personality and behavioral characteristics. Women are expected to be passive, warm and supportive. In contrast to men, who are expected to suppress their feelings, women are encouraged to express emotions openly. Women also are expected to be dependent and to need emotional support. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be active, independent, and self-controlled. An essential part of the male role is aggressiveness and dominance.

➤ ***Should traditional sex role differences be abolished?***

***Pros***

Stereotypes about the differences between men and women are relics from the past. When muscle power was the principal source of energy and breast milk the only safe food for an infant, the traditional division of labor between the sexes made some sense. But while times have changed, the old sex roles have not. Children are still trained to meet the expectations of stereotyped sex roles regardless of their psychological fitness to fill those roles. Many boys who would be happy raising children at home are pushed into the “man’s world” of completion and achievement, while many bored housewives are better suited for the roles of business executive or scientist. Even those who are comfortable with the traditional role of their sex pay a heavy psychological price. Women must suppress the domineering “masculine” side of their personality, while men are often terrified of appearing submissive or “feminine”. Too often the

result is a one-dimensional person who is out of touch with his or her own desires and needs. The elimination of stereotyped sex roles would not, as critics have charged, force women to go to work or men to stay at home with their children. It would instead allow us to accept both sides of our personality and choose a life style that fits our own needs rather than the inflexible demands of social stereotypes. As a result of sex role stereotypes, women receive lower wages, have less political power, and occupy an inferior position to men in our society. If there is ever to be true equality between the sexes, double standards and stereotypes must be eliminated. Only then will men and women be able to relate to each other honestly in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.

### *Cons*

Traditional sex roles are essential to the survival of society. They provide a rational and efficient division of labor, allowing men to specialize in some tasks and women in others. This not only permits parents to give different training to boys and girls as they are growing up but allows for a psychological division of labor. Girls are encouraged to develop the supportive, nurturing characteristics that make them effective wives and mothers, while boys are trained to assert the aggressive side of their personality, which needed for success in the economic world. The division of labor between the sexes minimizes competition, permitting men and women to perform different tasks that are complementary. If the reformers had their way, marital harmony would disintegrate as husbands and wives competed with each other to see who could make the biggest salary. Although reformers talk about sharing responsibilities of child care, in most cases children would simply be shipped off to boarding schools and day care centers. Despite arguments about the exploitation of women, traditional sex roles are fair to both sexes. While men do have advantages in the world of work, women have equal advantages in the family. The latter includes rights to alimony and child custody as well as special privileges such as help with tasks that demand physical strength or mechanical expertise. But even if the elimination of sex roles were desirable, it just isn't possible. Traditional sex roles have endured for thousands of years because they reflect biological differences between the sexes. Sex role differences are essential to our society and should be maintained.

The focus of the traditional male role is the world of work; he is the breadwinner for the family and the provider of financial security. The husband is supposed to protect and defend his family from outside dangers, make important decisions, and provide family leadership. He must show courage and strive for achievement, thus providing himself fit to "be a man". The traditional female role centers on home and family. Most women are under strong pressure to marry and have children, and their responsibility is to run the home and rear the children. While men's prestige is derived from their own efforts in the world, women's prestige is usually derived from that of their husbands.

The male sex role has greater power and prestige than the female role, but it also is more narrowly defined. A young girl is usually permitted to take on some aspect of the male role if she

desires. She may wear jeans, fight, climb trees, or play competitive sports, perhaps earning the label “tomboy”. But it is unheard of for a boy to wear a dress and play only with little girls. If he acts like a girl, he is condemned as a “sissy”. Similar rigidity is present in the role of the adult male. Although competition and achievement in the “male” world is discouraged by the female role, the successful businesswoman often wins great respect for her achievements without necessarily losing her identity as a woman. But even men who are most unsuited to the stresses and strains of a business career are not permitted to join the “female” world of home and family. Similarly, women can work in factories without losing their identities as women, but men who quit their factory jobs to stay at home are loafers – inferior to “real men”.

Men often fear that their masculinity will be threatened if they are too passive. A study of differences between male and female fantasy patterns concluded that men are much more fearful of losing control of themselves or their situation. The men seemed to believe that “once you slip, it is all over”, while the women were much more likely to believe that a person will ultimately recover from a defeat. Although the nature of sex role differences is quite clear, their origins are very much in dispute. Some hold that they are primarily a result of biological differences between the sexes, while others feel that culture is more important. Of course, no one denies that there are significant biological differences between the sexes. The issue is the extent to which these differences influence sex roles. But also there are wide variations in sex roles from culture to culture. Such variation supports the idea that culture is the dominant force in the formation of sex roles.

### **(b) Sex Role Socialization:**

Socialization is the process by which we learn the essentials of life in our culture. Customs, behavior, mores, values, how to speak, even how to think – all those are learned in the course of socialization. Sex role socialization is part of this process. It is the way we learn the behavior and attitudes that are expected of the members of our sex.

### **© Sexual Stereotyping:**

Sexual stereotyping starts almost from the moment of birth when boys are wrapped in blue blankets and girls in pink blankets. Girls’ and boys’ rooms are decorated differently and contain different kinds of toys. But the most important differences are learned as children begin to master a language. For one thing, most languages require the speaker to make frequent distinctions between the sexes. The use of the words *he* and *his* or *she* or *hers* continually draws the child’s attention to the importance of sex differences. In addition, the structure of every language conveys social assumptions about the nature of the differences between the sexes. The child quickly learns that the male is given first-class status while the female takes second place. The male is primary in our language, the female a vaguely defined “other”. The older and more aware children become, the greater the differences in the family’s expectations for boys and girls. Because the male role is narrowly defined, young boys come under some particularly intense



pressures. They are continually told to not be “sissies” and not to act like girls. In fact, the sex role of young boys seems to be defined primarily in terms of negatives: they are more often told what they are not to do than what they are supposed to do or be. A boy who playfully puts on a dress and lipstick is likely to receive a hostile and even panicky reprimand from his parents. Boys’ problems are aggravated by the fact that they usually spend much more time with their mothers than with their fathers and thus lack a positive role model. They are taught to reject and even fear anything feminine, but they live in the company of women. This conflict creates anxiety in many boys:

*This situation gives us practically a perfect combination for inducing anxiety – the demand that the child do something which is not clearly defined to him, based on reasons he cannot possibly appreciate, and enforced with threats, punishments, and anger by those who are close to him. Indeed, a great many boys do give evidence of anxiety which frequently expresses itself in overstraining to be masculine, in virtual panic at being caught doing anything traditionally defines as feminine, and in hostility toward anything even hinting at “femininity”, includes females themselves.*

Girls are not subjected to as many conflicting demands. Although passivity and dependence are encouraged, competition and achievement are at least permitted. The young girl is not continually warned against “acting like a boy” and does not have a fear of being masculine equivalent to the boy’s fear of being feminine. Because girls are raised by members of their own sex, they usually have a much clearer idea than boys of what will be expected of them as adults. However, the fact that fewer demands are placed on girls in childhood may make it more difficult for them to become independent, self-sufficient adults.

*From around the age of two to two and a half, when children are no longer perceived as infants but as children, more boys than girls experience more prohibitions for a wider range of behavior. In addition, and of special importance, dependent behavior, normal to all young children, is permitted for girls and prohibited for boys. Thus, girls are not encouraged to give up old techniques of relating to adults and using others to define their identity, to manipulate the physical world and to supply their emotional needs.*

The mass media also have a profound effect on the definition of personal sex roles. A variety of research studies show that television, motion pictures, radio, books, and magazines all tend to reinforce traditional sex role stereotypes. Children’s television programs are particularly important in the early socialization process, consistently depicting men and women in traditional stereotypes. Even the commercials are stereotyped. A study of 100 commercials shown on children’s television programs found that 95 percent of the narrators were male. Females were three times more likely to be shown in domestic activities, and males were ten times more likely to be shown in active roles.

**(c) Political Power:**

Politics has been considered a man's business in almost all societies throughout the world. Women are not even allowed to vote in most democracies until this century. The few women who have gained power have usually had the benefit of family connections to overcome objections to their sex. Indira Gandhi in India, Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), and of course the hereditary European monarchs such as Queen Elizabeth II in England are good examples. Further, female rulers have all been advised and assisted by male staffs. The fact that men continue to dominate the political area reflects average woman's lack of political consciousness. Most women vote much like their husbands, showing little awareness of their own special political problems. Further, women are discouraged from participating in politics by the same forces that discourage them from pursuing other professional careers. Social stereotypes tell women that it is "unfeminine" to be involved in the dirty world of politics, and the demands of home and family make it difficult for some women to devote themselves to such a demanding career.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Sex role socialization is the process by which children learn the behaviors and attitudes expected of their sex. The family plays a critical role in this process. Parents begin treating boys as boys and girls as girls almost from the moment of birth. Schools reinforce the traditional sex roles learned at home. Teachers and textbooks encourage high aspirations in boys and discourage girls. Radio, television and motion pictures also convey sex stereotypes. Sex roles, or set of expectations about the proper behavior for each sex, are basic components both of individual personalities and of the larger social system. Sex roles show a wide range of variations. The behavior of many men and women does not fit sex role expectations. Two important conditions seem to have influenced the development of sex roles – biology and culture. Despite the importance of biology in the origin of sex roles, the individual's role is determined primarily by culture. The roles we assign to each sex clearly promote sexual inequality. Men are given the dominant position, while a variety of evidence reveals a clear pattern of discrimination against women in education, employment, politics and everyday social life. But now the things are beginning to change. The call for a reconstructing of traditional sex roles has been met with considerable opposition and even hostility. New economic and social conditions are forcing us to rethink our traditional attitudes. Women are moving into the "man's world" of employment and competition, while men are beginning to explore the "woman's world" of family and children. Indeed, this redefinition of what it means to be a woman or a man may be one of the most significant developments of modern times. Nevertheless, our sex roles have undergone remarkable changes and will probably continue to do so.

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