

APPROACHES TO GENDER : AN OVERVIEW

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Sex

- Biological
- Permanent
- Fixed
- Natural

Gender

- Social/Cultural Construct
- Temporary
- Changeable
- Artificial

❖ Gender was initially used solely to refer to masculine and feminine words, like Le and La in French (L. Nicholson- Interpreting Gender, sign).

❖ It was psychologist Robert Stoller, who used the term sex in order to identify biological traits and gender to point the amount of femininity and masculinity in a person (1968). He started using this term when he found during his research that some people felt that they are trapped in wrong bodies!

❖ The making of the distinction between sex and gender is one of the key contributions of feminist theory. This distinction was developed to counter the theory of biological determination.

❖ It was developed by Geddes and Thompson in 1889. They argued that human beings social psychological and behavioural traits were caused by metabolic state.

Men

Men are Katabolic and expand their energy.

Hence they are:

- Energetic
- Passionate
- Variable
- Interested in Political and Social matters.

Women

Women are Anabolic and conserve energy.

Hence they are:

- passive
- Sluggish
- Stable
- Uninterested in Politics

- The theory of biological determination tried to justify the subordinate status accorded to women in the society. On this ground they were also denied political rights by the liberal political thinkers.
- Biological facts cannot be dismissed by ‘Act of Parliament’. Since biological facts are natural and inescapable, the subordination of women is natural and therefore cannot be changed.
- Racism and caste system are good examples.

In 1970s, sex differences were used to argue that women should not become airline pilots since in a month they will be hormonally unstable. Due to this they will not be able to perform their duties as well as men. (Lesley Joy Rogers, Prof. of Neuroscience).

- Since they were placing their arguments as biological and hence natural it became necessary for feminists to counter this.

Many feminists have challenged this theory:

- Famous Anthropologist, Margaret Mead has demonstrated that masculinity and femininity varies across cultures. What we describe as behaviour, roles, qualities etc. have social, rather than biological causes.
- Another feminist Anne Fausto sterling (Prof. of Biology and Gender Studies, Brown University) has questioned the idea that differences in corpus Callosums(the anatomy of brain) cause behavioural and psychological differences.
- In order to distinguish biological differences from social/psychological ones feminists appropriated the term ‘gender’.

- Gayle Rubin (American Anthropologist, activist and theorist of sex and Gender politics) was the first to use the phrase sex/gender system. He describes it:

“a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention.” It means gender is the ‘socially imposed division of the Sexes’ (1975).

- He says that although biological differences are fixed but gender differences are the result of social interventions that dictate how women and men should behave.
- Since gender is constructed it can be changed by political and social reform.
- He suggests that feminist should aim to create ‘genderless society’.

- Another Scholar, L. Nicholson explains, ‘gender as the social interpretation of sex’. According to Nicholson sexed bodies are like coat-racks and provide the site from which gender is constructed (Interpreting gender, 1994).
- The major question before feminists was to know, ‘how gender is constructed? Which social practices help in gender construction? What do we mean when we refer to gender?’
- The major problem before feminists was to explain, ‘how gender is constructed? Which social practices help in gender construction? We have different theories as we find no consensus among feminists on these issues.
- **Gender as socially constructed** - Sally Haslanger, Kate Millett
- **Gender as a feminine and Masculine Personality** – Nancy Chodorow
- **Gender as feminine and Masculine Sexuality** – Catherine Mackinnon

Gender as Socially Constructed

Simon De Beauvoir claims that

“One is not born, but rather becomes woman and that social discrimination produces in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature”. (Beauvoir, 1972).

According to **Sally Haslanger** (an feminist (American philosopher and professor) masculinity and femininity are casually constructed and the mechanism of construction is social learning. Masculinity and femininity are products of nurture or how individuals are brought up.

The process of socialization makes us as men and women. Parents describe their two years old infants' under gender stereotypic language: boys are described as strong, alert and coordinated and girls as tiny, soft and delicate. Girls and boys are trained in appropriate, gender specific forms of behavior, play, dress and so on (career). Children are often dressed in gender stereotypical clothes and colours.

This training is a continuous process. Most of the time it is subtle, but if necessary, punishments are also given to ensure conformity. If a man expresses feminine qualities he is publicly condemned, *aurton ki tarah churi pahan lo*. If he is not strong enough he will be taunted, *churiyan pahan lo*.

Kate Millett regards gender differences “essentially cultural, rather than biological bases” that result from differential treatment. She considers gender as “the sum total of the parents’, the peers’, and the culture’s notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression.”

Feminine and masculine gender-norms reinforce women’s subordination. Women learn to be passive, ignorant, docile, emotional helpmeets for men.

She says since these roles are simply learned, we can create more equal societies by ‘unlearning’ social roles.

Gender as Feminine and Masculine Personality

- Nancy Chodorow has criticized social learning theory as too simplistic. Since women are primary caretakers of small children whether boys or girls; their psychic developments differ. During adolescence girls find themselves closer to mothers; at the same time ,boys gradually distance themselves from their mothers in which mothers themselves play a significant role. As a consequence sons, gradually develop well defined and rigid ego boundaries and become emotionally deficient
- There is need to eliminate these gender differences as feminine and masculine personalities play a crucial role in women's oppression and make females overly attentive to the needs of others.

Nancy suggests that both male and female parents should be equally involved in parenting.

Gender as a feminine and masculine sexuality

- Catherine Mackinnon develops theory of gender as a theory of sexuality. Gender is created by sexual objectification of women and there by women are viewed and treated as objects for satisfying men's desires.
- Masculinity is defined as sexual dominance, femininity as sexual submissiveness Mackinnon believes thus gender is definition hierarchical.
- She considers that male dominance is not the result of social learning; rather socialization itself is an expression of power.

THANKS