

Sex and Gender

The sex/gender system has been identified by feminists as a social variable present in every society. While sex is a biological category, gender is a cultural category. Sex differences are grouped as male and female; this division is based on the human reproductive function. The differences are identified in terms of their respective chromosome structures, the Y-chromosomes occur only in male cells while X-chromosomes occur both in male and in female cells albeit in differing numbers, the number of X-chromosomes in female cells is twice that in male cells.

Sexual reproduction has been explained in terms of division of labour, the female being an individual specialized in reproduction. The primary identification of the male and female species is secured on the basis of their respective sex organs. Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) categorized three levels of sex-linked differences: (i) primary differences characterized by differences in sex organs; (ii) secondary differences characterized by differences associated with reproductive function, e.g., breast, body hair, etc.; (iii) tertiary differences characterized by differences in behaviour, e.g., aggression, care, assertion, submission. These traits qualify males and females differently, moreover, they are not directly linked to reproduction. Ellis is not the only one to speak of sex-linked differences among men and women. Such differences have been serialized by others including Darwin and Freud. Darwin equated sex-linked differences with evolutionary progress.

Ellis used the Darwinian insight to schematize the evolutionary process from ape to child to woman and then to man. This schematization helps to explain the immature status of woman vis-a-vis man. Closer to our times is the work *The Sex / Gender System* of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). He enjoys considerable authority among a large group of psychotherapists as well as among a formidable group of feminists, including the French feminist Julia Kristeva. Freud also identified three levels of sex-linked differences, namely, the primary biological level, for example, sperm, egg, followed by the social level characterized by masculine and feminine attributes, autonomy and relatedness - mature men are autonomous and women remain related. The third level referred to by him is the psychological or grammatical - manifested as active and passive traits. It is customary among biologists to refer to primary, secondary and tertiary sex-linked characteristics.

Chromosomes mark the primary sex-linked human traits while hormones characterize these secondary sexual characteristics. There is no qualitative difference between the hormones possessed by males and those possessed by females. Yet their body chemistries differ due to the difference in chromosome structures. The hormone secretion of all males are not identical, nor is the hormone secretion of all females the same, that is, the secondary sexual characteristics differ from individual to individual cutting across the primary male/female divide. The tertiary sex-linked characteristics like male/female impulses are greatly moulded by the environment. In the context of feminist literature the genesis of tertiary sex-linked characteristics is a matter of great debate. Tertiary sexual traits overlap with gender. Gender is a cultural construct. Each culture imposes certain norms on the behaviour of men and women.

These are prescriptions for appropriate behaviour. Like in most cultures ideally men are expected to be aggressive, assertive and brave among many other things and women are expected to be passive, receptive and caring. Arguably these role-prescriptions were initially formulated for the smooth functioning of society. A sexual division of labour provides the underpinning for a gender-divided culture.

Gender divisions are present in all cultures. The line of division, however, varies from culture to culture. Feminists have been systematically pointing out that all human societies till date are not only divided on the lines of gender roles, these roles have always been discriminatory - the attributes associated with male-gender roles have been valorized whereas the female-gender roles have been pejorated. Therefore, gender does not simply symbolize difference, it also symbolizes discrimination. Not only that, the discrimination has always disadvantaged women. Now, since sexual differences are biological, they are often referred to as natural differences, whereas gender differences being constructs are referred to as cultural differences. In order to keep these two sets of differences apart certain linguistic conventions have been formulated - the sex differences have been denoted by the male/female binaries whereas the gender difference has been referred to by the masculine/feminine binaries.

Matriarchy

Discrimination begins by placing men and women in different social positions - one is placed in the core and the other in the periphery. The one occupying the periphery, by virtue of the metaphorical space it occupies, is marginalized, silenced and made invisible. This position is either ignored or monitored by the core. There is a widespread myth that during the long history of man-kind women have sometimes occupied the core position. The common belief is that in patriarchy woman is pushed to the margins but in matriarchy she takes the central position. In reality matriarchy has always remained a theoretical alternative and has never been practised as a real option. Pure patriarchy has been at times replaced by a hybrid form known as matrilineal society where the lineage is traced through the mother's line but the family administration has always been monitored by the mother's brother, father, or some male member of her family. Not only has matriarchy been a historical myth, it is an option which is unacceptable to feminists. Replacing patriarchy by matriarchy would mean reverse discrimination. The oppressive structure is perpetuated in matriarchy - the actors simply change positions from the margin to the core.