

Understanding Gender & Gender issues.

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1. Gender and Gender issues

Gender: refers to the social and cultural codes used to distinguish between what a particular society considers 'masculine' or 'feminine' qualities, characteristics, attributes or behaviors. The definition of gender varies widely and is often the subject of exhaustive debates, although most agree that gender is largely socially and culturally determined. People are attributed a social and cultural gender that usually corresponds to their (assumed) biological sex and they are then expected to behave in accordance with gender roles as defined by their social and cultural context. Gender can be expressed in physical appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, social behaviors and interactions. The attribution of gender to a person by others is a (unconscious) categorization of a person as being a man or a woman. A person's own gender identity, i.e. their deeply felt (or psychological) sense of being male or female (or both, neither or other), usually - but not always - corresponds to their biological sex and to how they express their gender.

The term gender refers to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female. In most societies, being a man or a woman is not simply a matter of different biological and physical characteristics. Men and women face different expectations about how they should dress, behave or work. Relations between men and women, whether in the family, the workplace or the public sphere, also reflect understandings of the talents, characteristics and behaviour appropriate to women and to men. Gender thus differs from sex in that it is social and cultural in nature rather than biological. Gender attributes and characteristics, encompassing, inter alia, the roles that men and women play and the expectations placed upon them, vary widely among societies and change over time. But the fact that gender attributes are socially constructed means that they are also amenable to change in ways that can make a society more just and equitable

Gender is understood differently across societies. Sociologists, Social Psychologists and Tourism Scholars have coined the concept of gender in different ways. From a social cultural dimension, the meaning of gender is constructed by society and gender is referred to as socially learned behavior and expectations that are associated with the two sexes (Anderson, 1993:59; Henderson, 1994). Swain (1995) elaborates Gender to be a system of culturally constructed identities that are expressed in ideologies of masculinity and femininity that interact with socially structured relationships in division of labor and leisure, sexuality and power between women and men. Gender has also been investigated in terms of the individual (how men and women behave, their beliefs and attitudes, gender identity), in terms of social structure (gendered divisions in the social activities or labor of men and women), and in terms of symbolic orders (gender symbolism, how we think about 'masculinity' and 'femininity'). (Davis, 1991: 65). Therefore, a common understanding is that Gender refers to the

roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our societies and our cultures. It includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviors of both women and men, where conforming to one's gender role is understood to be 'doing gender', which ironically also leads to creation of differences between males and females.

Gender issues

Gender inequality exists in many countries around the world and varies in its severity. Many of the more developed countries have lower levels of gender inequality.

Major obstacle to development

Gender inequality in many senses is a lack of development in itself, but it also severely impacts on the economic capacity of the country which in turn restricts further development. Many of the schemes that focus on increasing development in countries start with reducing gender inequalities. In these senses gender inequality is a major obstacle to development. In countries where there is significant inequality for women there is usually an economic impact. When women are excluded from the workforce it represents underused resources. In pure economic terms it represents factors of production that are not being used. This leads to lower output by the country and subsequently lost income. Less workers also leads to less income through taxation for the government which restricts their ability to invest in infrastructure, health & education which would fuel further growth. If women are excluded from stages of education it again restricts them from the workplace, or it makes them less skilled which hampers the output of the economy. Innovation is a key driver of economic growth and women can play an equal role in new ideas if they are allowed the chance of education and are listened to in the workplace. Gender inequalities in the political systems of countries can lead to a more narrow political focus and lack of support from many of the population. Gender inequality and expected female roles as housekeepers often leads to higher birth rates which places a financial drain on families. High birth rates lead to high youthful populations which require government spending on education and health services.

Egregious gender inequality still exists globally despite of substantial national and international measures that have been taken towards gender equality. Only four out of over 135 nations have achieved gender equality including Costa Rica, Cuba, Sweden, and Norway. Yemen was scored the lowest across all dimensions. Measures of gender equality include access to basic education, health and life expectancy, equality of economic opportunity, and political empowerment. Although there have been evident progresses, many alarming issues regarding gender discrimination still prevail today; therefore, total gender equality must be made a global priority as a fundamental step in both human development and economic progress.

The degree and causes of gender inequality vary throughout the world. Noticeable crimes against women consist of violence, (murder of women), and rape (war rape). Honor killing, one such offense, is when a female member of a family is killed for the perception of having brought dishonor to the family. It has become a massive issue in countries such as Pakistan and the Muslim Middle East, and is on the rise. Other instances of illegality include the over 3,000 women in Guatemala who have been murdered over the past seven years on account of cases involving misogynistic violence, the estimated 130 million girls who were genitally mutilated in Africa and Yemen, and the approximate 5,000 women in India who suffer female infanticide each year (bride burning) due to insufficient dowry payment -- money given to the husband by bride's family. These actions are not only unlawful violence against women, but also towards the whole of humanity.

Sex-selective abortion is yet another major disaster of gender inequality as it fuels human trafficking, demographic imbalance, and sexual exploitation. India and China, the two most populated nations on earth, both informally maintain this practice of preference for male child birth over female. Females are undervalued in Chinese society, and under one Child POLICY, families opt for boys over girls. In China, with approximately 32 million more boys than girls under the age of 20, females are widely viewed as weaker, more expensive, and less intelligent than men. This gender imbalance has caused a ratio of 126 boys to 100 girls among the 1-4 age groups. Similarly, in India the birth of a boy is welcomed while that of a girl is viewed as a burden. Undoubtedly, sex-selection is a violation of the right to life and has distorted the natural sex ratios of 50/50 in countries in which it is practiced.

National and international measures are at work but they are not sufficient to minimize and eliminate gender inequality. For instance, the Society of Defending Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia is designed to empower women and protect their rights. In India, the Prevention of Immoral Traffic, the Dowry Prevention Act and the Sati Act aim to prevent widow burning. Indeed, China and India are both fighting feticide and infanticide. By providing financial assistance to families with girls, India is not only encouraging female education, but also supplying parents with financial aid for their daughters

dowry. Meanwhile, China has taken strides to limit the abuse of modern technology by outlawing the use of ultrasound or gender detection methods. Moreover, they have granted parents who have a female child another chance at birthing a son in the hopes that families will not abandon, abort, or murder their female infant.

From an economic viewpoint, gender discrimination is also a major impediment to growth as it prevents countries from reaching their maximum productivity potential. Although women constitute 40% of the global work force, there are still many who are unpaid family workers in the informal sector. Those who do work are generally paid much below that of male workers, despite being equally capable and skilled. Furthermore, their status and promotion is limited to middle or below ranks, they are laid off pre-retirement age more frequently than men, they have limited educational opportunity, and they typically run smaller farms and less profitable enterprises. Due to these obvious restrictions, many countries experience loss of productivity that amounts to 25% due to gender discrimination. According to one study, Japan's GDP will gain by 15% if employment gender discrimination is adjusted. Unfortunately, the historical influence of Confucianism in Japan has led to male superiority over female through domestic abuse, emotional violence, sex exploitation, unfair treatment in career, and an inferior social status. Gender discrimination is costly to nations across the globe and forces women to suffer the severe emotional and economic repercussions.

Beyond the economic costs, gender inequality also has severe individual and societal losses for a nation. While the female sex constitutes slightly more than 50% of the population, only 14 of the total 200 governments, or 7%, are headed by women. An adjustment of this inequitable representation will go a long way to correct global gender inequality. To further promote gender equality, there need be increased education for women, improvements in public health, more child care facilities, and availing women equal voice in cultural, social, economic and political spheres of public life. Without equal representation of women's voice in policy-making and institutions, decisions are often more advantageous for men and therefore inefficient to the nation as a whole.

The evidence of gender discrimination is rooted in history, tradition and culture. Gender inequality is a highly debilitating stigma and leads to detriments of women's psychology of their worth and dignity to themselves and to society. The remedy would have to emanate from the cultural tradition of citizenry; accordingly, the collaboration of local communities, institutions, national authorities and international bodies is essential to influencing change and promoting the value of women. They all must act in concert with respect to communication, education, leadership, and cultural norms and traditional values in order to shift the attitude and mindset of the population in favor of gender equality .

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