

## Gender Studies

Q. What are the theories of social construction of gender?

# Social Construction of Gender

### 1. Introduction:

The social construction of gender refers to the idea that the concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" are not inherent or fixed, but rather are constructed and shaped by societal norms, cultural beliefs, and social interactions.

It emphasizes that gender roles, behavior, and expectations are created and reinforced through social processes rather than being determined solely by biology. This perspective recognizes that different societies and cultures may have varying definitions and expressions of gender, and it highlights the influence of power dynamics and historical context in shaping how gender is understood and experienced.

## 2. Nature vs. Nurture Debate:

### a, Nature:

The nature part of the debate argues that "Behaviour is innate", which means that certain behaviors are present from birth or are a result of an individual's inherent nature, including genetic and biological factors. These behaviors are not learned or acquired through experience but are instead a natural part of an individual's genetic makeup.

### b, Nurture:

Whereas, the nurture part of the debate refers to the influence of environmental factors, experiences, and learning on an individual's development and behavior. This perspective suggests that people are shaped more by their upbringing, experiences, and the environment in which they are raised than by innate or genetic factors alone.



### 3. Theories of Social Construction of Gender:

#### i. Historicism:

##### a. Gerda Lerner: The Creation of Patriarchy

According to Lerner, early human societies were relatively egalitarian, where gender roles were not as rigidly defined, such as the hunter-gatherer societies. These societies were often characterized by more fluid gender roles and greater gender equality compared to later agricultural societies. However, the shift towards agricultural-centric societies gave birth to patriarchal structures. The domestication of animals and producing food by self gave rise to a certain sense of private ownership and property being transferred to one's own progeny. This in turn brought a realization of women's importance in producing offspring and limited their role to just that, along with enforcing their chastity.



Hunter-Gatherer Society



Shift towards Agriculture



Rise of Patriarchy



Women limited to producing offspring



Concept of Property / Ownership



Enforced chastity of Women

by Claude Lévi-Strauss: Exchange of Women

Strauss's theory of exchange of women intersects with the broader understanding of how gender roles and relationships are constructed within societies. Strauss insinuated that the exchange of women played a pivotal role in establishing social alliances and structures. Women, at the time, were being treated as commodities such as being used to build alliances through marriages which touches on power dynamics between social groups and how the exchange of



women was used as a means of negotiating and solidifying power relations. This can be tied to the broader social construction of gender roles, where power and control are often associated with certain gendered behaviors and expectations.

Moreover, women's reproductive ability was seen as an economic asset which led to women's roles being defined not by their individual desires but by broader social and structural factors, underscoring the influence of cultural norms on gender roles. Due to these practices, the concept of respectable and non-respectable women came about.

Women with their chastity intact being considered fit and respectable to be exchanged as gifts or for marital alliances. Along with that, the exclusion of women from creating belief systems and legal codes further entrenched patriarchy.



## ii. Ethnomethodology and Symbolic Interactionism

### a. Interaction and language characterize identities

From a young age, individuals learn about gender roles, behaviors, and expectations through interaction with family members, peers, and societal institutions. Language is used to communicate and reinforce these norms, contributing to the formation of gender identity. Many languages have gendered nouns, pronouns, and descriptors that reflect and perpetuate traditional gender roles and expectations. This can influence how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others.

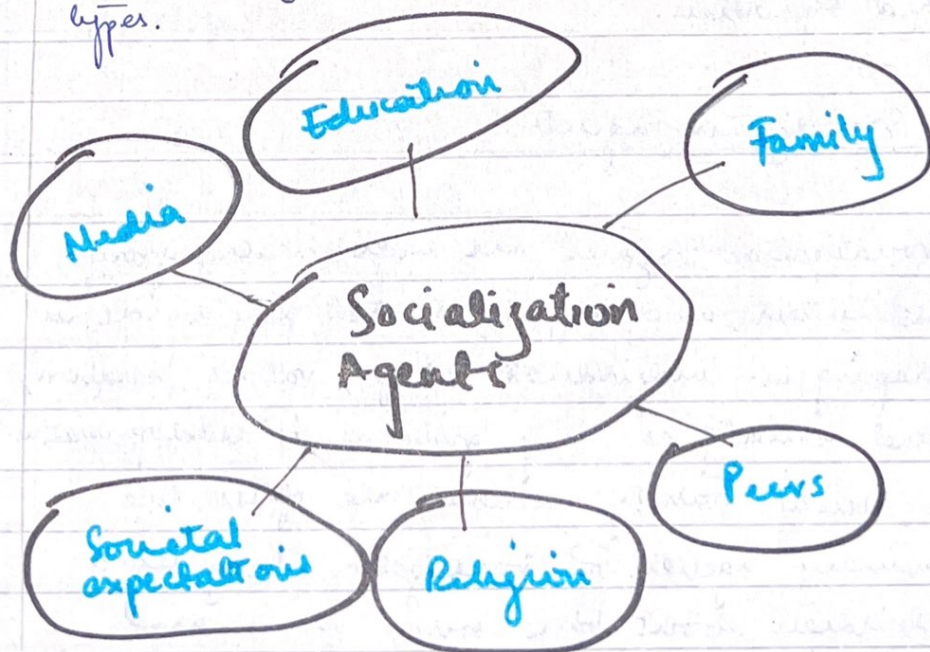
### b. Socialization agents

Socialization agents are individuals, groups, institutions, and experiences that play a role in shaping an individual's beliefs, values, behavior, and identity as they grow and develop within a society. Family members are often the primary agents of socialization. They teach children about basic social norms and introduce them to gender-specific behaviors and reinforcing societal expectations about



masculinity and femininity. In addition to family, schools also transmit societal values, norms, and expectations through the curriculum and interactions. Teachers and classmates may inadvertently reinforce certain gender behavior and expectations.

With that being said, peer groups also play a role in reinforcing and challenging traditional gender norms. Friends can influence attitudes and behavior related to gender through shared interests and experiences. Mass media, including TV shows, movies, etc. contribute to the formation of gender roles by portraying specific images and stereotypes.





### c. Judith Butler: Gender Performativity

Butler gave birth to the expression "Doing Gender", which means that individuals continuously perform their gender identity through everyday actions, such as how they dress, talk, walk, and interact. These performances contribute to the construction and recognition of gender.

Gender is established and sustained through the repetition of specific behaviors that align with societal norms. These expressions are not natural, rather learned and adopted over time. Gender performativity acknowledges that what is considered "masculine" or "feminine" is culturally and socially determined. Different cultures and historical periods may have different expectations and norms for gender performances.

"We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman." - Judith Butler



## by Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex

With the term "second sex", Beauvoir reflects on how women have historically been positioned as secondary to men. This relegation to a subordinate status contributes to the construction of gender hierarchies and reinforces unequal power dynamics. Men are often considered strong and seen as symbols of power, whereas women are considered fragile, and ~~both~~ men and women are socialized differently from childhood. This leads to the internalization of gender norms and expectations.

Women being considered as "eternal feminine" reduces them to limited stereotypes and other cultural narratives, literature, and societal norms further perpetuate these stereotypes, contributing to the construction of limited and demeaning roles for women.

"One is not born but  
rather becomes a woman."

- Simone de Beauvoir



## e, Nancy Chodrow: Reproduction of Mothering

The mother's role as the primary caregiver in many families leads to a deep emotional and psychological connection between mother and child. This connection influences how children develop their sense of self, particularly their understanding of gender. Boys typically identify with their fathers and girls with their mothers. Children's identification with their same-sex parent plays a crucial role in the development of gender roles.

The traditional division of labor within the family contributes to the reproduction of gender inequality. The mother's central role in caregiving limits her opportunities for personal and professional growth, perpetuating unequal power dynamics.

"The very process of mothering by its nature necessitates a gender-based division of labor between the sexes and provides a model of gender differentiation."

- Nancy Chodrow



### iii. Theory of Material Dependence:

Gender construction is usually influenced by social structures and material conditions. The gendered division of labor in society, where men are considered the breadwinners for a family for which their wife is more valued than the work performed by women at home on a daily basis as caregivers. This division of labor that is gendered, leads to women being unpaid laborers and men controlling all the finances, and gives birth to the construction of gender roles and creates patterns of inequality.

The structure where important work is considered to be performed by men, and the unlimited labor hours of women going unrecognized leads to exclusion of women from power corridors and women are largely left depending on men for finances and fulfilling their material needs.



### 3. Critical Analysis:

While the theories of social construction provide valuable insights to gender roles and identities, there are certain limitations to them. The theories of social construction of gender overlook certain aspects such as intersectionality, the role of biology in influencing gender identities and also the experiences of transgender and non-binary. These theories reflect on how individuals conform to gender roles but at the same time lack insights to why certain individuals do not identify themselves as either of the genders and what shapes their experiences and leads to their not identifying with traditional gender identities and roles.

### 4. Conclusion:

In conclusion, theories of social construction of gender significantly enhance the understanding of how societal and cultural factors contribute to the formation of gender identity and roles. While these theories provide valuable insights, they also pose potential oversights.