SESSION 4: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Sex refers to the biological attributes of being male or female. Gender refers to the socially constructed attributes of being male or female, or of femininity and masculinity. Women and men are treated unequally on the basis of the fact their sex.

Underlying the different assumptions of the treatment of women and men is a whole series of complex ideologies that seek to explain (and create) the differences between men and women, observed as well as constructed. Sex differences or the differences between males and females are often cited as the basis for unequal treatment. While we understand gender differences between men and women to represent socially constructed norms regarding the division of labour, and the distribution of power, responsibilities and rights between men and women, the basis for differentiation continues to be traced back to biological difference. However it is obvious that the biological differences between men and women are minimal and insignificant when compared with the similarities. Biological difference becomes magnified or exaggerated to represent an ideology of sex difference, which we refer to as the ideology of gender. It is used to justify unequal treatment of women and men. The power of the ideology of gender lies in the way it encompasses fundamental cultural and social values relating to the relations between men and women, as well as the force of history underlying its evolution. The historicity and cultural variations found in the construction of gender relations points to the fact that these are changeable.

The ideology of gender determines:
- What is expected of us
- What is allowed of us
- What is valued in us.

The ideology of gender also determines the nature and extent of:
- Disadvantage
- Disparity
- Discrimination

The manifestation of gender difference can be found in the construction of:
- Roles - what women and men do
- Relations - how women and men relate to each other
- Identity - how women and men perceive themselves

The ideology of gender thus contains norms and rules regarding appropriate behaviour and determines attributes; it also reproduces a range of beliefs and customs to support these norms and social rules.

Norms and rules have material consequences for issues of women and men's relative access to and claims over different categories of resources. The normative

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1 The ideas on the concept of the Social Construction of Gender in this summary was developed by Naripokkho, Bangladesh.
underpinnings of sex difference lead to differences in the way responsibilities are allocated, resources are distributed, and rights are granted. Asymmetries or inequalities thus grow to represent "conflicts" of interest, so that challenges to the way social rules are constructed represent challenges to the entire organisation of society. How women negotiate these changes will vary depending on the ability or capacity of a woman to risk changes to the way her life has been lived. Four categories of coping strategies that women commonly engage in can be identified:

* Acceptance
* Adaptation (involving negotiation and bargaining)
* Resistance

While there is a correspondingly increased risk for women as they move towards coping strategies based on resistance, there is no indication that women are only exposed to risk if they choose to question. Unquestioning acceptance of the status quo does not necessarily imply low risk: a powerful example of this is the case of dowry, where even when the commodification of women is accepted and dowry provided, women are often burned to death. While social change may come at a price, it is often far more sustainable and transformatory in the long-term if it represents a move from dependence to autonomy.
INSTITUTIONS AND INEQUALITY

An analysis of the ideology of sex difference uncovers the understanding that the social construction of differences between men and women is the basis on which rules/resources/responsibilities/power and rights are distributed or allocated between women and men in society resulting in discrimination.

Hence discrimination is socially constructed and is based on social rules or norms. What are rules? Simply put, social norms or rules are "ways of doing things" or patterns that become routine over a period of time. These patterns are so socially legitimised that they become reproduced with economy, because of the intricate ways in which identity and roles are intertwined. Four main institutions in society combine their practice and reinforce the ideology of the social construction of gender. These institutions are (i) The Family or household (ii) The Market (iii) The community and (iv) The state.

For example, a social rule or norm is that men are breadwinners and women are homemakers or that men are leaders and decision makers and women are followers and implementers of decisions. In accordance with the rules, starting from the household, women are expected to be obedient, submissive and fulfil household responsibilities while remaining in the background. None of the institutions provide resources to them - economic or social, which are seen (from the perspective of the social construction of gender) as irrelevant for them. This has serious consequence for women.

Denial of chances to the woman for education by the family leads to fewer options in the work place or the fact that women are solely responsible for childcare in the family leads to disapproval of working women and women who seek market place substitutes for child care. The women are unprepared to be competitive in the market which exploits them as cheap labour as they are not seen as needing the same wages as men. They are also then denied participation in community decisions, and in turn have limited rights in household decisions as they are seen as not having enough exposure or on the grounds that it is not their role. Because of their lack of decision-making powers and capacity in the public sphere, they are unable to influence the market. Their lack of decision-making in the public sphere also means that they are denied valuable economic and political rights by the state. Because of the disadvantages they face women in turn are unable to influence the state as critical political constituencies. In this manner a cycle of discrimination is established and justified on the basis of the expectations of society with regard to women and men.

The denial of equality and rights for women is based on biological difference as well as a notion of equivalent rights: men have a right to education to earn a living, women are economically provided for, or that change is costly. Gendered structures are so entrenched that it is uneconomical to do things differently. An example of this is the resistance to setting up day care centres at work places.

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2 The ideas in this paper are taken from Kabeer Naila, (1995) Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought, Verso
We need to unpack the interconnectedness of discrimination and the way various social institutions build their discriminatory practices on the same social rule. The public and private are connected. We need to see the boundaries within which women operate and the manner in which the discrimination in one sphere lays down the foundation for continuing inequalities in all other areas Officially, these rights in isolation seem varied and single such as the right to fair and equal remuneration, to political participation or the right to mobility, but their denial has the same source despite being played out in different arenas.

The unofficial picture that unfolds before us clearly illustrates the manner in which all the sites of discrimination interact and influence each other to keep women in a disadvantaged position with a resultant loss of rights and power. The allocation of responsibilities, resources and rights on the basis of social norms disadvantages women materially. There is loss of material benefit. Further more such allocations on the basis of social norms contradict the reality of women’s lives. It is not true that women do not need economic resources because they are being provided for. Nor is it true that all men provide for their family. The ideology remains although the material basis of such ideology has changed.

It is also critical to realize those social rules and norms impacts on women in different ways depending on their class, caste or communal positions. So in assessing the discrimination faced by women, care should be taken not to make assumptions on the basis of the experience of one set of women.

In demanding rights women cannot just see themselves in a linear relationship with the state. We need to see how women’s rights are regulated across all institutions and try to reform these institutions. We need to work towards a collective understanding of women’s rights and understand the rights of women according to their composite identities.

Further, social rules are so entrenched that not only do women who deviate from these social rules (which they have not defined) get “punished” (example, women who initiate divorce or demand inheritance) but women are often seen to participate in their own subordination. The power of social rules lies in the fact that they appear to be consensual and non-negotiable, while in fact they are based on inequality and power equations.

The whole debate around equality and rights for women is countered by a number of disagreements raised, which range from citing biological difference to equivalence to the cost of social change. In order to establish what the nature of the equality or rights is that we are demanding, we need to remember that women's relationships to rights are not unilinear or simple. They are not just about de jure rights but also about de facto equality which will mean assessing the process required to move towards greater equality.

We need to unpack the interlinkages between discrimination against women and the structural basis of inequality by looking at the way social rules are structured in different institutions of society. These are important to consider because gender relations are present in all of these institutions, and they are fundamentally interlinked. Institutions do not function as isolated units of society but instead draw on the rules structured within
the household and society. Assumptions that the household, community institutions, the market and the state are all independent of each other masks the extent to which gender differences are constructed and reproduced.

The model of social organisation used in law and policy is often based on the separation of these different institutions. This has led to the constant demarcation of spheres of activity into the public and the private. As is obvious, the private sphere is seen to be the domain of women, while the public sphere that of men. Gendered distinctions of this kind point to the power of the ideology of sex difference. The construction of gender roles within each of these institutions becomes extended to the organisation of women's activities, e.g. the fact that women's reproductive functions are carried out within the sanction or legitimacy of the household is further extended to include all functions relating to child rearing to the same institution. The biology of the mother thus becomes extended to the dominance of "motherhood" within the household. Thus it becomes socially "unruly" to consider market-place substitutes for the rearing of children: where this does happen, it is at a great emotional or social cost to women whose identity as a "mother" is thus brought into question.

Looking at the ways in which institutions reproduce inequality will thus have serious implications for the way we demand rights. It becomes apparent that in the contemporary context, rights are being built upon existing inequalities or differences, and are not aimed at challenging them. This means that prevailing conceptualizations of rights are not going to be inherently useful for substantive equality claims for women because they do not take into account the factors that will need to be addressed to achieve equality of outcome.

A final point: looking at inter-institutional relationships which determine the reproduction of inequalities between women and men will also enable us to consider the nature of relationships that will need to be addressed. We cannot just talk about rights in the context of the individual and the state, but we need to look at the way relationships can be regulated across all these institutions. Hence we need to work towards community or collective understandings of rights; as well as learn to incorporate sensitivity to the different kinds of rights that different women will require or prioritize based on their composite identities.

Towards a definition of substantive equality

In order to move from formal notions of equality premised on the notion of sameness between people situated in similar circumstances towards a substantive definition of equality which takes into account diversity, difference, disadvantage and discrimination, we need to look at the conditions that are necessary to make this move. It is clear that "equal treatment" of women and men is not sufficient to transform the situation of women - neutrality does not allow for sensitivity to disadvantages that may not permit some people to benefit from the equal treatment. Hence the focus must move to an emphasis on "equal outcomes" or "equal benefits".
INSTITUTIONS AND INEQUALITY

DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

1. Identify a social rule or norm.

2. On the basis of this rule/ norm, what are the gender based distribution of responsibilities, resources and privileges/ power that take place in the household?

3. On the basis of the same social rule, how does the market allocate resources and rights to women? And how does the effect of the household distribution of responsibilities, resources etc affect women in the market place.

4. How does the community reinforce and help perpetuate the asymmetrical distribution of privileges and power between women and men?

5. Assess the way in which state intervention builds on or institutionalises this distribution through law and policy.