

This lucid discussion of the concept of "gender" in feminist discourse deals with questions like the relationship between "gender" and "woman"; the difference between "women and development" and "gender and development"; gender and patriarchy; and between gender, caste and class. A must for everyone, especially those working on gender training.

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Cover Design: Visual Vibe [www.visualvibe.net]

Rs 70

Understanding Gender

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gENDER
BASICS

Understanding Gender
was originally published in 2000 by
Kali for Women
This edition published in 2003 by
Women Unlimited
(an associate of Kali for Women)
K-36, Hauz Khas Enclave, Ground Floor
New Delhi - 110016

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Reprinted, 2004
Reprinted, 2005
Reprinted, 2008
Reprinted, 2009
Reprinted, 2010
Reprinted, 2011

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ISBN: 81-88965-19-7

Design and graphics: Bindia Thapar
Cover design: Uzma Mohsin

Printed at Raj Press, R-3 Inderpuri, New Delhi – 110012



Although we have known the word gender in grammar, obviously it is being used differently now. Can you explain this new meaning ?

The word gender is now being used sociologically or as a conceptual category, and it has been given a very specific meaning. In its new incarnation gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles. It is used as an analytical tool to understand social realities with regard to women and men.

The distinction between sex and gender was introduced to deal with the general tendency to attribute women's subordination to their anatomy. For ages it was believed that the different characteristics, roles and status accorded to women and men in society, are determined by biology (i.e., sex), that they are natural, and therefore not changeable.

In a way women, and women's bodies, were and are held responsible for their subordinate status in society. Once this is accepted as natural, there is obviously no need to address the gender inequalities and injustice which exist in society.

The concept of gender enables us to state that sex is one thing, but gender is quite another.

Everyone is born male or female, and our sex can be determined simply by looking at our genitalia.

But every culture has its ways of valuing girls and boys and assigning them different roles, responses and attributes.

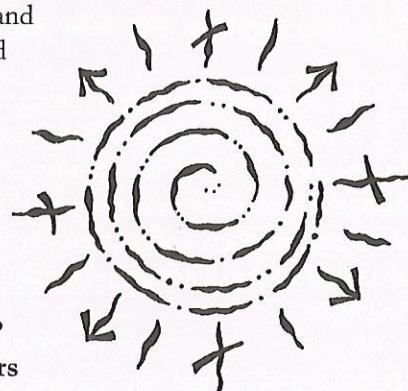
All the social and cultural “packaging” that is done for girls and boys from birth onwards is “gendering”.

Each society slowly transforms a male or female into a man or a woman, into masculine and feminine, with different qualities, behaviour patterns, roles, responsibilities, rights and expectations.

Unlike sex, which is biological, the gender identities of women and men are psychologically and socially — which means historically and culturally — determined.

Ann Oakley, who was among the first few feminist scholars to use this concept, says the following: “‘Gender’ is a matter of culture, it refers to the social classification of men and women into ‘masculine’

and ‘feminine’.” That people are male or female can usually be judged by referring to biological evidence. That they are masculine or feminine cannot be judged in the same way: the criteria are cultural, differing with time and place. The constancy of sex must be admitted, but so also must the variability of gender.”¹ She concludes that gender has no biological origin, that the connections between sex and gender are not really ‘natural’ at all.



Let us see the main differences between these two terms.

SEX

Sex is natural

Sex is biological. It refers to visible differences in genitalia and related differences in procreative function.

Sex is constant, it remains the same everywhere.

Sex cannot be changed.

GENDER

Gender is socio-cultural and it is man-made.

Gender is socio-cultural and it refers to masculine and feminine qualities, behaviour patterns, roles and responsibilities, etc.

Gender is variable, it changes from time to time, culture to culture, even family to family.

Gender can be changed.

H ow does one translate gender into South Asian languages ?

This is indeed a problem. While English has two different words — sex and gender — most South Asian languages have only one word — “linga” used for both sex and gender. To distinguish between them we have found two words to qualify *linga*. For sex we say “*praakritik linga*” or natural/biological sex, and for gender “*saamaajik linga*” or social sex. In fact this definition often works

better than “sex” and “gender” because the terms themselves contain the definition, and so no further explanations are required.

But isn’t gender closely related to our sex ? Aren’t the roles and behaviour assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences ?

Only to some extent. Because of their bodies women, but not all women, bear children, feed them and menstruate; but other than this there is nothing they do that men cannot do or that men can do and women cannot. Bearing children does not mean that only women can or should look after them. Men can just as well do the caring. So just having male or female bodies does not necessarily have to determine our characteristics, roles, or destinies.

But in reality it is quite difficult to establish what is natural and what is socially constructed, because as soon as a child is born families and society begin the process of gendering. In many South Asian cultures the birth of a son is celebrated, the birth of a daughter is bemoaned; sons are showered with love, respect, better food and better health care. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing, girls are encouraged to be demure and home-bound. There is nothing in a girl’s body which stops her from wearing shorts, or climbing trees or riding bicycles, and there is nothing in a boy’s body which stops him from playing with dolls, looking after younger siblings or helping with cooking or cleaning the house. All these differences are gender differences and they are created by society. Proof of the fact that gender is a cultural and social attribute rather than a natural one, is that it keeps changing — over time, in different places and among different social groups. For example a middle class girl may be confined to the home or school while a tribal girl may roam around in the jungles freely, taking the animals for grazing, or climbing trees for fruits, leaves or branches. They are both girls but they develop very different capabilities, aspirations and dreams, inspite of the fact that their bodies are the same.

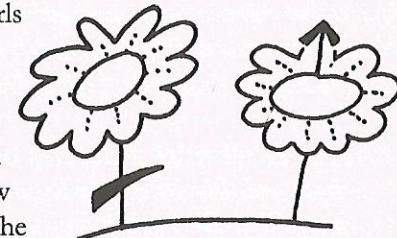
Similarly, in many families girls were traditionally not sent to school or allowed to go out of the house after they were 10 or 11, and were often married at puberty. But now things have changed. So too, the education, roles and responsibilities of men have changed, although perhaps not as much. This is what is meant when we say that gender is variable; it is or may be different in different families or communities and at different times in the same family.

Even our bodies can be shaped or changed by us, society or culture. We can change the size, shape and strength of our bodies through training, use, disuse, misuse or abuse. Obvious examples are bodies of male and female wrestlers, body-builders, athletes, dancers, yoga practitioners and so on.

Similarly, women’s bodies are such that they can procreate, but we can now choose whether to have children, how many to have and at what intervals to have them. Reproduction is not inevitable in the same way for women as it is for female animals.

*If a woman can cook,
so can a man,
because a woman doesn’t cook with her
womb!*

What follows from this is that the different status women and men enjoy in society is indeed socially and culturally determined; it is man-made, nature has very little to do with it. It is gender not sex which has determined that, (almost) everywhere, women as a group are considered inferior to men. They enjoy fewer rights, control fewer resources, work longer hours than men but their work is



either undervalued, or underpaid. They face systemic violence at the hands of men and society; and they have little decision-making power in social, economic and political institutions.

"No social order in history has extended, distorted and used the natural difference between the sexes as brutally and systematically as ours. This order first transformed natural sex into a social artificial gender, made 'men' out of men, and 'women' out of women — in fact, turned 'men' into the 'human race' and women into simply a sex as such ... And finally, having created these differences, it declares them to be 'natural' again, in order to render them economically exploitable." Claudia von Werlhof²

Every society prescribes different norms for girls and boys, women and men, which determine almost every aspect of their lives, and their futures. Let's just look at the more obvious ones.

Dress

Girls and boys, women and men dress differently in most societies. In some places this difference may be minimal, at others very stark. In some communities women are made to cover their bodies from top to toe, including their faces. The mode of dress can and does influence the mobility, sense of freedom and dignity of people.

Attributes

In most societies women are expected to have and perfect qualities such as gentleness, caring, nurturing and obedience; men are expected to be strong, self-confident, competitive and rational. Vasanth Kannabiran, an Indian feminist, once said in a gender training, "Rearing of children is supposed to be as natural, as inherent to a woman as giving birth to children... And it is not just in relation to the children we produce; it is assumed that love or



motherhood is sitting in me waiting to flow out like a stream to anybody who needs it. We become eternal mothers. So I mother my child, other people's children, my husband, my brothers, my sisters, my father who actually calls me 'my little mother'! To everyone I become a mother by extension. You are expected to overflow with a motherly feeling towards the entire universe. And this is supposed to be natural! Not work at all. It is something you do as easily as breathing, eating or sleeping."³

Roles and responsibilities

Men are considered to be the heads of households, bread-winners, owners and managers of property, and active in politics, religion, business and the professions. Women, on the other hand are expected and trained to bear and look after children, to nurse the infirm and old, do all household work, and so on. This determines their education or lack of it, preparation for employment, nature of employment, etc. However, the degree of differentiation between male and female roles varies widely. Sometimes the rules are merely preferential, and very little anxiety is shown by either sex over temporary role reversals.

"Cora du Bois reports that in Alor, although there are distinctions between the economic roles of the sexes, it is not thought unhealthy for anyone to take on the other sex's work — rather they are admired for possessing a supplementary skill. The women control the subsistence economy and the men occupy themselves with financial deals, but many men are passionate horticulturists and many women have financial skills. In some cultures, on the other hand, where horticulture is defined as a female pursuit, a proclivity for it in a man is regarded as proof of sexual deviation. In yet others, a special category may even be created for females who excel in pursuits assigned to both sexes." Ann Oakley⁴

Other societies impose rigid sex roles. The Mundurucu Indians of Central Brazil, again according to Ann Oakley, are an example of a society in which the polarisation of sex roles and sex groupings has become a primary social element. The physical and social separation of the sexes is virtually complete: men and boys live in men's houses separate from females. Each sex group, (with the exception of small children) interacts only within itself, and antagonism between the two is shown on many ritual and other occasions. The sexual polarity pervades not only economic tasks and social roles, but the area of personality as well, where it takes the form of a concern with dominance and submission. Anxiety about people's ability to stay within the prescribed sex roles and personality types, and about the real and imaginary desire to transcend them, is expressed in many pieces of folklore and ritual."⁵

To the outsider, western societies seem to have very little gender differentiation, but as Ann Oakley points out, "In western societies today, sex is an organising principle of social structure, and despite popular belief to the contrary, it plays a great part in determining social roles. So it is not surprising to find that, as among the Mundurucu, a great deal of anxiety in western culture has its roots in the demands made by gender roles. Psychiatrists tell us that a great deal of our security as adults comes from staying within the boundaries of these roles — we must stay within them if mental health is to be preserved."⁶



Could some of these differences arise because girls and women are biologically weaker ?

Actually, biologically speaking men are the weaker sex and the Y chromosome (found only in men) is responsible for many handicaps.

A list given by Ashley Montagu in his book *The Natural Superiority of Women* contains 62 specific disorders due largely or wholly to sex-linked genes and found mostly in males. "About half of them are serious, and include haemophilia (failure of the blood-clotting mechanism), mistral stenosis (a heart deformity) and some forms of mental deficiency. . . At every stage of life, beginning with conception, more genetic males die than genetic females. More males than females are produced and the two facts of greater mortality and greater production seem to go hand in hand."

Although X and Y sperms appear to be produced in equal numbers, between 120 and 150 males are conceived to every 100 females. By the time of birth the ratio of males to females has dropped to about 106:100 in the US (whites only) and in Britain to about 98:100. More males than females are miscarried or stillborn, and more males than females die of birth trauma; 54% more males than females die of birth injuries and 18% more of congenital malformations.

"In fact the life expectation of the female at birth is almost universally higher than that of the male. In Britain, life expectation at birth is 74.8 years for females, but 68.1 for males; in China it is 65.6 and 61.3 respectively; in Brazil, 45.5 and 41.8."⁷

Ann Oakley provides ample data from research studies to show that men are much more susceptible to infectious diseases and mortality. According to her this susceptibility "has been directly connected with the difference in chromosomal make-up between male and female. Genes controlling the mechanisms by which the body withstands infection are transmitted via the X chromosome. . . the male's higher susceptibility has a distinct biochemical basis."⁸

In South Asia however the biological superiority of women has been overshadowed by the social and cultural inferiority imposed on them and today, in almost every area, women lag behind men.

*Aristotle called the male principle active, and the female, passive. For him a female was a "mutilated male", someone who does not have a soul. In his view the biological inferiority of a woman also makes her inferior in her capacities, her ability to reason and therefore to make decisions. Because the male is superior and the female inferior, men are born to rule and women born to be ruled Aristotle said "The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying."*⁹

Sigmund Freud stated that for women "anatomy is destiny". Freud's normal human was male, the female was a deviant human being, lacking a penis, and her entire psychology supposedly centred around the struggle to compensate for this deficiency.

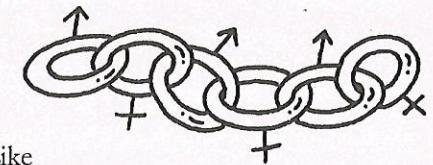
*And here's what Mr.Darwin had to say about women:
"Woman seems to differ from man in mental disposition, chiefly in her greater tenderness and*

*less selfishness. . . It is generally admitted that with women the powers of intuition, or rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in men; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilisation."*¹⁰

Are you saying that biological differences between women and men are of no consequence at all? That the fact that women produce children has nothing to do with the roles they are assigned in society?

We are not denying that there are some biological differences between males and females, but the fact that gender roles vary so much between cultures shows that they cannot be based on or explained away by sex alone. We should remember a simple rule of science — variables (gender roles) cannot be explained by constants (genitalia and chromosomes or sex). If biology alone determined our roles, every woman in the world should be cooking, washing and sewing but this is clearly not the case because most professional cooks, launderers and tailors are men.

What we are saying is that neither sex nor nature is responsible for the unjustifiable inequalities that exist between women and men. Like the inequalities between castes, classes and races, these too are man made; they are historical constructs and therefore they can be questioned, challenged and changed. A woman may well have children but that should be no reason for her inferiority and subordination; nor should it determine her education, training or job opportunities. Why should having different bodies and different functions lead to inequality? You do not have to be the same to be equal, to have equal rights and opportunities.



Maria Mies, a feminist activist and scholar writes in The Social Origins of the Sexual Division of Labour

"... male-ness and female-ness are not biological givens, but rather the result of a long historical process. In each historic epoch male-ness and female-ness are differently defined, the definition depending on the principal mode of production in those epochs. . . Therefore, men women develop a qualitatively different relationship to their own bodies. Thus in matristic societies, female-ness was interpreted as the social paradigm of all productivity, as the main active principle in the production of life. All women were defined as 'mothers'. But 'mothers' then had a different meaning. Under capitalist conditions all women are socially defined as housewives (all men as breadwinners), and motherhood has become part and parcel of this housewife-syndrome. The distinction between the earlier, matristic definition of female-ness and the modern one is that the latter has been emptied of all active, creative, productive (i.e. human) qualities."¹¹

If this is so can you tell us how society turns males and females into masculine and feminine beings ?

This happens through a process of socialisation or gendering; an on-going process within families and society.

All of us know that a new-born baby is not only immediately classified by sex, it is also assigned a gender. We have already seen how in some cultures even the welcome given to a new-born child is different. This is followed by the difference with which they are addressed, handled, treated and clothed and, through this regulation, taught how they should behave to be part of the society they

are born into. This is called **socialisation**. The specific process of socialisation which teaches children their gender roles is also called **gendering** or **gender indoctrination**. Different social mechanisms teach children masculinity and femininity of personality and make them internalise behaviour, attitudes and roles.

According to Ruth Hartley, socialisation takes place through four processes, namely, manipulation, canalisation, verbal appellation and activity exposure, explained below. All four processes are normally differentiated by sex and all are features of the child's socialisation from birth on.¹²

By **manipulation** or moulding is meant the way you handle a child. It has been noted that boys are treated as strong, autonomous beings right from the beginning. In some cultures mothers fuss with the baby girl's hair, dress her in a feminine fashion and tell her how pretty she is. These physical experiences of early childhood are very important in shaping the self-perception of girls and boys.

The second process, **canalisation** involves directing the attention of male and female children to objects or aspects of objects. Examples of this are giving girls dolls or pots and pans to play with, and encouraging boys to play with guns, cars and aircraft.



In working class homes in South Asia girls don't play with pots and pans, they are made to start cleaning **real** pots and pans, and **real** homes, looking after **real** babies while they are still very young; whereas boys are sent to school or made to work outside the home. Through this kind of differential treatment the interests of girls and boys are channellised differently and they develop different capabilities, attitudes, aspirations and dreams. Familiarity with certain objects directs their choices.

Verbal appellations are also different for boys and girls. For example, we often say, "Oh, how pretty you look" to girls and to a boy, "You are looking big and strong." Research studies show that such remarks construct the self-identity of girls and boys, men and women. Children learn to think of themselves as male or female and so to identify with other males or females. Family members constantly transmit aspects of gender role directly in the way they talk even to very young children, and they also convey the importance given to each child.

The last process is that of **activity exposure**. Both male and female children are exposed to traditional masculine and feminine activities from their very childhood. Girls are asked to help their mothers with household chores, boys to accompany their fathers outside. In communities where the sexes are segregated, girls and boys live in two distinct spaces and are exposed to very different activities. It is through these processes that children imbibe the meaning of masculine and feminine, and internalise them almost unconsciously.

If this process of socialisation is an on-going one then why is it that the debate between "nature" or "nurture" still continues? Isn't it obvious that upbringing is responsible for differences between girls and boys?

The amazing thing is that many of us are not always aware of what we are doing to our children. In fact we may believe we treat girls and boys differently because they are actually different. We may not accept that our daughters and sons develop differently because of the way schools, communities and we ourselves treat them.

Children also learn these roles without



being aware of the fact that they are being moulded. If there were no differences between girls and boys, and all girls and all boys everywhere behaved more or less in the same way, one could argue that gender roles are based on sex, but as we have seen that is not the case.

Sanctions or disapproval against children and adults when they deviate from their gender roles is another very powerful way of making everyone conform to expected male-female behaviour. The most common form of sanction is **social ridicule**.

The worst case I have come across of a backlash against women who dared to deviate, is from in a village in Kerala. Three young women workers saw their male colleagues go into a local pub every day. One day they decided to do the same just for fun. That led to all kinds of men following them and approaching them for sexual favours. Because they had dared to walk into a place where "good" women do not enter, they were defined as "bad". The logic was "If you can walk into a pub, you should be available for sexual pleasure too." Not being able to deal with the social ridicule and harassment that followed two of the girls committed suicide.

In addition to social sanctions there are also "economic sanctions" and, according to Ann Oakley, the severe problems confronting single women with children, and their economic difficulties are an index of society's disapproval of them. Often, families threaten or refuse to financially support children who deviate from set norms and practices.

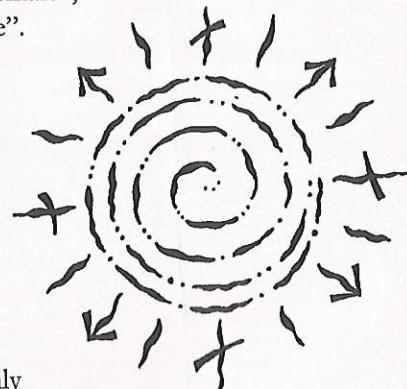
Can you elaborate on this business of labelling certain characteristics and qualities as masculine, and others as feminine?

Certain dualities have come to be defined as male or female when they need not necessarily be either. For example:

Body	Mind
Nature	Culture
Emotion	Reason
Object	Subject
Private	Public

With those on the left being “female”, and the ones on the right, “male”.

Not only have the two been ranged as polar opposite, a hierarchy has been created between them. Mind is supposed to be superior to body, and culture an improvement on and superior to nature. Those who are rational and objective are valued more highly than those who are subjective and emotional. Women are the bodies, almost like nature (they breed like animals); men are the minds, thinking, rational, acting beings who work on nature and transform “it” into culture. Men are therefore superior, over and above nature, they can do with nature what they please.



Not only do women belong to the left side of the above-mentioned dualities, the indigenous and poor are also categorised as such. This is why tribals, forest-dwellers, small peasants and fisherfolk can, like women, be treated with disregard by development planners. Their forests can be cut and lands taken over without their knowledge or consent. This is how millions of them become “development refugees” and end up in horrible slums in urban centres to eke out a living in the most dehumanising conditions.

At the global level, the third world or the South is considered Body, the first world, the Mind; third world is Nature, first world Culture;

third world is emotional and irrational and first world rational, scientific, modern.

It is important to understand these connections between gender and other hierarchies of class, caste, race, first world and third world, etc.

“Three hundred years of witch-hunting, running parallel with the colonisation of the world, were necessary to snatch from the women—as from Third World people—their power, their economy and their knowledge, and to socialise them into becoming what they are today: housewives and the ‘underdeveloped’. The housewife—and with her the ‘underdeveloped’—is the artificial product, resulting from unimaginably violent development, upon which our whole economy, law, state, science, art and politics, the family, private property and all modern institutions have been built. The Third World is the ‘witch’ of witch-hunting days and is the ‘general-housewife’, the ‘world housewife’ today including Third World men. The relation between husband and wife is repeated in the relation between the First and the Third World.” Claudia von Werlhof ¹³

Not just qualities and characteristics, but even spaces are gendered. A pub, football stadium, street corner, tea-shop, paan shop, cinema hall can all become male spaces. Women normally go into them accompanied by some men. If they cannot help going into them alone they are expected to leave as fast as possible, if they do not wish to get into trouble. Under no circumstances should they consider lingering around like the men.

Similarly the kitchen or public well is almost entirely a female space. I am at a loss to find a social space that is exclusive to women.

They have no space for entertainment or work which is theirs alone. In Dhaka some women have started a weekly “*adda*” — a term generally used for a gathering of men where they chat, eat, drink, and enjoy themselves. Many men and some women objected to the use of the word “*adda*” by women because the very concept of “*adda*” was male — not “respectable” enough for women. Words and activities which are fine for “respectable” men are not considered good enough for “respectable” women. This is patriarchal logic.

Even within the home, a quiet room or space might be reserved for the man so that he is not disturbed by the rest of the household. It has been pointed out to me in workshops that household resources or items too, may be gendered. For example the larger glass, chair, or bed are reserved for the (male) head of the household. In working class homes the bicycle, radio, wrist-watch are all for men.

I sn't language also gendered ?

Indeed it is. Language is patriarchal and therefore carries and reflects gender biases and inequalities. Often men have a vocabulary of their own which women seldom use. The most obvious example of this is words of abuse with sexual connotations, commonly used by men. Although men use them without any hesitation, they are horrified if any woman does.

Our languages are also replete with proverbs and sayings which show women to be inferior to men; refer to them as being sinful, mean and quarrelsome. There is an oft-repeated couplet in Hindi which says a drum, an uneducated or low caste person and women, all deserve to be beaten. “A woman's heaven is in her husband's feet” is a proverb repeated all the time by some maulvis. In Bangla there is a saying, “Unlucky is the man whose cow dies. Lucky is the man whose wife dies.”

Then there is the use of the masculine as the standard, the norm. ‘Mankind’, ‘he’ and ‘his’ are used even when the reference is to women. Words like chairman, newsman, sportsman, one-man-show and hundreds of others are commonly used for women in these roles — although this practice is now changing.

The language of social sciences, philosophy and other disciplines also continues to be patriarchal and ignores, marginalises or misrepresents women. The mode in which abstract thought is cast and the language in which it is expressed are so defined as to perpetuate women's marginality. We women have had to express ourselves through patriarchal thought as reflected in the very language we have had to use. It is a language in which we are submitted under the male pronoun and in which the generic term for “human” is “male”. Women have had to use “dirty words” or “hidden words” to describe our own body experiences. The vilest insults in every language refer to parts of the female body or to female sexuality.” Gerda Lerner¹⁴

Another point worth mentioning here is that certain terms and roles in our languages are gender ascriptive (where gender is built in) like uncle-aunt, brother-sister, mother-father because they indicate the gender or sex of the person. But there are a host of others which are not gender ascriptive but it is assumed that they refer to a man or a woman. For example, secretary, nurse, kindergarten teacher are assumed to refer to women whereas boss, pilot, manager, politician, surgeon, or farmer refer to men. These assumptions only prove that public spaces and jobs continue to be dominated by men. Women are few and far between, especially in decision-making and managerial positions.

