

# Lecture 8 Notes: Gender & Sexuality

## 1 Social Construction of Gender

### Definition 1: Social Construction of Reality

A process by which people collectively create, maintain, and transform the shared meanings, categories, and norms that constitute their social world. This includes how we make sense of abstract concepts (such as *gender*, *race*, or *class*) through everyday interactions and institutional practices.

- Sociologists emphasize that gender, like other facets of identity, emerges from the interplay between:
  - **Concrete experiences:** Our embodied interactions with others (family, peers, institutions).
  - **Abstract meanings:** Cultural narratives, symbols, and norms that assign significance to “masculine” and “feminine.”
- Gender is context-specific and dynamic: its meaning can vary by time, place, and social setting.
- **Intersectionality** highlights that gender meaning intersects with other identity dimensions (race, class, sexuality) to shape unique experiences.

### Definition 2: Intersectionality

The analytical framework that examines how multiple axes of identity (e.g., gender, race, class, sexuality) intersect to produce unique configurations of disadvantage or privilege in social life.

## 2 Sex vs. Gender

### Definition 3: Sex

A biological classification based on an individual’s anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones, typically distinguished as *male*, *female*, or *intersex*. Sex classification relies on primary and secondary sex characteristics.

- **Essentialist** view: Sex is a fixed, biological category that determines all other aspects of identity.
- Modern research shows *variation* in chromosomal patterns and hormone levels, illustrating that strictly binary sex categories overlook intersex realities.

#### Definition 4: Gender

A set of socially constructed roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities associated with being *male*, *female*, or *non-binary*. Gender emerges from collective meaning-making and is culturally linked, but not reducible, to biological sex.

- Gender roles and expectations vary widely across societies and historical periods.
- Although biologically associated with sex, gender is *learned* through socialization: family, media, schools, peers.
- There is *overlap* within and between groups: not all men or women conform to stereotypical traits.

### 3 Gender Roles and Norms

#### Definition 5: Gender Role

A socially prescribed set of behaviors, attitudes, and responsibilities regarded as appropriate for individuals identified as *men* or *women* (or other gender categories) in a given society.

- Gender roles often specify:
  - **Behavior:** e.g., assertiveness for men, nurturing for women.
  - **Dress and Appearance:** clothing or grooming styles deemed “masculine” or “feminine.”
  - **Values and Goals:** men as providers (wealth accumulation), women as caregivers (family and domestic responsibilities).
- These roles emerge from historical divisions of labor:
  - High infant mortality and subsistence labor shaped norms for early marriage and large families among women.
  - Men historically assumed provider roles with greater access to public work.
- Contemporary *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasized femininity* reproduce the cultural ideal of “what a man/woman should be.”

### Definition 6: Gender Norms

Shared expectations and informal rules about how individuals of a particular gender ought to think, speak, and act in social contexts.

- Gender norms are *enforced* through social sanctions: approval for conformity, reproach or stigma for deviation.
- They shape life chances by channeling:
  - **Education and Skill Acquisition:** Boys encouraged toward STEM, girls toward caregiving or humanities.
  - **Career Paths:** Women overrepresented in teaching, nursing; men overrepresented in engineering, executive roles.
  - **Familial Expectations:** Women pressured to prioritize marriage and parenthood; men to prioritize career and economic success.

### Example 1: Gender Role in the Workplace

In many organizations, women who display “assertiveness” or “ambition” risk being labeled “aggressive,” whereas men exhibiting the same behaviors are viewed as “leadership material.” This double standard reflects how gendered expectations shape evaluations of competence.

## 4 Paradigms and Levels of Analysis

### 4.1 Paradigms on Gender

- **Functionalism:**
  - Sees gendered divisions of labor as serving necessary functions for social order and stability.
  - E.g., traditional roles (men as breadwinners, women as homemakers) ensure family continuity and efficient allocation of tasks.
  - *Critique:* Justifies the status quo and obscures power imbalances.
- **Conflict/Critical Sociology:**
  - Emphasizes how power relations and economic interests produce and reinforce gender inequalities.
  - Views gender roles as tools for patriarchal domination: men control resources, women’s labor undervalued.
  - Examines how policies, laws, and institutions maintain male privilege.
- **Symbolic Interactionism:**

- Focuses on how individuals “do gender” through daily interactions, performances, and linguistic cues.
- Studies how shared meanings of “masculine” and “feminine” are negotiated, reproduced, or challenged in micro-level settings.
- Highlights how children learn gender through play, language, and peer feedback.

### Sample Question 1: Paradigms Applied

Choose a real-world example (e.g., salary negotiation, parental leave policy, sports team selection) and explain how each paradigm (Functionalism, Conflict, Interactionism) would interpret the gender dynamics involved.

## 4.2 Levels of Analysis

### Definition 7: Micro-Level Analysis

Examines face-to-face interactions, everyday routines, and self-presentation strategies by which individuals construct and enact gender in social life.

- **Doing Gender:** Individuals actively produce gender through body language, clothing, speech, and role performance.
- e.g., Boys discouraged from crying (“boys don’t cry”)—micro-sanctions enforce emotional norms.

### Definition 8: Meso-Level (Structural) Analysis

Focuses on how organizational and institutional arrangements (e.g., workplaces, schools, religious institutions) embed gendered divisions of labor, power, and resources.

- **Gender Regime:** The pattern of gendered roles and power relations within an organization or society (e.g., corporate hierarchy favoring men in executive positions).
- Formal policies (e.g., hiring criteria, promotion tracks) and informal cultures (e.g., “boys’ club” mentality) reproduce gendered structures.

### Definition 9: Macro-Level (Cultural) Analysis

Analyzes how cultural symbols, media representations, and public discourse provide frames and scripts for gendered identities and interactions.

- Cultural narratives (e.g., “good mother,” “self-made man”) circulate through media, literature, and religion.
- Individuals draw upon these symbolic resources to affirm or challenge gender norms.

## Example 2: Gender Regime in Healthcare

Statistics (2023):

- Physicians: 42% women, 58% men.
- Nurses: 91% women, 9% men.

This division reflects structural expectations: nursing is coded as a “feminine” caring role, medicine as a high-status “masculine” profession.

## 5 Gender Discrimination and Domination

### Definition 10: Patriarchy

A social system in which men hold primary power over political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property, often resulting in the marginalization and exploitation of women and gender minorities.

- Patriarchal norms are embedded in law, religion, education, and family institutions.
- Historical beliefs (e.g., women as intellectually inferior) justified exclusion from voting, higher education, and certain professions.

### Definition 11: Neoliberal Ideology

An ideology that emphasizes individual responsibility, free markets, and competition, often attributing social outcomes (including gender inequality) to personal choices rather than structural factors.

- Under neoliberalism, wage gaps and underrepresentation of women are explained as “lack of effort” or “preference,” ignoring systemic barriers (e.g., hiring bias, unequal caregiving burdens).
- Fundamental attribution error: blaming individual women for not “leaning in” rather than addressing organizational bias.

### Definition 12: Gender Domination

A system of power wherein one gender group (typically men) controls social, economic, political, and cultural institutions, thereby dominating other gender groups.

- **Dimensions of Gender Domination:**

- *Symbolic Power:* Defining “normal” gender behaviors; e.g., men as rational, women as emotional.

- *Political Power*: Who holds decision-making authority in government or corporate boards.
- *Social Power*: Control over social networks and membership in elite circles.
- *Economic Power*: Access to high-paying jobs, control over resources, and wealth accumulation.
- Because many attribute gender gaps to “personal preference,” structural discrimination often goes unrecognized.

### Example 3: Gender Wage Gap

Between 1998 and 2018, Canada’s gender wage gap narrowed from 13.3% to around 7.3%. Of this change:

- 56.6% explained by variables such as education (12.7), job tenure (5.5), occupation (26.3), and hours worked.
- 43.4% remained unexplained, often attributed to discrimination against women or gendered evaluation of work performance.

(Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey)

## 6 Social Change and Gender

- Recent shifts challenge traditional roles:
  - Increased women’s participation in paid labor, including leadership positions.
  - Growing numbers of stay-at-home fathers by choice.
  - Greater acceptance of *gender non-conformity*, including transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer identities.
  - Men entering “feminized” professions (e.g., nursing, early childhood education).
- We must *complicate* the sex–gender link:
  - Recognize that *sex* (biological) does not strictly determine *gender* (social).
  - Update language to reflect a *spectrum* of identities: *cisgender*, *transgender*, *non-binary*, *gender non-conforming*, etc.

### Definition 13: Doing Gender

The concept that individuals actively perform and reproduce gender through everyday actions, rituals, and communication, reinforcing or challenging existing gender norms.

- People are not passive recipients of culture; they selectively adopt, reinterpret, or resist gendered meanings.

- **Performance of Agency:** Children and adults alike use cultural symbols (clothing, speech styles, media) to construct and negotiate their gender identity.

#### Example 4: RuPaul and Neoliberal Drag

RuPaul's Drag Race showcases drag as a form of gender performance that both entertains and critiques traditional gender norms. Yet, the show's commodification of drag can align with neoliberal values (competition, branding), illustrating tensions between subversion and market-driven popular culture.

#### Sample Question 2: Envisioning Anti-Sexist Change

Describe one institutional (e.g., workplace, school), interpersonal (peer group, family), and individual (self-reflection) strategy that can move a society from passive acceptance of gender roles to active anti-sexist transformation. What concrete steps would be taken at each level?