

HUMAN RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: A GENDERED APPROACH



Editors
Dr Abul Foyes Md Malik
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Gender and Socialization: The Pressure to Perform Masculinity and Femininity

Dziesekhonuo Mere

Introduction

Gender and Socialization refers to the ongoing process through which people come to understand the behavior, expectations, and roles that their society links to being male or female. Even before children can speak, they are gently guided into these norms. A baby girl wrapped in pink and given soft dolls, or a baby boy dressed in blue and handed toy trucks, may seem like simple choices made by parents. Yet these small actions quietly teach children what their gender is supposed to look like and how they should behave.

For this paper, 65 students were interviewed to explore how they personally experienced this pressure to perform their gender. Their stories reveal how deeply gender expectations are woven into everyday life through family, traditions, and the wider cultural messages they grow up with. Through these insights, we can clearly see that gender is not just biological, it is something shaped, learned, and reinforced through social interactions.

Gender and Socialization

Gender is the social construction of being masculine and feminine. Being masculine or feminine is typically linked with their biological sex. Society associates masculinity with male gender having attributes of courage, brave, bold, with the ability to lead, protector, and provider of the family. On the other hand femininity is associated with female gender having attributes of gentleness, gracious, caring with motherhood and nurturing nature, submissive, sensitive and emotionally expressive etc. According to world health organization, gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed (WHO). Unlike sex which is biological. As a social construct gender varies from society to society and changes over time.

Socialization is a process whereby society teaches its members how to live in it. Socialization is a lifelong process where individuals learn and

developed their identity and social role in the society with time, age and gender. There are different stages of socialization; primary socialization which starts from childhood, Secondary socialization which begins in childhood and continues into adulthood and lastly adult socialization which occurs in adulthood and continues through the last phases in an individual's life. In all these three stages individuals learn and adapt to new roles and responsibilities which is expected of them basing on their gender. The main agent of socialization includes the family, educational institutions, peer groups, media, religion, and workplace. Each plays a distinct role in shaping the gender identities and expectations that of the society. Nevertheless, it can also be said that it is through these agents society reproduces stereotypical gender roles and identity. According to Anthony Giddens, socialization is both a form of learning and a process of identity formation (Giddens,74).

Gender and socialization are two interconnected concepts that play a crucial role in shaping human identity and behavior. While sex refers to the biological distinction between male and female, gender encompasses the social meanings, expectations, and roles attached to these biological categories. From birth, individuals are exposed to a variety of social cues and experiences that teach them how to behave as “men” or “women”. This lifelong process is known as gender socialization. Through this process societies sustain norms, values, and ideologies that define what is considered masculine or feminine. Understanding gender socialization is therefore vital to comprehend how gender inequalities persist and how they can be transformed.

Gender as Social Construct

Gender is not naturally given, it is a social construct shaped by cultural and institutional contexts. As Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” (Beauvoir, 267). This statement rightly emphasize that gender is a product of socialization. Different societies have different cultures, which significantly impacts socialization. While there are cultural variations, some common expectations exist across societies regarding gender roles. The functionalist view gender differences as necessary for social stability. For instance, Talcott parsons argued that the family functions effectively when men perform instrumental roles like being the breadwinner of the family and woman perform expressive roles like nurturing and taking care of the household. From symbolic interactionist standpoint, gender is continuously produced through everyday interactions and symbols. Erving Goffman and Candace West demonstrated how individuals do gender in social settings by performing behavior associated with masculinity or femininity (West and Zimmerman, 129).

The pressure to perform Femininity and Masculinity

For these purpose a group of 65 students were interviewed on whether they have faced any pressure to perform or to behave feminine or masculine, some of their responses are;

“Growing up, I was always told what it meant to be a good girl, I was expected to be gentle, kind, pretty, soft-spoken, and well- behaved. At first, I didn’t even question it , I thought this was just what girls were supposed to be. But as I got older, I started to feel the pressure of performing femininity, and how much it shaped the way I saw myself and how others saw me”. (Kinili)

One of the things the girls noticed was how much focus was placed on appearance, that there was an unspoken rule that they had to look a certain way to be considered feminine.

Another student shares,” ...it’s like I’m following a script that tells me how to feel, and when I follow that script, I often wonder if this is the real me, or is it this just what I’ve been taught to be?”. (Fenita)

The girl also mentions that growing up she didn’t really had to sit down for a lecture to learn what it was to be feminine, it was seen around her that girls were supposed to be soft-spoken, polite, gentle and beautiful. The expectation from the society to perform femininity also comes with the standards to always be careful not to appear “too much”- not too loud ,not too bold, not too messy.

“I’ve been living by the rule book on how to be feminine and I feel excepted in the society, but the truth is it is exhausting, when I look in the mirror, sometimes I feel disconnected. I’m dressed the way I’m supposed to but inside I feel like I’m wearing a costume”. (Ilo)

Both Femininity and Masculinity is socially constructed with certain perspective being already implemented. In a patriarchal society, right from the moment children starts understanding of the social surroundings; a girl child is disciplined in such a way that they are lower than male gender even within the family. Their ways of talking, dressing, walking is taught through socialization which starts from the family. One responded shares an instances,” I prefer to have short hair, yet my grandparents says that I am a girl and need to have long hair” (Eunice). Such things right from the family shows how femininity is socially constructed.

Very interestingly, one respondent highlighted that there are invisible weight that she has to carry to perform her femininity, not just to be a women but to be a right kind of women. However she believes true femininity does not come from expectation but it comes from freedom. Another respondent share her experiences, that being born a girl she never really questioned what it meant to be “feminine”. It was just

something which she picked up along the way- like a silent set of rule handed out without any explanation. These rules were never written down anywhere but they were always there. Performing femininity isn't just about looking a certain way. Society tends to value and adore women who live up to these unspoken standards. The amount of time, money, energy, and resources that goes into being feminine can be overwhelming and when women don't fit into the ideal model, there's a quiet shame that creeps in.

Family being an agent of Socialization, the idea of femininity is taught within the four corners of a woman's own household. As simple as being told to sit properly like a lady, talk like a lady, walk like a lady etc. these comment seems to be small but over time they shape the person, hence the idea of femininity being natural becomes questionable.

Masculinity same with femininity is a set of traits or attributes which defines a man associated with the male sex. Masculinity is also socially constructed through culture and daily life interactions and socialization. The concept of the origin of masculinity roots in behavior necessary for survival where physical strength is the first attribute. The natural advantage of man being physically stronger than women gave its way to other socially constructed attributes which is expected of a man, for instances being courageous, bold, assertive, not too emotional, etc. In an interview with the 65 students some answers of the male respondents shows how masculinity is also socially constructed.

"Growing up I was constantly reminded that I was a boy and I should not meltdown and cry but learn to control my emotions that was something I learnt without questioning. As I grew older I was taught that I need to have a career not only as a provider of my family but to bring good name and reputation to the family's name. These kind of expectations is what keeps me going but it's frustrating at the same time". (Thomas)

The media, peers and even some role models contributes towards reinforcing the notion that masculinity equates to being dominating, competitive, unemotional and lack of weakness.

"I felt compelled to adhere to this traditional masculine ideas, I tried to repress my feelings ,not to be vulnerable and to be confident all the time but I could not express my feelings, build sincere relationship and be myself. The pressure to adhere the traditional masculinity also caused me to feel anxious and stress. I felt as though I was in a constant battle with others to prove myself and live up to unrealistic expectation". (Puloto) For some men the sense of responsibility settles in at a very young age, becoming a weight they continue to carry throughout their lives. One such response was from a respondent,

“ Being the oldest and the only boy in the family of three siblings, I was always told that I need to take care of my sisters and my family in the future. I didn’t have much option to be vulnerable and dependent like my sisters. At this age, I don’t remember the last time I showed my emotions of vulnerability to my family, I feel embarrassed to do so”.
(Neitho)

Men are consistently expected to embody strength, toughness, and emotional restraint, regardless of the circumstances they face. Social norms often dictate that men should not express vulnerability, particularly through crying, and they must demonstrate responsibility and competence in their work in order to be regarded as “real men”. From birth, male children are frequently socialized into specific gendered roles that pressure them to prove their masculinity. Parents and caregivers play a significant role in this process. Boys are taught how to behave, think, and act in ways that align with culturally accepted notions of masculinity. These expectations extend to their manner of dressing, their conduct, and even the activities they are encouraged to participate in. In rural contexts, for example, boys may be expected to engage in tasks such as hunting, fishing, or other outdoor activities that are believed to cultivate physical strength, self-reliance, and survival skills. Similarly, chores like chopping firewood or performing physically demanding labor are often framed as essential components of becoming “proper” man. Many men struggle with societal expectations because they are required to conform to norms about what it means to be masculine. Those who don’t fit this model may feel like they are not good enough or that they are failing as men. This can lead to feeling of low self-esteem and even depression. The pressure to perform masculinity can have severe consequences limiting men’s potential and perpetuating toxic behaviors. However such social pressure are sometimes justified as necessary for preparing boys for adulthood, they also reinforce rigid gender norms and limit the range of acceptable behaviors for men. These norms can restrict emotional expression, constrain personal choices, and perpetuate stereotypes about both men and women. A critical examination of these expectations is therefore essential for understanding how gender roles are constructed and sustained within society.

Conclusion

Gender and socialization are not fixed realities but social constructions shaped by the expectations, beliefs, and traditions of the society we grew up in. from the moment a child is in the womb, families begin imagining their future in gendered terms choosing colors, clothes, values, and even dreams based on whether the baby is a baby boy or a girl. The interviews and everyday experiences of young people reveal just how

deeply these stereotypes continue to shape identity. Many still struggle with the gap between who they truly are and who society wants them to be. This shows how necessary it is to rethink the rigid ideas we attach to gender. Cultures and communities must recognize that gender is not uniform and cannot be confined to narrow expectations. Understanding this can help build a world where every individual regardless of gender can live with dignity and harmony.

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