What is the link between sexuality and gender?

Gender refers to the widely shared set of expectations and norms linked to how women and men, and girls and boys, should behave. Unlike 'sex' which refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women, gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that are assigned to men and women in any given society. These expectations are not fixed but are continually being constructed and reinforced through social relationships and economic and political power dynamics.

IDS partner organisation, Nirantar [1], works to empower girls and women from marginalised communities in India. Nirantar understands gender as

>a continuum in which there are different degrees to which one transgresses or breaks the social norms related to the ‘ideal’ woman and man. According to our understanding, everyone is assigned a gender (either male or female) at birth. Society creates strict norms that are meant to be followed by the two genders. These norms are upheld by a system of punishment and privileges. The norms are not only policed, they are also internalised." (Link to case study below)

Researchers, like those in Nirantar, who have explored the relationship between gender and sexuality argue that gender and sexuality cannot be thought of as distinct and separate categories but as intimately related. The societies we live in construct the right and wrong way to behave as men and women and these are mapped onto ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ sexual practices, beliefs and behaviours:

"Ideologies claiming that women should be pure and chaste can lead to female genital mutilation, honour killings, and restrictions on women’s mobility and economic or political participation. Ideas that men should be macho can mean that sexual violence is expected rather than condemned. In many places, to be considered a ‘proper man’ or ‘proper woman’, you need to act one hundred per cent heterosexual, and stay in line with gender stereotypes." (Ikkaracan and Jolly 2007: 3)

There are many ways to explore the relationship between sexuality and gender; in this section we outline three ways that gender is related to sexuality that are useful for thinking about sexuality and development.
1. Sexuality is influenced by gender norms

Social expectations linked to gender influence how women and men behave and this includes their sexual behaviour, attitudes and feelings. These expectations tend to be based on the assumption that there are two categories of people, men and women and that they behave differently based on their biological sex. There is also a basic assumption in development policy and programming that gender is linked to biological sex and that the recipients of development interventions are heterosexual. The assumption that the normal and natural sexual relationship and basis for the family is a man and a woman in a heterosexual marriage is sometimes described as heteronormativity. [2]

There is huge variation in the gendered norms and expectations relating to sexuality. The pressures to conform to the norms of any given society can have negative consequences for both women and men. In some contexts, women may be forced to enter marriages against their will and some may be subject to marital rape; or they may be compelled to undergo female circumcision in order to be perceived by society as an ‘adult woman’. Boys too are told how to behave as men, how to be taken seriously by their family and their community; this may entail being bullied or punished if boys are not ‘macho’ enough, or if they express same-sex desires.

2. Ideologies around sexuality work to control women

In many contexts, girls and women are seen as vulnerable and in need of ‘protection’ from men’s sexual advances. Virginity is often highly prized and is linked to a family’s ability to arrange a marriage and maintain social status. Controlling girls’ and women’s sexuality is also linked to material resources such as education and whether or not girls are able to attend school. Where virginity is important, parents may fear the increased possibility of sexual encounters between boys and girls at school (as shown by the study conducted by our partner organisation, Nirantar) or are concerned that, with education, girls may be more likely to challenge the patriarchal structures that are reinforced through historic family customs, like arranged marriages.

Sexuality is often used to control women who are seen to step outside of the norms of feminity:

…from the United States to Namibia to Poland, accusations around sexuality are used to attack women’s organising. Women mobilising for gender equality are sometimes accused of being ‘not proper women’, lesbians, or promiscuous. Such attacks aim to undermine such women and curb their political power and impact, as well as reinforce ideas about what is proper behaviour for women. (Ikkaracan and Jolly, 2007: 5)

As IDS member Mariz Tadros demonstrates in her case study [3] of politically motivated sexual assault in Egypt (2013), women who entered the public sphere of protest rather than remaining within the private sphere of the home were ‘punished’ through sexual assault. As Tadros points out, men were also the victims of sexual assault but because of gendered assumptions about who is the victim and who is the perpetrator these cases were less likely to receive attention
3. Gender norms related to sexuality can affect health and access to basic services

In many societies women are expected to remain silent around issues related to sex and sexuality. For this reason, it can be difficult for women to learn about risk reduction, or even if informed, it may be difficult for women to negotiate safe sex within their sexual relationships. Because of the strong norms that encourage women to remain virgins until they are married, studies have shown that it is difficult for unmarried women to access treatment services for sexually transmitted diseases as they may be subject to stigma within health care centres.

Research has shown, too, that in heterosexual relationships women's economic marginalisation can result in women entering sexual relationships where they have less economic power than their partner. This can impact on their ability to set the terms of their sexual relationship. Gendered expectations that young women cannot 'manage' or 'protect' their sexuality also has implications for women's access to education and employment. In their policy audit of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) education policy in India, Nirantar show the importance of considering the gendered dynamics of sexuality in relation to girls' ability to access education:

"the data indicate that fears related to girls' sexuality – namely that girls might express their desires or that they might experience sexual violence in the process of going to school – are a significant reason for pulling girls out of school. This is important in a context where girls' access to higher levels of school education is seen primarily as a gender issue. In the absence of evidence and without an acknowledgement of the key role of sexuality as a determinant, we are left with an incomplete understanding of this critical issue."

(Nirantar, 2014: 2)

It is often assumed that gender applies only to women and girls but it is equally important to engage with the ways that men's health and access to services can be affected by expectations linked to masculinity. For example, in many parts of the world men are expected to have more experience and knowledge about sex than women; this discourages men from learning about safe sexual practices and may make them more vulnerable to contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases. Notions of 'macho' masculinities that emphasise men's domination over women – socially and sexually – not only contribute to high rates of violent crime against women (as we see in places like South Africa – link to Case Study) but also to the stigmatization of men who fail to conform to these gendered expectations, including those who have sex with other men. As men are generally positioned as the perpetrators of sexual violence and not the victims, men's vulnerability to and experience of sexual violence also tends to be ignored (see the IDS bulletin on Patriachy [4] for further discussion).

Gendered norms around sexuality affect how sexual behaviour and sexual health issues are reported, researched and funded. Assumptions about women as the victims of sexual violence, for example, restrict our knowledge about how women negotiate risk and exert control in their sexual relationships. As men are considered to be strong and capable of managing sexual relationships, there is very little research into mens' experience of vulnerability, in both same-sex and heterosexual relationships. The lack of knowledge about the sexuality of transgender people often leads to the assumption that transgender men and women are homosexual. Gendered expectations of sexuality, therefore, also determine what we know about the sexuality of men and women, which in turn informs decisions about development programming, funding and research.

Further issues to consider
While gender is often talked about in terms of masculinity and femininity, gender theorists have sought to expose the plurality of gender expression and the way in which gender identities and forms are accorded different social value. In response to feminist critiques, for example, gender theorists have pointed to the fact that there is no singular masculinity but a range of masculinities that are ordered hierarchically. The dominant or ‘hegemonic’ masculinity is that which epitomises the patriarch, or alpha male, typical of Hollywood action films. This dominant form of masculinity is something which is valued in many societies, and to which many aspire. However, such ‘ideals’ of gender can have the effect of ‘disciplining’ the body and punishing those who do not conform. Heterosexual men, for example, who identify with their sex but not the social characteristics typically associated with dominant masculinity, may find that they are bullied and not considered to be ‘proper’ men. Halberstam writes about being called out of the ‘Women’s toilet’ by airport security because the guard expected women to look ‘feminine’ and not, in Halberstam’s terms, like a ‘masculine female’. This ‘disciplining’ of the body reinforces the notion that there is a right and a wrong way to be a male or female and has implications for the sexual relationships, behaviour, experience and attitudes of men and women of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

It is commonly assumed that your gender is determined by your biological sex. You are masculine because you are male, for example. The separation of gender and sex is most apparent in the experience of people who feel that their ascribed gender-identity is not aligned with their biological sex. Those people, who may identify as transgender, some will opt to change their biological sex while others may change their gender-identity but not their sex. The sexual orientation of those whose gender identity does not match their biological sex is not self-evident. Biological males who live as females may be attracted to males, females or other trans individuals. This is evident, for example, among travestis in Brazil, as Mountian observes in the policy audit conducted on the country’s ‘Brazil without Homophobia’ education policy, launched in 2004. Mountian found that travestis were discriminated against because they challenge the idea that gender identity is directly related to biological sex. Not all biological males feel themselves to have a masculine identity, and vice versa.

Discussion Points

- How do gender norms relating to sexuality affect the people that you work with?
- What does the experience of being a trans person tell us about gender?
- Can you think of examples of women’s sexual expression that you would describe as masculine?
- What are the positive and negative impacts of gender norms relating to sexuality for men and women?
- How many different models of masculinity can you identify?

Related resources:

Bridge Cutting Edge Pack: Gender and Sexuality [5]

Bridge Gender and Sexuality: Supporting Resources Collection [6]


Further Reading


Links