

Short Communication

Interrogating the gender spectrum; does the ‘biology’ or ‘culture’ debate still hold any currency?

Zilpha A Modi*

Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh-7911102, Arunachal Pradesh.

Abstract: More recently the world is witnessing an increasing trend in gender plurality. There is an increase in a number of people who refuse to be identified as either men or women. The previous male-female binary concept of gender is being stretched to include categories such as Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders (LGBT). This has forced to radically alter the previous notion of gender. In this essay, in the light of these developments, I will argue that even though there has been an expansion on the idea of gender, gender as a binary concept continues to be accepted and articulated universally. The reason for this lies in the cultural construction of gender and not biology. Biological differences is culturally appropriated to reinforce gender binary.

Keywords: Biological determinism, Gender debate, Gender spectrum, Gender inequality, Subordination of women.

I. Introduction

Gender appears to be a universal principle of social organization, one found even in the smallest and simplest societies. Every culture around the globe retains certain ways of characterization as male and female. This division is not necessarily derived from anatomy but is shaped and enforced through the cultural system. In other words gender is understood as a set of ideals that can be classified as either masculine or feminine. Intrinsic to the concept of gender is the argument on the asymmetrical relationship between the two. The relation between the two is assumed to be unequal and hierarchical. However there is little consensus on the reasons behind this asymmetry. This has been hugely debated since the 1940's and continues to be discussed until the present time. Two theories took shape in the discussions, one held that men is superior to women biologically and this leads to universal subordination of women the other refutes biological determinism and holds that the idea of ‘men’ and ‘women’ are cultural constructs and women’s subordination is due to such socio-cultural constructions. But regardless of the differences between the two theories, the notion of gender binaries and women as subordinates to men gained currency. This idea is accepted without much opposition and led to wide spread movement for gender equality and demand for women’s rights. The effects of which is protective legislation for women in the charters of various government, political parties and non-governmental organizations. It also permeates into everyday discourses in educational institutions, intellectual circles, work places, and other everyday spaces.

*Corresponding Author: modi.zilpa@gmail.com

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More recently the world is witnessing an increasing trend in gender plurality. There is an increase in a number of people who refuse to be identified as either men or women. The previous male-female binary concept of gender is being stretched to include categories such as Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders (LGBT). This has forced to radically alter the previous notion of gender. In this essay, in the light of these developments, I will argue that even though there has been an expansion on the idea of gender, gender as a binary concept tend to be more accepted and enforced universally. The reason for this lies in the cultural construction of gender and not biology. In many instances that follows in the discussion, biological differences is culturally appropriated to reinforce gender binary.

Interrogating biology

In the slums of Nairobi Kenya, rape and sexual assault on women is frequent. Being a predominantly patriarchal society, male dominance is often expressed through brute physical force. Rape is often used as a tool to achieve this. Also with prevalence of HIV among the youths, older women are often targeted because of their assumed safety from HIV and weaker bodies. This situation of Nairobian women may be taken as a perfect example to explain the biological difference or subordination of women's body. The fact that rape is more frequently charged on women and not men can be a case to argue that women's body are more vulnerable and weaker than men's. However, the way Nairobi's older women handle this situation gives an alternative explanation to this view. The older women rather than accepting the situation took to training their bodies in such a way that that it could withstand physical violence. They came together to form a group and took up karate to fight off a potential rapist. Their practice involved rigorous exercise- kicks, punches, running and other heavy bodies work out (Taiwo, 2016).

In taking up karate, Nairobi women clearly assumes that women's body is not a biological status quo. If given the right training and put to conditions of rigorous physical exercise it could be equal to men's body. Women's body to them cannot be hold up by 'natural' or biological givens like age or gender. In other words, women's body is not naturally weaker than men's. But it is a common practice in societies around the globe to define women as biologically weaker than men. This often stems from taking biological differences between the genders for granted and their asymmetry as natural facts. The physiology of the male body in comparison to female physiology is thought to lead to a natural asymmetry.

French philosopher Simon de Beauvoir was among the first thinkers to question the validity of this belief. In her seminal work 'The Second Sex' she explores the validity of biological fact. She argues that the anatomical and physiological difference of the human body is taken as biological facts to explain the gender divide. The physiological features of the female body particularly the reproductive function is considered the prime reason for the female body's weakness. The female body as compared to male body is thought to be at

great disadvantage because of these ‘biological facts’. Both the sciences and the social sciences such as psychology and history take these explanations as facts in explain the subordinate position of women. She argues that these ‘biological facts’ are not facts but myths, which have been taken for granted by the sciences. It doesn’t hold any scientific truth to prove that women’s body is weaker than man (Beauvoir, 1949).

In fact in a series of experiments done by a group of American scientists to find out whether women’s body are weaker than men’s, they found that gender was not a determining factor in body strength. The experiment was done on men and women of similar age group, weight, background and life style. They found that the strength of a body was determined by the amount of body weight and fat and not gender (Bishop, Cureton, & Collins, 1987). If ‘biological facts’ holds no truth what is the reason for female subordination then?

Sherry Ortner (1974) continuing this search on the reasons for universal subordination of women argues that the biological or physiological feature of women’s bodies made women seem closer to nature. Man on the other hand is seen closer to culture because of their engagement with culture. In the long run, women’s association with nature is crystalized and women become a metaphor, ideology and symbol of nature. She further argues that nature and culture are universal structures of every human society. All cultures implicitly recognize the distinction between nature and culture and culture occupies a higher position to nature as culture is associated with the ability to transcend nature and natural condition (Ortner, 1996, p. 26). Thus in a society where culture occupies a higher position than nature women because of their closer symbolic association with nature ultimately end up occupying a secondary position in the society. In other words biology does not inherently prove the female body weaker but cultural appropriation of biology does. Later many feminist scholars saw patriarchy as a widespread cultural system as the root for female subordination.

Interrogating Culture

Despite these explanations that there is no given biological inequality and biological asymmetry, cultural systems continue to maintain strict distinction. The case of Indian female sportswoman Dutee Chand is exemplary in understanding the ways in which cultural systems enforces gender divide based on biological features. Dutee a professional Indian sprinter was rejected from participating in the 2014 Common Wealth Games. The Athletic Federation of India disqualified her on the grounds that her level of testosterone was beyond the ‘normal’ acceptable level in a female body. Her gender was put up for investigation, she had to be medically examined or go through a ‘gender test’. This gender test was in other words a genital test. It is based on the medical idea of male and female and enforced by governing authorities such as International Olympic Committee and Indian Athletic Federation. For the International Olympic Committee gender is a clearly defined set of ‘natural’ condition that can be measured through levels of hormones and anatomy. In case of individuals who do not fit into the clearly defined gender parameters, they simply becomes an ‘abnormal’ person or people

without gender. Clinically this condition is termed as 'hyperandrogenism'. It is understood as a 'unnatural' condition in the human body when 'male' hormones exceeds in a female body or vice versa. And in sports it is feared that it may give undue advantage to the person with such a condition. In Dutee's case according to the 'experts' of the 'gender test' she did not 'medically' qualify to be a woman. She was debarred from participating in the Commonwealth Games (Padawer, 2016).

It is striking that despite repeated rejection and scholarly explanation on the concept of gender as different from biology there is continuing practice on the part of cultural institutions including sciences to restrict the meaning of gender to biology. Individuals like Dutee who do not fit into the clearly defined gender boxes are either termed 'abnormal' or rendered genderless. Anne Fausto-Sterling in her essay 'The Five Sexes' argues that science for long has been at the helm of dividing gender into male and female. Echoing Simon de Beauvoir views Fausto-Sterling (1993) argues that science takes for granted biological division as male and female and continues to reproduce it. The other genders which do not fit the characteristics laid down by science are brushed off as 'abnormal'. In many cases 'corrective' surgery or medication is offered as a measure to rectify such 'abnormality'. She argues that biology as a source of gender is also constructed and sciences have been having an upper hand in such construction. In her study of people termed as 'intersex' or 'hermaphrodite' or 'practicing hermaphrodite' it was possible to maintain a life that involved living life of both the 'genders'(Fausto-Sterling, 1993). But the predominance of culture in dividing gender or gendered life often put their life in trouble. The cultural world whether it is in the family, school or workplace enforces a clear distinction of genders. It forces the body to belong to either block.

But despite culture's tendency to impose its concept of gender it also leaves room for disagreement, discussion and change. There is growing consciousness within culture to expand the idea of gender. Not so much of cultures own making but because of the growing number of people who refuse to accept the traditional gender identity. There are an increasing number of people who refuse to identify themselves as either men or women. Some in isolation and some in groups, the movement has been on the rise since the 1990's leading to diversification of feminist explanation of gender in terms of queer theory. This has further resulted in the wide acceptance and acknowledgement of wider gender identities such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT). A total of 19 countries around the world have in fact drafted legislations to legally recognize genders beyond the traditional man-women identity. The United Nations has been instrumental in pushing the recognition of LGBT identity and their rights.

This new wave of gender expansion has also helped people like Dutee explain her case. The Court of Arbitration for Sports after hearing Dutee's plea, decided the case in her favour and further led to the stalling of 'hyperandrogenism' as a regulatory policy in Olympic sports.

Conclusion

The enquiry on the universality of gender binaries and women's subordination is more than fifty years old. Two reasons have often been cited for gender binary concept: first, biology, and second, culture. Anthropologists among others have been actively engaged in finding answers to these. Distancing themselves from the more 'general' argument that gender division are due to biology they argued that it is due to culture. Biological fact alone is not sufficient. It is the cultural appropriation of biological fact that leads to women's subordination. This is universal because biology is also thought to be universal.

But lately there has been a rise in the number of people who refuse to belong to either gender. When one thinks of gender relation one cannot think about the relation between 'men' and 'women' alone but also include other gender identities such as the LGBT. This problematizes the older understanding of gender relation as 'asymmetrical binaries' where men are dominant and women subordinate. But despite the expansion of the meaning of gender, the male-female gender distinction continues and with it women's subordination. This is mainly because of the universal interpretation of biological features as facts by culture. Biology continues to be use as the basis for gender distinction and is enforced by the medical sciences and other formal institutions alike. It is not surprising that a member of the European Union parliament recently opposed equal pay for man and women on the grounds of biological differences, resonating cultures deep-rooted conception of men-women asymmetry on the basis of biology. Culture not only constructs the biology of gender but also enforces it and continues to reproduce it.

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