

## DISPELLING THE MISCONCEPTIONS AND MYTHS ABOUT GENDER

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*"The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie --- deliberate, contrived and dishonest --- but the myth --- persistent, persuasive and unrealistic." (John F. Kennedy)*

### **Prelude**

This paper seeks to clarify the meaning of the terms that are associated with gender, and equally so to unpack the concept of gender itself and elucidate the fact that gender is not tantamount to women and that it does not exclusively cater for women issues and concerns but that of men as well. It is therefore the principal objective of this essay to demystify the ill informed perceptions and misconceptions that seem to equate gender to sex, and to further illustrate that the differences that continue to exist between men and women are only socially, and culturally fabricated.

### **The usage of gender**

The general usage of the term gender is relatively new. It increasingly became a buzz word in the late 1960s and 1970s, and became fashionable in professional disciplines such as the social sciences. The 'term came to serve a useful purpose in distinguishing those aspects of life that were more easily attributed or understood to be of social rather than biological origin'<sup>1</sup>. Robert A LeVine reiterates that studies of women and gender have proliferated in the Anthropological literature since 1970, providing new opportunities to consider old problems in the light of more adequate data and to find more sophisticated ways of conceptualizing gender differences as social, cultural and psychological phenomena<sup>2</sup>.

To work effectively on gender issues it is imperative that we clarify and understand the related concepts of gender, sex and equality. Gender is a concept which is widely used but often

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<sup>1</sup> Unger & Crawford, 1992

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. LeVine, PhD: Gender Difference: Interpreting Anthropological Data

misunderstood. For the last several decades the term gender has come into common usage particularly as a synonym for sex. Whilst the term is generally useful in our day to day conversations, a clear cut distinction between the two words, sex and gender, has not been definitely established. The term gender and sex are used interchangeably. The discrepant use of the terms can lead to confusion, lack of understanding and misconception. Maintenance of a clear conceptual distinction between the two words sex and gender and associated concepts is particularly helpful for the holistic understanding of issues pertaining to gender.

## **CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS**

### **What is gender?**

Gender is a social construct. It refers to the relationship between men and women, girls and boys. According to Carolyn Hannan (2000), gender relates 'to the attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female, and the socio-cultural relationships between women and men, and girls and boys'. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and learned through socialization processes. They are passed from one generation to another. They are however, context- specific and changeable. They are not static but dynamic. 'In most societies there are differences and disparities (inequalities) between women and men in activities undertaken, access to and control over resources and decision-making (power) opportunities. Gender is an integral part of the broader socio-cultural context'<sup>3</sup>.

### **What is gender equality?**

It means equality between women and men. The Constitution of South Africa is premised on the basic values and tenets of equality. "South Africa's definition of and goals towards achieving gender equality are guided by a vision of human rights which incorporates acceptance of equal and inalienable rights of all women and men"<sup>4</sup>. It relates to equal treatment, opportunities, right of women and men and girls and boys. Equality means therefore that 'women and men have equal

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<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Hannan (2000). She is a Principal Officer, Gender Mainstreaming: Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women.

<sup>4</sup> South Africa's National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality: [www.info.gov.za](http://www.info.gov.za)

conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from, economic, social, cultural and political development’ (ILO, 2000). In South Africa, gender equality is used as a strategic vehicle to eradicate the ills of the past. Furthermore, the principles of equality are being used at all spheres of government to inform and guide policy development, service delivery and political representation.

It should be borne in mind that equality is not strictly confined to women. It is therefore not a women’s issue but in principle should concern and engage men and women alike. Equality does not mean that women and men will eventually become the same, but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Equality denotes that ‘the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration. It is based on women and men being full partners in their home, their community and their society’<sup>5</sup>. According to Joyce Piliso-Seroke<sup>6</sup>, “gender equality starts at home. It is how we as parents promote gender equality that matters”.

### **What is gender equity?**

Gender Equity means “fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs which includes equal treatment or treatment considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities”. To ensure fairness, measures must often be put in place to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from operating on a level playing field<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: ABC of Women Worker’s Rights and Gender Equality, ILO, Geneva, 2000

<sup>6</sup> Chairperson of the Commission on Gender Equality

<sup>7</sup> Source: Gender Equality and Equity: UNESCO Paris, 2000

### **What is sex?**

Sex is the biological difference between men and women. Sex is determined at birth<sup>8</sup>. In essence sex is a biological concept.

### **A REVIEW OF GENDER DIFFERENCES**

Clearly women and men are different at genetic levels and carry different sexual organs. But beyond these obvious differences, men and women are equal and should be accorded equal opportunities to realize their full potentials. We all have equal capacities and abilities to do things. We all wish to be respected to say the least.

The inherently biological differences that exist between men and women do not in any way determine their full potentials, or their behavior, attitudes and capabilities. The different expression in talent or ability is overwhelmingly exaggerated by cultural patterns and socialization processes. As Dr Gilligan noted that 'there is no one universal human culture, but an enormous range of cultural expressions among different groups. With each group are a men's culture and a women's culture, the experiences of each gender are different'.

It is worth noting that changing patterns of gender role socialization have necessitated a thorough review and re-conceptualization of our views regarding gender difference in many areas of our lives. 'Some traditionally conceived female and male role elements continued to change in our changing societies. Gender differences in behaviour and conscious experience continue to decrease as men and women blends traditional role elements such as child rearing with traditional male role elements such as wage earners'<sup>9</sup>.

It is also asserted that gender role differences in political participation are diminishing worldwide or in other words, that women's political activity is approaching that of men's. Traditional attitudes of decreeing politics an inappropriate activity for women also appears to be weakening. However,

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<sup>8</sup> Source: M.Candida, S.Ines, M. Maitrayee (1999). A Guide to- Gender Analysis Frameworks (An Oxfam Publication) England.

<sup>9</sup> Krisanne Bursik: Moving Beyond Gender difference- Gender role comparisons of manifest dream content.

quite large role differences in political participation still exist in some parts of the world. South Africa has made significant strides in terms of the representation of women in Cabinet. It is said that approximately 43 percent of South Africa's cabinet ministers are women, as compared to the 30 percent recorded in 1999<sup>10</sup>. It has been said that "South Africa is one of only three African countries to have woman presiding officers in Parliament or a house of parliament" (*Philippa Garson*<sup>11</sup>). There is however still a long way to go, the government has not yet reached the 50% target it set out to achieve. *Philippa Garson further stated that* "while the political battle for gender equity has partly been won, the social and economic battles are clearly far from over. Levels of violence against women are alarmingly high. Women are extremely vulnerable to rape, sexual abuse, domestic and other violence, teenage parenthood, a lack of education opportunities, unemployment and sexual harassment". What this means is that the struggle continues, and it is not over as yet. The future is looking bright to say the least, but we should not become complacent about the current state of affairs, as the saying goes, there is a room for improvement.

## **THE COMMONLY HELD MISCONCEPTIONS AND MYTHS ABOUT GENDER**

Gender myths and misconceptions- provide a series of images of women and men that encourage us to understand what they do – or do not do – in particular ways.

### **Gender or Sex?**

A commonly held myth is that gender and sex are interchangeable terms. These two terms are not the same and carry different meanings. Sex is the biological and is inherited from birth, we are born either with X or Y chromosome. Genetic differences are innate and remain untainted. Gender, on the other hand, is the socio-cultural roles assigned to men and women, and is determined by society through its socialization agents (such as our families, peers, schools etc). Thus, men and women learn to behave and work in certain socially prescribed ways. 'While the fact that we are born male or female is unchangeable, the gender roles can and do change over time, and across cultures. Further, gender differences are based on ethnic, economic, social and cultural factors, so

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<sup>10</sup> Stats extracted from the article by Thabo Mokgola entitled "All the President's women"- 2004

<sup>11</sup> *Philippa Garson* "SA's push for gender equity". See: <http://www.safrika.info>

that the differences exist, not only between women and men<sup>12</sup>. The picture being painted here is that, differences that are perpetuated by socialization are not innately instilled on us and hence not static. They evolve with time, through changing conditions.

### **Gender is just another way for working on / promoting women's issues**

Gender concerns women and men as well. Therefore, it concerns and affects every single individual in the society- girls, boys, men and women. 'Talking about it opens up people's minds to the issues and makes them more sensitive to each other's requirements, i.e. men become sensitive to women's needs and vice versa'<sup>13</sup>. Gender initiatives are conceived to improve the plight of women since they are the most disadvantaged creatures in various societies. In South Africa women were disadvantaged by the discriminatory policies of the apartheid government and also by the indigenous and culture practices. Women as well as men specific initiatives are needed. "Recognizing and acknowledging gender differences does not mean a negation of our femininity or masculinity, but it's a better way and a good starting point to redress inequality and all sorts of ill fated discrimination" (ROZAN).

It is important that we acknowledge that gender differences exist in our societies, and acknowledging them is the first step to finding solutions for them. We need to accept that these differences are fabricated to disadvantage women and to suppress their full being. It goes without saying that if we continue to deny this honest truth, inequality will continue to haunt us and will manifest itself in many different ways, either through exclusion, exploitation, aggression, or discrimination. It must be placed on record that this process may be received with skepticism and ambivalence but it's the way to go, if we are truly committed to achieving equality. And yes, some of the changes will involve a shift in power relations, leading to circumstances that are not familiar. However change does not imply that society will be worse off but it will be different. Besides, change is inevitable. We need to correct imbalances, arrest discrimination and eliminate inequality. And eventually to create a society that is free from gender biases and stereotypes, also to build a progressive society where every single individual is respected and accorded due recognition.

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<sup>12</sup> Quote taken from ROZAN publication. ROZAN is an NGO working on issues of emotional health, gender and violence against women and children. Article: 'Myths about gender'.

<sup>13</sup> ROZAN

## **WHY DO MYTHS PERSIST?**

Myths based on gender and on race persist, despite the evidence to the contrary. The crucial question is: where did they come from and why do they continue? The following are just some of the reasons:

It is a common belief that because men are the principal producers in “modern” society that this has always been the case. In fact in earlier times when women were the main food-gatherers and producers, there were matriarchal societies where women had high status, were preeminent as cultivators and were glorified as goddesses. As late as the 2nd century BC, the major deities in European culture were women. There are a variety of theories as to why this changed. Some like Reed felt that with the evolution of private property women lost their place in productive, social and cultural life and their worth sank along with their former status. Others like DeBeauvoir felt that change occurred when it was established that men as well as women were involved in the reproductive process. civilized man.” (Le Bon, 1879, reported in Gould, 1981). At times in history it has been said that women are better than men. At other times it has been said that men are better than women<sup>14</sup>.

All these myths are emphatically wrong and unjustifiable. We need to oppose them vigorously and of course take corrective actions. Equality can not triumph if these myths continue to exist and find refuge in our thoughts and minds.

## **GENDER THEORIES AND FRAMEWORKS**

### **Biological determinism**

This theory is also called genetic determinism and based on the belief that all differences that exist between men and women are strictly biological. It asserts that all human behavior is innate and cannot be changed or altered. Biological determinism is often used to support generalizations about men and women, such as 'men are naturally more able in maths and technology' or 'women are naturally suited to domestic duties'.

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<sup>14</sup> Judy ButlerCampbell-Kibler Associates Groton Ridge Heights

These views are based on investigations of genetic differences between men and women, often searching for differences in brain function. However, even by the early 1990s, it was clear that the constant finding of psychological research is that 'sex differences are small, their origins unclear, and the variation within each sex far outweighs any differences between the sexes' (Segal 1990:63 as reproduced in Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998:44).

Biological determinism asserts that certain behaviours are justified and unchangeable because 'boys will be boys' (or 'girls will be girls'). There is little consideration of the wide variety of behaviours among members of each sex or how masculinity and femininity relate to each other in different settings. For these reasons, biological determinism has the potential to undermine school behaviour management programs.

Clark, in her early study of gender in primary schools *The Great Divide* (1989:12), notes that 'effort to change the stereotypical behaviour of children, particularly boys, is often seen by other members of staff as either an unnatural or impossible thing to do.'

However, this view of 'natural' difference is difficult to support when notions of appropriate gender behaviour are not static, but differ over time, between ethnic and cultural groups, and even between and within families.

### **Sex role socialization**

Sex role socialization asserts that gender behaviour is not innate, but socially conditioned - that boys and girls learn to be masculine and feminine through the different social expectations imposed on them by family, peers and society.

The theory of sex role socialization links with the theory of biological determinism because, by focusing on sex roles, it reinforces difference based on biology. Neither theory can provide an adequate explanation for the wide range of behaviours amongst women and amongst men and why these vary so markedly around the world.

## **The construction of gender**

This theory acknowledges that men and women are actively involved in constructing their own gendered identities.

... “we, as individuals and as groups, are not passively shaped by the larger societal forces such as schools or the media, but are active in selecting, adapting and rejecting the dimensions we choose to incorporate, or not, into our version of gender”<sup>15</sup>.

We adopt different masculinity and femininity practices depending on our situations and beliefs. Our understandings of gender are dynamic, changing over time with maturity, experience and reflection.

Thus we are active in constructing our own gender identities, but the options available to us are not unlimited. We are influenced by the collective practices of institutions such as school, church, media and family, which construct and reinforce particular forms of masculinity and femininity. These widely accepted, dominant notions of gender often construct masculinity and femininity as opposites, ignoring a vast array of shared human characteristics, and traditionally valuing masculinity as more powerful. Such ideas may be accepted, challenged, modified or rejected as individuals develop and shape their gender identities: In their lives in family and community, and before they come to school, children learn socially approved ways of interacting as female or male. As a consequence, many girls and boys develop narrow and limited concepts of masculinity and femininity - concepts which impoverish their existence. (National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-1997:7)

The construction of different ways of being feminine or masculine is a dynamic process in which we all play a part.

## **Gender and culture**

This paper will not do justice if it does not bring issues of culture into the fore. When we talk of gender roles, gender equality and the like, it is of paramount importance that we expand our

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<sup>15</sup> Allard, Cooper, Hildebrand, Wealands 1995:24

discussion and look at issues of culture. It is no doubt that some of the gender stereotypes and misconceptions are culturally perpetuated. At worst, some people use culture to justify gender inequality. The question is: what is culture? As the Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture, Ms NGW Botha puts it “culture is a way of life”. The point to note is that culture is not solely about symbols, signs, material things, traditional practices but also about gender relations, norms and values of a society. It is culture that informs the behavior of men, women, boys and girls in a society. Culture is a very adaptive phenomena, it is not static and changes over time. It should be placed on record that culture is susceptible to abuse most especially in rural areas, where people tend to use culture to suppress the voices and interest of women and girls. More often than not gender based violence and inequality is carried on under the cover of culture. In some communities, particularly in rural areas “women often experience their opinions being disregarded. They have no choice in decision that drastically influences their lives and they consequently excuse themselves from responsibility and from talking a stand”<sup>16</sup>. This happens primarily because women often find themselves reduced to child bearing and rearing. Their male counterparts often exclude them from decision making processes.

There are of course positive teachings of culture though, such as the values of Ubuntu and respect for others. The principles of Ubuntu, proclaims that a person is a person through other people. In view of this, it is imperative that we should utilize culture and the institutions of traditional leadership to promote gender equality and to erode whatever gender injustices that seems to prevail in our communities. It is critically important that men refrain from misusing culture to advance their myopic agenda at the disbursement of gender equality. In the same breath, it is crucial that women to refrain from being subservient and should take upon themselves the responsibility to proclaim their self liberation and empowerment. Moreover, women should adhere to the principles of supporting and empowering other women. The culture of silence and self pity is now over. Women should stand up and reclaim their position in the society.

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<sup>16</sup> Dr Marjorie Jobson, a Commissioner with the Commission on the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities at a Gender, Culture and Rights Workshop held in Boksburg From 1-3 February 2006

## **Conclusion**

The argument advanced in this essay is that, the usage of gender has been clouded with discrepancies which often lead to the misunderstanding and misconception of the term gender. The argument is that gender does not in any way advocate only the interest on women and hence gender is not a synonym for women. We thus need to demystify the misconceptions about gender in order to effectively work on issues pertaining to gender equality and empowerment.

The essay also highlighted the fact that gender equality denotes equal opportunities and treatment. It does not suggest that women and men will become the same but rather equal. The Constitution of South Africa is founded within the framework of gender equality. It is committed to create a society in which opportunities are not determined by sex. It is also determined to ensure that women are positioned into the mainstream of politics, economy and leadership. The essay also argued that communities, most especially rural communities have over the past decades, in not centuries abused culture to justify the ill treatment of women. Women have been subjected to all forms of inequality, injustice, discrimination and eventually rendered inferior to their male counterparts. We thus need to vigorously oppose gender inequality and utilize traditional leadership structures and culture to promote and achieve the objectives of gender equality.