

Gender Roles in America

Gender refers to the biological and sexual differences between men and women, which are mostly physiological and anatomical. There are two human genders in the world: the males and females. Gender role is a term that describes a set of social and behavioral norms or responsibilities considered to be appropriate for persons of a given gender. Gender roles differ widely. This arises because gender roles are constructed and nurtured culturally. This social-cultural construction of gender roles may reflect the natural aspiration of gender. Gender roles may also be manipulated, which in most cases leads to oppression of that gender.

The social structure of gender refers to different norms, beliefs and values created by the society that dictates the roles played and assigned to various gender groups. These values are promoted and strengthened by social institutions such as the media, school, and families among others. Such values and beliefs tend to determine the approach to upward mobility and shape the identity, character, and roles of gender of an individual. From an early age, children of both sexes under the influence of these factors (such as parental) learn and get conditioned to think, act, behave, and socialize in gender-specific roles. In a family, a newborn male will tend to learn and acquire characteristics similar to those of the father or elder siblings of the same gender, while a girl child also does the same, but now on the roles of her gender. At this level, children acquire traits that are gender determined and inclined. These gender traits are further cultivated and nurtured in areas of socialization such as schools and churches where much time is spent at an early age. Interactions between students, teachers, and other staff may be directed by gender. Teachers and the other staff members play influential model roles to the students, and their role is exceptionally valuable. Teachers may communicate gender-centered messages to the students during lessons by expressing the way they value girls and boys work (Headlam). Some teachers

may express differential attitudes and expectations towards their students. For example, a female class teacher may expect her female students to lead the boys in class performance, and this can prompt her to encourage her students using personal examples.

Recently, teachers have avoided the universal use of masculine language to refer to both genders in classrooms, and in several occasions, instructors are trying to create a non-sexist social environment. In some countries, sexist linguistic teacher practices are still common (Blumberg, 7). A common and famous finding is that boys are comfortable with more challenging interaction with their teachers, like to dominate classroom activities, and get more noticed than their counterparts. "In the United States context, such favoritism was common in the 1980s and 1990s, and continues to be observed" (Deustch 108).

There are several examples of attributes and traits that the two genders learn to accept in a given society. For instance, young females learn to be caring, compassionate, nurturing, and co-operative in preparation to their roles as mothers and wives. On the contrary, male children will socialize to be independent, confident, competitors, and achievers. They also learn to control their feelings and emotions especially those of tenderness. These attributes are acquired in schools, homes, churches, and through the media.

The media, which is universally accessible today, has contributed significantly in the development of gender roles in social context. Most commercial advertisements are gender biased; this influences the development and nurturing of similar attributes and traits by both genders. A telling example is that of Mr. Clean and Windex commercials, which shows women cleaning bathrooms and washing the windows instead of men. Similarly, the Budweiser beer commercial shows some men sitting together watching sports while having a sip of their drink. These two advertisements send home a gender message that women are homemakers, therefore,

expected to maintain and take care of the house while men are free to interact with their friends and have fun. Other media materials such as movies and music also communicate in a similar tone. It is not clear whether the blame lies on the media for bringing these commercials that create social standards or the social standards for creating these commercials. Media in most cases comes as a mirror of what is actually happening in society.

Church has always been painted as a neutral and impartial institution governed by accepted morals. However, as far as gender construction is concerned the church has taken a leading role in the shaping and development of these roles. According to its social teachings, the church supports gender differentiated roles and duties. If we take an example of the Genesis creation story as it is told in the Bible, a woman was created from a man's body. This gives a man a senior or superior look when compared to a woman. Several other Bible stories tell about women taking the roles that are considered feminine today such as cooking a meal. In that context, Abraham's wife prepared a meal for their strange visitors who were later recognized to be angels. In the Catholic Church, priesthood is a role assigned solely to men; no woman can be allowed to be a priest. The backing for this rule is in the Bible story when Jesus appointed his twelve disciples.

The overall influences may be both positive and negative, depending on the nature and environment involved. Influences from the church have been received wholly and more trusted than other factors. The reason is attributed to trust the congregation has towards its spiritual mentors and the Bible. Students at school may be influenced negatively by either teachers or peers. Media materials such as music and video may also bring negative influence on gender roles. For example, a movie may depict a woman president character, as a failure compared to a male counterpart.

America today has the largest number of divorcees in the world. Analyses done on the driving force for these divorces revealed that about 60 percent of the cases were attributed to gender roles as the main reason. Most of the women of the affected families argue that they wanted equality and recognition from their male partners who held a contrary belief. This is a negative influence on the gender roles. Increased access to education for the female gender and the development of career life show an example of how these factors have bared tangible fruits. There has been launched a media campaign to support equal and equitable education for both genders and to prove that everybody is equal.

Suicide attempts and reported cases are results of negative social influences in gender role construction. Most of these suicidal attempts and cases result from perceptions of low self-esteem and inferiority complex (in the female gender) seen in some media material such as movies and videos.

During the last five decades a radical drift in perception of gender characteristics and gender based roles has been observed in the world at large. However, this evolutionary change has brought confusion in the understanding of gender roles; different schools of thoughts have suggested unique and possible theories. For instance, some think that gender roles are nurtured, in which case, it refers to the social contraction of these roles. On the other hand, the other theory considers these roles as being natural and inborn. Several developments, generally considered favorable, have been recorded with this change. Fifty years down the line gender roles confined and oppressed some of the genders. Women were considered incapable of leadership roles, and, therefore, denied the opportunity of serving in that capacity. Gender differences saw discrimination in the provision of social services based on gender. Today laws and declarations, focused on eliminating of counterpoised discrimination especially on gender roles have been

enacted. It is quite common today in America to see a man preparing a meal for the house unlike in the past (Hawke 70). History has proven to us that gender roles based discrimination has no basis and is misplaced in the society. This is the reason why the society is believed to be inappropriate, for a certain gender has had no consequences being violated in the modern society.

In conclusion, gender role is here to stay and will continue to exist in years to come. However, gender specific roles are on a rampant change and they are highly mutational. Several factors contribute to the social creation of gender roles. It is not clear which are the real or actual influential inputs; the same social institutions, the institutions they affect create these factors. This can be considered as a cycle of inputs and outputs. Gender differences have had both positive and negative influences on the society. Positive influences have been seen where the influences of gender roles have brought, developed, and improved rather than on the contrary. The general gender development and change observed in America for the last five decades has been beneficial and favorable.