

## **GENDER ROLES**

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### **GENDER ROLE**

The term “gender roles” refers to the socially and culturally defined expectations for behaviour, attitudes and responsibilities that a given society assigns to individuals based on their perceived gender.

According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA), gender roles are “learned behaviours in a given society/community that condition which activities, tasks and responsibilities are perceived as male and female.”

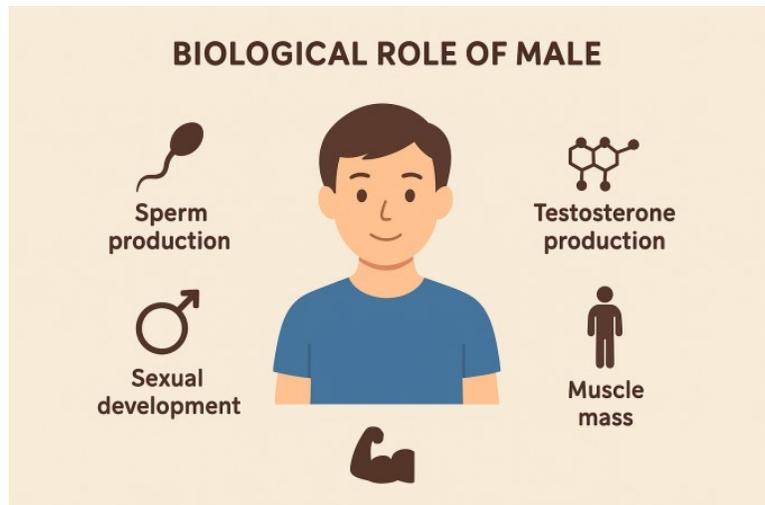
The term Gender Role was first coined by John Money in 1955 during the course of his study of intersex individuals. Money used the term to denote the manners in which these individuals expressed their status as a male or female in a situation where no clear biological assignment existed. At present the term is used to refer to the society’s concept of how men and women are expected to act and how they should behave. These roles are based on norms or standards created by society.

### **BIOLOGICAL ROLE MALE-FEMALE**

The classification of organisms into male and female has long been foundational in biology, based on the production of gametes (sperm vs ova). In humans and many other species, this binary categorisation is accompanied by anatomical, physiological, hormonal and chromosomal differences (e.g., XY vs XX) (Ritz & Greaves, 2022). These biological distinctions have been used as the basis for understanding different “roles” of males and females—such as reproductive roles, parental investment, strength/performance differences and disease susceptibility. Nevertheless, such framing requires nuance, as biological factors are intertwined with social, cultural and individual variation, and are not deterministic in isolating gendered behaviour.

#### **Biological Roles of Male**

- a) Males produce sperm (male gametes) in the testes—seminiferous tubules produce spermatogonia, which mature into spermatozoa.
- b) The male gonads (testes) produce testosterone and other

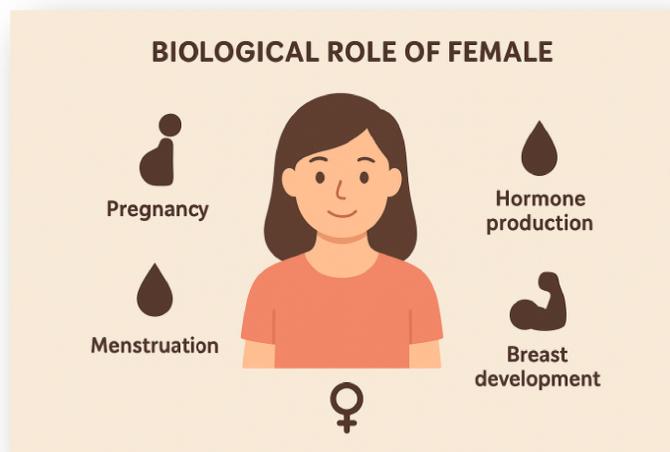


androgens, which regulate many male-typical biological functions, including libido, muscle mass, bone density, and secondary sexual characteristics.

- c) Early during embryonic/fetal development, male-specific structures (e.g., testes, penis, vas deferens) are formed under the influence of the Y chromosome/ SRY gene and hormones like anti-Müllerian hormone (AMH) and testosterone.
- d) At puberty, increased androgen levels in males trigger the development of features such as facial and body hair, deeper voice, increased muscle mass, broader shoulders, and other traits associated with being male.
- e) The male reproductive system comprises accessory glands (seminal vesicles, prostate, bulbourethral glands) and ducts for the maturation, storage, transport and delivery of sperm.
- f) Males contribute sperm which fuses with a female ovum, initiating zygote formation and thus continuation of the species.

### Biological Roles of Female

- a) Production of ova (female gametes) is the chief biological role of female. The ovaries store and release egg cells (ova) which, when fertilised by a sperm, can lead to a zygote.
- b) The ovaries (and later the placenta during pregnancy) release hormones such as oestrogen and progesterone, which regulate the menstrual cycle, secondary sexual characteristics, and support pregnancy.
- c) The female reproductive tract (fallopian tubes, uterus) provides the environment for an egg to be fertilised and for the embryo to implant in the uterine lining.
- d) Once fertilisation occurs and implantation takes place, the female reproductive system supports the growth, nourishment, and protection of the developing fetus until birth.
- e) The female body is biologically equipped to deliver the baby, including uterine contractions, cervix dilation, and the birth canal (vagina).
- f) Following birth, breast tissue in females produces milk to nourish the infant. This involves hormonal regulation (e.g., prolactin, oxytocin) and structure of mammary glands.



### CULTURAL ROLE - MASCULINE AND FEMININE.

Gender roles are culturally defined behaviours, expectations and norms associated with men and women (or other genders) in particular societies. The various expectations that people,

#### Cultural Role: Masculinity

Masculinity is understood as the set of attributes, behaviours and roles culturally associated with men. It is not simply a biological given but a socially constructed identity shaped by cultural, historical and institutional forces (Butler, 1990).

Cultural institutions such as family, religion, media and popular culture play a central role in transmitting masculine norms. Socialisation processes in the patriarchal societies encourage boys to internalise masculine

scripts (provider, protector, emotionally invulnerable) early on; failing to fulfil these can result in status loss or stigma. Popular media also reinforces these norms. The study "Redefining Masculinity: A Critical Analysis of Pankaj Tripathi's Cinematic Representations" shows how contemporary Hindi cinema is beginning to challenge the emotional suppression norm by portraying men who are empathetic and expressive,

though such portrayals remain the minority. These emergent narratives suggest cultural transformation but also highlight how entrenched masculine norms remain..



### Cultural Role: Feminine

"Femininity" is understood as the set of socially, culturally and historically constructed traits, behaviours and roles associated with being female (or playing the feminine role) in a given society. From an Indian cultural perspective, femininity is deeply embedded in religious, mythological, kinship and social norms. Allender notes, the colonial era in India framed femininity through the lens of "learning femininity" in relation to race, class and colonial modernity. The social constructionist theory emphasises that gender identities including femininity are constructed through social processes, cultural narratives and institutional practices rather than simply derived from biology.

Feminist theory highlights how femininity is usually coded in relation to patriarchy and power: for example, ideologies of "ideal womanhood" serve to reproduce gendered hierarchies. Many traditions view the 'essences' of



manhood and womanhood as sharply contrasting and allot entirely different roles to men and women, generally placing woman in powerless and inferior rank in Indian cultural streams. The lens of intersectionality reminds us that femininity intersects with caste, class, religion, region and colonial legacies.

The depiction of women in popular culture (e.g., Bollywood films) typically reflects and reproduces traditional femininity: domestic roles, sacrifice, emotional support. The cultural role of femininity in Indian societies is multifaceted. It draws on religious and mythological traditions, kinship and family structures, and modern economic and media forces. Theoretically, femininity is a socially constructed role shaped by culture and power, not a fixed biological destiny. In India, femininity interacts with caste, class, religion and region, producing multiple feminine identities. While femininity has served to reproduce gendered inequality, it also offers space for negotiation, transformation and resistance.

## **PRODUCTIVE ROLE**

In gender studies literature, the “productive role” refers to activities undertaken by individuals (men or women) to produce goods and services either for exchange, sale or subsistence. Productive role can be defined as income-generating work undertaken by either men or women ... to produce goods and services, as well as the processing of primary products that generates an income.” Traditionally, economic discourse privileges visible, monetised, paid work; however, gender-sensitive analysis reveals that much of women’s productive work is undervalued or unrecognised. In Indian societies, the cultural role of gender in productive work is mediated by social norms (about what is “appropriate” for men or women), by institutional constraints (land rights, labour market access) and by sectoral gender segregation (agriculture, informal economy).

In India, gendered productive roles cannot be studied solely through gender; they intersect with caste, class, region. For example, women in marginalised caste groups may engage in agricultural labour or wage work, yet lack institutional support, leading to lower productivity, pay and status. Studies of rural wages in India show persistent gender wage gaps and that mechanisation has sometimes worsened gendered disparities.

- a) The “productive role” ascertains the activities by men and women that produce goods and services for sale, exchange or subsistence. These are the activities carried out by men and women in order to produce goods and services either for sale, exchange, or to meet the subsistence needs of the family.
- b) Gender shapes who does what in productive roles. Men are more likely to be recognized as the primary “breadwinners”, while women’s productive contributions often remain unrecognized or undervalued.
- c) The division of labour framework shows that productive roles are gendered. Tasks, sectors and remuneration differ by gender due to social norms, access to resources, time-use constraints, and cultural expectations.
- d) Even when women engage in productive work, they often hold lower-paid, informal, part-time or seasonal jobs compared to men, because of gendered constraints (e.g., fewer skills/training, time burden from care work, social restrictions).
- e) The cultural expectations of gender roles mean that productive work for women may overlap with reproductive (care) and community work, leading to a “triple role” burden - reproduction + production + community management.

## **REPRODUCTIVE ROLE**

The question of reproductive roles who bears children, who rears them, and how society assigns and values that responsibility lies at the heart of gender-studies, sociology of the family, demography and feminist theory. The reproductive role is more than biological childbearing; it also includes the social reproduction of labour (raising children, caring for adults) and domestic tasks. The classic sociological view holds that gender roles involve a division of labour. Men tend toward productive work (paid labour, public sphere) while women are assigned reproductive and domestic tasks (childbearing, child-rearing, home maintenance). For example, policy documents define the reproductive role as including “child-bearing/rearing responsibilities and domestic tasks” done primarily by women. Caroline Moser’s “triple role” framework identifies women’s roles as: reproductive (home, family), productive (income), and community-management (voluntary / informal community tasks).

Feminist theory argues that reproductive roles are socially constructed and often undervalued, reinforcing gender inequality. Nancy Chodorow argued that the “mothering” role is socially reproduced through childhood and kinship structures. Women become primary caregivers, thus perpetuating gendered personality and social roles. In demography, scholars like Karen Oppenheim Mason link fertility transitions to changing gender roles and family systems.

Another concept, *stratified reproduction*, speaks to how reproduction is socially stratified: some groups are privileged in their reproductive choices and child-rearing capacities, while others are constrained. These frameworks show that reproductive roles are not just natural or biological but interwoven with social, economic and gender power dynamics.

From a structuralist perspective, as societies modernize, there is a tension. Women’s roles in the productive sphere increase, yet the reproductive/domestic tasks often remain or even intensify (the “second shift”). In many Western societies the “separate spheres” model (men in public, women in private) emerged during industrialization and became normative, reinforcing reproductive roles tied to women. In patriarchal systems, reproductive roles are tied to perpetuation of male lineage, inheritance and family power structures; hence controlling women’s fertility and reproduction becomes a means of maintaining gendered power. It is vital to note that reproductive roles vary by class, caste/ethnicity, region, and socio-economic status. In India the intersection of caste and early childbearing shows how reproductive timing is influenced by social stratification. Thus, reproductive roles cannot be understood purely in gender terms—they are bound up with other axes of inequality. In many Western societies (e.g., UK, US, Western Europe) the normative model historically was woman = home, motherhood, domestic labour; man = breadwinner, external labour. For example, in a typical mid-20th century Western household, the wife would stay at home, bear children, raise them, manage household tasks; the husband would earn the income and make major decisions. These reproductive roles helped maintain social order (from a functionalist lens). But feminist critique shows how this restricted women’s autonomy and labour recognition. More recently, Western societies are shifting with increasing female labour participation, dual-earning households, father involvement in child-rearing, but reproductive roles still often fall unequally on women (e.g., motherhood penalty, unequal domestic labour). The structural study in Spain found that younger women with higher education are more likely to prefer hybrid work–family models rather than full traditional or full egalitarian models. Thus, in the Western context reproductive roles have evolved, but they continue to carry gendered expectations and inequalities.

## **COMMUNITY ROLE**

Community roles refer to the activities, responsibilities and positions that individuals play within their wider neighbourhoods, social networks, voluntary associations, civic groups and informal

collective life. These roles are shaped by social structures, cultural norms and power relations; hence gender becomes a central dimension in who takes on which community roles, how such roles are valued, and how they intersect with family, work and public life.

Alice Eagly's social role theory holds that much of the difference in men's and women's behaviour arises from the different social roles they occupy, rather than innate biological differences. In the context of community roles, this theory suggests that women are more likely to be assigned or assume roles tied to "communal" traits (nurturing, caring, social cohesion) while men are more likely to take on "agentic" roles (leadership, organising, public sphere) due to social expectations embedded in gendered divisions of labour. From a structural-functional perspective, gendered roles (including in community life) are seen as contributing to social stability. For example, men's and women's differentiated roles maintain the smooth functioning of families and communities. While this offers a historical lens, critics argue it underestimates power, conflict and change in gender relations. The theory of the social construction of gender posits that gender roles, including community roles, arise out of socialisation, culture and institutional structures so what counts as a "male" or "female" community role is not fixed but contingent on time, place and the broader gender order. In particular, the concept of *community managing roles* and *community politics roles* (Caroline Moser) is significant. Moser argues that women often take on unpaid community-managing roles (for example organising local groups, care networks) whereas men typically dominate formal community politics.

## **RELIGION AND ITS ROLE IN CREATION AND PRESERVATION OF GENDER INEQUALITY**

Religion has long been a central institution in human societies, shaping moral codes, social order, identities, and everyday practices. At the same time, religion has played a significant role in structuring gender relations: who does what, who has power, who is relegated to subordinate roles. The question thus arises: How does religion contribute to the creation and preservation of gender inequality?

From a sociological perspective, religion often reflects and reinforces patriarchal social structures. Walby (1990) viewed that the Patriarchy theory posits that male dominance and female subordination are rooted in social, economic, and ideological systems. Religious institutions historically have been male-dominated with men occupying clerical authority, interpreting sacred texts, and setting norms of gender behaviour. This structural dominance provides a foundation upon which gender inequalities are created and sustained. The Social Role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) suggests that gender differences stem from different social roles men and women occupy. In religious contexts, gender roles are sanctioned and reinforced as part of the moral-order where women are assigned communal, caring, domestic roles while men are designated with public and decision-making roles. Religious narratives and rituals legitimize these roles, embedding them in everyday life.

Religion functions as an ideological system. It provides symbols, narratives, and belief-systems that give meaning to social relations, including gender relations. Such ideologies can naturalize gender inequality portraying men's dominance as divinely ordained or women's role as inherently supportive rather than leading. Sacred texts, ritual practices, and religious-legal norms often encode hierarchical gender relations.

An intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991) recognises that gender is not the only category at play; religion intersects with class, caste/ethnicity, region and socioeconomic status. In many contexts, women's subordinate position within a religion is compounded by other axes of disadvantage. For example, in some Hindu or Muslim contexts, gender inequality in family law or inheritance

is mediated by religion plus caste or class (Chakraborty, 2024). Research by Seguino (2011) found that higher levels of religiosity are strongly correlated with more gender-inequitable attitudes and worse gender outcomes (e.g., labour market, household, political participation) across countries. Similarly, Klingorová and Havlíček (2015) analysed world-religion affiliation and found that societies with no religious affiliation had the lowest levels of gender inequality, whereas societies dominated by Islam or Hinduism exhibited the highest levels of gender inequality. The study “The Role of Religion in Gender Inequality in Ghana: The Christian Perspective” (Frimpong, 2022) found that Christian teachings and institutional practices contributed to women’s subordination including limiting leadership roles for women in the church and reinforcing patriarchal gender norms in families and society.