

"As we have accumulated more and more evidence from more and more societies, we have become increasingly confident in this assertion that to omit gender from any explanation how militarisation occurs, is not only to risk a flawed political analysis; it is to risk, too, a perpetually unsuccessful campaign to roll back that militarisation."

Cynthia Enloe

Nonviolence is about putting an end to violence, no matter if this violence is committed on a large or small scale, on an intimate or a structural level. Nonviolence is about challenging hierarchical structures based on values of domination and control, and about confronting both injustice and the oppressive structures, institutions and authorities that uphold them.

For movements working for peace and justice, confronting oppression and injustice in society, it is very important to question and confront the power structures perpetuating the same injustices within our own movements. Groups where women, queer and/or trans* people - or anyone else - feel excluded, not listened to and not taken seriously, will drastically fail in accountability. Actively working to make our movements inclusive, broad and diverse does not just make for larger movements; it makes room for more perspectives and experiences, and also makes us more creative and effective in our work against injustice. In order to create safe and sustainable communities, and cultures that promote peace and justice, we must address all issues of structural, cultural and direct violence wherever they exist, and in whatever form they take. Gender awareness helps us to make sure that we don't perpetuate the same injustices in our nonviolent actions and campaigns that we are trying to stop.

In this section, we include concepts to help you incorporate gender awareness in your trainings, actions and campaigns.

What is gender and how does it affect us?

Gender is a social construction of ideas that assign certain roles, attitudes, images and behaviour to us depending on the sex we were assigned to at birth and the gender identity that we and society identify us with.

'Male' and 'female' are constructed as - and assumed to be - binary positions, which means opposites that are mutually interdependent and attracted to each other. Ideas about male and female behaviour, of masculinities and femininities, interact with and change depending on other social categories such as race, age, ability, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity and religious beliefs, and also vary over space and time, but affect and influence all of us our whole lives. The world around us expects us, and teaches us, to be either boys/men or girls/women, with different standards of behaviour for these two categories. Out of these expectations we learn how to act, feel and think in order to pass as either male or female.

Gender is not something we are, it is something we do. We are permanently (re)constructing gender, our own as well as others. Thus, rather than fixed and opposite positions, we should understand gender as something that exists within a constellation, as identities and expressions existing by themselves and in clusters, being constantly reformed and regrouped by us and the societies we live in. This means that there are many possibilities to change how we understand gender, and to open up space for all the varieties of gender that exist, space that is needed in a just and peaceful society.

The assumptions about us and expectations on us because of our (perceived) gender identity condition our choices and possibilities in all kinds of ways. The social constructions about gender contribute heavily to power relations between individuals, as well as between groups of people.

How is gender related to power and justice?

The social construction of gender teaches us to view the world and think in dichotomies, and to associate these with either masculinity or femininity; activity versus passivity, rationality versus emotion, strength versus weakness, control versus disorganisation. Patriarchy teaches us to value the categories associated with masculinity higher than those associated with femininity, and – using the same logic - the lives of those assigned the male gender higher than those assigned the female gender. Power and resources are also unequally distributed according to this logic. For example, this can be seen in how different kinds of work are valued and who is expected to do it, whose experiences and stories are listened to and believed, and who is given roles as leaders of family, community and society.

Consequently, the gender identity we are assigned to and that we ourselves and society form us into, gives us very different amount of power over our lives and decisions that affect them. Our access to power and privileges also relies heavily on other social categories (such as race, class and age, among others), which means people get advantages or disadvantages from gender privilege in very different ways.

Adding to this, people who don't comply with the expectations of their assigned gender are punished - privately, publicly, or both. People that behave in a different way than is expected of their assumed gender identity, as well as people who don't agree with the gender identity that the state has assigned them to, are confronted with a whole range of direct, structural and cultural violence.

Why is a gender perspective important to our work?

Violence takes many and various forms; it can manifest as physical harm between one person and another, as psychological control by a partner over many years, as occupational injuries because of monotonous, wearing work, as chronic illnesses and shorter life expectancy because of housing in polluted areas, or as large scale violence against whole populations in times of war. In all cases, violence is made possible by the existence of unequal power relations (out of which gender is one). Power relations rely on violence, among other sanctions, for their reproduction. With a gender lens, we can understand how violence and (gender) power relations are mutually constituted in all spheres of social life, and how the different forms of violence are gendered. This gives us an important insight into our work for peace and justice.

One example of this is the way we use technology. The idea of “being in control” (of one's life, of the world) is closely related to certain masculinities, and contributes to the belief not only that technology can be controlled (such as nuclear power, or genetically modified organisms), but also that technology can solve almost all problems. At the same time, technology itself and the consequences of the use of technology have a very different impact on our lives, depending on our gender.

Creating peace is about building a society where all of us can feel safe and a sense of affinity, and so peace is intimately connected with struggling against power structures and norms that limit, marginalise and oppress us. Although patriarchy and other power structures set limits for all of us, it is important to recognise how these structures values some lives and bodies more than other and oppress us in different ways.

For movements working to end violence it is crucial to understand the full spectrum of violence in our societies; the different forms it takes and how it targets and affects us in different ways depending on our positions. Working with gender awareness to change both ourselves, and the (power) dynamics within our organisations is an important personal and organisational transformation that in itself acts to diminish structural violence in our societies.

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