

Gender is a social construction of ideas that defines the roles, belief systems and attitudes, images, values, and expectations of men and women. It contributes heavily to power relationships, not only between men and women, but also within each group; this results in many social problems. Different cultures have different ideas about gender, about what is suitable for men and women to do and to be. Gender not only changes from culture to culture, it also may change over time, or it may change within a culture during a crisis situation.

What is the Difference Between Gender and Sex?

Sex refers to natural biological differences between men and women. While many of these differences are clear and fixed, even some biological differences exist across a spectrum. Gender, however, is very much constructed by the cultural ideals, belief systems, images, and expectations about masculinity and femininity in a given society.

How is Gender Related to Power and Justice?

In many cultures, men's experiences and perspectives are seen as the norm. Heterosexual masculine behaviour, however that may be defined, is taken as the standard. The exercise of power, especially in public, is seen as masculine. In most cultures, men are assumed to be the leaders of family, community, and society while women are assumed to be followers and supporters. Such assumptions can mean that women and girls have little say in decisions that affect their lives. It can also mean that men who do not follow traditional roles face public criticism. However, because gender is a socially constructed idea, it is possible to challenge and change oppressive notions about male and female roles. This is what we call gender justice.

How Does Gender Affect Each of Us?

We are affected by social constructs about gender from the moment we are born. Masculinity is injected into boys' mentality in many ways. There are social pressures on them to deny their feelings, to act strong physically, and to prove their worth by dominating or competing with others. Control or power over others and violence may be seen as signs of masculinity. Such socialisation undermines the human dignity of everyone. Men and boys are often brutalised to prepare them for military service. War itself is gender violence against men, as men and boys are forced to kill.

Girls are often socialised to deny their intellects, to be good listeners, to be proper and obedient, and to prove their worth by placing the needs of others first. Passivity and silently accepting injustice may be seen as signs of femininity. Such socialisation undermines human dignity and fosters victimisation. Protection of women and girls is used in propaganda to incite or justify war. War itself is gender violence against women, as sexual violence is used as a weapon of war.

Why Should Peace Movements Deal with the Issue of Gender Violence?

A gender perspective gives important insights into the work for peace and justice. Ideas about masculinity and femininity lie at the roots of violence and are used to support armed conflicts. The level of violence against women and girls in peacetime is an important indicator about how just and peaceful a society really is. Peace and justice organisations that want to end the violence of war will be more effective if they

understand the full spectrum of violence in their society and challenge it.

Survivors of gender violence during war know that reconciliation is impossible without gender justice. The silence around sexual violence against men and boys during war must also be broken. Peace movements cannot ignore issues related to gender and war, such as the increased militarisation of women, the skills and leadership that women and girls could bring to peace-building, and how gender expectations encourage men to fight.

Why is a Gender Perspective Important in Our Work?

People who work for social change often assume that we are free from internalised assumptions about gender and thus do not need to learn and change ourselves. Creating awareness and changing ourselves and the dynamics within our organisations on gender issues is an important personal and organisational transformation that in itself acts to dismantle structural violence in the society.

It is difficult to work on gender issues because it is about everyone of us, and we cannot avoid it. Because we are directly affected, we often face fear when the issue is raised. We don't know how to deal with it or don't want to, and we are afraid of more conflict and division. Often it is easier to say that this is not our priority. To encourage ourselves, we can look for examples where other groups and movements have begun to raise these questions.

This document was adapted from materials created by the International Fellowship of Reconciliation Women Peacemakers Program (<http://www.ifor.org/WPP/index.html>) and expanded in the training manual of the International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (<http://www.womenforpeaceandjustice.org/>)

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