



What is «gender»?

Gender is a socially constructed definition of women and men. It is not the same as sex (biological characteristics of women and men) and it is not the same as women. Gender is determined by the conception of tasks, functions and roles attributed to women and men in society and in public and private life.

Women as well as men shape gender roles and norms through their activities and reproduce them by conforming to expectations. Men as well as women can promote changes in gender relations. Gender relations are reproduced not only between but also amongst women and men (e.g. mother/daughter, father/son).



What are «gender relations»?

In most contexts, women and men (girls and boys) play different roles at a household, community and societal level. To perform their roles, they need different resources (natural, economic, political, social). Often however, women or men cannot play the roles they want and/or access the resources they need because of their gender. Women in particular face difficulties accessing and controlling resources and their social and economic contributions are often undervalued.

To «identify gender relations» is to look at the attribution and organisation of roles, responsibilities, resources and values attached to women and men in order to assess the differences and inequalities between them and to map out their specific interests, opportunities, constraints and needs in development.

What are key characteristics of «gender relations»?

Unlike biological characteristics of women and men, **gender relations are context-specific**. They vary between and within countries (e.g. rural/urban regions), but also between households. Often, households present different patterns of male-female relations depending on their structure e.g. if they are women-headed, nuclear or extended. Because women and men interact in all aspects of life, gender relations are omnipresent in the private sphere (i.e. household level) as well as the public sphere where women and men interact as community members or colleagues.

Gender relations are not static. Even in traditional cultures, gender relations change as a result of economic, legal, political or environmental conditions. Some changes are intentional and positive in terms of gender equality – for instance, many countries have taken steps in laws to eradicate gender discrimination. Deliberate steps can also be taken to maintain/increase gender inequality (e.g. in Saudi Arabia, women are not allowed to drive). Changes can be negative for equality as in some countries of the ex-USSR where unemployment amongst men is high as a result of market liberalisation policies. Without their traditional role and status as household heads and breadwinners, an increasing number of men resort to domestic violence to express their malaise and reclaim their masculinity. But changes can also be positive. There are many women working in export processing zones, including traditional cultures such as Bangladesh. Their recruitment has nothing to do with women's empowerment as all to do with economic viability. However, whilst working conditions in these factories is questionable, there is growing evidence that women can improve their status in the household as a result of the financial contribution. Changes in gender relations can be slow or sudden. For in Rwanda, women acquired new roles and responsibilities «overnight» after many men were killed in the 1994 genocide.

Gender relations interact with other social relations.

Not all women and all men are the same: Age, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and ability (physical and mental) influence women's and men's activities and responsibilities, as well as their status, opportunities and constraints in life. Individuals carry multiple identities. In different circumstances, one identity may prevail over others. In India, a high caste woman may have more power than a low-caste man, but she may still be subordinated to men in her own caste. However, rich or poor, young or old, muslim or catholic, «people» are always women or men, meaning that gender is an unavoidable relation. For instance, many conflicts are currently fought on ethnic or religious grounds, but women and men are undeniably affected and involved in these conflicts in different ways.

Gender relations are power relations.

Institutions in private (e.g. the family, marriage) and public spheres (e.g. religion, school, labour market) reflect and maintain gender relations. Therefore, attempts to change them to improve gender equality are often perceived as threats to «traditions» and culture. Gains towards gender equality may be difficult to achieve, but they can easily be lost. There are many examples of societies calling for a return to traditional values, including the subordination of women, when they feel «threatened» by external forces or ideas. Traditional gender relations, where women's status is inferior to men's, are often flagged up as a symbol of cultural identity.





What does «gender equality» mean?

Gender equality is the aim of Gender and Development. It does not simply or necessarily mean equal numbers of women and men (girls and boys) in development activities, nor does it necessarily mean treating women and men (girls and boys) exactly the same. The aim is not that women and men become the same, but that their opportunities and life chances become and remain equal. Gender equality includes the right for women and men to be different. It signifies an aspiration to work towards a society in which women and men (girls and boys) are able to live equally fulfilling lives and to equally contribute to designing the society they want.

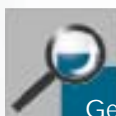
What does «mainstreaming gender» mean?

Mainstreaming gender is a strategy to achieve gender equality. It means recognising that women and men often have different needs and priorities, face different constraints, have different aspirations and contribute to development in different ways. A key hypothesis is that organisations and societies must be transformed to accommodate women's and men's needs and treat them as equals. For instance, in 1997, with the victory of the Labour Government, the number of women parliamentarians in the UK increased significantly. Soon after they were elected, a group of women MPs lobbied to change the working habits of the Parliament (e.g. all night sessions) to be able to reconcile their professional and family life.

Mainstreaming implies that actors and institutions normally involved in development are able to incorporate a gender equality perspective in the way they work (their institutional culture, competence etc.), as well as in all their policies and programmes, at all levels and at all stages of their planning cycle.

What does «integrating gender as a transversal theme» mean?

Working with gender as a transversal theme is one of the strategies for mainstreaming gender. It is a planning methodology. At a programme/project and sector level, it implies that before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men respectively. It requires the participation of women as well as men throughout the planning cycle and the systematic integration of their respective priorities and needs.



Gender relations are intrinsic to all aspects of life. Whatever our age, religion, ethnicity, class etc. we are always either a woman or a man, with the limitations and opportunities that are associated with it in a particular context.