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**18/SMS09/095**

**IRD 318**

**IS GENDER RELATIONS CHANGING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY? WHAT ARE THE AREAS OF CHANGE AND THE FACTORS DRIVING THE CHANGE?**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) “*Gender*” refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men which include norms, roles and relationships of groups of men and women, and the roles and relationships between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed, however, gender roles in some societies are more rigid than those in others and may not be easily changed. Furthermore, according to the Collins English Dictionary, *Gender* is the state of being male or female in relation to the social and cultural roles that are considered appropriate for men and women. In addition, “*Gender in Practice; Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation*” have defined Gender as a socially constructed definition of women and men. It is not the same as sex (i.e. the 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 and when individuals or groups do not “*fit*” established gender norms or roles, they often face stigma, discriminatory practices or social exclusion – all of which adversely affect health. This is because Gender norms, roles and relations influence people’s susceptibility to different health conditions and diseases and affect their enjoyment of good mental, physical health and wellbeing. In other words, Gender can be defined as a set of socially constructed characteristics describing what men and women ought to be. It is culturally shaped depending on the place (community) and/or time. In gender studies, the term “*gender*” should be used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities and not just to the state of being male or female in its entirety.

**Gender relations** are the ways in which a culture or society defines rights, responsibilities, and the identities of men and women in relation to one another (Bravo-Baumann, 2000). Gender relations intersect with all other influences on social relations such as: age, ethnicity, race, religion,

and so on to determine the position and identity of people in a social group. Since gender relations are a social construct, they can be transformed over time to become more equitable. Gender relations refer to relations between men and women that are socially determined by culture, religion, or socially acceptable ways of thinking or being. These relationships between men and women, as they exist in most societies, are characterized by the marginalization of women in decision making and other forms of power sharing in the home and places of authority. The economic exploitation of women and extensive violence to the person and psyche of women is the problem of unequal gender relations which is both personal and systemic. This is giving rise to gender-based violence, death, poverty of families, neglect of children and a variety of societal dysfunctions in the interest of justice, empowerment and the development of families and communities, these relations need to be analyzed and new solutions found for their transformation.

There are various areas of change in gender relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Firstly, economic change, the impact of structural economic change, and in particular the entry of the large number of women into the labor market is one of change of gender relations as it has received the most academic attention. Secondly, we have political participation, in which women were excluded from being elected or participating in politics. They were also prevented from accessing higher education until 1878. They could not vote in national elections, denied access to political seats, had no access to higher education, were subject to state endorsed violence from their husbands and were the property of men, usually their fathers or husbands and they could not be seen or heard as it was believed that they belonged to the kitchen; 150 years later we have seen our society transformed, and women can now vote and participate in the politics of their country. The rise of feminism has helped so much in the fight for equality. The feminist movement also inspired the development of women studies in schools and the importance of gender studies has been globally recognized. Worldwide women's movements seem to concern themselves with the same themes such as women's legal and political rights; violence, education, employment and discrimination, political participation among others.

Thirdly, access to communications; the increased access to communications has led to changes in gender relations. The ICT and media has helped in informing the less informed about the importance of their fundamental human rights. Also, programs that provide opportunities for dialogue and reflection can play an important role in shifting gender relations. ICT skills were

often seen as less necessary for girls, but today both male and female have access to the use of mobile phones, laptops and so on. Another area of change is marriage proposal, whereby women can now propose for marriage and give men engagement rings.

Lastly, the issue of dress code in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, trousers are worn by both genders which was not rampant in the early centuries. The dress code is changing as new cultural influences meet technological innovations.

Also, the most significant drivers of change vary considerably between contexts and over time, but economic change, education and exposure to new ideas via the media and other communication processes are particularly common. Greene et al. (2011) considers drivers of change with respect to masculinity, and find similar forces have driven changes in expectations of men's and boys' roles and behavior as have driven changes in the expectations of women and girls. They highlight the ways norms of male behavior are strongly shaped by the expectation of differently positioned female actors. Gender relations in some societies changed lately whereby women now play equal roles as men in owning lead large companies, own personal businesses, manage big organizations, earn higher academic degrees from all sectors equal to men, as compared to early centuries. The both genders actively attend sporting events; go to bars and all other and outdoor activities that were dominated by men alone. The 21<sup>st</sup> century demonstrates equal participation of both genders in different activities as compared to early centuries that kept women behind by being responsible for domestic chores. Although we can see the visible areas of change, religions across all denominations still hold believe of man being a superior being from woman gender. This naturally has left a gap between the two genders whereby man still carries weight of being the head of the household though women headed families also perform equal roles but the family still remains incomplete without a man due to title, security, and other duties that women cannot perform.

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