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**IS GENDER RELATIONS CHANGING IN THE 21ST CENTURY? WHAT ARE THE AREAS OF CHANGE AND THE FACTORS DRIVING IT?**

1. **What is Gender and Gender Relations?**

**Gender**is a state of being a male or female. In most cases, it’s typically defined with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological differences. Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) defines it as ‘relations between men and women, both perceptual and material’ It is not determined biologically as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men but is constructed socially. It is a central organizing principle of societies and often governs the processes of production and reproduction, consumption and distribution’ (FAO, 1997).

Gender relations refer to relations between men and women that are socially determined by culture, religion, or socially acceptable ways of thinking or being (Institute for Social Transformation, 2020. These relationships between men and women, as they exist in most societies, are characterised by the marginalisation 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 the problem of unequal gender relations 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.

1. **Is Gender Relations Changing?**

Gender relations is changing with the increasing awareness campaign and globalization that is spreading round the world. In the current generation of 21st Century, gender is often misunderstood as promotion of women who have taken more active role in different sectors and careers despite some traditions still hold women inferior in their society like numerous cases reported in Indian cultures women still come from traditional strict households, they have accepted their roles and feel comfortable in their decisions or lack thereof. Feminist movement gained momentum in the 1960’s and 70’s in the United States together with other Human Rights groups that advocated for equal rights among all genders in recent centuries after observing women gender being domesticated by cultural norms, religious believes, traditional marginalisation yet for the few women who were out speaking role models showed great hope. Gender roles in communities changed lately whereby women now play equal role as men in owning lead large companies, very active in their families and communities, own personal businesses, manage big organisations, head political groups, earn higher academic degrees from all sectors equal to men, to mention but few as compared to early centuries. Both genders actively attend sporting events; go to bars and all other outdoor activities that were dominated by men alone. The 21st 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.

The following are some examples of the areas gender relations are changing:

1. Marriage Proposals
2. Dress Code
3. Job/Work

**1. Marriage proposal:** Marriage proposal in early centuries, men typically propose to women which was traditionally their role but in the 21st Century, women are stepping up by proposing to men as they get down on their knees. They have boldly come out elaborating men initiative proposals that can’t wait any longer for men to propose. Sometimes cultures term them as taboo breakers who boldly ask their future husbands to be hand in marriage. Men traditionally take head the process of proposing for marriage but this has changed in the 21st century where women now take bold action in dating and propose for marriage. This has left some traditional cultures thinking of women proposing as prostitutes desperate for marriage for example in the Iteso Culture, an ethnic group in eastern Uganda and western Kenya men take lead in proposing for marriage but when woman proposes, man shys off in fear of mockery and insults from fellow men or woman might be having HIV/AIDS as to why she boldly took men role of proposing for marriage and men prefer traditional marriage proposals or weddings. This happens in rural villages. However, todays women can propose for marriage. More women are proposing than ever before. Some are giving men engagement rings.

**2. Dress code:** Culturally dress code for men and women are defined by norms and expectations that relate to an understanding to tell difference between man and woman. The dress has the most direct contact with the human body and is therefore considered an integral part of the self. Garments influence and shape the appearance with significant impact on the construction of social identity. Dress codes differ from culture to culture, religion to religion, tribe to tribe, some people use different dress code for different settings for different gender (marriage parties, church/mosque, offices, etc) for example the easiest identified dress code is men put on trousers and shirts while women put on skirts and blouses. However in the 21st century, the trousers are worn by both genders. Women dress on trousers, shirts and neck-ties like men while men as well take part in women dresses, skirts and blouse though not widely in public. This has been associated with gay proactive men. In Islam women are required to wear modest forms of attire which covers from head to toe. Therefore all this depends on the traditional cultural environment either in rural or urban; though in most urban settings adapt any kind of dress code. In other words the world of clothing is changing as new cultural influences meet technological innovations.

**3. Job/ Work:** Traditionally, both genders have different roles and responsibilities whereby men were considered responsible for taking care of the family financially; guiding the family while listening to their spouse though they make final decisions while women are to take care of children and household duties. During the 20th – 21st centuries, there has been strengthened Gender inequalities in all areas that are rooted in social structures but also in attitudes, Many arguments have shown imbalance at work. Others defend men to be more burdened while others argue that women are more burdened with daily chores such as laundry, cleaning, cooking food, shopping, looking after sick relatives and carrying out repairs, while men only show significant contribution by other services of mending faulty items around the house. Both genders to some extent perform equal domestic duties though tradition still holds some societies. Even their roles in cooperate organizations are increasingly changing.

1. **Drivers of Change in Gender Relations.**

Depending on the circumstances, the derivers of change can serve to promote positive change in gender norms or reinforce discriminatory norms.

**1. Economic development:**

Economic developments (either new opportunities opening up or existing opportunities ending) can lead to rapid change in gender roles, which can, in turn, lead to changes in gender norms. But there is often a time lag between changes in a given norm and changes in the practices those norms lead to. For example, women are often accepted in workplaces before norms about labour equality change. Broad economic changes can, in particular, contribute to changes in norms about gender roles and the value of education. This is the case whether economic opportunities close down or open up. For example, changing norms around investing in daughters’ education and young women working outside the home in India and Bangladesh have been largely driven by recognition of the economic benefits of these activities.

**2. Demographic change:**

Urbanization and migrationtwo important demographic factors in gender role change. Research indicates that urbanisation often brings with it more egalitarian gender norms. This reflects new educational and economic opportunities for women and girls in urban areas, and reduced exposure to some of the structures that reinforce existing gender norms (such as traditional leaders). Migrants to urban areas are often exposed to people from other regions and cultural and ethnic groups, as well as the media, new ideas and lifestyles. Migration, whether in-country or across national borders, can have similar effects, giving men, women, boys and girls the chance to do things that go beyond the limits of accepted gender roles in their home communities. Alternatively, migration can reinforce conservative or discriminatory gender norms – for example, if diaspora communities cling to gender norms and practices of their former communities as a means of asserting their identity in their new environment.

**3.** **Increasing access to education for girls, boys, men and women:** Rising levels of education across all age groups (including adults) are a critical driver of norm change. Through education, boys and girls are exposed to new knowledge and ideas, including gender equality, which is a formal part of the curriculum in many countries. Education (particularly secondary education) is associated with reduced support for a number of discriminatory or harmful practices, including child marriage and gender-based violence. Girls’ own desire for education is an important driver of norm change. Increasingly, girls are aware that education opens up opportunities for a better life, for them and their families – one that goes beyond marriage, motherhood and (in rural areas) small-scale farming. This creates a virtuous circle, as educated girls are typically more accepting and supportive of gender equality, develop greater selfconfidence, and are more able to voice their opinions and influence decisions that affect them.

Education for boys can be an equally important driver of norm change. As with girls, education can give boys access to new knowledge and ideas about gender equality, encouraging respect for girls’ and women’s rights. It can enable them to see girls as competent and knowledgeable, challenging stereotypes about boys having greater innate abilities.

4. **Political activism and change**: in many cases, changes in gender norms have been spurred by social and political activists mobilising for change. Typically this has involved a combination of approaches: challenging people to reflect on and change their own behaviour and attitudes, while mobilising for legal or policy changes nationally or internationally. For example, social movements tackling gender-based violence often take a dual approach, challenging individuals to stop committing or condoning violence while mobilising citizens to support law reform and other positive changes (such as training police to deal sensitively and respectfully with victims of gender-based violence, or providing better support services for survivors). Periods of conflict, or other significant political change or disruption, can also lead to change in gender norms. They can disrupt old beliefs and practices around masculinity and femininity, or lead people to do things that do not fit with traditional gender roles, simply in order to survive. Sometimes political or armed movements explicitly aim to remodel gender relations – in some cases towards a more egalitarian society (as with the Maoist movements in Nepal) and in others promoting more conservative social relations.

Institute for Social Transformation (2020). Gender relations. Accessed on 28th April, 2020. <https://ist-tft.org/new/transformation-gender-relations/> .