Oxford Policy Management

BASICS OF GENDER MADE SIMPLE

An Exploration of Concepts, Terms, and Myths

Preface and Acknowledgements

Oxford Policy Management (OPM), with the support of Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) grant, is implementing the project 'Adaptive Learning For Gender Responsive Health Systems.' The key purpose of this project is to provide robust learning exchange opportunities and need-based technical support to the foundation and its Technical Support Unit (TSU) partners in their gender intentional programming efforts in UP and Bihar. As part of the project, OPM facilitates GenderCollab—an active gender and health system learning network, and a Gender Support Desk—to offer technical assistance, evidence generation, and learning resources to the foundation and its TSU partners.

OPM under the gender support desk, collaborated with Bihar TSU to facilitate a gender training workshop for Bihar TSU's State and District team members on 3rd and 4th May 2023 in Patna. The purpose of the workshop was to support Bihar TSU team to apply a gender lens to their ongoing work and foster a more intentional approach towards gender programming. The workshop focused on demystifying concepts associated with gender and clarifying what gender really means. This document has emerged from the discussions conducted during the workshop. The key purpose of the document is to serve as a primer to reinforce the understanding and messages conveyed in the workshop and be available for the participants as a refresher note. The document presents some of the fundamental concepts and myths associated with gender.

We would like to mention that while we at OPM embrace the spectrum of identities, including those of LGBTQIA+ individuals, and strive to foster inclusivity in our discussions, for the purposes of this training workshop we focused on understanding gender as a binary.

We thank Mr. Anand Pawar, Executive Director of Samyak - A Communication and Resource Centre in Pune, for facilitating the workshop and providing insights on the document. We thank Ms. Tanvee Nabar, co-founder of Ladyfinger Co - a communication design studio for her live sketch-notes that are presented in the document.

Table of Contents

1

Basic concepts and issues

The personal is political

The phrase 'the personal is political' highlights how individual experiences, hitherto considered as private and personal, are inextricably linked to the larger socio-political context[1]. Understanding this enables one to understand that no individual experience can be apolitical. It encourages people to critically examine and acknowledge the power dynamics and systemic issues that shape their personal lives and relationships—a starting point for any transformation. Viewed from this perspective, gender roles and expectations are inherently connected to the larger systems of power and hierarchy.

Women's personal problems recognised as political problems. In the late 1960s, Carol Hanisch and the New York Radical Women group organised various consciousness-raising sessions and small-group discussions where women shared their personal experiences. These discussions formed a platform for women to identify commonalities and patterns in their personal problems and link them to larger social issues and norms shaped by the patriarchal structures around them. Hanisch argued that these platforms cannot be regarded as mere personal 'therapy groups' but as strong politically informed acts comparable to organising huge protests and rallies.

For instance, simple acts from laughing in public or how we sit or stretch in a public space to more severe acts such as the occurrence of domestic violence within homes are often considered a private or a personal matter.

However, it is important to understand that who is allowed to do what and where are not matters of personal choice or private affairs; they are socially and culturally prescribed gender roles and norms that are governed by a deeply entrenched patriarchal value system that prevails in the most societies. Thus, while it is acceptable for men to stretch in public or sit in any way they like, women do not enjoy these privileges. Similarly, an understanding that domestic violence is not merely a private matter but rather a broader societal issue helps us to acknowledge that the problem is rooted deep in power imbalances, and in patriarchal control within relationships. By re-phrasing it as a societal issue, we can better understand how the personal is political and encourage collective responsibility to address it.
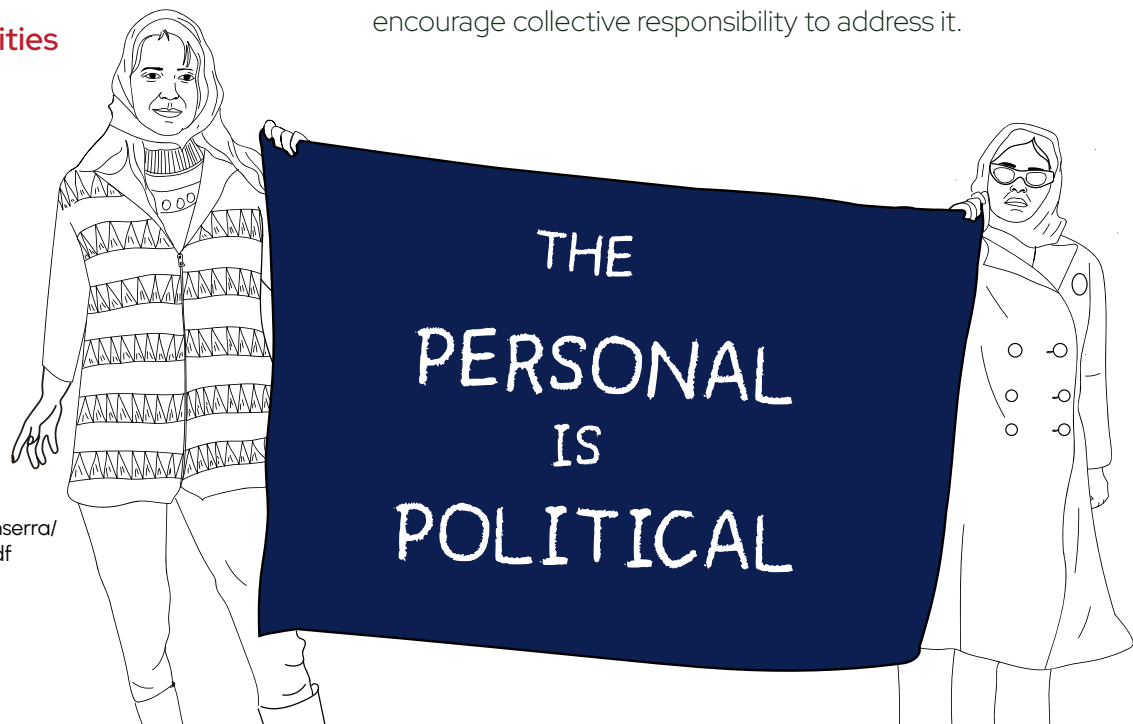
1. https://webhome.cs.uvic.ca/~mserra/AttachedFiles/PersonalPolitical.pdf

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Establishing the language of gender and its right meaning

Any transformation begins by altering or establishing the right language to talk about it.

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in defining the language or lingo used for each subject. For example, the discipline of chemistry employs a different language and concepts (e.g., reaction, bond, catalysis) to the discipline of geography (atmosphere, erosion, etc.). Each subject has its own lingo that is specific to its context and helps in understanding the basics of that subject. Language is important. It gives meaning to words/terms and establishes a structure to understand them. It is only after the right meaning has been established that one can think of making changes. Using the right language to define and understand the meaning of gender is important before we start thinking of addressing its implications or work on integrating gender-intentional interventions in our work.

Language has implications.

In Hindi language, a husband is referred to as 'pati'. The meaning of 'pati' in Sanskrit/Hindi language

is owner or 'maalik'. An owner of crores of rupees is called Crorepati, and of Lakhs is Lakhpati. How can one perceive the relationship between a husband and wife as equal in light of the meaning associated with the word 'pati'? If one is the owner, then the other one is automatically 'naukar' or servant. This vocabulary itself establishes an unequal relationship between a husband and wife and assigns power to the former over the latter.

Let's move away from using words casually:

'Natural' or 'normal' ways – When we say something (e.g., sex) is natural or normal, we give scope for defining what is unnatural or abnormal.

'I work on gender' – This does not convey anything or any meaning. But with a clear understanding of gender, one would say they work toward gender transformation to bring down levels of gender-based violence, etc. It is important to establish the right meaning of words.
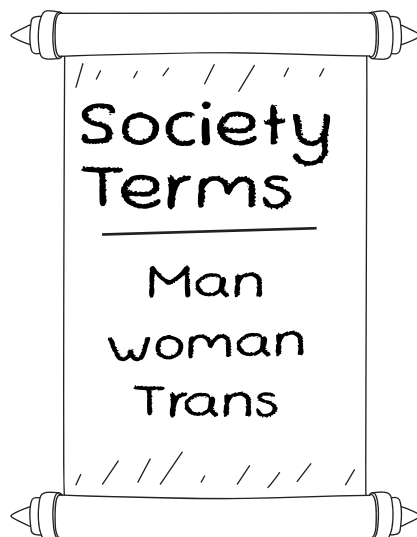
Lay The Correct Language Foundation

Common misinterpretations of the meaning of gender

SEX

Biology Terms

Male
Female
Intersex

Gender

Society Terms

Man
woman
Trans
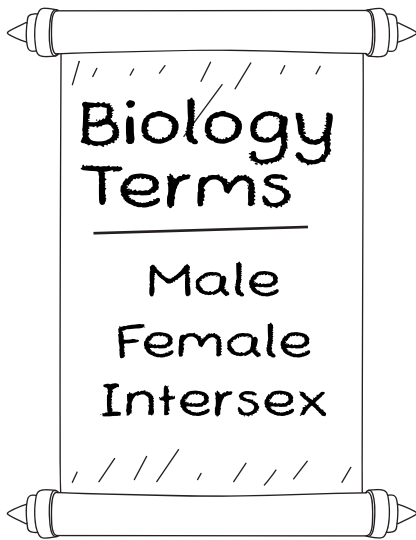
Before we understand the meaning of gender, it is important to establish what gender is not about:

Gender is not only about women's issues: Gender is often misunderstood as a women's problem or as relating to women's issues or a discourse that pertains to women alone. However, gender encompasses an understanding of power and hierarchy experienced equally by men and women and a range of other identities.

Gender is not about two sexes, i.e. male and female. It is important to recognise that gender is a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses a range of identities and experiences beyond the traditional understanding of male and female.

Equality and discrimination are not gender; they are the implications of gender: When talking about gender, people often start talking about inequality, discrimination between men and women, violence, and/or injustice. These are, however, all implications of gender rather than gender itself. People use their own experiences of gender to give meaning to it and make sense of it. This is because there is no clear understanding of gender or related concepts, which also leads to people using such terms interchangeably.

Gender — A social construct

Gender is a social construction of identities, roles, and expectations assigned to a specific sex, creating differential power relations. While sex refers to the biological and physical differences between males and females, gender is a socially constructed ascribing of specific roles, behaviours, and expectations in regard to being masculine or feminine.

> For instance, men are often expected to possess qualities like strength, dominance, and assertiveness, while women are expected to exhibit traits such as nurturing, passivity, and emotional sensitivity. Masculinity is associated with strength and femininity with passivity Being associated with strength means men are expected to protect women, who are identified as in need of protection.

Giving different values to the roles and expectations creates differential power relations in which women's roles and expectations are considered subordinate to men's roles and expectations.

Gender as a social construct is also culturally specific and hence is also a cultural construction. While gender relations are shaped by societal norms and expectations, what meaning is attributed to these norms and expectations is influenced by the contextual cultural beliefs and practices. Hence, we find that different cultures have different understandings of what it means to be masculine (attributes, behaviours, roles, or characteristics associated with men and boys) or feminine (attributes, behaviours, roles, or characteristics associated with women and girls).

Addition Of Value To Difference Can Birth Discrimination

GENDER

BIOLOGY

For instance, a culturally constructed image of a Punjabi man includes a strong muscular, turban-clad, loud, moustached person. In contrast, for a Scottish man, wearing a skirt-like outfit is an acceptable masculine trait that might not be considered so in another cultural context.

Gender is a social and cultural construction of identity, at a given point of time. It is important to consider that gender constructions are often subject to time and change as per the prevalent media-led, market-led construction of gender or other such factors.

Gender roles and responsibilities change over time. For instance, in the past it was more acceptable for men to have long hair, whereas in the present men with long hair are often subject to ridicule and labelled 'feminine'. Another example of shifting gender roles is the abandonment of the practice of Sati in India, which involved widows sacrificing themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. This practice is no longer considered an acceptable responsibility for women in contemporary society.
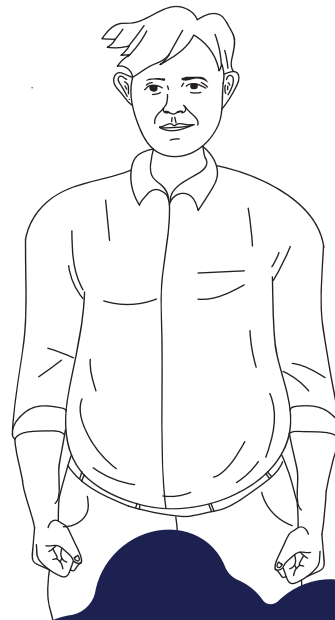
Do Muscles Define A Real Man?

What Makes A Man ?

Do All Women Have To Be Mothers?

When Am I Feminine Enough?

Gender socialisation

Gender socialisation is a process through which individuals learn and internalise gender norms, social expectations, and roles. In a discussion paper[2] by UNICEF on gender socialisation during adolescence, gender socialisation is defined as the process whereby individuals develop, refine, and learn to 'do' gender by internalising gender norms and roles as they interact with key agents of socialisation, such as their family, social networks, and other social institutions. Socialisation begins early, through constant reinforcements and ascribing of roles and expectations, including attributes of sexuality, at an early age. The most common example is that of attributing colours; girls are associated with pink and boys with blue. This continues in relation to what toys the different sexes are given, or what school subjects they choose.

Home Is Where SOCIALISATION Starts

When a child accompanies us to a social function, what kind of guidance do we provide? We instruct the child on appropriate behaviour, how to greet others, and caution them about not overindulging in ice cream. We socialise the child to understand and exhibit acceptable behaviour within social settings. Likewise, we also socialise children on various aspects of their identity, such as how to conform to societal expectations of being a boy, fulfilling the notion of being a 'real' man, practicing a specific religion like Hinduism, or even adopting the cultural traits associated with being a resident of Delhi.

2 John, Neetu A.; Stoebenau, Kirsten; Ritter, Samantha; Edmeades, Jeffrey; Balvin, Nikola (2017). Gender Socialization during Adolescence in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Conceptualization, influences and outcomes, Innocenti Discussion Papers, no. IDP_2017_01, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence

Gender socialisation categorises everyone into boxes of masculinity and femininity, with distinct roles and expectations for each, setting out the attributes for men and boys as well as women and girls. Anyone who doesn't fit inside these boxes is ridiculed and looked down upon. For instance, gender socialisation dictates that men are expected to maintain short haircuts, while females are encouraged to grow their hair long. Through our socialisation processes, we have internalised gestures and non-verbal communication such as feminine ways of tucking one's hair back elegantly, or manly ways of sitting or walking. Gender compels everyone to fit in the box – both men and women. Those who do not fit in are looked down upon and often punished. For instance, men who cry easily are often ridiculed and mocked. When a woman of the household claims her right to property, she is perceived as someone who is

Does My Femininity Live In My Hair?

Men Don't Cry Or Do They?

not adhering to the prescribed gender norm, i.e., to be subservient to the male of the household and not claim rights over resources/property. Participants provided several examples from their personal socialisation experience.
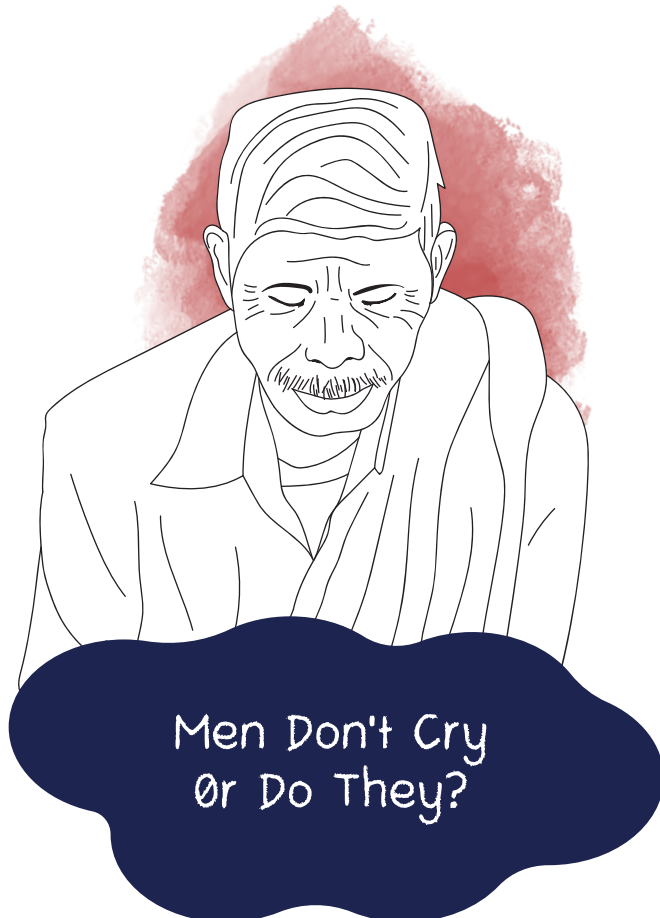
'I grew up with many women in my house. They all wore flowers in their hair, and I loved wearing them too. I understood much later that the act of wearing flowers in one's hair is perceived as feminine, and I never really understood the logic behind it.'

'I used to get hurt while playing, and I used to cry easily. I was told time and again about how inappropriate it is for a boy to cry.'

WINDOW OF PRIVILEGE

The rigid categorizations of masculinity and femininity, along with their prescribed duties and obligations, may seem like an equalizing or level fielding framework. However, these constructs of masculinity open windows of opportunity and privileges exclusively for the male gender while women often find themselves in subordinate positions when it comes to accessing resources, holding power, and engaging in everyday activities.

For instance, these everyday privileges decide who gets the chicken leg on their plate, who gets to sleep under the fan, who gets to have more control over resources, who owns land, whose surname is passed onto the next generation, etc.

'Common notion of a responsible and a strong father is often associated with disciplining and creating a sense of fear in the child. In my opinion, I wonder whether instilling fear and scaring one's child is a healthy for a father-child relationship. Men are not supposed to establish authority and supremacy to be a 'good' parent. But it is often expected of them. I have always questioned this as a parent.'

'Cooking needs to be seen as a life skill. For me, the constant nagging and imposition—I must learn to cook, women should be able to cook, to be able to get married you must learn how to cook— has made me dislike cooking.'

'We are socialised to associate power with male figures. We often see people addressing women officers of higher ranks as "Madam Sir", or sometimes "Sir". We are socialised to address those in authority and power with male pronouns' – Participant.

## Everyday Patriarchy And Privilege
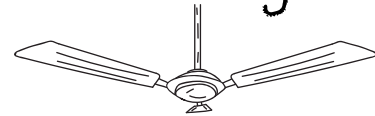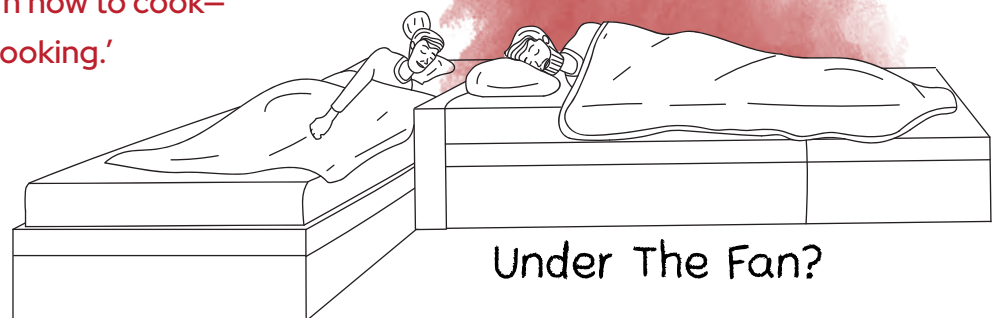
Whose Mattress Is Under The Fan?

While being defined by masculinity and femininity offers some privileges on one side, it also serves to restrict and oppress. The privileges of masculinity are higher than those of femininity. On the downside, however, as shared below, even the expectations on men and boys to be the primary providers for their families, hide their emotions, etc. create enormous mental stress and pressure for them. Further, even expectation that having a moustache is considered masculine can serve as a pain point for men who do not want to wear a moustache but feel compelled to do so to conform to the expectations around masculinity and manhood in their societies.

Interestingly, women, get access to these privileges as well, albeit conditionally. The condition depends on their proximity to power, i.e., to the powerful male member of the family or to the powerful head of the state/institution. For instance, a woman who has given birth to a male child or a woman who is the closest to the male head of the family is likely to enjoy more privileges than other women in the household. These privileges are often lost if the proximity reduces, however. For instance, a married woman who may have had a considerable say in household decisions could lose her voice and agency after she is widowed.

Gender, power, and patriarchy

Gender operates as a system of power whereby the majoritarian gender—the one in power—exercises control over the other through a structured system. This system is what we call patriarchy. Patriarchy is a system that upholds and perpetuates male dominance, power, and privilege within societies. It operates through social, cultural, economic, and political structures, norms, and beliefs that privilege men over women and other marginalised genders. Just like oxygen or electromagnetic waves in the atmosphere, which are all pervading but invisible to our eyes, patriarchy manifests itself in our daily lives in various subtle ways. Patriarchy operates by privileging men and giving them control over women's labour (e.g. what work they can do or cannot do, the persistence of the gender pay gap, etc.), resources (e.g. inheritance, ownership of property, ownership of productive resources like land, etc.), mobility (where they can or cannot go), reproduction (e.g. maintaining purity of lineage, the preference for sons, family planning, etc.), and sexuality (what is appropriate dress, who they can marry, etc.).
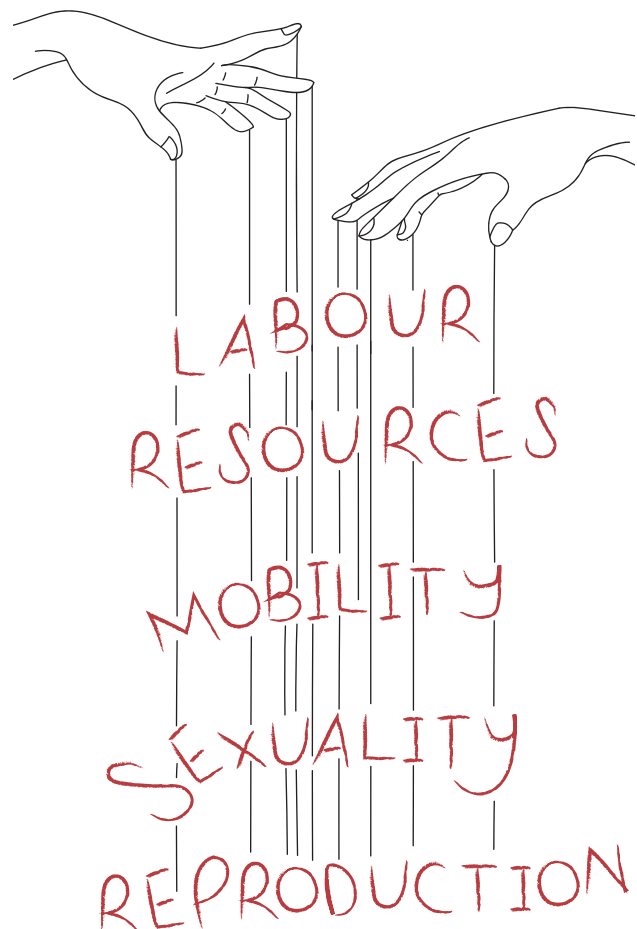
Labour

Women's labour, their employment, the type of work they engage in, their working hours, and the way they work are often dictated by the needs and expectations of men. For instance, women are encouraged to take up jobs that align with the ascribed feminine roles. Such jobs include receptionists, nurses, jobs in the care industry, jobs that ensure a woman is home by the evening, jobs that allow her to balance her domestic responsibilities, etc.

Resources

Typically, women are expected to seek permission or notify their families and/or husbands regarding their expenditures, while men are not subject to the same expectations. Failing to comply with this norm often leads to insults and rebuke. Despite overseeing the upkeep and management of the home, women have little control over household finances and rarely own any property or resources. Examples where women own small-scale enterprises but their husbands hold decision-making power over business activities are a case in point.

Mobility

It is common for women to face restrictions when leaving their homes, particularly if they are alone or it is night-time. They are required to have a valid reason for going out, while men take up leisurely activities as if it is their entitlement, without the need to justify their movements. Additionally, women and girls are often subjected to constant surveillance and monitoring, while there is no such scrutiny for men or boys.

Sexuality

Limiting women's mobility is a means of exerting control over their sexuality. There is a prevalent fear that allowing women to move about alone, especially at night, could result in harm or damage to the family's honour and reputation in society. However, this fear is rooted in the desire to preserve women's 'vaginal purity', which is an attempt to dictate who women can have sex with and when. Regulating and limiting women's sexual autonomy helps to maintain societal expectations of female chastity, modesty, and adherence to prescribed norms of sexuality.

Reproduction

The timing, number, and spacing of children are typically decided by males in a patriarchal society, with women having little to no say. By controlling women's reproduction, patriarchal societies attempt to regulate family size, ensure lineage continuity, and manage resources within the existing power structure of male dominance. Despite this, contraception and family planning are often women's responsibility.

There are two ways of understanding patriarchy:

The classical understanding of patriarchy sees a social system in which men hold primary power and dominance over women in the political, economic, and social spheres. This society is characterised by male authority and women's subordination. This explains how, in a patrilineal society, an individual's name (surname), identity, food, culture, and access to and inheritance of property rights and resources is through the male line. However, the classical understanding is limited to understanding patriarchy as a 'men over women' phenomenon. It does not capture the nuances of where women benefit from patriarchy and men suffer due to gendered construction of social norms and behaviours.

A feminist understanding of patriarchy builds on the classical understanding. It states that patriarchy is not just about men dominating women: it should be understood as a system of power dynamics, gender relations, and intersecting systems of oppression. While men, women, and a range of identities are affected by this system of patriarchy, it mainly operates by privileging men. Male-centric behaviour reinforces power imbalances between men and women (and other genders) and positions men as the dominant group. When this behaviour is normalised and institutionalised, it leads to the generation and establishment of patriarchy as a system.

This feminist understanding of patriarchy helps us to see how male-centred privileges benefit even the women connected to them, i.e. as mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters. Women are provided with a sense of pseudo-control/power and respectability, which is conditional in nature. The condition is to fulfil the gender norms associated with their role—to toe the line as per the male-centric behaviour and be in proximity to the dominant gender. To be rewarded with privileges and power within the system, it is important for women to behave as 'good women' by fulfilling the gendered expectations.

For instance, a married woman will enjoy more privileges than an unmarried one. When a woman gets divorced, she is no longer associated with a husband and therefore loses her legitimacy, ownership over resources, power, and respectability in society. The chances of a female employee getting promoted are higher when she is agreement with her male bosses and does not call out any power imbalances in their male-centric behaviour.

We frequently confuse patriarchy (or pitra-satta in Hindi language) with male-centric behaviour (or purush-pradhanta in Hindi language) and use them interchangeably. The two concepts are different, although they are related to each other in a cyclic manner. Male-centric behaviour and practices (purush-pradhanta) are behaviours and practices that favour/prioritise men over women or any other gender. For example, a man is expected to be served a hot cup of tea whereas this is not the expectation for women, or a woman will eat the leftover food from the previous day but a man would never have it. When this behaviour is normalised and institutionalised, it leads to the generation and establishment of patriarchy (pitra-satta) as a system.
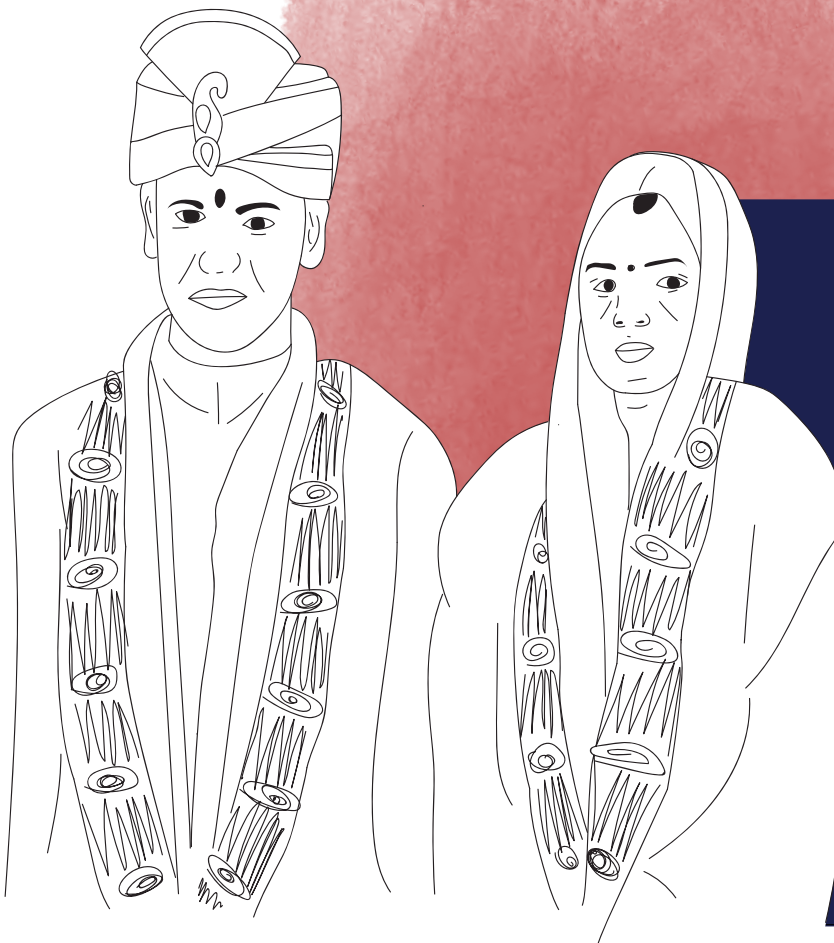
Male-Centred Privileges Benefit Even The Women Connected To Them

Equality, equity (affirmative action), and substantial equality

Often, the terms 'equity' and 'equality' are used interchangeably. Equity, equality, and substantive equality have distinctive meanings, however. Equality is the idea that, for anything to be fair, people must always be given **equal opportunity.** However, equal opportunities given to people who are unequally positioned in society may not lead to equality of outcomes. Substantial equality is when one goes beyond equal opportunity and focuses on equal outcomes. Equality might enable equal participation for all, but it does nothing to ensure equal distribution of results or outcomes for all.

Equity is the strategy used to achieve substantial equality. According to the AHA Institute for Diversity and Health Equity[3], equity ensures that individuals are provided with the resources and support they need to have access to the same opportunities as the general population. Equity represents impartiality, whereby the distribution is made in such a way to even opportunities for all, i.e. levelling the playing field. Conversely, equality indicates uniformity, where

Equality + Equity
(Using Affirmative Action As A Tool)
= Substantial Equality

it is assumed that everything is evenly distributed among people when in fact it is not.

Affirmative action, also known as positive discrimination, is a tool that is used for implementing equity. It means taking proactive measures to provide additional support, resources, and/or opportunities to people who have been historically disadvantaged or discriminated against based on factors like gender, race, caste, disability, or socioeconomic status, such that they are equipped to take advantage of equal opportunities. An instance of affirmative action is seen in the practice of setting aside or reserving seats on buses specifically for women, pregnant women, elderly people, or people with disabilities. This approach ensures these individuals have fair and equal access to transportation. By reserving these seats, they are given the chance to travel comfortably on a bus that would otherwise have been occupied by able-bodied individuals (mostly men).
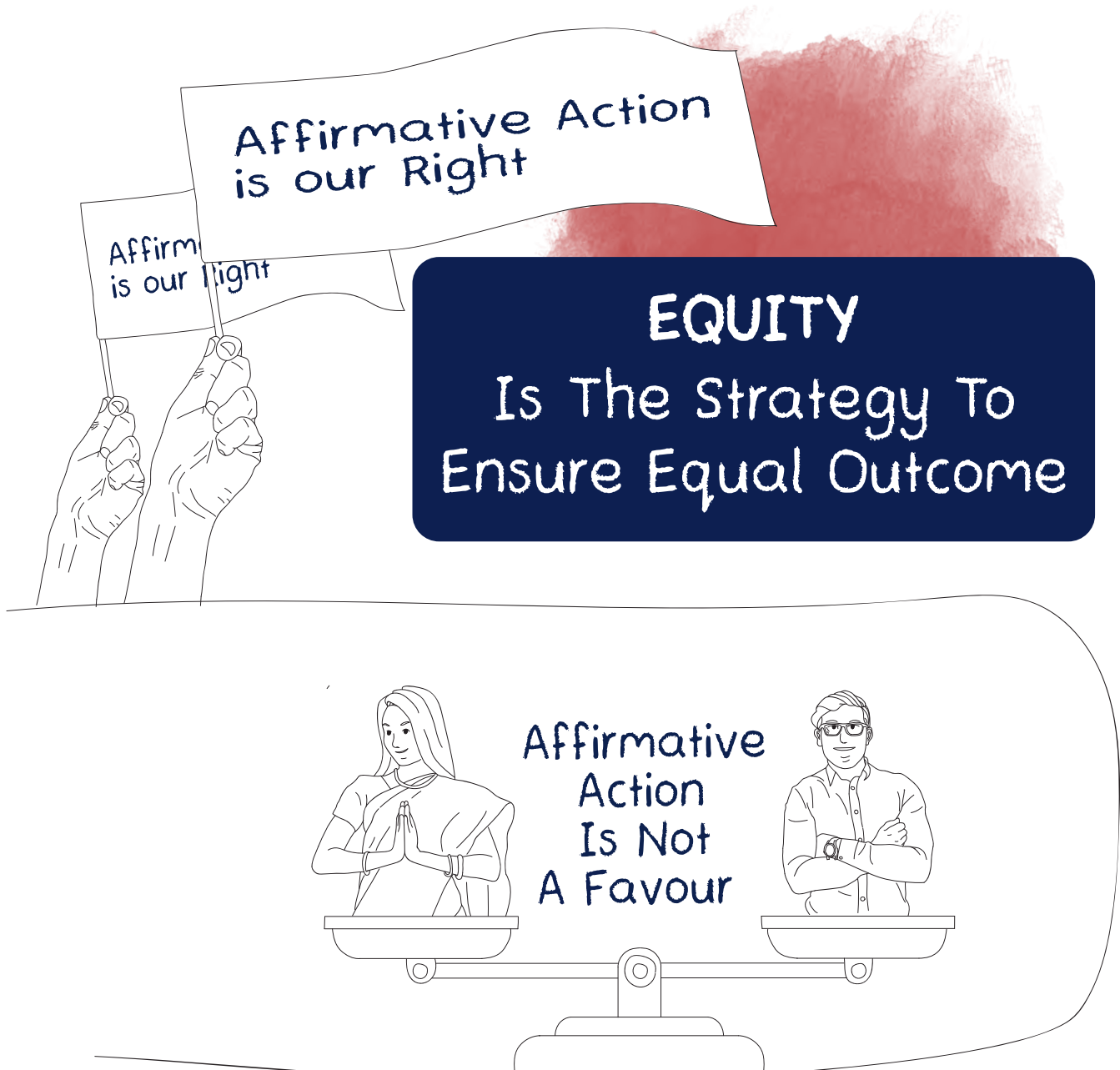

Having A Seat Booked Helps Ensure EQUAL RESULT Not Just Equal Participation

It is also important to see affirmative action through the lens of social justice or 'samajik nyay' (as it is called in Hindi language). Equal access to opportunity, resources, and results is not a favour that is done to people but rather it is their right. For example, the Protection

3 American Hospital Association, Glossary of Health Equity Terms.

of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (also known as the DV Act, 2005) is a piece of affirmative action that specifically identifies women as beneficiaries because they are disproportionately affected by domestic violence. The DV Act recognises the gender power dynamics that contribute to gender violence and addresses them by providing women with specific rights and safeguards to ensure their safety. The Act does not specifically mention men as beneficiaries, but it does not exclude them from seeking legal protection and remedies under other existing legal provisions and mechanisms available in the Indian legal system. Therefore, the focus should be on implementing the law successfully to ensure women's rights and not on getting away with it because of the notion that it wrongfully targets men.

Affirmative Action
is our Right

Affirm
is our Right

EQUITY
Is The Strategy To
Ensure Equal Outcome

Affirmative
Action
Is Not
A Favour

2
Clarifying Terminologies

BMGF's Gender Integration Guide[4] (March 2023) highlights how, whether designing an intervention, technology, product, or research study, integrating a gender lens can greatly contribute to the success and impact of an investment. However, to take appropriate action toward integrating gender, it is important to understand various terms that are often used interchangeably without properly establishing their meaning. Given that Bihar TSU is mandated to undertake gender-intentional programming, the session on terminology aimed at clarifying their meaning.

Access and control

The two terms differ significantly from each other. Access to a resource implies the ability to obtain and use it. For instance, young girls and women have access to digital devices such as mobile phones. Control over a resource refers to the decision-making power and authority to determine its allocation and management. Mere access to a mobile phone does not imply control over it if her activities are constantly supervised, the content is frequently monitored, or, in fact, the mobile phone was only given to a woman to enable a man to keep track of her whereabouts. Control encompasses not only the ability to access the resource but also the ability to govern its distribution and usage according to one's interests or objectives.

Gender intentionality and gender transformation

Gender intentionality refers to the deliberate and conscious effort to increase access to resources. Access to a resource implies the ability to obtain and use it and is limited to that. Gender transformation encompasses not only increasing access but enabling control and authority. It involves addressing the underlying power dynamics and working toward achieving more equitable distribution and management of resources. Thus, if gender intentionality is access, then gender transformation is control.

Patriarchy Is In The Air! All You Need Is A Gender Lens To See.

4. BMGF, Gender Integration Guide _ https://www.gatesgenderequalitytoolbox.org/

Gender lens

Use of a gender lens implies approaching or examining an issue by paying particular attention to intrinsic power dynamics and unpacking patriarchal norms around it. These could be around one's own relationships, family, groups, workplace, etc. A gender lens equips one to question, reflect, enable in decision-making processes, and critically analyse the situation at hand. For instance, it is often challenging to recognise the influence of patriarchy in our everyday lives and experiences. However, adopting a gender lens helps us to observe the pervasive nature of patriarchy—how it subtly manifests within our workplaces, families, and social interactions.

> When an adolescent boy wishes to pursue a career in beauty, care, or nursing, he is often discouraged from doing so. If you employ a gender lens on this situation, it helps to understand that he is discouraged because these career opportunities are considered 'feminine' in nature or 'something that women do'.

> For instance, during large gatherings and family functions, often the first batch of people served food are men, followed by children (sometimes boy children and then girl children), and finally women. Women often assume responsibility for serving the food.

> For someone not using a gender lens, this might come across as a typical practice or something that helps better coordinate large gatherings. However, with a gender lens, one would notice how the men are prioritised over women and how women are expected to assume responsibility for serving men and putting themselves last.

Power and control

Power and Control (or 'Satta' and 'Niyantran' in Hindi language) are often used interchangeably but are two separate concepts with different meanings. Having power over something means having the ability to make decisions for oneself. Having control means having the power and authority of decision making in relation to others. Control is an expression of power or a form of power to decide for others. It is to make choices for others without consulting with them, unidirectionally.

For example, it is common for women in a household to have the power to spend household income managing household expenses. However, the control over that income, i.e. how, where, and how much of that income the women can spend, rests primarily with their husbands. Power over a resource suggests influence and decision-making capacity, while control over a resource implies ownership, governance, and the ability to enforce decisions regarding its use.
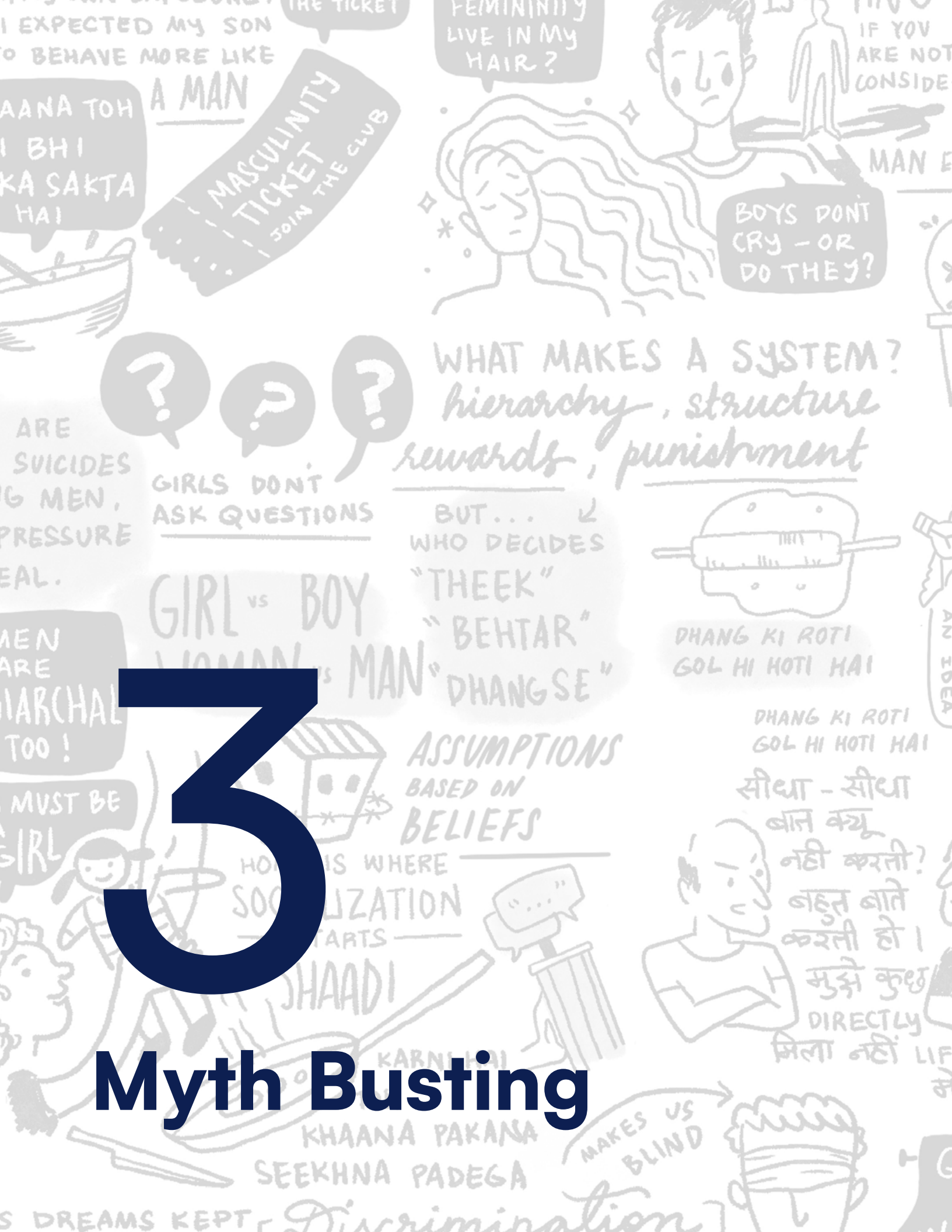
3 Myth Busting

Myth 1:
Women are women's worst enemies

It is a common misconception that women are women's worst enemies. In a patriarchal society, the spaces available to women within any sphere are limited. Most of the time, they can access power and privilege only through proximity to male centres of power and male-centric behaviour. If that proximity decreases, the privileges and authority are frequently lost. This is a highly competitive space where power can only be retained through reinforcing patriarchal behaviour and practices—thus leading to the idea that 'women are women's worst enemies'. It is important to understand that women are still operating within the sphere of male dominance and playing out their roles within a system

dominated by patriarchy. The rules and norms are still being defined by male dominance. Thus, a common perceived notion is that women in a family are in a constant state of conflict and strategise to sabotage each other's position. However, any such attempt is often done in order to hold on to their positions of power—often scarce. The presence of other or more women forming close relationships with the family's men is threatening for those in closest proximity to power.

A mother-in-law, for instance, could feel threatened by her daughter-in-law, who might step on her proximal position with the man of the family—her son. Of course, if we go by the number of men involved in family and property disputes with each other or in road rage incidents, the opposite can be true as well—men can be men's worst enemies! One should be mindful of making blanket statements that are often a sweeping generalisation of the situation guided by one's notions.

Myth 2:
Matriarchy will put an end to patriarchy.

Matriarchy is not the antithesis of patriarchy. Matriarchy is a social system in which women occupy positions of power and authority over males, whereas patriarchy is male dominance and control over women. Both systems involve hierarchical power structures and the domination of one gender over another. Therefore, such uneven/imbalanced power dynamics associated with patriarchy cannot be solved by establishing matriarchy as a solution. Gender equality and equity is the solution to both patriarchy and matriarchy, where power is distributed equitably, and all individuals of all genders have equal opportunities, rights, and agency.

Myth 3:
Matriliny and matriarchy are one and the same thing.

These two terms are frequently misunderstood and used interchangeably. However, these are two distinct concepts. As noted above, matriarchy refers to a social structure where women occupy positions of power, authority, and control over men. On the other hand, matriliny is a social system in which women or mothers pass on their lineage and family identity to their children, meaning that children belong to their mother's ancestral line and family resources, or property may be inherited through the maternal side. Matriliny primarily focuses on kinship and descent through the female line, without necessarily implying female dominance (unlike matriarchy). For instance, the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya is commonly believed to be a matriarchal society; however, it is a matrilineal patriarchal society, where lineage and inheritance are traced through the maternal family line but men (usually the mother's brother) wield power and control over property and other decisions leading to dominance over women.

Myth 4:
Hierarchy and roles create inequalities.

Hierarchy, by its nature, can contribute to inequalities within a system or organisation. It centralises power, authority, and decision making at the top levels. However, hierarchy alone is not inherently problematic. The issues arise when power within the hierarchy is misused. Assigning roles is not a problem, but manipulating hierarchy to assign value to certain roles is problematic. Here, hierarchy then becomes a vehicle for reinforcing and increasing disparities. For instance, the act of making roti (bread) can be seen as a role, while the expectation to make it a certain way (say, fluffy, round, or to be served hot) represents power. Making a roti is a task assigned to someone, but determining how it should be made correctly is an exercise of power. The question then arises: Who has the authority to determine what constitutes the 'right way' to make a roti?

Values assigned to roles are bestowed through a system of rewards, punishments, and recognition. Often, women are rewarded only informally. For instance, praising the woman's cooking skills or her spring cleaning, yet choosing to never contribute to any household chores, is an attempt to incentivise her, shedding self-responsibility without considering the woman's own choice and liking. There is no formal recognition of her household management in a tangible or measured way (say, compensation for her unpaid work such as household chores, childcare, etc.).

WHAT MAKES A SYSTEM?'
Hierarchy, Structure,Rewards, Punishment

But.......
Who Decides What Is "Good" Or "Proper" Or "Better"?

A Good Roti Should Be Round In Shape?
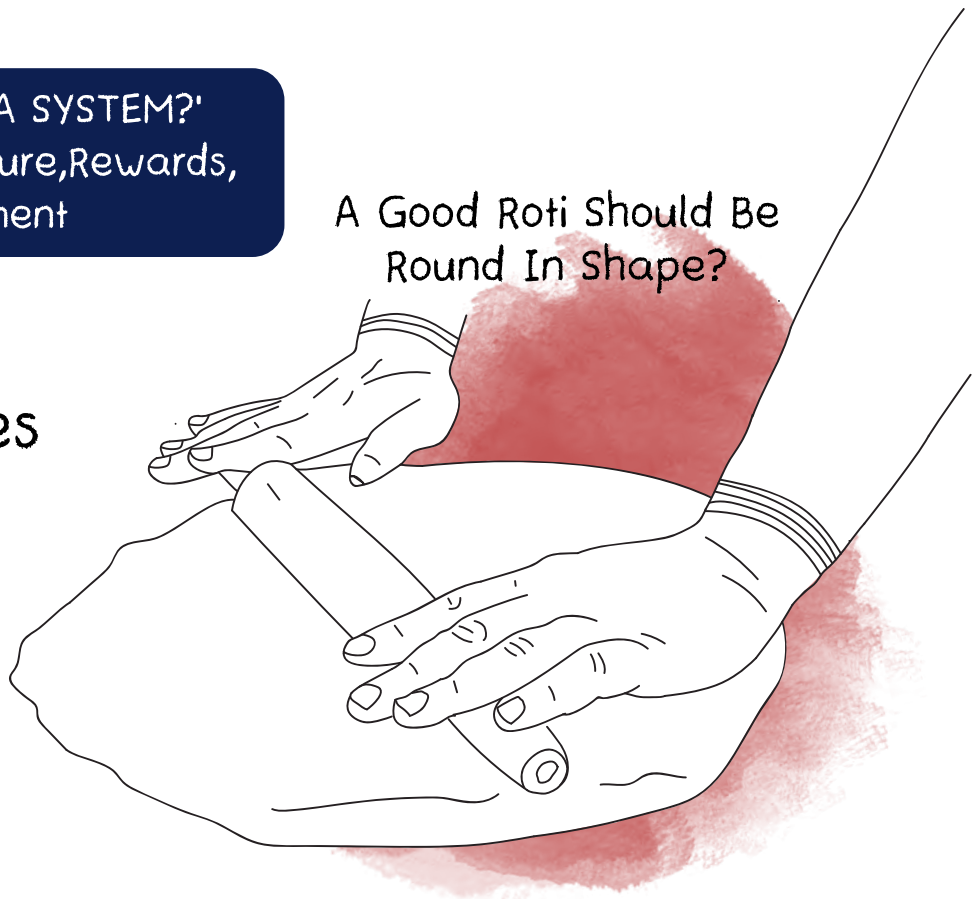
Myth 5:

## Symbolic and numerical equality is the same as gender equality and equity.

There are pitfalls in solely relying on symbols and numerical indicators of equality without unpacking or engaging with the evidence presented.

Symbolic notions of equality: A state of illusion can be understood as a subjective experience that is distorted from reality or is an inaccurate interpretation. Using a gender lens helps one to unpack and identify symbolic notions of equality. Often, a symbolic notion of equality is perpetuated via anecdotes. When someone is asked whether the situation has improved for women over the years, they immediately tend to respond positively: 'Yes, it has improved. It is not like it was before', 'Women are flying planes now', 'girls are getting access to education now', or 'women don't marry young anymore'. However, these responses do not indicate in any way the achievement of equality; rather, they may just mean that situations are improving.

Symbols are powerful and can inspire change, but they alone do not guarantee equality. While Kalpana Chawla holds the distinction of being the first woman of Indian origin in space, this does not mean that all women enjoy access to equal opportunities for such accomplishments. While her achievement can serve as a source of inspiration, it remains a symbolic representation rather than a comprehensive measure of equality.

Gender is a power relation; equality needs to be measured in terms of whether the dynamics of power have changed in the relationship. Simply sharing tasks or some visible reversal of roles may not necessarily indicate a change in the power dynamics. For example, a man who cooks and contributes to household chores might signify that the relationship between these spouses is gender equal. However, if the same man engages in physical and emotional violence toward his spouse, the signified illusion of reality is called into question.
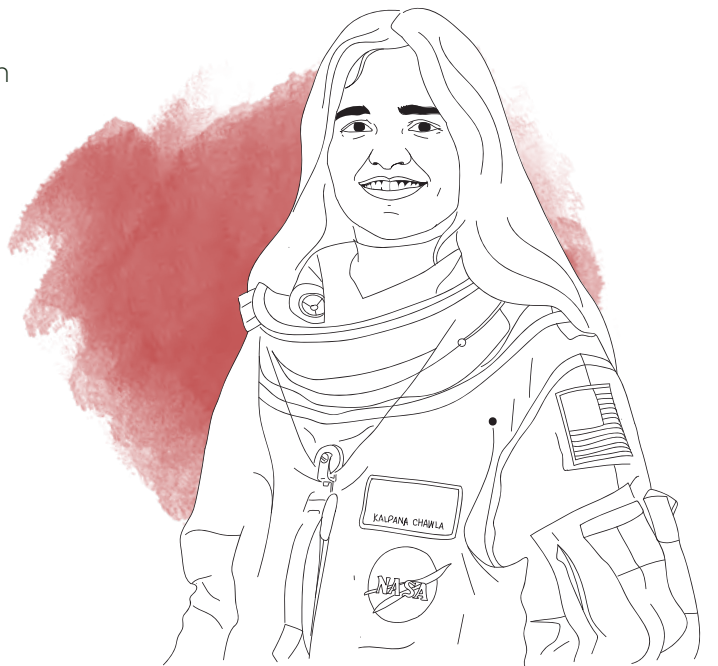
Symbols Are Important But They Don't Mean Equality.

If one relies solely on the symbolic or numeric indicator, this will lead to being in a state of illusion. In Pune, Maharashtra, an evaluation of a project on strengthening women's livelihood opportunities through access to credit (INR 50,000 as a seed grant to set up any business activity) pointed to a success story of a woman running a profitable vegetable vending business. When the evaluation expert visited the woman and her vegetable cart to document her case study, she realised that the woman deeply regretted taking the loan and her profit-making business activity. The participant pointed out that when her husband noticed that the vegetable vending business was making good profits, he resigned from his existing job as a security guard and now uses her money to buy alcohol for himself. He sits right next to her cart the entire day, supervises, and meddles in her day-long work, demands petty cash, and, if refused, hits her. 'If any male customer pays me a repeated visit, he immediately assumes that we have an extramarital relationship", said the vegetable vendor. What seemed like a strong case study of the project's positive impact in fact suggests it may not have had the intended result of increasing access and control of resources for women.
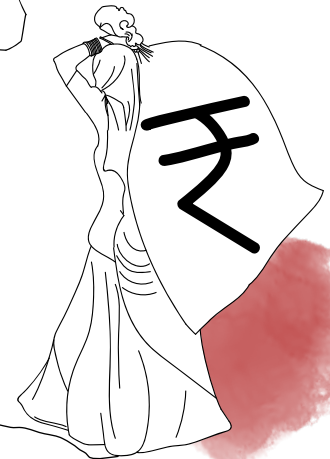
Was This Equality?
Ever Since My Business Succeeded

My Husband Has Become A Pain

Why Did I Take That Loan?

₹

Numerical indicators may not be an accurate representation of substantive equality: Impact indicators based on numerical values often neglect the quality of implementation. When incentives are associated with achieving 'targets', there is less effort toward identifying root causes or checking the effectiveness of the programme. For instance, that girls' school enrolment rates are at par with boys' enrolment rates only ensures numerical equality. By increasing mere access to schools, we are not ensuring substantive equality. To truly achieve it, other factors that contribute to low attendance rates and dropouts should be identified and addressed.

If reports indicate that 2 lakh women in the country have been provided with access to bank accounts through a state-led initiative, one cannot conclude that the initiative has achieved women's economic empowerment. It is essential to consider factors of access, control over financial resources, decision-making power, voice, and agency toward economic independence.

Even in a scenario where the sex ratio is reversed, with more females being born compared to males, this cannot be considered an indicator of gender equality. There is a need for a comprehensive understanding of the underlying factors contributing to gender disparities to effectively address the complex challenges faced by women.

While indicators can provide information about the availability of resources, they do not necessarily reveal whether individuals or communities can effectively access and utilise those resources. Cultural barriers, social dynamics, and personal circumstances are influential factors that can affect mobility but may not be adequately captured by indicators alone.

Let's consider a government programme aimed at improving girls' school attendance by distributing free bicycles. The number of bicycles distributed alone does not indicate whether the desired outcome of increased attendance has been achieved. It is crucial to examine whether the bicycles are actually being used by the girls to commute to school. Factors such as road conditions, proximity to school, maintenance costs, and social conditions all impact their decision-making process.

Myth 6:

Gender is equal to women.
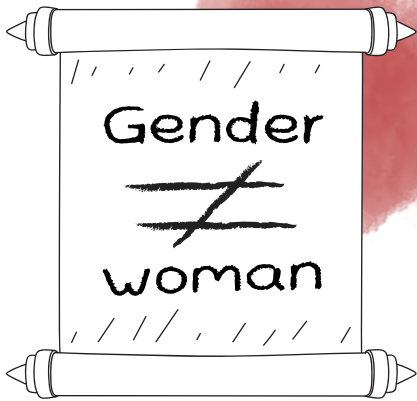
Gender is more than just women because it encompasses a range of identities beyond biological sex. While women often align with the female gender, gender includes men, non-binary individuals, and gender non-conforming people. However, discussions on gender inequality (an implication of gender and not gender itself) often focus on women as they are the most affected by the power imbalances created by patriarchal systems.

Disclaimer: In this document we often refer to gender as a binary, but we acknowledge that there are range of identities such as LGBTQIA+.

Myth 7:

Patriarchy is good for men.
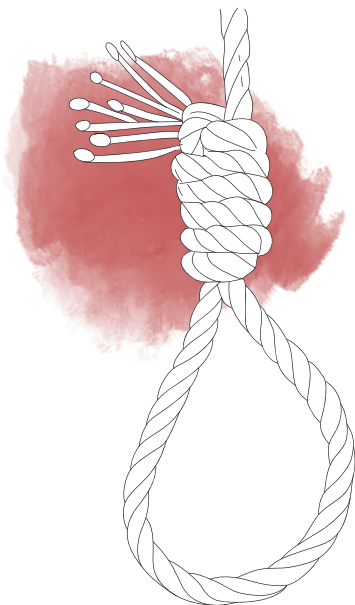
There Are More Sucides Among Men.

The Pressure Is Real.

Gender norms perpetuated by patriarchy lay out stringent roles and responsibilities that assign accepted attributes of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. The box of masculinity offers multiple windows of opportunity for men but simultaneously it also creates oppression. Gender conformity on the part of men—i.e. to look and behave a certain way, to not express emotions, to shoulder the responsibilities of being providers and protectors etc.—creates immense emotional and psychological damage, leading men to create harm to others or self-harm. Violence against women and the prevalence of mental health issues, including exceedingly high rates of suicide among men and boys, are evidence of this. For instance, India contributes 24.3% of male suicides globally, while 71% of suicides in India are by men and 65% of all the suicides in India are in the age group 18–45 years[5].

5.Source: https://main.mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/National%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Strategy.pdf

4

Conclusion

Understanding gender and its fundamental concepts is essential for addressing inequalities and promoting equality. Gender is a social and cultural construct that encompasses diverse identities and experiences. It is important to debunk common myths and misinterpretations surrounding gender, as it helps dismantle harmful misconceptions (such as assuming it is solely about women's issues, or a binary concept limited to male and female) and enables an accurate understanding of how gender operates.

This document summarises the core concepts and key terminologies discussed during the training workshop, limiting the discussion of gender as a binary. The key areas covered in the document include basic concepts, clarification of commonly used terminologies and common myths associated with gender. The purpose of this exercise is to unpack some of the fundamentals and everyday use of concepts and present them in simpler terms.

Oxford Policy Management