

## ROLE OF GENDER AND FAMILY IDENTITIES IN HUMAN HISTORY

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### Summary

Family, historically variously defined, constituted both the first simple human societies and the prototype, basic building block and metaphor for all subsequent more complex human social aggregations. Because of its centrality to cultural definitions of self and of others, it has been a site of continual struggle over membership, power and meaning from the founding first families of mythology down to the present. These struggles have been greatly amplified and intensified by the massive transformations wrought in global human society by industrialization over the past five hundred years (see *ROLE OF HUMAN SOCIETIES IN THE HISTORY OF THE BIOSPHERE*) which have completely transformed the old models and forcibly reconstituted family so as to free up its labour power for cash exchange in the marketplace. This process of monetisation has in turn led to power shifts within the family unit and to varying degrees of state intervention to support and superintend the reconstituted family in the interests of maintaining social stability and protecting the national interest. In this context, the "discovery" of gender and its reading back into the past has become a powerful ideological weapon in the hands of the traditionally powerless within family structures – women, homosexuals, bisexuals and others – subverting the supposedly "natural" base (sex difference) upon which family, even in the modern era, continues to be constituted. An understanding of the history of gender relations within families and society, therefore, is of crucial importance to development workers as most societies not only perceive but also value men and women differently.

### 1. Definitions

The family is a historically and culturally specific entity, making generalizations dangerous. We can, however, broadly define it as a multi-generational social unit constituted around real or imagined lines of blood descent from common ancestors. The latter can be either

male or female, although descent has historically been more commonly traced through the father (patriarchal) than the mother (matriarchal). Families are invariably hierarchical in respect of age and gender with old men at the apex of power and young women at the bottom. They may also be segregated historically by race and/or class where slaves or servants are owned or employed by or within the family unit. In the latter instance, the race and/or class divide overrides age and gender so that, for example, senior black men and women are reduced to "boys" and "girls" through servitude in a white household at the beck and call of even the youngest daughter. The family performs both ideological and economic functions, inducting the new generation into the norms and values of the society and organizing them into productive units.

The concept of gender questions the assumed "natural" foundation of the family unit by distinguishing between sexual difference (biology) and its overlaying cultural elaborations/constructions (gender) to argue that the family is an ideological construct. As such, it is designed to perpetuate the power of men in general, and senior men in particular, over all women and children by constituting the latter's subservient positions within the family unit as preordained by biology and hence as "natural" and immutable. By disputing this claim and arguing that the supposedly "natural" attributes of men and women cannot be attributed to their biology, but are rather culturally constructed and infinitely mutable, gender reduces the heterosexual family unit to a historical artifact and makes it possible to imagine its reconstitution in an infinite variety of alternative ways. Indeed, the family is seen as a primary socializing force for gender identities and hence a key site of struggle if those identities are to be reformed. Although, in its academic incarnation, gender theory emphasizes the constructed nature of both female and male identities and their interdependence, in much popular political discourse gender operates as a synonym for "women" and underpins political programmes seeking greater rights and freedom for women.

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