
UNIT 13 GENDER AS A BASIS OF DISCRIMINATION

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13.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- discuss the meaning and definition of sex role;
- elaborate reasons for sex role stereotypes;
- discuss various theories regarding sex roles;
- outline the sexual division of labour and gender stratification; and
- explain the subjugation of women in different societies.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Every human being is a man or woman by sex. The part played by an individual in the course of social interaction is called as "role" Men and women play different roles. Sex role is the role played by an individual due to his or her sex. Later there is the development of sex role stereotype. In a male dominated society the men's roles are given a higher status and whatever a woman does is rated as low.

The anatomical differences were for a long time viewed as intimately related to differences in emotional and intellectual capacities, as well as differences in physical abilities. The

tasks and roles assigned to men and women in our own cultural tradition were assumed to be correlated highly with anatomically based aptitudes.

Patriarchy, means to serve the interest of the male sex. The sex role division is such that men are for production and women for reproduction. The unpaid, unseen household work is considered lower than the work done by men outside the house. Women are sexually vulnerable; therefore many societies put a lot of restrictions on them and many rituals and taboos are linked to the various biological events in life.

13.2 THEORIES OF SEX ROLES

We will now discuss various aspects of the theories of sex roles.

13.2.1 Biological Theory of Sex Roles

George Peter Murdock sees biological differences between men and women as the basis for sexual division of labour in society. Men have more physical strength and therefore they take such roles which require physical strength. Women can bear children and therefore they are associated with activities that are related to the raising of family.

Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox say that biological factors programme human behaviour though there may be cultural variations. They call it "human biogrammer" and there is some difference in the biogrammer of men and women.

Talcott Parsons characterizes women's role in the family as "expressive" which provides emotional support and warmth necessary for the socialization of the child. The man's role on the other hand is "instrumental" as the bread winner of the society. Both the expressive and instrumental roles are essential and they complement each other.

13.2.2 Sociological Theory of Sex Roles

According to a British sociologist Ann Oakley, sex is a biological term and gender is a cultural term. Gender refers to the sex of an individual after socialization.

Oakley argues that division of labour is not universal. She disagrees with Murdock. She regards it as a myth that women are biologically incapable to carry out heavy and demanding work. She also noted that employment of mothers is not detrimental to the children's development. According to her Parson's explanation of woman's "expressive role" and men's instrumental role, is for the convenience of men.

Emile Durkhiem, one of the founding fathers of sociology, said that in the primitive societies men and women were fairly similar in strength and intelligence and only as civilization progressed new codes evolved which restricted women from working outside home. Thus they became weaker and less intelligent.

The process of socialisation begins the moment a person is born. Sex roles are learned activities as children are socialized into these roles. Thus sex role allocation is a social phenomenon and is in fact learned behaviour. Women for centuries have been socialized into passive roles.

13.3 PERSPECTIVES ON THE EVOLUTION OF SEX DIFFERENCES

The earlier anthropologists like Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown etc. had under valued the role of women. All their studies were centered round males. Moreover, it was through the males in the village they got information about community life as well as the role of women in the community. This male bias was criticized by Margaret Mead, who studied primitive societies of Pacific Ocean Islands.

In the era between the late 1930's and the mid 1960's cross cultural data on the sexual division of labour very quickly dispelled the idea that men (or women) are unable to do some tasks assigned to women (or men) in our culture. Knitting, weaving and cooking sometimes fall into the male province while such things as pearl diving, canoe handling and house building turn out to be women's work in some settings. A noted anthropologist

Margaret Mead's pioneering research on tribes in the Pacific raised these issues. She found that sex roles and personality in these tribes were contrary to what are found in the western world. Hence she raised doubts about the biological basis of these roles.

However gender differences do exist in the simple society in the hunting and gathering societies. Hunting is a male activity because it involves long travelling and women find it difficult, due to their reproductive and nurturing function. But the women in these societies work very hard and are good and skilled in discriminating between edible and inedible plants and fruits, reading the tracks of animals etc. Hence the actual physical labour of women is no different from that of men. Yet dominance of males in these societies lead to ascribing different statuses for work.

Freidle notes that tasks assigned to men carry higher prestige though the same tasks done by women in other societies do not carry the same prestige. This is primarily due to male dominance which results from the fact that man's life is more public and woman's life is more private due to child bearing and child rearing. Men thus claim greater rights than women to distribute goods outside the domestic group. When man hunts the flesh is shared by the total community but when a woman gathers by way of food it is shared only by the family members. Men have greater control over exchange of valued goods.

Check Your Progress 1

Note : Compare your answer with one at the end of the unit:

- 1) Say True or False
 - a) Men and women play different roles (T/F)
 - b) Gender is a biological term. (T/F)
 - c) The process of socialization begins the moment a person is born. (T/F)
- 2) Fill in the blanks
 - a)sees biological differences between men and women as basis of division of labour.
 - b)studied primitive societies of Pacific Ocean Islands.

13.4 COLONIALISM AND DEVELOPMENT

We live today in a global world based on complex political and economic relationship. Although most of the colonized world achieved independence by the 1960's, the economic domination of the capitalist world system that was initiated during the colonial period had not been significantly altered. In the late twentieth century an imbalanced relationship between the countries of the industrial or "developed" world and the developing or Third World remains. How have the men and women of the developing world experienced the continuing impact of the penetration of capitalism and the integration of their societies into the global economy.

In many parts of the world, originally egalitarian gender relationships have been replaced by more hierarchical ones, and women have consequently been marginalized, removed from the positions of economic and political decision making that they held in the pre colonial period.

If women got any attention it was as mothers and housekeepers in family planning projects and in training programs for home economics. Male centered development programs often resulted in new division of labour between the sexes, by which the dependency of women on men greatly increased.

Greater female dependency on men has also resulted from the process of urbanization, from the shift from household to factory and industry, from the introduction of cash crops. In some societies women have lost their traditional rights to land and men, though continuing to rely on women's traditional assistance, claim the entire income from the cash production export crops for themselves.



Women sweeping the compound clean
Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

13.5 IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT ON WOMEN

Indian demographers have proposed several hypotheses to explain the declining sex-ratio, and five of these suggest important contributing factors.

- i) Females are under enumerated in the Indian census.
- ii) The general mortality rates of females are higher than those of males.
- iii) Indian families prefer sons and female infants are consequently neglected leading to higher female mortality.
- iv) Frequent and excessive child bearing has an adverse effect on the health of women.
- v) Certain diseases have higher incidence in women.

This raises the whole question of attitudes towards females and the role of women in Indian society.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that a preference for boys lies at the heart of the inferior status of women and girls in India and many other countries. Equally disturbing are the increasing indications that when public services – ranging from medical and health facilities to agricultural extension projects – are provided in the course of development efforts, they may either reinforce the traditional male biases or diminish the status that women enjoyed in the traditional society.

13.5.1 Female Infanticide and Child Neglect in Rural India

It is beyond doubt that systematic indirect female infanticide exists today in India in addition to the sex selective abortion (i.e. female foeticide) and female infanticide (killing of a child under one year of age). It was found that in certain villages in Rajasthan there were no female children. In Salem district in Tamil Nadu female infanticide is openly practiced.

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The indirect female infanticide accomplished by nutritional and health care deprivation of

children results in higher mortality rates of daughters than sons. In several parts of rural India there is a strong preference for sons. Sons are considered as economic assets, they are needed for farming and for income through remittances if they leave the village etc. Sons play important roles in local power struggles over rights to land and water. Sons stay with the family after their marriage and thus maintain the parents in their old age, daughters marry out and cannot contribute to the maintenance of their natal households. Sons bring in dowries with their brides, daughters drain family wealth with their required dowries and constant flow of gifts to their family of marriage after the wedding. Sons, among Hindus are also needed to perform rituals which protect the family. After the death of the father, daughters cannot perform such rituals. The extreme son preference is more prevalent among upper castes and classes than the lower castes and classes.

13.5.2 Gender Household and Kinship

Let us now take the example of Taiwanese women. These women marry into the household of their husbands. According to Wolf a Taiwanese wife must pay homage to her husband's ancestors, obey her husband and mother in law, and bear children for her husband's patrilineage. After Taiwanese wife gives birth to a son, her status in the household begins to change and it improves during her life course as she forges what Wolf calls a uterine family – a family based on the powerful relationship between mothers and sons. When a Taiwanese wife becomes a mother in law she achieves the greatest power and status within her husband's household.

13.5.3 Views of Engels Leacock

According to Engels Leacock the early communal society was self sufficient. Men and women work together and neither of them were dependent on each other. Thus there was a reciprocal division of labour. Also there was no distinction between the public world of men's work and private world or women's household work. Both the sexes produced the goods necessary for livelihood. Thus in this type of society, goods were produced only for consumption to satisfy everyday needs. Later on as the process of industrialization began goods were produced on a large scale, concepts of trading and exchange became common. Slowly in order to maximize their profits the capitalists started exploitation of the women and workers. This led to the isolation of family as a separate unit and the women were then confined to their families and thus the place of work and residence was separated.

13.5.4 Equality and Inequality: The Sexual Division of Labour and Gender Stratification

In most societies certain tasks are predominantly assigned to men while others are assigned to women. In European and American cultures it used to be considered "natural" for men to be the family bread winners, women were expected to take care of the home and raise the children. An underlying assumption of this division of labour was that men were dominant because their contribution to the material well being of the family was more significant than that of women. Women were dependent on men and therefore automatically sub-ordinate to them.

The "naturalness" of this division of labour has been called into question as women increasingly enter the labour force. However has this significantly altered the status of women within their families and in the wider society? Or has it simply meant that women are now working a double day, performing domestic tasks that are negatively valued and not considered work once they get home from their "real" day's work? If employment enhances the social position of women, why is it that women still earn only 65% of what men earn for the same work? Why is there still a high degree of occupational segregation by gender?

What precisely is the relationship between the economic roles of women and gender stratification?

Cross cultural research on the sexual division of labour attempts not only to describe the range of women's productive activities in societies with different modes of subsistence, but also to assess the implications of these activities on the status of women.

13.5.5 The Cultural Construction of Gender

We all live in a world of symbols that assign meaning and value to the categories of male

and female. Despite several decades of consciousness raising in the United States, advertising on television and in the print media perpetuates sexual stereotypes. Although "house beautiful" ads are less prominent as women are increasingly shown in workplace contexts, body beautiful messages continue to be transmitted. In children's cartoons women are still helpless victims who the fearless male hero must rescue. Toys are targeted either for little boys or little girls and are packed appropriately in colours and materials culturally defined as either masculine or feminine. Argues that women, because of their reproductive roles, are universally viewed as being closer to nature while men are linked with culture. She defines culture in terms of human consciousness including the products of the same like, technology which is used to control and harness nature. That which is cultural and subject to human manipulation is assigned more worth than that which is natural, hence women and women's roles are degraded or devalued, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What does the cross cultural research on the sexual division of labour aim at? Give your answer in about ten lines.

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- 2) Why is there a strong preference of sons in the North India? Give your answer in about ten lines.

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3) What were the observations of Engels Leacock in the early communal society? Give your answer in about ten lines.

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13.5.6 Women and Domestic Work

In virtually all countries and among all classes, women have lost ground relative to men.

Oakley reports that one of the features of housewifery that women value is the feeling of autonomy. Just because housewives express their experiences in terms of enjoying being their own boss does not mean that their condition of work can be analyzed in terms of a high degree of autonomy. Firstly there is the prescription for certain kinds of feed for certain occasions. Secondly the food is to be ready within a specific time. Thirdly, the control is exerted by the preferences of the consumer which dictate the exact variant of the dinner to be served.

13.5.7 Impact of Industrialization and Urbanization

On the other hand working couples in an urban society (since spouses need each other help more) have learned to share and cooperate in many ways. Men whose work shifts are different from those of their wives often cared for children while their wives worked. Husbands also helped their wives with the household chores but the subtle discrimination between the two sexes continues.

13.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen how there is gender bias or subtle discrimination against women in various fields in the different parts of the world mainly in patriarchal societies which serves the interest of the male sex.

13.7 KEY WORDS

- Stereotype** : A fixed form , character or image.
- Patriarchy** : Male headed family and the descent is reckoned in the male line.
- Socialization** : The basic social process through which an individual becomes integrated into a social group by learning the group’s culture and his rôle in the group.
- Horticultural Society** : Society where the occupation is growing flowers, vegetables, fruits and plants.
- Demographers** : A person studying the science dealing with statistics of human population including size, births, deaths etc.
- Mortality rate** : Death rate
- Bias** : Prejudice, leaning of the mind, an opinion before there is a reason for it.

13.8 FURTHER READINGS

Caroline B. Bettell, Carolyn F. Sargent (ed.) (1993), *Gender in Cross Cultural Perspective*, New Jersey Prentice Hall.

13.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) True
b) False
c) True
- 2) a) George Peter Murdock
b) Margaret Mead

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Cross cultural research on the sexual division of labour attempts not only to describe the range of women's productive activities in societies with different modes of subsistence, but also to assess the implication of these activities on the status of women.
- 2) In the rural North India there is a strong preference for sons. Sons are considered as economic assets, they are needed for farming, for income through remittances if they leave the village. Sons play important roles in the local power struggles. Sons stay with their parents after their marriage and maintain the parents in their old age. Sons bring dowries with their brides. Sons are also needed to perform rituals after the death of the father.
- 3) Engels Leacock observed that in early communal society, the division of labour between the sexes was reciprocal and the wife and her children were not dependent on the husband. Distinction did not exist between a public world of men's work and a private world of women's household service. The large collective household was the community and both the sexes worked to produce goods necessary for livelihood. The exploitation of women began with the emergence of individual family as an isolated unit and women's labour was considered as a private service in the context of the family.