
UNIT 15 GENDER STATUS AND POWER

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit would help in the process of understanding:

- the nature of gender relations both in terms of production, and reproduction issues, and
- the role of social institutions in the equity issues.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

All over the world women are denied equal access with men to opportunities with men to opportunities for personal growth and social development in education, employment, marriage and the family, professional and political life. While women in India share many of their disabilities with women in the developed countries, their experience of discrimination is more extensive because of sex segregated character of society, the conditions of poverty and the traditional value system.

The understanding of the nature and bases of gender relations and the that of women's lives, their concerns, and perceptions necessarily entail a consideration of the dimension of power. In fact, the entire question of the status or position of women in a has often been viewed as hinging on the issue of how much power women as members of their sex have vis-à-vis men. Power has been interpreted in a variety of ways: it may refer to autonomy, influence, power to decide for others, ability to manipulate, institutionalized positions in the authority structure of a community, supernatural power to harm or bless others and so on.

There is nearly consensus among the scholars engaged in cross-cultural research on gender that central to the structure of women's decision making in any society is the structuring of production and reproduction in society, the details of which are discussed below:

15.2 GENDER INEQUALITY: ISSUES OF REPRODUCTION

We now turn to various issues of gender inequalities such as motherhood, heredity, fertility and so on.

15.2.1 Motherhood

Motherhood is the central fact of female existence because it is the most authentically biological experience that differentiates a woman from man. A woman's role in the reproduction of human beings far outweighs that of a man. It is invariably a woman who mothers. Motherhood and mothering are usually perceived as naturally related. This bringing forth of new life and its sustenance, so essential to human survival, paradoxically, become instruments of subordination. Maternal responsibility is used as an alibi to exclude a woman from power, authority, decision and a participatory role in public life. Further, motherhood and mothering are not controlled by her.

Glancing specifically at the situation of India women, Krishnaraj argues that what was, originally, a source of women's power, viz., her procreative role has rendered her powerless, that is specially subject to male domination. Perceived as a field in possession of the owner of seed (read semen), a woman's motherhood renders her specially susceptible to male control and domination. Deprived of minimum safety nets such as nourishment, safe birthing, adequate anti-natal care, child care facilities, motherhood renders working Indian women, specially in poor rural areas, extremely vulnerable. State sponsored incentives to motherhood both as ideology and material help are also questioned as patriarchal, denying women the ability to render motherhood as materially empowering.

15.2.2 Heredity

From ancient times the process of human reproduction in India has been conceived of in terms of male seed germinating in the female field. This can be seen in texts used during rituals of marriage and other crises of life many of which are of vedic origin, and the great epic of Mahabharata. The law books, particularly Manu Smriti, use it as the basis of determining the status of the offspring of mixed unions and for assessing the propriety of the types of mixed unions.

The conception of the process of human reproduction seems to have formed part of both the literate tradition and people's consciousness through the ages. Leela Dube argues that though medical science as expressed in Ayurveda recognised a woman's contribution to heredity, it was propagated in popular culture that the child carried the man's blood, as semen was believed to a product of his blood. In many matrilineal tribes, the superior reproductive role of a woman is recognised.

The underlying implications of the metaphor of conception as the seed sown in the soil are used for: biological symbolization of descent, to understand the nature of relations between the sexes and their relative rights and positions. Two things emerge from this. First, an essentially unequal relationship is reflected in an emphasised through the use of these symbols; and second, the symbolism is utilizing the culture to underplay the significance of women's contribution to biological reproduction. While tying her down to the supreme duty of motherhood, this symbolism is instrumental in denying her the natural right over her own children. Also in creating and sustaining an ideology in which strategic resources of both types – material as well as human remain in the hands of men.

15.2.2 Fertility Performance

Allowing for variations of behaviour across regions and between higher and lower caste, it is generally true that in India, a woman's sense of personal growth is related to her fertility performance and the social standing she achieves as a mother of sons. High fertility in sex segregated society affects the status of women in several ways. First, the birth of the first child at a very early age and repeated pregnancies combined with malnutrition leads to high maternal mortality and fetal wastage. Second, women are so completely tied down by child care, house work and agricultural labour that few options are open to them for their personal growth apart from their main role of wife-mother. Third, since such high value is attached to the reproductive function, formal education tends to be seen as irrelevant for girls who are destined for marriage and motherhood at an early age. This pattern of early marriage and the attitude to female education is largely responsible for the high female illiteracy rate.

15.3 GENDER INEQUALITY: ISSUES OF PRODUCTION

Man's rights over the woman do not relate only to her sexuality and reproductive capacity, but encompass her productive capacities and labour power also. Just as he is entitled to have control over her sexuality and over the product of her sexuality, he is entitled to have control over her labour and also the proceeds of her labour. The extent of her actual participation in the process of production does not decide the worth of her contribution for she is a dependent as far as the productive resources are concerned and works as a family labourer. She is perceived as a dependent in respect of shelter also, for it is the husband's right, both by law and custom, to establish a matrimonial home. The notion that man is the provider of shelter and staple food is firmly rooted in the minds of the people. It is not surprising therefore that a woman's role in cultivation and other over her earning for the she lives in her man's house and eats his produce even though all the while she also earns. This logic is applicable even where the woman is earning through wage labour. The non-recognition or gross under recognition of woman's contribution to economy is not unconnected with the patriarchal ideology being propagated through various methods.

Because of occupational segregation based on a sex-typed division of labour, high proportion of educated women are found in such female occupations as nursing, teaching and clerical work; less number of women seek career in engineering, technology and science, in politics and administration. There are several reasons why this pattern of occupational segregation and the exclusion for women from positions of executive authority and leadership are maintained. First, socialisation in the family and education in the school reinforce "gender roles", that is, cultural/definitions of the traits and behaviour that are considered appropriate for men and women. In school, girls are encouraged to aspire to a limited range of occupations which are believed to be "feminine" and compatible with the demands of their primary gender roles of housewife and mother.

Also, the increase in the number of women in the profession and the service sector has not lead to sexual equality in the distribution of occupational positions having power, status and privilege.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What are the key reproductive issues that affect gender relations in Indian society?

Use about 4 lines for your answer.

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- 2) What are the influencing factors for leading more women into occupations like nursing, teaching etc. Tick the right answer(s).

i) less work at home

ii) easier to get a job

iii) makes the household more viable economically

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- a) Socialisation b) Education c) Media d) Culture
- 1) only a
 - 2) only b
 - 3) only c
 - 4) only d
 - 5) all

15.4 ROLE OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

We now examine gender relative to caste, religion and marriage.

M. N. Srinivas remarks: "It (the changing position of India women) has many facets and generalization is well nigh impossible because of the existence of considerable variation among regions, between rural and urban areas, among classes and finally among different religious ethnic and caste groups. Historian Romila Thapar also refers to the same predicament when she remarks: "within the India sub-continent there have been infinite variations on the status of women diverging according to cultural milieu. family, structure, class, caste, property rights and morals".

15.4.1 Gender and Caste

In order to properly assess the position of women in ancient society, a brief reference to stratificatory system as expressed through varna and caste system is necessary. Features like caste endogamy as mechanism of recruiting and retaining control over the labour and sexuality of women exist. Concepts of purity and pollution segregating groups and also regulating mobility of women are very crucial. Caste not only determines social division of labour but also sexual division of labour. Certain tasks have to be performed by women while certain other tasks are meant for men. In agriculture, for instance, women can engaged themselves in water regulation, transplanting, weeding but not in ploughing. Also with upward mobility of the group, women are immediately withdrawn from the outside work. Overt rules prohibiting women from specific activities and denying certain rights did exist. But more subtle expression of patriarchy was through symbolism giving messages of inferiority of women through legends highlighting the self-sacrificing, self-effacing pure image of women and through the ritual practices which day in and day out emphasised the dominant role of a woman as a faithful wife and devout mother.



Village women discuss matters of status and power

Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

The linking of women and shudras together is one more evidence of the low position of women. Prescription and prohibitions for shudras and women were same on many occasions. The prohibition of the sacred thread ceremony for both women and shudras, similar punishment for killing a shudra or a woman, denial of religious privileges etc. are some of illustrations which indicate how caste and gender get entrenched.

15.4.2 Gender and Religion

In most of the religions, we find the great philosophical and theological teaching about the essential sameness of human nature, of the intrinsic worth of all human beings as everyone, woman just as much as man, is endowed with a soul, a divine spark, or is part of the same atman. This lofty ideal is often of very little practical consequence, however, in actual practice, much of the ethical teaching and the religious counsels reflect the social position of women in a particular environment. As a result, we also possess many sacred texts which relegate women's place to a lower or secondary rank to man. Such texts are frequently quoted as the spiritual basis for the legitimization of women's low status through the ages; they are the sacred authority which teaches that woman's status has to be low and unequal to that of man.

One important point in understanding the value structure in Indian society is the dual concept of the female in Hindu philosophy; on the one hand, woman is fertile, benevolent, bestower of prosperity; on the other hand she is considered aggressive, malevolent and destructive. This dual character manifests in the goddesses also, as there are dangerous, aggressive, malevolent goddesses like Kali and Durga; there are equally important goddesses like Laxmi, Saraswati, Mariamman who are benevolent. In short, the value structure by presenting the dual character of women seems to have been successful in creating a myth that India women possess power, may be not in visible terms. However, it is a very valuable concept in understanding the seemingly high and really inferior position of women in India. Hence, we have the paradoxical situation that in some religious teachings, an idealised exaltation of women in her role as mother and wife occurs; in some instances, an ideal of woman in her eternal essence is projected when in actual social life subjugation is woman's common lot.

Today, with an altogether different situation in society, the religions, are faced with an entirely new challenge. Since the social economic and political emancipation of women has become widely accepted, new pressures from the social environment are affecting all the religious traditions and the inadequacy of their traditional teaching regarding the general status or image of woman is being fundamentally questioned.

15.4.3 Gender and Marriage Regulations

The concept of anuloma and pratiloma marriage by definition denigrate women. A marriage where a boy of upper caste marries a girl of lower caste is approved and called anuloma, while marriage of women ritually pure groups with men of lower ritual status were considered pratiloma. Most serious punishments like excommunication and even death could be evoked for transgressing the norms. Physical mobility is also restricted through caste norms. The significant symbol of the low status of women in society is that the women of lower castes are accessible to men to higher status, while there is a very severe punishment for men of lower castes who dare to approach any women of higher groups.

Marriage at an early date, marriage within the caste and even in the subcaste, prohibition of pratiloma, marriage where a woman of higher caste marries a man of lower caste, marriage as a sacrament whereby a woman is bound in wedlock till she dies, were all practices which suggest the control of sexuality.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) How did the institution of caste contribute to unjust gender relations in India? Use about 5 lines for your answer.

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15.5 LET US SUM UP

In order to have better understanding of the present social structure and position of women therein, it is imperative to know the operation of various factors and institutions moulding the society. Women's sexuality is the site of power, desire and the disavowal of desire. Sex discrimination is fundamentally unjust, and an offense against human dignity and an infringement of human rights. The status of women is therefore important from the viewpoint of both human rights and social justice and its implications for social progress and development.

15.6 KEY WORDS

- Gender** : Socially determined expectations for what it means to be male and the female. Gender is one element in a larger stratification system in which individuals and groups are ranked according to their access to valued resources in society.
- Gender Inequality** : Gender inequality refers to the distribution of resources within society by gender. This concept describes the relative advantages and disadvantages of men and women in society.
- Status** : Popularly employed as a synonym for prestige, but in sociological and anthropological usage, it can mean a position in a social structure. In role theory, the distinction between status and role is that between a social position and the behaviour expected of its incumbent.
- Power** : The ability to affect the behaviour of others, with or without their willingness to comply.

15.6 FURTHER READINGS

Desai Neera and Maithreyi Krishnaraj (1987). *Women and Society in India*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications

Dube Leela, Eleanor Leacock and Shirley Ardener (eds.) (1986). *Visibility and Power*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Rajan Sunder Rajeshwar ed. (1999) *Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

15.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The key reproductive issues that affect gender relations are: motherhood, heredity and fertility performance. The procreative role which is a source of women's power paradoxically renders women powerless and subject to subordination. Similarly through conscious propagation of seed and earth (field) ideology, equal reproductive role of woman is denied in India society.
- 2) All

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Caste not only determined social division of labour but also sexual division of labour. Caste system had clearly defined roles for both men and women. Through caste endogamy, it recruited and retained control over the labour and sexuality of women. The concepts like purity and pollution helped segregate groups and regulate mobility of women.