Unit 10

The Household as a Cooperative—Conflicting Unit

Contents

10.1 Introduction
10.2 The Socio-economic Dynamics of the Household
10.3 Capabilities, Well-being, Agency and Perception
10.4 Social Technology, Cooperation and Conflicts
10.5 Conclusion
10.6 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

Unit 10 has the objective of introducing a critical thought process in the minds of students on the basis of research in the field of family and household as operational sites of human behaviour. After going through this unit, you should be able to see that ‘household’ in this unit connotes a co-residential unit of the family. Also you will be able to:

- See the household as a workshop of family life;
- Understand that functionalist and conflict perspectives have contributed to the cooperative-conflict perspective and that feminist thought has substantially contributed to this perspective;
- Understand that a household is not a unified and undifferentiated category;
- Explore the idea that sex, reproduction and economic considerations impinge on household members differently according to age, sex, gender relations and kin ties;
- Find out how state impinges upon the household and its members; and
- See that the cooperative-conflict perspective initially focussed on the household economy alone but we are extending the argument in this unit to include reproduction, state, religion, community and violence.

10.1 Introduction

In Unit 9 we have seen that the household and family are organised along the lines of residence and kinship respectively. The two may or may not coincide with each other at all times and places. Desai (1964) and Shah (1973) have shown us that the census of India analysed the household data on the basis of the numerical size of the household and arrived at the conclusion that the joint family was giving way to nuclear family in India. This was challenged by examining the numerical data from the dimension of kinship and jointness of the family.

In a somewhat similar manner, feminists, and particularly feminist economists challenged the conventional assumptions in economic theory that all members in a family are identical for purposes of economic analysis. We have seen that like Marxists, radical feminists saw the family as an exploitative and oppressive institution that was in turn exploited by the capitalist structure. But liberal and socialist feminism did not, unlike radical feminism, think that the family was dispensable and technology could liberate women by taking over the reproductive functions. To them, the family was the chief institution of patriarchy. The alternative institution did not surface as a viable possibility, despite efforts such as the 'kibbutz'.

The family has been the bone of contention in feminist thought. Socialist feminists did think that the family and reproduction tied women down. Their resolve was for women to move into the public sphere and be like men to be equal with them both inside and outside the domestic sphere. Women's entry into the public sphere was to prove that women were as good as men. This would not keep them reduced to the status of the 'second sex', to use Beauvior's (1972) expression. While socialist feminists' route to equality with men was through the entry of women into the public sphere, liberal feminists wanted liberty, justice and equal rights as citizens. Wollstonecraft (1792) argued against the wife's dependency within marriage and being an ornamental symbol of man's success rather than his partner. She spoke against the suspension of the very legal existence of the wife, or at least her incorporation and consolidation into that of the husband. It was in this context that Wollstonecraft insisted that women had an independent right to education, property and the protection of the civil law. The woman's rights as a citizen were needed to ensure that women were not forced into marriage through economic necessity, and wives were not dependent on the goodwill of their husbands.

Reproduction and mothering roles of women in the family do not easily lend themselves into the public/ private dichotomy when citizenship rights are at stake. But motherhood as a form of citizenship which Wollstonecraft argues for, does not solve the problem of male privilege in formal political and legal power while leaving women as dependents of men. The dilemma between motherhood and citizenship rights without being dependent on men is termed as 'the Wollstonecraft dilemma' (Pateman, 1988). Wollstonecraft, like liberal feminists today, was seeking citizenship for women on gender-neutral grounds, at the same time recognizing their specific qualities and roles, especially mothering, within a framework that allowed women to become full citizens only by being like men. Today feminists look at difference among women obtained in class, race and community differentials, as interfering with the project of gender equality. Thus questions of inequality between men and women cross-cut those with class, race and community (caste and religious). See ICSSR 1974 for a comprehensive coverage of gender inequalities in India. It is in the above context that intra-family differences gained privilege in research. We shall learn about this perspective below.

10.2 The Socio-economic Dynamics of the Household

The standard literature on economic development was, until the 1970s, frequently reluctant to consider the position of women as a separate problem of importance of its own. Gender-based analysis was often seen as unnecessarily divisive. In economic development studies, many writers insisted on keeping the deprivation of entire families (actually meaning households) as the right focus of studying misery and for seeking remedies, thus placing households in the class-structure and in the economic strata for analysing the poverty-prosperity range in a given setting.

As mentioned in 10.1 above, feminist thought, especially feminist economics literature was critical of standard economic development studies in late

1970s and early 1980s. Besides, socio-economic development instead of economic growth driven development also emerged as an alternative perspective and possibility around the same period. The challenge to the modernist project was to incorporate a range of socio-political and cultural variations rather than take societies/ communities as monolithic, undifferentiated categories. Gender sensitive development literature (Moser 1993) too critiqued the undifferentiated analysis in economic development literature as it evolved its analysis from the women in development (WID) approach to the gender and development (GAD) approach.

Though the non-gender view may have a plausibility in some contexts, in others, income and class categories are over-aggregative and even misleading. Gender is a crucial parameter in social and economic analysis in relation to variables such as class, income, ownership, occupation and household status. It is now well-known that women have a lower status within and outside the household compared to men; even in women-headed households, women face adversity in economic terms. Women-headed households constitute a majority of the poor households. Feminisation of poverty speaks about the gender dimension of poverty. Thus concentrating on household poverty without looking at the gender dimension is misleading in understanding the causation, consequences and relationships that work in the poorer households. Sen (1987) argued for promoting research incorporating the gender dimension order to arrive at a better understanding of the household dynamics. You can refer Sen (1993) where he has taken up three different analytical views of the family (actually meaning, household) and evaluated their contributions and shortcomings and privileged the cooperative-conflict perspective.

Though the family was criticized by Marxists as a selfish and individualising institution, there exists contrary evidence where love, care and sacrifice/ selflessness, conflict and violence go on simultaneously in the family. We have seen above that there has not yet been an alternative to the institution of the family though its size and structure, including the normative structure has not remained the same over time (see Patel 2005 for the changing unchangeable of the family i.e. that aspect of family which is considered to be beyond changes, such as, the norms, values etc. In this light let us consider the three kinds of assumptions about the family discussed by Sen (1993). The Glue-together family (household) assumes the family as a unit which takes decisions about income, occupation, distribution and allocation among its members and other expenditure heads. In such a view, there are no individual decisions, individual utility, etc. but only family decisions. This model aggregates all individuals in the household into a unit and adds other households in a society to be analysed only according to their income, expenditure, property ownership, etc. disregarding age, sex, kinship and relationship differentials which are socially and culturally organised. The latter constraints are also stretched and bended as household members strategise even while acting in typified ways.

The second case, Sen takes up is based on Becker’s (1981) assumption that the household is ‘the super-trader family’. Becker views the family from an economic approach where each individual in the household is maximising individual utilities, through their activities including entering into marriage and reproduction, besides everyday, routine behaviour. Becker ignores that this utility maximisation is not carried out uncompromisingly – without constraints of propriety, norm and convention (see Patel 1994 for more on Becker and his thesis of ‘a baby or a car’ in the socially organised and situated fertility behaviour in rural Rajasthan). The ‘bargaining model’ brings into the arena of the household, principles of rational self-interest — a needed demystification of the ‘veil of enchanted relationships’ which obscures family dynamics. The relational character of the family — household is eclipsed though, in focusing on family members’ actions solely in their capacity as individuals. Perhaps one could see ‘negotiation’ as a key principle in the arena of the family-household, where men and women perceive themselves as operating in and through relationships, and where, using the structural gaps and ambivalences in the system, pushing the limits, drawing upon the available alternate conceptions, women work their way through kinship structures which are both oppressive and — particularly in the absence of state responsibility for social security — supportive, providing them their primary security network (Ganesh 2001:29-30).

The third assumption Sen takes up is that of ‘the despotic family’. This approach assumes that the despotic head of the family takes all decisions and others just obey. Sen points to the literature produced on ‘status of women’ and ‘feminisation of poverty’ which shows a variance from ‘the despotic family’ view. Besides, it ignores the constraints of propriety and norms which too are not uniform for entire societies. For gradual shifts in the position of different members of the household during their life course, see Patel 1994 (chapters 6 and 7) on how women are able to negotiate their fertility preferences after a certain stage in their life. The ability to negotiate and decide does not remain static but varies over time and in different permutations and combinations with differential experiences of the household members and invocation of norms, constraints and propriety. It is here that the household is visible in its cooperative-conflict unit form (see Sen 1993 for capabilities and comparisons by gender in health, education, survival, including sex-ratio and such other human capital development parameters).

Reflection and Action 10.1

Interview 5 women of different age groups 16-20, 25-30, 35-40, 45-50, and 55-65.

Ask them about the different roles they play in their household; socially, economically, in decision making. Write a note of about 5 pages on “Role and Status of Women in an Indian Household” comparing the data collected through the interview. Share your note with other students at your Study Centre.

The systematically inferior position of women inside or outside the household in many societies points to the necessity of treating gender as a force of its own in development analysis. The economic hardship of women-headed households is a problem both of female deprivation and of family poverty. Furthermore, females and males in the same family may well have quite divergent predicaments, and this can make the position of women in the poorer families particularly precarious (on female-headed households see Gulati 1981 Profiles in Female Poverty).

Over the last few decades, there has been substantial documentation from a women’s studies perspective of the gender bias in the household which lead to measurable negative outcomes for women. In view of the dominance of patrilineal kinship over large parts of India, it is an obvious step to ascribe to it the devaluation of daughters and the son-preference which are salient features in contemporary Indian families. But this is too broad a generalisation to capture nuances and retain a cutting edge. It is necessary to scrutinize the family-household to see in what ways and to what extent it is the site for working out of rules and principles not derived from descent or even from kinship. There is a need to keep in mind the distinction between household as a site of gender bias, family as an agency for socialisation of members to accept and transmit the bias and as a monitoring agency responsible for punitive action, and the ideology of the descent system as a source of devaluation of females, insofar as it permeates the family – household. The household as a concrete institution is only partly constituted by patrilineal kinship. Other traditional and modern institutions contribute to the articulation of patriarchy. These include caste-based institutions and their ideology, the state and its policies, religious institutions, economy, media — thus, the culture and society at large. Insofar as they assume and project certain ideas of male and female, these inevitably percolate into the matrix of the family- household. The source of these ideas is not necessarily the descent system. Patriarchy has often been used to describe a society which at various major institutional levels codes and expresses male dominance and in such a society, kinship is often but not necessarily patrilineal. There is no doubt that entitlements to familial resources are based largely on kinship rules, and in this regard, patriliny is unbalanced and works to the disadvantage of women (see unit 6 of ESO-02 Society in India of IGNOU's B.A. Sociology Programme). But the specific character of patriliny in India also reflects what could be called cultural concepts and values such as the idea of marriage as destiny, the spiritual merit of *dana* particularly *kanyadana* ('gift of the virgin'), the auspiciousness of the married woman and the inauspiciousness of the widow, the *anuloma-pratiloma* rule of intercaste marriage, the idea of transformation (or 'transubstantiation' as it is sometimes called) of a woman's body upon marriage, and the sacramental character of her ritual incorporation into the affinal household. These are not inherent in patrilineal systems, but are specific to Hindu India and they have definite implications for women's life trajectories in the subcontinent. More critically, many aspects of the workings of the household, including what can be called familial ideology, are derived from the exigencies of caste (Ganesh 2002: 26-27).

There are also systematic differences among the developing countries in the survival rates of females vis-à-vis males. Asia has a sex ratio (female per 1000 male) of only 950, but Africa comes closer to Europe and North America with a sex ratio of 1020 indeed considerably higher than in sub-Saharan Africa. Even within Asia the sex ratio is higher than unity in some regions such as South east Asia (1001), but much lower in China, India, Bangladesh and west Asia (940) and in Pakistan (900). There is substantial variation within a given country: for example, in India the sex ratio varies from 870 and 880 in Haryana and Punjab to 1030 in Kerala. It is clear that had the average African sex ratio obtained in India, and then given the number of men; there would have been about 30 million more women in India today (see Sen 1988). The corresponding number of 'missing women' in China is about 30 million the cumulative contrast of sex specific mortality rates – not unrelated to social and economic inequalities between men and women-find expression in these simple statistics, which form something like the tip of an ice berg much of which is hard to observe. Later studies (Agnihotri 2000) and Bose and Shiva (200?) highlight the sharper unfavourable differences in sex ratio over time and regions in India.

There is no dearth of evidence on the gender discriminatory ethos in the contemporary scene. John Hoddinott (1996) contributes to the literature in this area. Presenting evidence from the Phillippines and Bangladesh, Hoddinott points out that nutritional adequacy at the household level correlates poorly with that at the level of the individual household member. The data he cites show that of the individuals comprising study households, a substantial proportion were subject to relatively low food intake even when aggregate levels of household nutrition were high, and further, that within households, food allocations favoured males over females. Disparities such as these have ofcourse been explained in terms of the social and cultural manifestations of gender discrimination. Hoddinott shows in his paper that there is another dimension involved as well.

In making his point, he invokes the economic principles of efficiency, equity and bargaining. Of these, the first makes for a distribution of food such that the household's nutritional resources accrue preferentially to its economically more productive members. This forms the basis of food allocations deliberately tilted in favour of males. Maximisation of the household's productivity and income is the rationale here. One implication of this, the author points out, is that school meals programmes targeted at girls can be thwarted when households 'compensate' by reducing the quantities of food given to girls at home and reallocate the 'surplus' to the family's economically more productive members. Gender discrimination in the household is thus overlaid with an economic rationale. But the principle of efficiency is not inexorable, for there are times when it is eclipsed by the principle of equity. Evidence from rural India suggests that the former is likely to operate less during seasons of plenty, at which time equity considerations are likely to come to the fore.

The third principle — bargaining — draws upon non-cooperative game theory. The advantage to household members when they pool their resources, Hoddinott (1996) says, is jeopardized when any member implicitly threatens to go for an 'outside option', i.e. an economic opportunity that is available outside of a familial pooling arrangement. That forms a bargaining lever for laying claim to a greater share of a household's food resources. This empirical problem of perception and communication is indeed important. On the other hand, it is far from obvious that the right conclusion to draw from this is the non-viability of the notion of personal welfare. There are considerable variations in the perceptions of individuality even within such a traditional society, and here the lack of perception of personal welfare is neither immutable nor particularly resistant to social development. Indeed the process of politicisation — including a political recognition of the gender issue — can itself bring about sharp changes in these perceptions.

The systematically inferior position of women inside and outside the household in many societies points to the necessity of treating gender as a force of its own in development analysis. The economic hardship of woman-headed households is a problem both of female deprivation and of family poverty. Furthermore, females and males in the same family may well have quite divergent predicaments, and this can make the position of women in the poorer families particularly precarious. To concentrate on family poverty irrespective of gender can be misleading in terms of both causation and consequences.

The fact that the relative deprivation of women vis-à-vis men is by no means uniform across the world does not reduce the importance of gender as a parameter of analysis. This variability is an important reason for giving serious attention to the causal antecedents of the contrasting deprivations. To take an extremely simple and crude example, it is clear that despite the evident biological advantages that women seem to have over men in survival and longevity (when there is some symmetry in the attention they receive on basic matters of life and death, such as nutrition, health care, and medical attention), there is nevertheless a remarkable preponderance of surviving men over surviving women in the population of less developed countries taken as a whole, in sharp contrast with the position of the more developed countries. Whereas there are about 106 women per 100 men in Europe and North America, there are only 97 women per 100 men in the developing countries as a whole. Since mortality and survival are not independent of care and neglect, and are influenced by social action and public policy, even this extremely crude perspective cannot fail to isolate gender as an important parameter in development studies.

It is, however difficult to translate this elementary recognition into practice and to find an adequate framework for the use of gender categories and sex specific information in social analysis. Sen (1990) asserts that the problem is far too complex and basic to be 'resolved' by any kind of simple model, but one could go some distance toward a better understanding of the problem by broadening the conceptual structure and the informational base of gender analysis in economic and social relations. He thus extends the income and distribution of resources within the household to incorporate the following elements in his analysis.

10.3 Capabilities, Well-being, Agency and Perception

Sen (1990) examines different theories of household economics such as standard models of "household production", "family allocations", or "equivalence scales" in capturing the coexistence of extensive conflicts and pervasive cooperation in household arrangements. But these too have an inadequate informational base and are particularly negligent of the influence of perceived interests and perceived contributions. In this light, not only are capabilities, well-being and agency important but so is perception regarding these qualities and such other attributes.

An alternative approach to 'cooperative-conflicts' is then sketched, identifying certain qualitative relation in the form of directional responses of the outcome to certain determining variables in the informational base. These relations are translated into a format of 'extended entitlements', based on sharpening the concept of 'entitlements' (already used in studying famines and deprivation of households) by incorporating notions of perceived legitimacy in intrahousehold divisions.

Each person has several identities. Being a man or a woman is one of them. Being a member of a family is another. Our understanding of our interests, obligations, objectives, and legitimate behaviour is influenced by the various — and sometimes conflicting — effects of these diverse identities. In some contexts the family identity may exert such a strong influence on our perceptions that we may not find it easy to formulate any clear notion of our own individual welfare. Based on empirical observations of the family-centred perception in some traditional societies (such as India), some authors have disputed the viability of the notion of personal welfare in those societies (Das and Nicholas 1981). It has often been observed that if a typical Indian rural woman was asked about her personal "welfare", she would find the question unintelligible, and if she was able to reply, she might answer the question in terms of her reading of the welfare of her family. The idea of personal welfare may not be viable in such a context. This happened not only with women but with men also. This was observed during the fieldwork among the elderly in Rajasthan (Shah, Patel and Lobo 1987). Neither men nor women found meaningful and relevant the questions on income (personal) and having a room for oneself. The nearest they could go to was personal expenses on items no one else in the household consumed, e.g. tobacco, snuff, opium etc.

Insofar as intrafamily divisions involved significant inequalities in the allotment of food, medical attention, health care, and the like (often unfavorable to the well being- even survival- of women), the lack of perception of personal interests combined with a great concern for family welfare is, of course, just the kind of attitude that helps to sustain the traditional inequalities. History bears evidence to the fact that acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice. It can be a serious error to take the absence of the consciousness of that inequality as evidence of the absence of that inequality (or the non viability of that question) argues Sen. We can go back to the example given earlier from fieldwork experience with the elderly. Not only the women but even the men found questions of personal/ individual income and room absurd. These men were by no means the underdogs in their families, nor were the elderly women. Perception is based both on facts and on cultural notions, connotations and values about those facts, thereby making the study of deprivation and interests of family members a complex one.

Sen further states that personal interest and welfare are not just matters of perception; there are objective aspects of these concepts that command attention even when the corresponding self- perception does not exist. For example, the 'ill fare' associated with morbidity or undernourishment has an immediacy that does not await the person's inclination or willingness to answer detailed questions regarding his or her welfare. Indeed, the well being of the person may plausibly be seen in terms of the person's functionings and capabilities; what he or she is able to do or be (e.g. the ability to be well nourished, to avoid morbidity or mortality, to read and write and communicate, to take part in the life of the community, to appear in public without shame). It is here, that Sen's economics comes back rather strongly. He argues for individualism and this is in accordance with western liberal thought in the utilitarian tradition.

It is also possible to distinguish between a person's 'well-being' and 'agency'. A person may have various goals and objectives other than the pursuit of his or her well being, although there are obvious links between a person's well being and the fulfilment of his or her other objectives. The overall success as an agent may not be closely connected- and certainly may not be identified- with the person's own well-being. It is the agency aspect that is most influenced by a person's sense of obligation and perception of legitimate behaviour.

10.4 Social Technology, Cooperation, and Conflicts

The 'social' content of technology is what Marx called 'the combining together of various processes into a social whole'. The so-called 'productive' activities may be parasitic on other work being done, such as housework and food preparation, the care of children, or bringing food to the field where cultivators are working. Technology is not only about equipments and its operational characteristics but also about social arrangements that permit the equipment to be used and the so-called productive processes to be carried on.

Household activities have been viewed in many contradictory ways in assessing production and technology. On the one hand, it is not denied that the sustenance, survival, and the reproduction of workers are obviously essential for the workers being available for outside work. On the other hand, the activities that produce or support that sustenance, survival or reproduction are not typically regarded as contributing to output and are often classified as 'unproductive labour'.

Sen (1990) gives a hypothetical example of a household to combine the material (monetary), the capabilities and the perceptions as co-existing in a household. He says that an integrated view should be formed of the pattern of activities outside or inside the home that together make up the production processes in traditional as well as modern societies. The relations between the sexes are obviously much conditioned by the ways these different activities sustain and support each other, and depend inter alia on the particular patterns of integration.

The prosperity of a household depends on the totality of various activities-getting money incomes, purchasing or directly producing (in the case of, say, peasants) food materials and other goods, producing edible food out of food materials, and so on. But in addition to aggregate prosperity, even the divisions between sexes in general, and specifically those within the household, may also be deeply influenced by the pattern of gender division of work. In particular, the members of a household face two different types of problems simultaneously. One involving cooperation (adding to the total availabilities) and the other conflict (dividing the total availabilities among the members of the household). Social arrangements regarding who does what, and who takes what decisions can be seen as responses to this combined problem of cooperation and conflict. The sexual division of labour is one part of the social arrangement.

Seeing social arrangements in terms of a broader view of technology and production has some far reaching effects. First, it points to the necessity of examining the productive aspects of what are often treated as purely 'cultural phenomena'. Contributions that are in effect made by labour expended in activities that are not directly involved in 'production' narrowly defined. Second it throws light on the stability and survival of unequal patterns of social arrangements in general and deeply asymmetric sexual division in particular. An example is the resilient social division of labour in most societies by which women do the cooking and are able to take on outside work only insofar as that can be combined with persisting as the cook. Third, it points to the division between paid and unpaid work in the context of general productive arrangements, and fourth, the specific patterns of sexual divisions outside and within the household. The nature of cooperative arrangement implicitly influences the distributional parameters and the household's response to conflicts and perception of interest. Systems of kinship orient members of different kinship systems differentially to many activities. Perceptions of activities may differ in societies with patrilineal, matrilineal and bilineal kinship systems. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge the spread and influence of patriliny as a macro ideology in the world. Dube (2001) has contrasted the three kinship systems by which the quality of gender relations and position of women vary in and outside the household.

By introducing the capabilities, agency and perception dimension to the household as a cooperative –conflict unit, Sen (1990) has broadened the scope of this perspective to cover a number of dimensions other than income and distribution of resources.

Action and Reflection 10.2

1) Read Dube 2001 (chapter 6) and discuss the comparative position of women in the household in the three kinship systems she describes in her essay or
2) Take five households in your neighbourhood. Make a list of activities and dietary intake of each of the members. Classify this data by sex, age and kinship ties with the head of the household.

Discuss the differentials both within and outside the household in work and diet among the members.

10.5 Conclusion

This unit focussed on the perspective that views the household as a cooperating and at the same time a conflicting unit. In the previous unit, unit 9 we had seen how emotions in the family and the household include not just the positive emotions of love and affection but also those such as tensions, hate, rivalry and jealousy. The cooperative conflict perspective came up in the backdrop of feminist thought and struggle. This thought also influenced economic analysis and questioned the value of studying the household as a unified whole without internal differentiation by gender. Subsequently, further advancement in the analytical parameters took place by incorporating issues of capabilities, well-being, agency, perception and social technology.

We have seen how kinship systems have differential meanings for similar activities. This will be further clarified in units 11 and 12 of this Block. We have also included the dimension of 'reproduction and gender differentials' in the household as cooperation combined with conflict in varying measures. We have discussed this issue in the introduction to this unit. We can also include the role of perceptions and see how perceptions regarding distribution of resources and inputs of different members in fertility decisions are influenced by the state through its policies. In a similar vein, the influence of caste and religious community on the household is strong and can affect the social technology, capability, agency and perception of activities in the household. These may range from franchise, political representation, choice of marriage partner, divorce and remarriage, biological and social reproduction, access to healthcare, etc. Population policies of India and China have impacted reproduction in the household quite differentially. State policies and the household / family may be analysed from the cooperative-conflict perspective.

10.6 Further Reading

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