

Unit 27

Gender and Social Stratification

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Learning Objectives

After you have read this unit you will be able to

- discuss gender and stratification
- discuss the contribution of Marx and Weber to understanding of social stratification

27.1 Introduction

In most societies the tasks of women are clearly differentiated. In the West as well as in the middle class sections of Indian society, men have been seen to be the bread winners and women were expected to take care of the house and raise children. This arrangement used to be considered as 'natural' and complementary, having roots in the biological makeup of the sexes. The economic dependence of women and sexual division of labour were closely interlinked.

The ideology of 'naturalness' of division of labour has been challenged as women started entering the labour force in large numbers in the West. The rise of feminist movement in the west raised questions about division of labour and almost universal subordination of women across societies and cultures. The questions like has employment changed women's status? Are they facing double burden of performing jobs which are negatively valued. For example housework not being considered as work whereas paid work outside the household as work. Statistics show that women all over the world earn much less than men for the same work. Occupations are also segregated along gender lines. Other questions relate to women's active participation in work force, its consistent devaluation and women's exclusion from decision making. In understanding these issues we look for answers in the stratification theories.

Feminist scholars resist to treat the problem of women essentially an artifact of the contemporary system of economic exploitation. They have argued that the oppression of women is not to be seen as 'secondary' to class oppression as a whole. Women are oppressed as a class by men and patriarchal structures are geographically and historically almost universal. The major axis

of differentiation in prevailing society is not class but gender and it is women who wait for the 'longest revolution'. Gender in class stratification theories attempts to uncover the sources of structured inequality and social change. Both Marxists and Weberians have been engaged in empirical research which both document and attempt to explain the forms and structures of inequality. It has been widely criticized that the class situation of family members is 'derived' from that of the main breadwinner who is usually a man. The question of gender raises serious problem for both theoretical and empirical work in social stratification. The active participation of women in all walks of life, the decrease in the number of households that have only male bread winners, passage of new laws created an environment for women's location in social stratification. According to Newby (1982) the issue of gender inequality arose from women's movement.

27.2 Weber, Marx and Stratification

Weber observed that societies can be stratified according to their degree for class or status formation, providing the most important and basic fact of social stratification theory. The first form of inquiry concerns with the extent to which class or status systems are the predominant modes of social action at the societal level. Theories of social stratification then presuppose as their explanatory object the inter and intra-societal variability of class or status formations. At this time the question of sexual inequality treated in terms of division of labour (Marxist approach) which considers women as 'reserve army' i.e. The labour of women could be called upon to facilitate expansionary 'deskilling' clerical work as well as in periods of acute labour shortage such as in wartime. According to Max Weber economic and technological changes favour class stratification and pushes status stratification in the background.

Since the determination and explanation of the variability of class and status formation have been the central concerns of the study of social stratification, the documentation of the inequality of opportunities and outcome occupied a subordinate place. It was justified on several grounds. First, because of interest in the distribution of unequal rewards, life-chances and how different social arrangements could procure 'better' outcomes and opportunities. The second reason was the importance given to the explanation of 'outcomes' of class or status differentiation, which were considered as by-product of stratification analysis. These approaches never gave serious thought to issues of gender inequality, because the emphasis was on class polarisation and status-group consolidation. Earlier it was always presumed that gender relations are usually heterosexual and therefore crosscut by class and status relations. It gave bearing on the view that gender relations are somehow similar to ethnic relations.

Box 27.1: Marx and Patriarchy

Marxist school of thought has led to the conceptualisation of sexual division in terms that have less to do with actual social relationship or patterns of social interaction, that with the determination of the 'place' of female labour within the class structure and of its 'functions for capital'. A major question arose from this perspective is whether or not female domestic has always had difficulties in formulating a stable and coherent theory of action which could relate the analysis of objective class position and of system contradictions to class formation. There was a fundamental difference from the kind of analysis that has accreted around the concept of 'patriarchy'

which refers to patterns of behaviour or forms of social interaction. Both Marxists and patriarchy approaches also differ on whether women constitute a class or not, while patriarchy is seen as a structure of social relations in men are privileged systematically and women disprivileged in such a variety of social contexts that it makes sense to think of gender relations as a form of 'stratification'.

Patriarchy constitutes a type of social formation that has been improperly ignored by conventional stratification analysis. According to Mann (1986) the omission of gender as a basis of social stratification created a crisis in stratification theory. The five main areas of stratification theory, which have been influenced by Gender, are individual, the family and household, the division of labour between the sexes, social class and nation-states.

27.3 Gender and Social Stratification in Cross-Cultural Perspective

The unequal accesses to resources, opportunities and rewards and to rights between men and women are legitimised by patriarchy across societies and cultures. Status inequality between men and women is not a new phenomena which is reinforced through patriarchy and its institutions, gendered division of labour and social institutions like marriage, dowry, property and inheritance and subordination. Sylvia Walby (1994:22-28) observes that patriarchy is not only differential distribution of power but also it is built into the very mechanism of production.

Reflection and Action 27.1

Write a note on gender in a cross-cultural perspective. Discuss your views with your friends.

Feminist sociologists working on the concept of class have challenged its basis solely derived from man's occupations. A major concern of feminist critique has been to consider what modification of class boundaries would be necessary if women in paid work are to be considered as well. Secondly they have sought to reevaluate the contribution of women's work to the family.

Cross cultural research on sexual division of labour attempted to describe wide range of women's productive activities in societies with different mode of subsistence but also the status implications of these on status of women.

For feminist anthropologists right from the very beginning the chief concern has been to explore the causes of universal gender inequality. They sought to explain its origin and perpetuation in terms of sociological, cultural and material terms. Each of these explanations rested upon a major dichotomy which was taken to be universal: public/domestic, nature/culture and production/reproduction.

In feminist anthropology, the relationship of gender with social stratification has been conceptualised primarily in the way gender informs social structures as a symbolic construct and as a metaphor for social action. Gender is conceptualised as symbolic representations and the behaviour of women and men and their relations. Anthropologists like Rosaldo, Lamphere and,

Ortner identified gender and kinship as the basis of social inequality whereby recognising how women's access to property and decision making etc. are subsumed within larger ideological, material and political contexts of kinship structures.

Ortner and Whitehead (1981) proposed a model of prestige structures which is defined as the set of prestige positions or level that result from a particular line of social evaluation, the mechanisms by which individuals arrive at a given level or positions, and the overall conditions of reproduction of the system of statuses (ibid..13).

Gender, they argued, is one such prestige structure, and in every human society, man and woman compose two differentially valued terms of a value set, men being men, higher (ibid..16). They suggested that male prestige is linked to 'public roles', such as chief or a Brahman, while female prestige is defined in relation to men, in such roles as wife, sister and mother, in other words female structures are encompassed within the male structures. Conceptualising gender as one of the prestige structures pushed the gendered analysis of social stratification across societies.

Anthropological literature suggests that women's work outside of household and in subsistence economy indicates as well as reinforce generally egalitarian relations between women and men. Women's in Vanatinai have access to power both through their control of the economic capital of land and through their accumulation of symbolic capital in exchange and mortuary ritual. But among horticulturists in highland New Guinea, women raise staple crops but men raise prestige crops that are the focus of social exchange.

Box 27.2: Division of Labour

This cultural valuation is the foundation for gender stratification that is then reinforced by gender ideologies of male superiority and a high degree of sexual antagonism between men and women. Meigs (1990) describes a "chauvinistic" ideology that is rooted in men's role as warriors. The division of work among Mundurucu, an Amazonian horticultural society, where men hunt, fish and fell the forest area for gardens while women plant, harvest and process manioc. Men work at Mudurucu has more assigned value. As Murphy and Murphy (1985) state "Male ascendancy does not wholly derive from masculine activities but is to a considerable degree prior to them". Male domination is traditionally symbolic. According to Martin and Voortries (1975) the decline in female participation in agriculture is that the female domestic workload tends to increase when root crops are replaced by cereal crop and when animal labour replaces manual labour.

Women's value is defined by their reproductive abilities rather than by their productive activities. Bride wealth is considered as compensation to the bride's parents or her kin for the productive and reproductive rights of the bride; dowry as a form of inheritance provides a bride with land and other wealth and helps her to attract a husband.

In traditional patriarchal Irish family (studied by Arensberg & Kimball (1940) work was divided by gender and age. The division of labour considered "natural" and power in the hands of men. Pastoral societies are also generally characterised by patriarchy and a dichotomisation of the sexes, both symbolically and socially segregation of the sexes and gender stratification

are fundamental attributes of many pastoral societies. Campbell (1964) who studied "Sarakatsoni of Greece" says that the life of pastoral 'Sarakatsoni' revolves around three things: sheep, children and honour gender ideology is embedded in these three valued items. The ultimate authority lies with the male despite the fact that female contributes equally in all aspects of life.

27.4 Status of Women

Generalisations are often made about the status of women according to different modes of adaptation but these studies show that great amount diversity persists. To understand gender stratification, the interlinkage of both ideology and participation in production must be understood. As Atkinson (1982: 248) states, "It is too facile to deny the significance of sexual stereotypes or to presume that women's influence in one context cancels out their degradation in another, just as we know that women's status is not a unitary phenomenon across cultures, we need to be reminded that the intra cultural picture is equally complex." Socialist feminist scholars, however, maintain that patriarchy precedes class inequality. They clearly show that new forms of subordination and gender asymmetry have superseded the old, leaving patriarchal control undisturbed. Industrial work privileged men who took control over the earnings and social power while leaving women as dependents.

Leela Dube, Eleanor Leacock and Shirley Ardener (ibid:xi) provide a cross-cultural perspective; focusing upon the insignificance and passivity of women and the primary of men in various societies. Leela Dube observes that making women invisible despite their obvious preference and effective visibility is the root cause of their low status in society.

Inequalities of gender can be explained by "gender regimes" which is a cluster of practices ideological and material, which in a given social context, acts to construct various images of masculinity and femininity and thereby to consolidate forms of gender inequality (Connell, 1994: 29-40). According to Kabeer (1995:37) 'biology is gendered as well as sexed'. Male and female are translated as man and woman based on mutually exclusive traits of masculinity and femininity.

Women are attached to a two-fold stratification i.e. in relation to men and in relation to other women. Gender structures different spheres of male-female inequality.

Many egalitarian societies in the contemporary world are characterised by a division of labour whereby men hunt and women gather. Friedl (1975:78) outlines four reasons for this division i.e. the variability in the supply of game, the different skills required for hunting and gathering the incompatibility between carrying burdens and hunting and the small size of semi nomadic foraging population. Despite the common assumption that men hunt and women gather, there is no sharp division of labour. The Tiwi, Australian aborigines who live on Melville Island off the coast of Northern Australia both men and women hunt and gather. Women are considered economic assets and a source of wealth and prestige for men. Women acquire social status and can be politically influential. Goodale (1971) suggests that Tiwi culture emphasises the equality of men and women in society. Among the Agta Negritos of North Eastern Luzon, the Philippines women enjoy greater social and economic equality with their men compared to Tiwi of Australia. They

make significant contribution to the daily food supply and also control the distribution of the food they acquire, sharing them with their families and trading them in the broader community. This challenges the widely held notion that in foraging societies pregnancy and child care are incompatible with hunting. They have developed methods of contraception and abortion to aid them in spacing their children.

In horticultural societies, in which cultivation and farming is required by the use of hand-tool technology women play important roles in production. Lepowsky points to gender egalitarianism among the horticultural and matrilineal people of the pacific island of Vanatani. He says that the prominent position of women in Vanatani exchange and other activities.

27.5 The Indian Context

According to Kalpana Bardhan (1986:94) "Although the family is the salient units of analysis for stratification studies, whether based on class or caste analysis, it is not quite sufficient situated within the broader framework, the division by sex and the status of women affect its properties of stability and dynamics".

Reflection and Action 27.2

Write briefly on patriarchy, economy, and class structure. Put down the main points in your notebook.

In Indian society, besides family as a basic unit of stratification the role of kinship, family and everyday relations, the role of male head of the family, status equality between men and women are some of the questions, which needs examination. Michael Mann (1986:40-56) discusses patriarchy, economy and class structure. According to Mann compartmentalisation of women persists despite involvement of women in politics, development programmes and processes and feminism. Indian society has been divided into *purushjati* and *stree jati*. To conceptualise women and write about them, Nita Kumar (1994:4) suggests four ways to deal i.e. by making women the object of human 'gaze' by seeing women as actors and subjects by giving them the prerogative of males, by focussing on the patriarchal, ideological discursive within which women exist and which seemingly control them without a chance to get out of them, by looking at the hidden, subversive ways in which women exercise their agency. She raises some questions like desirability of having women as subjects and to replacing of the masculine, rational, free subject into a feminine one.

According to Monisha Behal's (1984) work in Mainpuri district in west Uttar Pradesh, women's lives in the village are full of gloom and sadness because of work overload, bad health, drudgery and poverty. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (1984) pose the women's question by highlighting the incompatibility of Indian constitutional Law, violence, aggression and crimes against women. Mahatma Gandhi viewed that women has infinite capacity for sufferings because she is the mother of man has also been critically examined. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986) studied the Indian women in the context of interconnections between gender, caste and class. They explained that the patriarchal upper castes tightened both caste and gender division as they consolidated their economic supremacy and defended challenges to that supremacy.

Box 27.3: Women and Dalits

Status asymmetry of genders is part of the larger social structure which is reinforced through caste and family values. Gender and caste are important aspects of class exploitation. Women in the Indian society are stratified along caste, class, religious and ethnic boundaries thus no generalisations on the status become possible. Women are stratified. Women from Dalit sections, suffer from triple oppression – caste, class, gender.

Divided by economic inequality and the ideology of hierarchy Indian women hardly share interests. It has been found that work is prime mover of women's status because there is a correspondence between economic stratification, social hierarchy and differentiation of female work pattern and employment modes. Caste oppression, class exploitation and gender inequities are more stable and durable as they are practiced within the family.

Women's movements in India have mainly focused on those issues which seem to cut across boundaries such as violence against women, work related inequalities, access to education and employment, health, social recognition of work of house wives and remuneration for their work, political repression and under representation, price rise etc.

Raising issues of exploitation and oppression in different spheres of life i.e. family, marriage, economy, religion and politics, feminists seem to cover a large vista of gender concerns in diverse Indian contexts.

In all kinds of writings it has been admitted that patriarchy, stratification system and status of women are closely inter-related and any kind of positive change in the status of women would be an attack on patriarchy and stratification system. Through a symbolic analysis unequal practices have been seen express deep seated cultural valuations of what it is to be a masculine and feminine. Leela Dube (op. cit.) discusses the relationship between man and women by using metaphoric concepts of 'seed' and the earth in various patrilineal cultures as justification of gender asymmetry.

Women in literary writings have been projected in a conservative form. In the last three decades large spate of writings on various aspects of gender inequality challenge the invisibility of women in economy, denial of unemployment, decision making and violence and crime against women as male privileges.

The abolition of landlordism and the breakdown of its socio- cultural milieus have affected women in a positive manner. Mencher and Saradmoni (1983:A -167) find that female income is essential for below poverty line houses. Most of the women are engaged in three types of work: (a) participation in the traditionally defined labour force (b) domestic work plus activities like alone. Even these women are victimized because of their sex and poor economic back-ground.

Karuna Ahmad finds (1979 : 1435 - 40) five trends in women's employment: (a) clustering of women in a few occupations (b) clustering either in low status occupation or in the lower rungs of the prestigious profession, (c) women receive lower salaries than men, (d) high proportion of highly educated and professionally trained unemployed women.

Studies suggest that women's professional locations reflect their position in society in terms of caste and class backgrounds and educational achievements. Perceptions regarding status among women are shaped by modern education than the traditional values regarding marriage and family.

Agnihotri (1996) and Agarwal (1984) gave preference for Marxist approach in analysing women. Agarwal proposes that a number of questions which would have a bearing on gender relations will get obfuscated in the organisation of production and relations of production. But despite the metaphor of reforms and individuation of women, emphasis on chastity, patriarchy, division of Labour, sacredness of Marriage seclusion with the household has persisted

27.6 Caste and Gender

The three basic characteristics of caste are:

- i) Exclusion or separation i.e. rules governing marriage and contact, which maintains distinctions of caste.
- ii) Hierarchy i.e. the principle of order and rank according to status.
- iii) Interdependence i.e. the division of labour which is closely tied to hierarchy and separation.

These three analytically separable principles of the caste system operate through units based on kinship. Women's lives are largely lived within familial parameters. The centrality of the family and household remains very important in their lives (Dube, 1996: 1- 27).

Women's work contributes substantially to the occupational continuity of a caste group. significant continuities in the link between caste and occupation can be seen with respect to Brahmin is still acting as a Purohit (priest) for upper and middle level castes. Among artisan castes of goldsmiths, blacksmiths, potters and weavers, many are still using their traditional profession for their living and women are helping them directly or indirectly at all levels of work. Basket weaving is a joint activity of men and women. In rural areas and small towns it is common for women from households of petty traders and shopkeepers to grind spices and prepare fries, fritters and preserve for sale in the family shop. It is a fact that occupational continuity of a particular caste depends largely on women (ibid).

Jajmani relations, short-term contractual affiliation between artisans and service castes and land owners, cultivators and traders, and relations of exchange among occupational castes, a feature of many rural and semi-urban areas, function at the level of family. Both men and women render services and receive remuneration in case and kind for their work. We can see in every region of India there are specific 'Untouchable' castes whose women work as midwives: these women, along with the men of their caste, share the essential task of removing pollution of upper and clean castes. The bond or contract which ties labourers to their masters is understood to include the services of both the husband and the wife (ibid).

The necessity of continuing with occupational work is an important basis for marrying within the caste. Women's contribution to occupational continuity is carried out within patrilineal limits and under the impositions and controls of caste. A woman's education may also be restricted keeping the work demands and marriage market in mind.

In difficult times of the family, Scheduled Caste women generally do works of scavenging but not the men. It is held that since women are used to doing domestic work for their own household, can do similar kind of work for others. The men feel that it is below their dignity to do such works or jobs. Among migrant families, women are often the principle supporter of the family. But the controls are retained at this time also. Social and ritual matters are discussed and decided upon by the males of the caste with in the neighborhood (ibid).

Food and Rituals: Food constitutes a critical element in the ritual idiom of purity and pollution. The concern of purity and pollution centering on food begin at home. The prescriptions and prohibitions regarding food for women are governed by principles of kinship, marriage and sexuality. Women play key role in maintaining the sanctity and purity of home. Notions of safety relating to both purity/pollution and the 'evil eye' entail a variety of restriction and constraints on women in the tasks of processing, preserving, cooking and distributing food. In situation away from home and their locality men tend to be more relaxed about rules of commensality, in a similar context women are both chaperoned and watched over carefully and are expected to follow rules more strictly (ibid).

There is a pervasive notion that women never attain the level of purity of men of their own caste. It is well known that traditionally women of twice-born castes have been equated with *Shudras* who could not be initiated into the learning of the *Vedas* (ibid).

Marriage and sexual relations constitute a central arena in which caste impinges on women's lives. The cultural apprehension of the vulnerability of women and the emphasis on their purity and restrained behaviour which emphasises on limited interaction with opposite sex, are important components of management of female sexuality in a caste society. The strong patriliney in North India institutionalizes control of sexuality and fertility of women. In the case of an unattached woman, pregnancy is a disaster because in partrilineal society the issues of caste boundaries and her own purity are involved.

Growing up of a female child is marked by severe controls, idealization of familial roles, and emphasis on female modesty and strong value attached to virginity of female. Women are expected to retain the purity of caste at all life stages.

The pre-pubertal phase is looked upon as intrinsic purity stage and it is celebrated in a number of ways, like worshipping and feeding virgin girls on 8th day of Navaratri. This calls for restrained behaviour on their part and emphasises the need for protection and vigilance. In Indian society, restrained and controlled sexuality is a pre-requisite for socially sanctioned motherhood (Dube ibid). Even in urban areas middleclass women working in the public work sphere experience pressures to conform to the image of 'good woman' and face sexual harassment.

The principles of sexual asymmetry underlie the relationship between caste endogamy and dowry, the different fates of men and women in inter-caste unions and the sexual abuse of women. Sexual mores and restrictions are less severe in case of 'lower caste' women. Men have mechanism by taking purifactory bath and the ritual expiation of the offence to escape pollution

which occurs through sexual intercourse with a low caste woman, but the same is not accepted in case of 'upper caste' female, she is banished, declared dead to the family. Inter-caste marriages especially in rural India are still not tolerated and many cases of killing the couples have been reported in the recent past. Sexual violence against lower caste and tribal women is not an uncommon feature here.

M.N. Srinivas (1976: 90) has pointed out that in contemporary caste society cognate jatis tend to get telescoped to form a single entity for purposes of marriage caste both imposes constraints and creates the dominant ethos which underlie the practice of dowry within Hindu society. The increasing social and economic differentiation has increased the demand and expectation on the part of the groom's family.

27.7 Tribe, Gender, Stratification and Change

For long it was assumed that tribal societies were not stratified along caste and class in the Indian context and the gender relations were seen to be near egalitarian. Tribal Women's status was also seen to be much higher than the caste women since concepts of purity and pollution did not apply to them and women enjoyed considerable autonomy in sexual and marriage affairs. Despite women's major contribution to tribal economy, they were excluded from inheritance of property and political decision making. Recent literature suggest that tribal societies are changing at a fast pace. Colonialism, coexistence with caste groups, missionaries, industrialisation, education, political democratisation etc have influenced them to a great extent. Gender asymmetry which always existed in these groups has multiplied and become more complex due to import of outside influences and growing stratification based on wealth and power (Mehrotra, 2004). Gendering of politics and the state are other major areas of concern. Women's right to vote and the constitutional provisions for gender equality could not ensure women's active participation in the political realm and statutory bodies. Their exclusion from public decision making bodies is near complete. Gender inequality is inbuilt into state's seemingly progressive policies as highlighted by Swaminathan (1987,cf. Sharma,1997). She picks up Minimum Wages Act and the Equal Remuneration Act as well as policies for women's education and the Hindu Law of Succession. Women's movements in India have created a great deal of awareness and gender issues have come to the centre stage. Women's organisations raising questions of gender inequality and empowerment have been operational at both grassroots and other levels of Indian society, employing local strategies in resisting social and economic oppression (Mehrotra, 2002). National and international agencies have created spaces through NGO action in rural and tribal areas for economic as well social development. The much debated and practiced phrase women's empowerment has become the buzz word and a quiet revolution is taking place at grassroots level through women's active participation in development process. Agarwal (1994), however, notes that effective rights in land alone can empower women. Women's struggles are about bringing social transformation and emancipation from cultural bondage which keeps the stratification stable.

27.8 Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that a gender informs and organises social stratification as one of the organising principles like race, class, caste or status. Gender in interface with race and class determines the structure

of western society, whereas caste and gender enter into class laying down the structure of action for its members in the Indian context. The understanding of status implications in social life and everyday routine of men and women are symbolically represented in ideological and material aspects of society.

The question of gender and stratification is not to be understood in terms of inequality between men and women and in terms of subordination of women alone. Recent researches on masculinity also suggest maleness to be the symbolic construct as the femaleness is, reflecting that how gender as a cultural construct expresses the relational dimension rather than the individual attributes across societies and cultures.

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