UNIT 3  GENDER AND THE LIFE COURSE

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- comprehend about the life course approach;
- understand gender and the life course perspective;
- know about the different life courses and its implications from gender perspective; and
- learn about the changing scenario affecting life courses.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The unit discusses the gender and life course perspective. Clarity of the concept of gender is very important to understand the life course in a gendered perspective. Gender is often defined as the socio-cultural meanings attributed to the physical and biological differences between the sexes, and how those meanings are manifested both symbolically and materially in societies (Mascia-Lees and Black, 2000). Gender is a relational concept that anthropologists have found to be useful for elucidating the dynamics of socio-cultural systems that invest meanings, role expectations, and positionalities in female and male as well as alternatively gendered persons. Gender as a concept refers to differences, hierarchies, rankings, etc., which exist between two sexes. It explains cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity that inform various roles that are played by women and men in the society. Gender constructs have significant influence on physical, social and psychological growth and development. As individuals grow from infancy to childhood and then to adulthood their gender and age along with a
host of other factors influence their personality and behaviour. From the moment of birth a child is conditioned by the cultural constructs that inform the manner in which it is handled by early care givers, and later grows up learning its gender specific manners and fulfills gender specific role play. In most instances the systematic, unfavorable denial of opportunities, rights and resources is based on gender although these vary from one society to another. These may also change over time, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly. Throughout the world men and women live in different worlds in terms of the ways in which they experience various life situations during the journey from womb to old age.

3.2 LIFE COURSE APPROACH

The concept of life course was first developed in sociology in the 1960s. Glen Elder Jr., a sociologist, was one of the early authors to write about a life course perspective, and he continues to be one of the driving forces behind its development. Elder Jr., defined life course as “a multilevel phenomenon changing, ranging from structural pathways through social institutions and organisations to the social trajectories of individuals and their developmental pathways”. The life course perspective is a theoretical model that has been emerging over the last five decades, across several disciplines. Sociologists, anthropologists, social historians, demographers, and psychologists—working independently and, more recently, collaboratively—have all helped to give it shape. The ‘life course’ has made it possible to analyse the way in which personal life interacts with social institutions such as education, family, marriage, and labour market and also the other way around. Van Gennep (2004[1909]) delineated a structure for transformative ritual practices he considered universal and common to all cultures. Although they vary greatly in intensity, specific form, and social meaning, rites of passage are ceremonial devices used by societies to mark the passage or transition of an individual or a group from one social status or situation to another. Rites of passage resolve life-crises; they provide a mechanism to deal with the tension experienced by both individuals and social groups during ambiguous occasions including, but not limited to, birth, puberty, marriage, and death. By adopting a comparative approach to develop his taxonomy of social rites, Van Gennep noted that these social customs are used to mark specific moments of the life course. Many societies use these ceremonies to articulate events that hold significance not only for individuals and families but the larger society as well. Associated with each life stage is a specific social status and a definitive set of obligations and responsibilities that the incumbent is expected to fulfill as the individual advances the normative, sequential stages of the life course—generally from infant, adolescent, spouse, parent, elder, to deceased—taking on a new social role at each phase. Rites of passage function to accomplish status transitions; they provide a mechanism for individuals and their societies to recognise those who negotiate the rites as intrinsically different beings.

Life course perspective looks at how chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change that shape people’s lives from birth to death. Of course, time is only one dimension of human behaviour; characteristics of the person and the environment in which the person lives also play a part.

The life course approach focuses on the relationship between the ‘self’ and ‘society’ and acknowledges the temporal framework of the changes and movements which have and will continue to shape the context of particular
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cultures and historical periods (Hockey and James, 2003; Dewilde, 2003). For instance, ageing as a social phenomenon can only be comprehended through contextualising physiological ageing within cultural and historical contexts (Pilcher, 1995). It is multifaceted, composed of interdependent biological, psychological and social processes.

The life course paradigm set out by Giele and Elder (1998) provides an appropriate explanatory framework within which to locate the analysis. Giele and Elder (1998:10) define three key elements: *location in time and place*, that includes the cultural background experienced by individuals; *linked lives*, referring to family norms and cultural expectations, for example with respect to women’s roles concerning employment and child-care; and *individual agency* - the decisions that an individual makes and the priority that they give to different aspects of the lives, for example decisions concerning education, employment and family formation. All these are intimately linked. Social science scholars who apply the life course perspective in their work rely on a handful of staple concepts: cohorts, transitions, trajectories, life events, and turning points.

**Cohort:** Group of persons who were born at the same historical time and who experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age.

**Transition:** Change in roles and statuses that represent a distinct departure from prior roles and statuses.

**Trajectory:** Long-term pattern of stability and change, which usually involves multiple transitions.

**Life Event:** Significant occurrence involving a relatively abrupt change that may produce serious and long-lasting effects.

**Turning Point:** Life event that produces a lasting shift in the life course trajectory.

### 3.2.1 Life Course and Life Cycle

The concept of life course has also been used in relation to different stages in human life. However, the concept of ‘life course’ has gained popularity over ‘life cycle’ since the concept of ‘life cycle’ is perceived to imply multiple turns and a relatively fixed or inevitable series of biological stages and ages (Hapke and Ayyankeri, 2004).

Rather than viewing any stage of life, such as childhood, youth and older age, or any group in isolation the life course is concerned with an understanding of the place of that stage in an entire life continuum (Riley, 1983). An individual’s social, economic and political situation is both the outcome of previous actions and the contingent result of a historical process.

The life course approach provides a framework for analysing individuals’ experiences, at particular stages of their lives. Unlike the term life cycle, which implies fixed categories in the individual and assumes a stable system it emphasises the inter-linkage between phases of the life course rather than seeing each phase in isolation (Katz and Monk, 1993; Hockey and James, 1993). It permits a more dynamic approach to relations between the individual, the family, work and others (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1989). The life course approach provides an alternative framework for analysing the various influences, which
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contribute to the life experience of individuals at particular stages of their lives. It indicates more flexible biographical patterns within a continually changing social system (Arber and Evandrou, 1993; Katz and Monk, 1993).

In many studies life course approach is used as a framework for analysing the life experience of individuals at particular stages of their lives. The perspective has theoretical relevance also for the structure – agency debate since tracking multiple dimensions of life course development over an extended period of time makes it “very clear that structure and personal action determine the life course” (Kruger and Baldus, 1999, 356-359).

The early studies of life course were life cycle models that concentrated on single role sequence. For example, the life cycle of individuals was portrayed as ‘children mature, marry and have children who then grow up and start a family as the cycle continues into another generation’ (Elder et al. 2003: 7). In recent times life course studies concentrate on bridging the gap between social dispositions and individual preferences for a particular behaviour (Settersten 2003, Giele 2004). Moen (1992) and Hakim (2000, 2003, 2004) study the link between multiple roles of women – family and work – in relation to marriage and family formation in the individual life course. This reflects the changing role of women in the society from that of a traditional homemaker to that of a contributor to the household income. It is also an indication of changes in individual behaviour in order to cope with these changes.

3.3 GENDER AND THE LIFE COURSE

Here the gender and life course perspective has been explained from both anthropological and development perspectives to understand the complex phenomenon of differential allocation of tasks and resources based on sex and its relation with and impact on the life course of men and women like marriage, motherhood/fatherhood, work, power and ageing across societies.

The circumstances during the entire life course influence the situation of individuals as they advance in age. ‘Gender relations cannot be assumed to be static over the life course, since life transitions, age-based norms and physiological changes all impact on the way gender roles are constructed and gender identity experienced’ (Arber and Ginn, 1996:13). Therefore, a life course perspective has the potential to direct attention to the situation of women and men at various times in their lives.

In the context of India, a life course perspective has been adopted, for example in studies of women’s health and reproduction (Das Gupta 1996). Anthropologists like Susan C. Seymour (1999) have focused on the lives of women in detail. Her work on “Women, Family and Child Care in India: A World in Transition” is an in-depth study of twenty four Hindu families of different caste and class groups in an urbanised part of Orissa. She focused on socialisation of girls and significance of women’s role through the life cycle in a society where the patrifocal extended family is predominant. The longitudinal study also examines the impact of recent urbanisation and modernisation on groups of contemporary Indian women. Most studies exploring life courses in India focus exclusively, or mostly, on girls and women. Alice S. Rossi explored the people’s lives especially women
as they move from youth to age in her edited book *Gender and the Life Course* (1985) and *Sexuality across the Life Course* (1994).

Despite the gradually increasing interest in men as gendered subjects and in men’s lives in South Asia within gender studies, the range has so far been limited to topics such as male sexuality and violence. Compared to the multiplicities of femininities in South Asian Studies, men appear in fewer studies and often in two-dimensional range, either as house-holders (patrons) or as landless labourers (clients). One of the significant works on masculinity is by Joseph Alter.

While acknowledging the regional and other diversities in the lives of men and women across South Asia, some features emerge in most studies on the life cycle of women, encapsulated by Mines and Lamb (2002, 81) as follows: In general, a woman can expect to progress over her life from being a daughter in her natal home, to a wife and daughter-in-law in her husband’s and in-law’s home, to a mother of young children, to a mother-in-law, and finally to an older woman and frequently, widow.

In spite of girls’ structurally weaker position compared to boys (Das Gupta, 1996, 217), girls enjoy more personal freedom and autonomy in their natal homes than they do after getting married (Mines and Lamb, 2002, 81). While a daughter-in-law is at the bottom of the household hierarchy and controlled by both women and men in the groom’s house, a young married woman is still cherished as a potential child-bearer (Mines and Lamb 2002; Saavala 2004, 151).

Women gain freedom upon getting older, the mother-in-law generation has more freedom in life, is less dominated by males, and has more authority than in earlier life phases (Das Gupta 1996, 217; Saavala 2006, 149; Lamb, 2002).

It has been argued that men, by contrast, do not experience as many marked transformation in their lives as women, although they too are expected to marry, to have children, to be economically productive, and finally, as the senior male in a household, to assume the role of central authority. Thus the argument that men experience fewer transformations may reflect the lack of research on male life courses rather than the actual situation. Since there is a tendency to approach different phases of life in the Indian context as static, it is important to take into account the notion that division based on the position in the life cycle are subject to change and transformation (Saavala 2006, 149). The age categories, meanings and relations are always shaped both institutionally and through everyday interactions. For example, the transition from ‘child’ to ‘teen’ is negotiated through both institutions and everyday interactions (Thorne 2004, 404).

Different phases and institutions of life such as marriage or parenthood have a central influence on other aspects of life like working life. Among the few who combined analyses of work and life course, Hapke and Ayyankeril (2004) explored the gendered livelihood strategies of fishermen and women in South India through their lives. They introduced the concept of ‘work life course’ which they define as “patterns of engagement of men and women in remunerative work throughout their life course”. In another contribution to the discussion on work and life course, the life cycle approach is central, namely Arjan de Haan’s (2003) analysis of gendered experiences of male and female labour migrants in Kolkata. He showed how young men have a relatively long period when they can move around
without (adult) supervision (*ghumma*) and try out jobs here and there. But no such option exist for young women, whose experience are confined to the household. (Mattila, 2011).

Kapadia (1998) examined the two subordinated groups—“untouchables” and women—in a village in Tamilnadu, South India. The lives and work of “untouchable” women in the village provided a unique analytical focus that clarifies the ways in which three axes of identity—gender, caste, and class—are constructed in South India. The author proves that the non-Brahmin custom of close kin marriages gives women greater protection and independence. The involvement of maternal relatives in every important stage of women’s life and the general distance maintained from paternal kin has been observed by her while describing the puberty ritual in great detail. This is quite distant from the partilineal preferences of Brahmins, who encouraged pre-puberty marriage and accorded a far lower status to women. With urbanisations, however, these protections are being withdrawn and the rights and obligations of matrilineal kin eroded. Non-Brahmin households are moving away from the traditional system of pledging girls the male members of the maternal uncle’s family and substituting the traditional bride price with the pernicious practice of dowry. There is a tendency for upwardly mobile non-brahmins to adopt the patriarchal practices of Brahmins for class mobility. The adoption of urban systems and ideas does not necessary improve the lot of women; instead it reduces the importance of women’s labour, withdraws them from economically remunerative occupations and dissolves the community within which woman’s role was respected and conceded.

### 3.4 DIFFERENT LIFE COURSES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

According to Banerji, “The life of a woman according to the *Dharmasastras*, has three stages, that of an unmarried girl, a married girl, and as a widow” (quoted in Puri, 1999, p. 6). Interestingly, all three stages of a woman’s life are defined in relation to her status to men, that is, pre-married, married, and post-married. Different life course have been discussed here which have a influence and implication on this other aspect of life especially in the context of women. The phase of girl child discusses the processes of a girl growing into a woman in the patrilineal and patriarchal societies like India. It will reflect on the issue of constraints that a girl faces in the process of socialising herself as a female followed by other life courses.

#### 3.4.1 Girl Child

Evidence of the preference for and dominance of males in Indian society is found early in the life cycle. From conception, female children are regarded and treated differently than male children. For instance, if through amniocentesis the gender of the foetus is determined to be female, she may be aborted because of the preference for male children. In contrast, male children are highly valued. Males do not require dowry, they will be able to support their parents in their old age, and they are the only ones who can perform the death rituals. Males are also favoured and viewed as an investment because they receive dowry from the bride’s family. The female child receives less or poorer quality food and may experience unequal access to health care (Van Willigen & Channa, 1991). Discrimination at the early age with the girl child also affects various other aspects
of her life like education, marriage etc. As female children are not as highly valued as male children, they are often viewed as economic and social burdens which is reflected in the declining sex ratio in India and increased cases of female foeticide in many parts of India. The popular image and perception of the tribal women is that of being better off than their non-tribal counterparts. A higher social status of women was reported by Furer - Haimendorf (1943), Hutton (1921), Hunter (1973) and Firth (1946) among Tharus of Uttar Pradesh and Nagas and Garos of the North East. Rivers (1973), Dalton (1872) and Grigson (1938) however have reported low status of women among Todas, Kharis and Mariya Gonds with reference to certain taboos during certain periods and ceremonies. Majumdar (1973) has reported a higher status of tribal women on some indicators while lower on others, while Shashi (1978) has concluded that the status of tribal women varies from tribe to tribe. They are considered as an asset due to roles played by them in the society. The practice of bride price during marriages is quite common among them. In recent years as the capitalist economy is setting in, tribal women are being deprived of their traditional roles, due to which their economic value is decreasing and the practice of ‘bride-price’ is giving way to the system of dowry as generally witnessed in non-tribal society.

A study by Sutapa Agarwal (2005) highlights the discrimination as an active and passive elimination of girl child in different socio-economic conditions as a life course approach by exploring data from 329 ever married women in a community-based survey conducted in five villages of Haryana, India in 2003. The broad objective of the study is to investigate into the inter linkages between the different aspects of women’s life course with sex selective discrimination. Active elimination of girl child has been seen in terms of abortion according to sex of the surviving children, pregnancy order, mother’s childhood experience, autonomy status and marital instability. The finding suggests that autonomy, education and exposure to mass media have negative impact whereas co-residence with in-laws and no male child has significant positive impact for active elimination. In-laws play an important role in abortion under the umbrella of son preference. This present study examined the sex selective discrimination by active elimination of female foetus and passive elimination of female child leading to their death and the role of different background characteristics like women’s childhood experience, autonomy, married life and sex preference and family size preference of women in it. Therefore, it can be said that there exists women’s life course impact on the discrimination against girl child. Women who themselves had the worst childhood experience (in terms of discrimination in all spheres including childhood status, food, education, mobility etc.), had less autonomy in various dimensions (such as decision-making, monetary, mobility, fertility etc.), felt high instability in her married life or perceived a sad married life, are more responsible for the discrimination against girl child from conception through her childhood leading to a vicious cycle of gender deprivation and gender discrimination.

3.4.2 Menarche: Beginning of the Reproductive Life Course

The onset of the first menstrual cycle is the sign that the girl has entered puberty. The first menstruation is known as menarche. Menarche also marks the beginning of the fertile years in a woman’s life signifying her reproductive potential as she becomes biologically capable of bearing children. The event is often preceded by signs such as enlargement of the breasts and the uterus and the growth of
pubic hair. Hence it is related with rapid physical growth and hormonal changes which influence the behaviour pattern of pubescent girls. Menarche usually occurs between ages 11 and 13 but it may begin sooner and in others it may be delayed, but very rarely beyond 16 years of age. The onset of menarche varies with the activity level of the girls and the nutritional status of girls.

In the cultural context of India, attainment of menarche by girls is considered a biological indicator that the girl is ready for the commencement of sexual relations. This is evident from the traditional practice of Gauna that was commonly followed in the olden days. In this system, girls used to be married off at an early age but continued staying in the parental home without the consummation of marriage. However, when a girl attained menarche, the ceremony of Gauna would be performed and then the girl went to live at her husband’s house where she would begin her married life. The event of menarche is also a social indicator signifying the eligibility of the girl for marriage and the initiation of the search for a suitable marriage partner (Caldwell et al. 1983). Research findings by Padmadas et al., (1999) illustrate that the two events of menarche and marriage follow each other very closely in the rural areas. Menarche initiates the beginning of the reproductive life course followed by the events of marriage and birth of the first child. In addition to this, menarche as an event has a social relevance. In many cases it is marked by the change in role of girls in their family from girlhood to adulthood like taking up responsibilities in the house, exhibiting matured behaviour, taking on womanly duties like cooking, learning to do the pooja and helping the mother in the kitchen.

3.4.3 Married Status

Because of the way in which society is organised, in most societies, parents and family members start talking about marriage of girls from a young age. In many cases, they do not welcome the girls from birth, mainly as they think that they shall have to spend a fortune on their marriage and subsequent events. Girls are seen as property of another house. Though the official age for marriage for boys and girls is 21 and 18 years, respectively, in many traditional societies in our country many boys and girls are married at a much younger age. For e.g., in Rajasthan, in some tribal communities, it is considered auspicious to marry children on Akshey Tej day and mass marriages take place on this occasion. From a young age women think that for them marriage is natural and logical. Many women find that they are expected to become wives and that wives are expected to become mothers. Susan’s C. Seymour’s (1999) long term study in Orissa on changing family organisation, child rearing practices and gender roles in India reveals a socio-cultural system where early marriages are not only considered normal for many women but also resulted in satisfying lives for them. In her study she introduces to a system of family and gender that is based upon cultural assumption and structural principles that are very different from those characteristics of most contemporary western societies.

Raval (2009) pointed out that a substantial body of literature in psychological anthropology has challenged the stereotypical depiction of South Asian women as passive subordinates in patriarchal families, and has provided accounts of these women as actors in their social world focusing specifically on situations of inter personal conflict. She analysed the narratives of Gujarati women from two cohorts, daughters-in-law in Gujarat, India and mothers-in-law in Gujarati
immigrant in Canada, to argue that these women actively engage in negotiating the conflicts between their wishes and others expectations. The mode of agency that they exercise is less egocentric and more relational. The decision making and negotiations occur within the parameter of their familial roles rather than rebellion against family structures, and their actions are driven by motivations involving the welfare of their children and grand children rather than “individualistic” desires. These narratives along with ethnographic works exploring South Asian personhood, call for the need to broaden the conceptualisation of agency and challenge the appropriateness of traditional individualistic feminism in understanding the lives of women globally.

In most societies girls and boys are prepared differently for marriage. Although the situation is changing, but in many cases it is found that boys are usually brought up to acquire working skills to be used outside home, which will bring in money. On the other hand women are more likely to be legally and financially dependent on their spouses. Therefore even if women are emotionally or physically ill-treated within marriage, they may still be better off remaining with their husbands for financial support as the society may not treat a divorced woman sympathetically. But in the changing scenario, it has been found that women with jobs prefer to get married at a later age and also prefer to have few children. The trend is fast changing especially in urban areas.

Even after marriage, women who cannot give birth to children or do not want them due to their careers, face considerable difficulties. Women who do not produce children may be divorced and face humiliation as well as economic insecurity. These social pressures affect the way infertile women are treated and add to the difficulty. This is also true for mothers who want to be professionals, sportswomen or simply enjoy life as individuals in their own right.

Marriage is an event that often brings about a marked change in the lives of most women. Marriage in all cases brings about a change in place of residence when a woman leaves the parental home to begin residing with the husband and his family. The marital status confers on women the position of a wife. Simultaneously she takes on the roles of a daughter-in-law, sister-in-law etc. Thus marriage brings about a new network of relationship, which is built around the woman in which she often has to adjust and compromise the control of women and the potential for violence are especially great when a woman leaves her natal home to become a part of her husband’s family. On moving in, the status of the daughter-in-law is often very low compared with the men and even with any older women in the household. If there are dowry related problems, it is at this stage that the likelihood of fatal violence is elevated. The abuse begins when the husband and/or his family harass the wife for more money and more goods from her family (Van Willigen & Channa, 1991). If the wife and her family do not comply, a staged accident— dowry burning—may occur. This may not be true in all cases as Susan C. Seymour (1999) based on her study on lives of women in Orissa pointed out that in a family system that keeps sets of related men together in multigenerational house, known as “Joint Families”, by sending daughters away and bringing in outside women as wives and daughters-in-law through a complex system of arranged marriage, women are the moving pieces in an exchange system that creates extensive webs of kinship. She raised a question in the study that is this hardship for them? Yes, for they must leave the security of their own family and join a different family. Do they find it oppressive? Sometimes but not
generally as Indian women are socialised to expect a dramatic transition at the
time of marriage and to assume new responsibilities in their husband’s household.
It emerges from a much broader socio-cultural system in which women though
structurally disadvantaged are expected to fill critical family roles associated
with power, authority and respect. Furthermore, this is enmeshed within a cultural
system in which feminine powers are writ large: within Hindu theology and
practice females are believed to possess great power (Shakti). Male deities cannot
act without their female counterparts—their source of creative power and female
deities are widely worshipped in their own right.

The patriarchal nature of Indian society is seen quite clearly when one examines
the role of women. For the most part, women are viewed and treated as inferior
to men (Frankl, 1986; Gangrade & Chander, 1991; Narasimhan, 1994 in Johnson
and Johnson, 2001). As a result of this domination by men, women are
economically dependent on men and have fewer choices in terms of occupation,
education, and life course.

Part of the reason they are considered a burden is because of the dowry system.
Marriage is the only socially acceptable life course option. Thus, if a woman
does not marry, she and her parents will suffer socially. If a woman does marry
and finds herself in an abusive situation, she probably will not return to her
parents’ home or divorce her husband because she and her family will be ostracised
from their community. Although marriage is the only acceptable status for adult
women, this constraint does not apply to men (Puri, 1999).

The earlier concept of Stree dhan (a woman’s property) has now become distorted
as dowry and underlies much of the tensions that marriage creates in India.

3.4.4 Motherhood

The event of first birth marks the transition to ‘motherhood’, which brings about
with it a myriad of changes in a woman’s life. The event usually interrupts her
educational career, her participation in the labour market, personal and
professional aspirations for success, imposes limitations on her physical mobility
and is an invasion to the personal space of a woman. Hence the event of first
birth has significant social and cultural connotations attached to it. The social
connotation attributes to women the social role of mother while the cultural
connotation acts both as a constraining and facilitating factor leading to her status
enhancement in the society. Highly educated women have better access to
information and hence have greater control over their fertility career.

In most Indian homes, it is not just the birth of a child but the birth of a son that
bestows real motherhood upon a woman. In many parts of Northern India, people
count the ‘number of children’ as ‘number of boys’. Girl children are not even
counted as part of the family. Thus motherhood brings its own anxieties and
many women face problems in their marital home if they are unable to conceive
or fail to conceive a boy child.

In the course of life also the mother of a son has the privilege of assuming the
coveted role of a mother-in-law, when she becomes powerful within the family
and wields considerable clout over sons and daughters-in-law. Such a position
of power is never attained by parents of daughters as they remain lower in rank
to the bride receivers.
Even in old age it is taken for granted that sons will take care of their parents and parents with grown up sons can hope to pass a comfortable old age. However in the modern times things may not turn out quite as ideally and often educated and earning women are capable of taking care of their parents although even today in Northern India at least, this is looked down upon.

### 3.4.5 Widowed Women

Thus even as a widow a woman is better off if she is the mother of sons than of daughters. In traditional times widows were subjected to many restrictions and sometimes women of the upper castes were forced to commit ‘sati’ or to lead a miserable life in places of worship like Benaras or Puri.

As a widow, a woman is no longer under the control and care of her husband and must either reside with her sons or in-laws. Either of these living arrangements may translate into very poor treatment, abuse, or even abandonment, as the woman is yet again transformed into a social and financial burden (Johnson and Johnson, 2001). Furthermore, mistreatment of the woman by her husband’s family arises, especially when the widowed woman is without male children. Once again, the patriarchal notion of male supremacy prevails.

However menopause as such is not a stigma, rather a woman gains in status after her periods cease as her body is now considered pure. Older women are allowed such participation in rituals as are not normally allowed to women who still menstruate. But as a widow a woman becomes inauspicious and is shunned at many rituals especially those that have to do with fertility, like marriage.

The status of a widow also varies with caste. Among the lower castes there was never any restriction on widow remarriage but among the upper castes, especially Brahmins, even a child widow was not allowed to marry again.

### 3.5 Empowerment and Life Course

Empowerment is 1) a process from a state of disempowerment to greater empowerment and 2) women’s agency is central to the process of empowerment. Empowerment is not static, but varies by location, time, and stage of life cycle (Dyson and Moore 1983; Mason 1986; Gage 2000; Malhotra, Schuler et al. 2002). For example, in South Asia, the relative disempowerment of young, recently-married women is contrasted with the relative empowerment of mothers-in-law in cross-sectional analyses (Mason 1986; Kabeer 2001). Selected studies indicate empowerment varies by age, marital and employment status (Standing 1991; Das Gupta 1996; Gage 2000; Hindin 2002). Some researchers have theorised that women’s empowerment is responsive to demographic events, with empowerment increasing over the life course as women bear children, and, in many countries, male children in particular, an idea generally—but not universally—supported by the limited research on the issue.

Women’s initial empowerment affects family formation pressures following marriage, the strength of which may depend, in part, on the presence of co-residing in-laws (also affected by women’s initial characteristics), with more empowered women being more capable of resisting pressures to bear children. Women’s initial empowerment and family formation pressures each lead to the
size and composition of the families women form and also their work life outside the home. More empowered women and women with fewer pressures are more likely to achieve a smaller family and desired family composition while less empowered women will more likely have a more normative family formation.

Because life course theory suggests that individual’s outcomes are influenced by their accumulated experiences and resources, women’s later empowerment is, in turn, influenced both by their earlier empowerment and by intermediary events like again the size or composition of the families they form.

In nearly all societies, motherhood and domestic duties are regarded as important feminine roles. On this account girls from a young age help mothers in household duties and child care and are married at young age. To become a mother and bear children is considered as an important feminine role. They may also be made to discontinue education to get married. Men are considered as breadwinners for the family. Their role is to be employed and to support the family.

### 3.6 CHANGING SCENARIO AFFECTING LIFE COURSES

Every society in contemporary times is facing the onslaught of ongoing rapid social and cultural transformations. The consequences of such changes are visible in the behavioural and ideational changes of individuals in the society. Some aspects of sweeping social change have directly affected women’s lives and what had been considered restrictive for women is no longer perceived to be so, both by women themselves as well as the social and the cultural context in which they live.

Women and higher education as well as women and paid work command the central stage in the changing lives of women through a re-structuring of their life course. Enabling women to pursue higher education and their participation in the labour force also illustrate the role of changing societal institutions in recent times. Family set-up, religious and cultural prescriptions have become more accommodative in the passage of time, which earlier spearheaded the traditional role of women as ‘homemakers’. Educational, occupational and family careers no longer follow the stable, continuous and predictable course. Their respective influence on the life course is observable in the timing and sequencing of events in women’s life. Hence the changing structuration of the life course indicates women’s new position in today’s society.

As more and more women are acquiring educational skills they are seeking jobs and getting employment in the market place. This changed situation is affecting roles of both women and men and bringing change in their lives.

Times and situations are changing fast on account of forces of modernisation, urbanisation, liberalisation and globalisation. Accordingly, the societies are acquiring different values and under going change. In modern societies, women and men are facing a situation of conflict and encountering conflicting situation about their roles and expectations both within and outside the home. Today girls are expected to receive higher education, marry, have a family, maintain a professional career and yet attend to numerous traditional household duties and chores. Therefore married women often experience role conflict and feel guilty
of not spending sufficient time in being good housewives and mothers. At the same time women’s access to employment leads to higher mobility, outside the four walls of the house and neighborhood, greater participation in decision making, contribution to the family income, savings etc. All, this constitutes crucial means of becoming less dependent on male members and also exercising control and assertiveness.

3.7 SUMMARY

Discrimination and inequality faced by women on the account of sex has a profound impact on the life course of women like marriage, motherhood, work, old age etc across the societies. Therefore, a life course perspective has the potential to direct attention to the situation of women at various times in their lives. The world of men and women are different in terms of work, mobility, status, condition, position, work, wealth, education, nutrition, marriage, relations and practically everything. Understanding the concept of gender and life course is essential to our understanding of how various events, activities and processes affect lives of boys and girls, men and women, in different ways in different societies on account of which they learn masculine and feminine behaviour. In spite of girls’ socially weaker position compared to boys, girls enjoy more personal freedom and autonomy in their natal homes than they do after getting married. While a daughter-in-law is at the bottom of the household hierarchy and controlled by both women and men in the groom’s house, a young married woman is still valued as a potential child-bearer.

Women gain freedom upon getting older, like the mother-in-law generation has more freedom in life, is less dominated by males, and has more authority than in earlier life phases. Menarche, marriage, motherhood are events that often brings about a marked change in the lives of most women. Every society in contemporary times faces the onslaught of ongoing rapid social and cultural transformations affecting women’s lives and life courses.

References


Gender and the Life Course


Suggested Reading


Sample Questions

1) What is life course approach? Explain concepts related to life course approach.

2) Explain gender and the life course perspective in detail.

3) What are the implications of the different life courses? Explain from gender perspective with examples.