
UNIT 2 FAMILY AND GENDER

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Learning Objectives



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

- understand the family as a ‘gendered institution’ in a cross-cultural perspective;
- discuss sexual division of labour, social construction of sexuality and discourses of motherhood and caring;
- explain how socialisation practices construct gendered subjects; and
- understand changing dimensions of family and gender relations in Indian society.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Of all the social institutions, family is the most ubiquitous. Sociologists and anthropologists have devoted much time and energy towards the study of the family across cultures. The family is the site for reproduction, production and consumption; it is the primary agency of socialisation or enculturation within which the new generation learns the norms, values and life-ways of their social group; it is the primary agency of identity formation within which an individual learns what roles she/he is expected to play and positions to occupy. Symbolic interactionist theorists like Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead have emphasised that it is within primary groups like the family that an individual develops a sense of ‘self’; and learns how to shape and regulate behaviour with reference to the expectations and value judgments of the wider social group. In a nutshell, it is the family that facilitates the development of the unsocialised individual organism into a social ‘person’.

Gender identity, gender socialisation and enactment of gender appropriate roles are a critical aspect of this process. Our identification as 'male' or 'female' places certain constraints or limitations as well as opens up certain avenues and opportunities in our lives.

Let us begin by clarifying the important distinction made by scholars between the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. In her famous book, 'The Second Sex' (1949) The French author Simone de Beauvoir asserted that 'one is not born a woman; one' becomes one. One may be born as a female of the human race but it is culture, society and civilisation which creates 'woman', which defines what is 'feminine' and prescribes how women should behave and what they should do. Sociologist Ann Oakley made the distinction between biological sex and social gender in her book *Sex, Gender and Society*, first published in 1972. She wrote that the word 'sex' related to the biological differences between male and female in terms of sex organs and reproductive capacities. Gender referred to the cultural meanings ascribed by society and the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine'.

Feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin's classic article "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" (1975) drew on the theories of authors such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Claude Levi-Strauss to understand the cross-cultural regularities in the status of women. Her theory of the "Sex/gender system" attempted to identify a dynamic system through which the biological features of 'Sex' were transformed into the social features of "gender". In the words of Ellen Lewin (2006:44) "Societies depended upon gender as a way to render persons eligible for particular kinds of manipulation in the social exchanges that occurred through marriages."

Society "needs" men and women, and hence creates them everywhere.

Despite this analytical difference, we see that everywhere the 'natural' or 'biological' differences between male and female are overlaid with layers of cultural meanings and societal prescriptions. Women are thus seen as 'naturally' weak, submissive, nurturing, family oriented, self-sacrificing and unsuited to the hurly-burly of professional commitments, politics, science and technology etc. The 'natural' thus becomes 'social' just as the social and cultural are attributed to biological difference.

The family is the key site where biological sex transforms into social gender. When a baby is born, the first question that is usually asked by anxious relatives and friends is "Is it a girl or boy?" The answer to this question will determine a great many of the life chances and future opportunities and prospects of the infant. It may even play an important role in survival chances, as in some communities, the girl child is viewed as an economic and social burden and may be subjected to fatal neglect or even infanticide. Girl children may not have access to the same quality and quantity of nutrition may be groomed to help in domestic chores and child care while their male siblings may be sent to school or college. Being born male or female plays a crucial role in the division of labour, in the prestige and pay accorded to various kinds of work and in participation in various public spheres like the economy, polity, religious and aesthetic realms of society. Biological differences thus translate into differing cultural expectations and opportunities and, significantly, into discrimination on the basis of this difference. Gender is thus recognised by social scientists as one of the most important axes of stratification and discrimination amongst human beings. Gender

theorists in contemporary times prefer to take an intersectional approach, by studying the manner in which gender interacts and intersects with the other bases or axes of differentiation like race, caste, class, ethnicity etc.

In the present unit, we will attempt to build upon the important arguments made in the previous unit which dealt with gender and kinship. The terms kinship, marriage and family are usually used together in anthropology and it is very difficult to analytically separate them. Any discussion on kinship will necessarily involve family and marriage and vice versa. However by devoting separate Units to **Kinship and Gender** and **Family and Gender** it is expected that you will obtain a deeper insight into the manner in which the most personal and intimate experiences of human life lay the bedrock for a gendered and frequently gender-unjust social structure. Feminists have opined that any attempt to rid society of its gender-discriminatory ideologies and practices must begin within the matrix of the family and intimate relations, with some radical feminists calling for the dismantling of the heterosexual nuclear family itself. Shulamith Firestone's controversial and famous book *The Dialectic of Sex* (1979) is one such extreme viewpoint.

It is important to bear in mind that we cannot speak of the family as a static, unchanging social institution. Definitions of who constitute a family, family organisation, patterns of mate-selection, residence, inheritance etc., exhibit great historical and cross-cultural variation. The family is also embedded within and in constant interaction with other social institutions, including the economy, the state, the legal system, religious and educational institutions. Changes in the institutional matrix have a corresponding impact on family structure, functions and interrelationships. Gender is one of the core themes underpinning these interactions. To give a simple example, sexual division of labour is observed both within the domestic spaces of family and household as well as public spheres like the market and workplace. Any change in one is bound to affect the other. Indeed, as you have earlier read., Friedrich Engels theorised the interrelatedness of capitalism and patriarchy, of class and gender and compared women to the 'proletariat' or oppressed working class whose labour power was 'appropriated' by men/capitalist class. In this unit, we will also be taking a close look at the interrelationship between the worlds of domestic and work through a gender lens.

2.1.1 Reproduction and the Family

One of the important functions of the family is the reproductive function. Men and women come together through the socially sanctioned institution of marriage in order to channelise their sexuality in socially approved relationships and to have children thus ensuring generational continuity.

The ethnographic record does have several examples of "same sex" marriage, eg. The 'berdache' system among the Cheyenne Indians of North America and the "temporary boy-wives" of the Azande of Africa and female-to-female marriages amongst the Nandi community in Kenya (Ember et al, 2007:360). However, these are the exceptions, rather than the rule, and family systems across the world rest fundamentally upon heterosexual unions between men and women.

Feminists opine that reproduction, like all human activities is not a purely biological act but a social one. Even though the acts of conceiving and giving

birth to a child involve biological processes in a fundamental way, they are “overlain by multiple layers of social and cultural practices.” (Bradley, 2007:117)

As mentioned earlier, Engel’s “The Origins of the Family” is regarded as a foundational text by scholars of gender. Reproduction, according to Engels, was of a two-fold character, involving both the production of survival needs like food, clothing and shelter as well as the production of human beings (reproduction) in order to carry on the species. These mutually connected activities involve the most important gender-based activities of the family, namely, domestic labour (housework and childcare) and maternity and motherhood.

2.1.2 The Domestic Division of Labour

In a short but influential article entitled ‘A Note on the Division of Labour by Sex’, Judith Brown (1970) asked the question about whether there was something universal about the kind of work done by women across societies. Surveying an array of ethnographic materials on division of labour by sex, Brown suggested that it was women’s responsibility for the bearing and rearing of young children that determined the nature of division of labour by sex. If women undertook work that was dangerous, kept them away from their children for long periods or interrupted their childcare duties, it would threaten the survival and well-being of their children. As Lewin (2006:42) writes; “Brown’s article thus codifies a classic statement of the relationship between sex and gender: women’s reproductive roles are, in this view, a biological given; the social obligations that arise from them are cultural, but fundamentally linked to that biological foundation that admits few variations. Sex and gender then, are imagined as theoretically divisible, but empirically intertwined, tied together by evolutionary pressures as much as by convention.”

Brown’s formulations set the tone for a good deal of theorising in feminist anthropology particularly the understanding that it was woman’s reproductive role and its attendant responsibilities, viz. motherhood, that were at the core of gender systems across cultures. Irrespective of economic and technological development, women across cultures are charged with a specific set of reproductive responsibilities that determine their participation in activities outside the domestic sphere. Sherry Ortner’s (1974) paper “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture”, interrogates whether women’s close identification with the ‘natural’ realms of reproduction placed them firmly within the ambit of ‘nature’, which, as we know is considered to be of a lower order than its binary opposite ‘culture’, which is associated with the world of men. Esther Boserup (1970) examined various systems of agriculture across the world and observed that less intensive forms of food production such as gathering and early horticulture tended to be more amenable or ‘friendly’ to women’s labour. However, when communities adopted plough based agriculture, which required greater physical strength and intensive labour, men assumed the major role. It can be speculated that when the labour of women is less vital to the survival of the family than that of man, their relative social status also declines.

The notion of ‘separate spheres’, i.e. women in charge of the private, domestic world of housekeeping, cooking, caring and of course, giving birth to babies and men ‘in charge’ of the public spheres including working, earning a livelihood and participating in the other works of society, is in fact at the very heart of the modern, industrial nuclear family.

Gender differences in the responsibility for children are an important aspect of the family as a 'gendered institution'. Tracing the historical evolution of this pattern in American society, Amy Wharton (2005), notes that the word "housework" was not introduced in the English language until 1841, suggesting that in earlier times there was no clear-cut distinction between work performed at home and work performed elsewhere. With the dawn of the industrial revolution, the growth of the factory system and urbanisation, the domains of 'home' and 'work' came to be separated, and this was further reinforced by gender-based division of labour.

"Among the middle class, the workplace became men's domain, while families were seen as populated by women and children. Because middle-class wives cooked, cleaned, raised children, provided emotional support, entertained and sacrificed their own ambitions for their husbands' careers; it was as if married, middle class men brought two people to work, rather than one." (Wharton, 2005:85).

However, it was a different story with the working class. Many working class women had to contribute to the household by taking up waged work. They had to juggle the double responsibilities of 'housework' and 'paid work'. The above example illustrates the complex interplay of gender and class in shaping family arrangements and adjustments. However, it was the middle class experience that became the basis for cultural norms and practices at the workplace, which became an essentially male sphere. As Cancian (1989:17) writes: "In sum, the ideology of separate spheres reinforced the new division of labour, and portrayed a world of independent, self-made men and dependent, loving women. The ideal family was portrayed as a harmonious, stable, nuclear household with an economically successful father and an angelic mother" (c.f. Wharton, 2005:86) Wharton makes the important point that the doctrine of separate spheres was as much prescriptive as descriptive, providing a powerful cultural justification for men to work for pay and women to stay at home and care for the family. If, for some reason, a man was unable to work or provide adequately for his wife and children, he was deemed a failure, an unfit husband and father. Likewise, a woman was expected to centre her life around the needs and well-being of her family and it was this investment of love and emotions that also made her 'unfit' to be a worker. A woman who was unwilling to be a full-time caretaker was also stigmatised and her 'femininity' was held in doubt.

In the Indian context, Maitreyi Chaudhari traces the recasting of women as creatures of domesticity to colonial capitalism and modernity. The 19th century social reform movement was strongly influenced by Victorian values and culture, and accordingly, Indian women were sought to be educated and moulded to fit the 'ideal type' of 'reformed' women. This new Indian woman was to be gentle, refined, and skilled in running a 'home'. Reformers wanted to devise a system of education for women that would "enable the wife to serve as a solace to her husband in his bright and dark moments... to superintend the early instruction of her child, and the lady of the house to provide those sweet social comforts, idealised in the English word – Home" (Chaudhari, 2011:51) The idea of the 'ideal woman' as wife/mother will be taken up for discussion later on in the unit.

Continuing to the discussion on the domestic division of labour, Harriet Bradley (2007) notes that despite the increase in labour market participation of women

in the post World War II period in the West, their domestic responsibilities have not altered significantly. Several research studies show that even “in dual earner families in advanced countries like Australia, Canada, the U.S.A. and Norway, men reported doing only about 25 percent of total housework. The nature of housework men do is also a matter of choice; they play with children, take them out for excursions, read them stories etc. while leaving the routine maintenance tasks like cooking, cleaning and feeding to women. The responsibility for planning and coordinating the household routine falls largely on women; they are the ‘household managers’. Bradley sums up: “women ‘do the housework’; men ‘help’” (2007:120). The gendered nature of domestic work thus creates and sustains gender disparities within the household and at the workplace. Women’s contribution to the running of the household is largely seen as an extension of their ‘feminine nature’ rather than important work in its own right. The coming of the industrial age further sharpened the division between the ‘world of work’ and the ‘world of domesticity’ placing cultural expectations and norms on the performance of both sets of duties and responsibilities. The ‘breadwinner-homemaker’ dichotomy on which the industrial, nuclear household was based has had a profound impact on gender relations within the family.

2.2 SEXUALITY, HETERONORMATIVITY AND THE FAMILY: CONTROL OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

2.2.1 Sexuality

Marriage is the institutional mechanism through which sexual activity and procreation are regulated. While sexuality may seem to be a highly personal, private matter concerning the individual, anthropologists and sociologists maintain that sexual behaviour is socially and culturally learnt. It is also highly variable, as the ethnographic record shows. In many pre-modern societies, sexuality is tightly controlled and rule-bound, due to the requirements of inheritance and the establishment of paternity. The history of wealthy and aristocratic groups in different societies reveals the importance placed on ‘legitimate heirs’ and inheritance. While men have by and large been allowed sexual freedom and to have multiple partners, women have been forced to be strictly monogamous and confine sex to marriage. Bradley (2007) notes that world religions like Christianity and Islam while in theory, uphold marital fidelity for both spouses, in practice take a relatively lenient view of male promiscuity while condemning and punishing non-monogamous women. In the context of Hindu India rigid control of female sexuality is linked with the caste ideology based upon hierarchy, the concept of purity and pollution and the notion of women as ‘gate-keepers’ of the honour of the family, the caste and the community. Female sexuality is viewed as potentially uncontrollable and destructive to both the familial and social order, hence all measures are enforced to ensure that it does not escape the tight control of the natal and subsequently conjugal family. Practices like pre-puberty marriage, restrictions on the movements and activities of married women, disfigurement or even murder of widows and with the advance of technology and bio-medicine, the sinister practice of foetal sex-determination and aborting female children are all the offshoots of the patriarchal ideology that views females as a burden and female sexuality with suspicion and hostility. Rigid prescriptions and proscriptions with regard to marriage rules (hypergamy,

jati endogamy, gotra exogamy, village exogamy etc.) also serve to police sexuality and individual choice in mate selection. Recent instances of young couples being brutally hunted down and sometimes killed by angry kin and community members for going against the traditional rules and selecting ‘unsuitable spouses’ aptly demonstrate the conflict between the ideology of freedom of choice in sexual or romantic matters and the ideology of regimentation or control over sexuality in the interests of wider social networks of kin and community.

2.2.2 Heteronormativity

When we speak about sexuality being as much a social construct as a personal choice, it follows that there is a certain ‘normative’ kind of sexuality that society endorses and approves, i.e. hetero-sexual relationships.

The term ‘heteronormative’ is used to describe the socially approved sexual relationship between a woman and a man. This relationship which potentially results in procreation is at the very foundation of marriage and family. Alternative expressions of sexuality such as homosexuality, lesbianism, bi-sexuality and even voluntary renunciation of sex or ‘celibacy’ are seen as antithetical or against the institution of family. The ‘gay’ community all over the world has been at the receiving end of society’s censure and disapproval, and in many societies, homosexuality was an offense punishable under the law. It is only in recent years that ‘gay rights movements’ or ‘queer liberation’ has succeeded in gaining some legitimacy for alternative sexualities and secured them some legal rights. In India, the decriminalisation of consensual homosexual activity by the ‘reading down’ of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in July 2009 by the Delhi High Court is regarded as a landmark judgment.

2.3 GENDERED DISCOURSES ON MOTHERHOOD AND CARING

There is a powerful ‘discourse of motherhood’ across cultures and through history which places great cultural value on motherhood. In many societies including India, becoming a mother is considered to be a key ‘act’ in a woman’s life and the fulfillment of her womanly destiny. Becoming the mother of a son gives a young woman a better status in the marital home, however, if she gives birth to several daughters in succession, she is reviled. Barrenness is seen as the worst curse that can befall a woman; in many Indian languages she is referred to as a “barren field” (‘baanjh’ in Hindi). Motherhood is associated with the values of selflessness, sacrifice, placing the desires of the child and family above one’s own desires and needs and finding fulfillment in this ‘natural’ function. The psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has written extensively about the relationship between mothers and children in his work “The Inner World” (1978) which has been of great relevance to students of anthropology as well as psychology. When a young married woman enters her husband’s home, she is virtually a stranger in a strange land who has to often face humiliation, hostility and an unsympathetic attitude from her new relatives. She has to face much physical, mental and emotional anguish before she gets assimilated in the new setting.

Motherhood becomes the culturally sanctioned path to her elevation in status, especially if she produces a male heir. Kakar writes in detail about the intense physical, emotional and psychological bonding between mother and infant and

the powerful cultural and religious imagery about 'good' and 'bad' mothers. While the tight dyadic bond he describes has been challenged by other authors, his insights on the immense cultural weight accorded to motherhood in Hindu India are valuable. The studies of authors like Stanley Kurtz (1992) and Susan Seymour (1999) demonstrate that within the partilineal Indian family, 'multiple-care giving' is the norm, wherein the child is tended to by various other women in the household (grandmother, sisters, unmarried aunts, cousins etc) rather than just the mother.

Within the Western context, the emphasis on the 'woman as homemaker' role discussed earlier has created a powerful discourse on the 'maternal instinct' as an inborn feminine trait rather than as a socially learned and variable practice. The concept of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996; Cheal, 2002 c.f. Bradley, 2007) refers to the 'work' expected of mothers by focusing most of their time and energy upon the child's development, nutrition, education hobbies and play to ensure that s/he gets the best possible start in life. This kind of intensive 'mothering work' places heavy demands on mothers living in nuclear households who cannot rely upon extended kin networks to assist with childcare.

For women in paid employment, the 'double burden' of child care and professional commitments is particularly problematic and leads to feelings of guilt, stress and role conflict. Elizabeth Badinter in her important work *The Myth of Motherhood* (1981 c.f. Bradley, 2007) critiques this model of 'total motherhood' and points out that the role of fathers was commonly ignored even though there is no reason why they should not also be involved in child-care. We note that in the contemporary globalised culture, the image of 'new fatherhood' is also becoming salient and young men are shown to be taking interest in caring for their babies, playing with them, demonstrating public affection to them, accompanying them to school, helping with homework, etc. However, when it comes to decisions regarding staying at home, refusing a job or a transfer, taking leave to look after a sick child or putting 'home' before 'career', traditional gendered expectations usually win the day. Many more women are working outside the house compared to earlier times, but there are still 'housewives'. 'House husbands' or men who choose to stay at home to look after their families are still very rare and usually are the butt of ridicule and jokes. Cultural understandings of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' thus structure relationships of reproduction and production.

The above section has taken you through some of the important dimensions that contribute to the 'gendering' of the family. We now move to a very important area, namely gender socialisation. As you are aware, socialisation or enculturation is the process through which individuals learn cultural norms, values and behaviours. These include the socially approved ways of behaving, thinking and feeling in accordance with sexual identity. Child care practices provide us with useful entry, points into understanding the cultural values that underpin societies, and anthropologists have contributed much in this area. Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament* (1935) and *Male and Female* (1949) were foundational texts. Beatrice Whiting's *Six Cultures: Studies of Child Rearing* (1963) is regarded as a classic cross-cultural text. In the Indian context, the studies of Susan Seymour (1999) Margaret Trawick (1992) Alan Roland (1988), Stanley Kurtz (1992) to name but a few are highly influential works.

2.4 BECOMING GENDERED: THE FAMILY AND GENDER SOCIALISATION

Before you read this section, try this mental exercise. Try to recall the earliest memories of your childhood and the first time you became aware of gender. When was the first time you thought of yourself as a ‘boy’ or ‘girl’? When did you first think of others in your environment as male or female? You will probably realise that gender is a meaningful concept to children as young as three years of age. They can identify themselves and others as female or male.

How do children develop this understanding and start to behave like girls or boys are expected to in that social setting? Is it a biological or genetic response or is it the product of culture and environment? Social scientists agree that biology and genetics definitely play a role in personality and behaviour, however most social scientists agree that it is culture that shapes or acts upon an individual’s biological ‘raw material’ to form a ‘socialised person’, a member of society. The major theories of socialisation include the theories of ‘social learning’ and ‘cognitive development’ which are general theories that are applicable to gender socialisation as well. Another perspective – ‘identification theory’ – was specifically developed to explain gender socialisation and acquisition of a gender identity. While the former theories focus on the way children learn appropriate behaviours through imitation and internalisation from their parents, identification theory draws on Freudian ideas and focuses on how psychological, unconscious processes work in shaping gender identity. Nancy Chodorow’s 1978 classic *The Reproduction of Mothering* is an extremely influential text for anthropologists and sociologists of gender. According to Chodorow, gender identity is formed during early childhood as children develop strong attachments to a same-sex parent or adult, i.e. boys to the father and girls to the mother. However, in societies like the U.S.A. (to which Chodorow belonged) women were the primary care givers and thus children of both sexes developed their early emotional attachments to their mothers. However, as children grow up, boys have to ‘switch’ their identification from mother to father – an emotionally painful and difficult process – especially because fathers are less involved than mothers in child-care. Girls, on the other hand, continue to identify with the mother and learn what it means to be a female from her.

These different paths to gender identification according to Chodorow are responsible for the formation of gender-differentiated male and female personalities. While girls tend to be more connected to others and empathise with the feelings of others, boys are more comfortable with distance and separation and do not develop ‘empathy’ to the same extent as girls. Moreover, girls are more secure of their female identity whereas boys and men may need to ‘prove’ their masculinity every now and then to themselves and to others.

Even though Chodorow has been criticised for generalising on the basis of a particular, historically specific type of family – viz., the Western, nuclear family – her observations about the importance and centrality of the mother’s role in early child care and nurturance are important. Also, the insight that mothering itself is ‘reproduced’ through the formation of a ‘Feminine’ personality that values attachment, nurturance and empathy – traits that are commonly, identified as ‘maternal’ ones – enriches our understanding about how gender is produced and reproduced within the setting of the family.

We shall now discuss how gender is 'constructed' through socialisation of children in a specific socio-cultural context, viz. patrilineal Hindu society in India. For this purpose, we shall refer to a well-known article by Leela Dube (2001).

'On the Construction of Gender: Socialisation of Hindu girls in Patrilineal India' by Leela Dube systematically traces how women are 'produced as gendered subjects' through the intersections of family, kinship and caste which form the institutional matrix of Hindu society. From her very birth, the girl child is made to feel less valuable than a male child, whose birth is welcomed with celebration and feasting. If a baby brother follows her, she is considered auspicious and lucky, if a line of sisters result, the family is pitied. Folk sayings and proverbs like "Bringing up a daughter is like watering a plant in another's courtyard" clearly demonstrate preference for male children.

"Girls grow up with the notion of temporary membership within the natal home." (p. 91) Rituals and 'pujas' like Durga puja in Bengal and Gauri puja in Maharashtra symbolically celebrate the return of a married daughter to her natal home for a brief, happy period followed by her inevitable return to her marital home, as per the wishes of her husband. A little girl grows up observing marriage ceremonies where the bride is sent off amidst much wailing and display of emotion and hearing proverbs and lullabies which reinforce the message that her stay at the natal home is short-lived.

While a pre-puberty girl is regarded as pure and a manifestation of Devi or Mother Goddess, the onset of puberty on the other hand introduces dramatic changes in her life. She is now regarded as 'ripe', 'mature' or 'grown-up' and this transition is accompanied by rituals and observances including confinement and seclusion, eating special food, a ritual bath, particularly in Southern and Western parts of India and wearing 'grown up' clothes like a sari to denote her new status.

Attaining puberty places several restrictions upon a young girl's freedom and activities; her dress, department, manner of speech, (what Bourdieu refers to as 'habitus') must conform to cultural notions of 'modesty' and good character so that her marriage prospects are not compromised. Dube cites various proverbs and metaphors from various parts of India, such as:

"Whether the thorn falls on the petal or the petal falls on the thorn, it is always the petal that runs the risk of getting hurt and disfigured".

"Whatever can happen to buttermilk? It is the milk that gets bad"

"A glass once cracked is cracked forever."

Krishna Kumar the eminent educationist, writing about his experiences of "growing up male" in a small town in Madhya Pradesh, highlights what he calls the 'tragic pattern of socialisation' wherein girls would walk in a close group from school to home without looking here or there whereas boys would use the same street to hang around, run and play or maneuver their bikes. Krishna Kumar writes:

"Watching these silent clusters for years eroded my basic sense of endowing individuality to every human being. I got used to believing that girls are not individuals." (c.f. Dube, 2001:107)

This candid confession underscores how differential patterns of socialisation amongst boys and girls have implications for future marital and familial relationships wherein women's individuality and agency are neither recognised nor tolerated.

The reinforcement of masculine and feminine identities also takes place in terms of training in household chores and tasks. Earlier in the unit we discussed the gendered division of labour. Girls are trained to do tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, helping with childcare etc. because these are deemed to be naturally 'women's work'. An important component of this is the notion of 'service' or 'sewa' which is instilled in girls through the ideas, values and practices associated with food. Girls are often made to eat leftovers or their food intake is controlled so that their bodies do not look too mature or well-developed and so that they cultivate patience and restraint, learn how to cope with pain and deprivation.

Leela Dube writes:

'While they (girls) are being trained for present and future roles, the fact that they will eventually be going into another family is never forgotten. That a girl will have to leave her parental home is certain; to what kind of home she will go is not. And it will take her years to acquire any powers of decision-making or any autonomy in that new home. There are also many 'ifs' in the process. Socialisation for an unfamiliar setting and an uncertain future imparts a degree of tentativeness and provisionality to the process.'" (p.112)

Males, on the other hand are socialised into placing the continuity of the family at the centre of their lives; they are the inheritors as well as those responsible for the care of the elders in later years. The sense of entitlement and belongingness experienced by boys is in marked contrast to the insecurity and tenuousness experienced by the girl.

We may conclude the section with a very poignant 'bidaai' song (song sung at the time of departure of the bride) from the Hindi belt:

'O father you brought my brother up to be happy,
You brought me up for shedding tears,
O father, you have brought your son up to give him your house
And you have left a cage for me.' (p.93}

2.5 FAMILY AND GENDER RELATIONS IN TRANSITION

We have earlier noted that family systems are not static; they respond to and simultaneously impact other social institutions. In contemporary times, the State has played a major role in the affairs of the family; the state mandated programme to control population and limit family size, for example has had a distinct impact on reproductive behaviour and choices. The enactment of legislations pertaining to family matters like marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, prohibition of dowry, prevention of domestic violence etc. demonstrate that the demarcation between the 'private' and 'public' realms is rather artificial. The women's movement has played an important role in sensitising in society to the crimes

and discriminations being faced by girls and women within the family like dowry, bride-burning, domestic violence, juvenile sexual abuse, feticide and infanticide. The land mark report “Towards Equality” (1974) highlighted the discriminations being faced by Indian women in all spheres including the domestic, a quarter of a century after Independence.

Spread of women’s education, urbanisation and greater female workforce participation, globalisation, the information revolution and the growing impact of mass media, mobile telephony and other means of communication have virtually opened up a new world of possibilities and opportunities for the new generation of men and women.

Alongside these trends, we also note the prevalence of sex-related crimes, marital descriptions and breakdowns, so-called ‘honour killings’, trafficking of women and girls and an alarming decline in the sex ratio. Tulsi Patel (2005) observes that sociologists and anthropologists have not taken sufficient cognisance of the crises confronting the family and have confined themselves to a rather limited range of research questions.

Longitudinal studies provide interesting and rich data on change and continuity in the Indian family. Susan Seymour’s ethnographic work with families in Bhubaneshwar, Orissa spans over thirty years. Her data sheds light on the changing perceptions about family roles, responsibilities and obligations through a gender lens. Comparing the narratives of women across three generations, Seymour notes the gradual shift from ‘interdependence’ towards ‘independence’ and ‘personal autonomy’.

Women have experienced conflicting signals about their roles and identity. Greater access to education, later age at marriage have made girls more independent, at the same time, cultural values of modesty, docility and obedience to family wishes coexist. The continued reliance on ‘arranged marriages seem to prove this.

Seymour notes that the traditional patrifocal family is based upon age and gender hierarchies of authority. Older members have authority over younger ones and males have authority over females. Relationships of authority take precedence over relationships of love or dyadic emotional bonds. Women are expected to refrain from showing overt love and affection to their children and similarly, it is considered improper for a married couple to display love and affection in front of other family members.

However, Seymour’s findings indicate that the conjugal bond (between the married couple) is growing stronger and husbands and wives particularly in middle and upper income families had a more egalitarian relationship. Young women are less fearful and willing to walk out of unhappy marriages.

Helen Ullrich’s (1987, 1994) longitudinal study of Brahmin families in a South Indian Village documents how young women have succeeded in effecting change through education and now take an active role in selecting their husbands. After marriage, they prefer to live in nuclear households where they can be free of the interference of in-laws and share a more intimate relationship. (c.f. Seymour, 1998).

Leigh Minturn's longitudinal study of Rajput women in Khalapur village in North India carried out in 1955 and 1975 also documents greater autonomy and freedom; women could visit their natal homes more frequently, were less deferential to their parents-in-law and cooked food for their husbands and children on separate chulhas. Elders acknowledged that these changes were on account of improved education and greater autonomy and control exerted by their sons in the joint household. Elders are largely philosophical about these changes and accept these as God's will". (c.f. Seymour, 1999: 289)

Susan Wadley's (1999) study of Karimpur, a North Indian village where she had done fieldwork in the late 1960s and to which she returned in 1983-84 also describes significant educational change for women and the impact of television and films on redefining gender roles. Families are growing more 'couple oriented' and young husbands and wives demand their private space within the joint household, which would have been unthinkable to the older generations. Karimpur villagers however see this change as a symptom of disorder, challenging the once well-entrenched caste and gender hierarchies (c.f. Seymour, 1999: 289-90)

The above empirical studies demonstrate the changes in family structure and gender roles wrought about by modernisation. Seymour (1999) raises the following questions:

"To what extent will the patrifocal joint family be able to adjust to these kinds of democratizing changes while retaining the general commitment of family members to the well-being of the collective whole? Will India achieve any better solutions to the dilemma faced in Western societies of how to balance the needs of the family, whether extended or nuclear, with the desire to enhance gender equity and provide women as well as men with personal autonomy?.... Will these women be able to rely on the help of husbands, parents-in-law, and other extended kin in caring for children and the elderly, or will the kinds of familial problems faced by working couples in the contemporary United States simply be duplicated in India?" (p. 291)

These are indeed very important and interesting questions and only time can reveal the answers. There is a need for ongoing anthropological and sociological research on these various dimensions.

2.6 SUMMARY

We have focused upon the centrality of gender as a fundamental organising principle of the institution of family. Gender shapes our personalities, structures our opportunities and expectations and constrains and controls our behaviour. We examined how the family operates as a site of reproduction and production. We noted how domestic labour is gendered and how the idea of 'separate spheres' places women and men into distinct slots as homemakers and breadwinners. We examined how the discourses of heteronormativity, motherhood and caring further exacerbated the gender issue. We examined how the family system creates gendered subjects through gender socialisation and focused on the case of patrilineal Hindu society. In the final section, we discussed change and transformation in the systems of gender and family in contemporary Indian society.

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Suggested Reading

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Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss the centrality of gender as a fundamental organising principle of the institution of family.
- 2) Examine how the family operates as a site of reproduction and production.
- 3) Examine how the discourses of heteronormativity, motherhood and caring exacerbate the gender issue.
- 4) Discuss change and transformations in the systems of gender and family in contemporary Indian society.