
UNIT 1 GENDER AND WORK PARTICIPATION

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Learning Objectives



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

- discuss and understand the concept of unpaid work and paid work;
- review historical view of work participation from the perspective of gender; and
- examine gender roles and intersections with socio-political categories such as class, caste, rural-urban and its impact on women and work.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Lourdes Beneria (1999) a feminist economist in her classic paper on ‘unpaid labour’ have underlined the role of “conceptual and theoretical norms of statistical biases” that have resulted in devaluing, dismissing, and excluding women’s contribution (Beneria, 1999, p.287). An illustration to her point is the below definition of unpaid work by Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which says: “work that produces good and services but is unremunerated. It includes domestic labour, subsistence production and the unpaid production of items for market” (OECD, 2000).

By the logic and articulation of the above definition and using Beneria’s point of view, it is implied that women’s sexual reproduction particularly associated with child rearing, and cultural stereotyping, besides her work where she is responsible for cooking, cleaning will be deemed as “unpaid” because it is unremunerated and performed for domestic purposes. In addition, this definition not only implies “sexist biasness” but assumes and deems women’s unpaid work as natural, inferior, unreal and unworthy.

In contrast to these definitions, according to United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), ‘unpaid work of women is the foundation of human experience’ (UNIFEM, 2010) yet women’s work that is carried out in private domain, inside her household, both in production and sexual reproduction for the family and society is consistently devalued, unacknowledged and marginalised.

The above assessment of unpaid work done by women themselves establishes a fact that women in spite of being prime contributors to society through their sexual reproduction and household work, women’s work were regarded as chronically insignificant because of the presumption that “work” essentially means something that is undertaken outside the private domain, it has worthiness because it is done outside the house, it is not for pleasure but drudgery, there are fixed wages for the work and there are specific timings when work is undertaken, therefore “work” is understood narrowly.

These biased assumptions that largely shaped such exclusive conceptualisations were challenged by feminists who demanded and made several efforts to get the governments understand not only women’s work but all work that is performed by women, children, and even men should be accounted in “unpaid work”.

It is through the efforts of these feminist economists and activists that such conceptualisation of understanding unpaid work became to be broader and sensitive. Surprisingly, these operational definitions of work continue to devalue and sideline women’s contribution not only in third world countries but across all parts of the world. In fact in all modern societies the idea of work was mainly understood as spatially divorced from the family/ residence. That is why even sociologists assume that “workplace” and “residence” become spaces that are “spatially segregated” (Silver, 1993). Therefore the powerful imagery associated with work and idea of breadwinner is always masculine and men’s work essentially means ideas of income/work that is carried outside the private domain is ‘real’ work.

Very peculiar to the above biasness is the definition of employment, which is again narrowly defined as “activity distinguished from unpaid work” by the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (2009). To determine what constitutes an employment, applying “third person criterion” is used. This essentially means that any activity that can be done by a third person without diminishing its utility would determine the distinction between unpaid/paid labour. With the above framework, activities undertaken for leisure such as gardening, cleaning, or for domestic consumption, or voluntary work undertaken for charity or community service (usually unpaid) are classified as activities or forms of unpaid work.

The above frameworks continue to interpret women’s work inside the house such as cooking, cleaning and caring as unpaid. Besides, since the work is performed for domestic consumption and is without remuneration, the work is unaccounted in records and statistics. Ironically, the same work when done by the third person becomes a “paid work”. This implies contributions of housewives who remain inside the house and carry domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, and caring or engaging in reproductive work such as bearing children or looking after the old and sick can be deemed as “unpaid”. As pointed out rightly by Selma James (2012: 219), this adds insult to injury, the woman anywhere who doesn’t secure a wage may enter statistics as “economically inactive.”

1.2 REVISITING THE DEBATE OF UNPAID LABOUR

The debate of unpaid labour is not new but a historical one. In fact, the due recognition to women's work may be regarded as an *ongoing* struggle of feminists, women's movement and progressives to include women's (both production and sexual reproduction) in statistics/labour records besides valuing women's work, which so far has been systematically excluded and deemed insignificant. This demonstration of undervaluing women's work in labour records, statistics, government records, etc is symbolic of undervaluation and dismissal of women's work and contributions therefore, it is extremely important to underscore this as an "*enduring debate* of human history" that is argued by Beneria Lourdes (1999) who traces this genealogy in her remarkable article on unpaid labour.

In this thread of history, contributions of feminists need to be taken into account. It is important to revisit the classical work of Margaret Reid (1934, as Cited in Lourdes, 1999) who radically articulated about the systematic exclusion of domestic production (from national income accounts. She also developed an alternative by designing a method to estimate the value of home-based work. Interestingly, there have been viewpoints that were sympathetic to women's work and viewed women's work from "time-allocation" to "market goods" besides activities undertaken by women which fell under subsistence sector (see Lourdes Beneria) "market values" but they essentially eliminated the visibility to women's unpaid work unlike the way it was articulated in Reid's assessment. Therefore, it is important to note that *accounting* women's unpaid work is symbolic of a long struggle that women have been engaged in.

1.3 UNDERSTANDING HOUSEWORK

Mackie and Pattulo (1977) point out that historically there is very less data about women's housework with few exceptions of upper class women and their lives which came to be documented through biographies and autobiographies. Lesser privileged women and their lives were poorly documented. However, what is known is women were given certain prescriptions and in a matrimony pamphlet in 1543, it mentioned that ideal wife duties were to '*serve him (husband) in subjection, be modest in speech and apparel, to have charge of the house and its management*' (Mackie and Pattulo, 1977: 9).

The Victorian traditions in Great Britain propagated the ideas that "home" was the ideal place for women and it also valued virtues such as "domesticity" and "soberness" as favourable in order to be good, homely and domestic wives. Interestingly, these Victorian values spread in almost all colonies and were used to influence colonised women (Jane Haggis, 2000, p. 108-126). This is not to suggest there was no prevalence of sexual division of labour within the household in India and other third world countries, in fact there were stricter codes of conduct for women on caste lines due to concepts of retaining caste purity. However, external colonisation must have reinforced strict caste-patriarchal codes in context of upper caste Indian women and their lives. The idea of women's biological and sexual role therefore becomes important. The ideal woman therefore creates roles, responsibilities and functions for women, and any transgression is proscribed and deemed deviant.

The unit of family is the basic and the most important to allocate roles to women, children and men. It is a role within family that impacts women's life chances and work participation rate in the labour market and at a household level. According to radical feminist view, family is represented as the micro unit of class and relations within the family are unequal and exploitative based on sex. Women are almost like dispossessed workers and members of proletariat class, property-less without resources, and they engage in labour that is used for domestic consumption and reproduction under compulsions. Their labour is therefore undervalued. In this analysis, husband in this sense is analogous and member of the exploitative class exploiting, oppressing and expropriating his wife's labour. Thus women (housewives) are proletariats and men (husbands) are capitalists. In this analogy, the exploitative relations are grounded and women's labour is clearly devalued, unremunerated, and unrecognised (Dex, 1985).

It is no surprise that historically women's work both housework and ability to sexually reproduce has been blatantly dismissed, and incessantly devalued. A renowned feminist Simone de Beauvoir rightly called women as 'second sex'; connoting women were always of inferior status in patriarchal societies.

Before we begin to unravel complexities of intersections such as class, race, caste, rural-urban divide as factors complicating the monolithic and universal views on understanding women and their work, we begin by examining some of the historical views on women and work participation.

1.4 HER-STORY OF WORK PARTICIPATION

The sexual division of labour has been one of the most important themes in the feminist scholarships. Significant to this is the dominant views of looking at women as closer to the nature, sensitive and nurturer. Also, biological role of reproduction was considered as something that made women powerful. In the metaphysical sense this ability was regarded as magical yet their labour besides sexual reproduction was considered as innate to their lives, their responsibility. It is not surprising that some of these constructions were used to justify women's domestic work and care they had to incessantly offer to their children, husband, and elderly. Furthermore, prevalence of sexual division of labour was known amongst all known societies and because this has being a prehistoric phenomenon, this division of labour was deviously regarded as 'natural' (DN& GK, 1989).

Although women's work history ideally and predominantly should have been understood from the reproductive role she undertook, besides that of nurturing children, old, sick in the family; yet we do not see the role and labour of women being sensitively addressed.

Before the advent of industrial societies of the west, women were destined to be at home and carry out domestic chores in addition to the social production carried out at a family level. Records suggest in the barter system, family as the unit was self sufficient and autonomous. The local and small economies or exchange essentially was based on family. Family was not only the basic social institution but also a site of first unit of home production. Women, children and men in the family participated in labour. Women carried the traditional gender roles in supplement to the labour she contributed at family level. This has been documented in the family and shop account registers in North Eastern states of USA.

This simple, agrarian, barter economy when entered into a phase of more complex industrial and urban economy it greatly altered not only the economic structures and work but also the very fabric of everyday socio-cultural life. In this stage, “home” was a site of private sphere, disconnected from the modern workplaces. Nonetheless women who entered the workforce had to share the “*dual labour*” of home workers and workers. It was also assumed that the domestic sphere was a spatial space disconnected from the public and the daily chores were unpaid, unremunerated because they were domestically carried out, innate and intrinsic to women’s life. Conversely, the site of factory or an industry was the site of employment, paid work.

Bridget Hill (1989) gives a historical mapping of women’s work history in 18th century England. She draws from the Industrial revolution in western countries which had radically altered women and their work life. Transportation, technology and modes of communication facilitated and enabled men and women to migrate in search of jobs to industrial cities. Records of young women moving to cities such as Manchester, Massachusetts came to be extensively documented. The dependency on family labour declined thereby making working woman as an independent and autonomous woman.

Ironically the sexual divisions of labour remained intact even in impersonal and complex industries of capitalist economies as women were stuck in stereotype roles and worked predominantly in the areas of housekeeping, food industry exceptions being in opportunities available textile industry. Besides the factory labour, women worked in ‘other’ industries such as confectionaries, candy manufacturing, rope making, and carpet weaving and so on (Hill, 1989).

Contradicting aspect of these developments were that in spite of these opportunities, women were treated as unequal, they were paid low wages in comparison to men and their work was considered as replaceable. Also, “the capitalist and industrialist also outsourced work by distributing materials to be processed to be in the homes of women. This way there was always surplus labour available. In fact, this aspect of distributing work outside the factory was a notable phenomenon and women participated in this labour informally. This form of work was where factory owners mostly notably in shoe and textile industries distributed the materials to be processed in the homes and women themselves sought such kind of work. This was known as ‘*outwork*’. Women toiled and worked hard and these incomes were regarded as supplementary income to support the family” (Women, Enterprise, and Society, 2012).

In countries and contexts such as India, myths and ideal women role models were reinforced through religious texts. Stereotypes and defined boundaries for women were prescribed. For instance in ancient and mythical accounts of mythical women in Hindu literature women were predominantly portrayed as loyal, faithful, subservient, obedient, religious housewives. Central to their identity was the celebrated role of motherhood. These ancient texts broadly indicate status conferred on women and clearly place women in the role of housewives, mothers and sisters, and under the control of patriarch. Their life was almost defined and biological reproduction was an important and integral aspect of their lives. In addition, women provided their labour to raise the family and were relegated inside the four walls of the house.

1.5 EXCEPTIONS OF GENDER ROLES

There are some exceptions to these above discussed constructions where women subverted the prescribed “gender roles.” Archeological evidences suggest women and men lived in families, led a communal life and there was clear division of labour yet it did not mean that women were not involved in doing other activities that men carried out. In fact, studies on tribes suggest that women carried out activities such as hunting and food gathering.

Here it is important to note that women were regarded as magical and powerful due to her abilities to conceive and she came to be respected for her role in this biological reproduction or as long as she contributed through sexual reproduction. But even this adulation of women declined over a period of time and history suggests that this celebration and adulation of women did not continue for long.

Nonetheless, in the primary pastoral stages of life, the main task for women and men was to obtain food. It has been widely debated what role women played in this society and were they restricted inside their homes. It appears although the role of men was that of the hunter, women too participated in hunting.

Several studies on tribes such as Oraon, Munda, Santhal, and Ho show a ritual known as “*janishikhar*” associated with women who participated in hunting (DN and GK, 1989). This illustrates women participated in activities such as hunting that were not only outside the house but were mainly carried out by men. In addition, the authors cite studies on Agata tribe from Philippines where women have often cited how they participated in hunting and reproduction and were not detrimental in any way. The above exceptions from the tribes suggest that in the tribal way of life there were no strict boundaries of sexual division of labour and perhaps women’s status was that of equal with men if not inferior.

However, this sexual division of labour was more widespread than few exceptional instances as found in tribal society. This is brilliantly illustrated by Nancy Osterud (1977), who reflects on the hosiery industry which was divided between mechanised and workshops in England. She points out that men were predominantly engaged in mechanised jobs whereas women did intensive “*out-work*” inside their home/household –based sector.

This continuous and consistent sexual division of labour had most profound effects on domestic economy of working class families- where women found themselves stuck inside their homes working for wages and this sexual division of labour was now visible even at a factory level, where men dominated mechanised and well-paid jobs (Osterud, 1977: 242)

It is also important to note historically women have been considered as ‘cheap labour’ in the industrial times and this has resulted from the social and sexual division of labour (Raphael Samuel, 1977, p. 243). It is also not a surprising when it is said that “women’s work is never done: it is never or hardly ever, done by men’ (Kate Osborne, 1991: 3). Therefore, we see a pattern of women being pushed into jobs that are ‘gendered’ and women end up in professions such as domestic/food related industries, teaching, caring etc. In addition, her work which is done at home, housework and mothering remain unpaid work, a non-work. These circumstances clearly places women at several disadvantages and

1.6 SITUATING WOMEN WORKERS IN INDIA

Often voluminous of literature on women and work has emerged from the industrially advanced countries. The implications to this are often the essence, dynamics and differences that are present in countries, and contexts are not enunciated. Furthermore, the concepts, theories and explanations that are not native have their own limitations. These patterns are evidenced in social sciences and feminist writings. Understanding women in Indian society, her role, work, status, caste are some of the important features that play a significant role in shaping her work and social life. Karin Kapadia (1992) calls our attention towards 'social blindness' where she points out that often social scientists and feminists overlook 'Asia' over Africa. She reminds us that Asia as a continent also has a large proportion of women in the informal sector where they are in major in key economic activities and yet they are invisible, therefore it is important to situate and articulate women and work in these contexts.

Kapadia (1992) through her fieldwork on Pallar, ex-untouchable women in Tamil Nadu, explains that sexual division among the agricultural workers like the sexual division of work is a cultural construction. It is therefore cautiously and consistently designed and constructed in that way. In her field study on Pallar from Aruloor of Tamil Nadu, she notes that 'sexual division of agricultural work here is successful because it has been assumed that this division of work is natural and god given, besides being ordained by the human biology' (Kapadia, 1992: 228).

Sexual division of labour in India across the castes, class and language groups are blindly accepted both by men and women as something that is inherent and natural. Women are expected to perform activities of cooking, cleaning, caring, mothering etc. as they are innate to her nature. Besides, women also undermine their own labour and contribution because they think it is intrinsic to their biological roles.

Besides, the sexual division of work, 'dual burden' is equally an important site to understand women's exploitation. Culturally, women are expected to be "good women" by taking care of her family members, cooking, cleaning, and looking after kinship and community relations. This is in addition to other active economic life where she toils and labours for wages. This dual responsibility of performing and balancing paid and unpaid labour classically captures the essence of double burden that women have to bear in a culturally constructed society where gender roles dictate every aspect of life.

1.7 SEGMENTED LABOUR MARKETS

Segmented labour markets are also known as dual labour markets, which consist of various sub groups that are divided into water tight compartments. In this viewpoint, labour markets are divided into two sectors, primary and secondary. The primary sector is male dominated, and enjoys high income, safe and secure working conditions, robust social security system and better terms of work and

employment relations and ensured mobility to grow. On the contrary, secondary sector is low skilled sector, with irregular, ambivalent employer-employee relations, marked by exploitative and poor working conditions and ill paid wages. This sector is often dominated by women. This simplistic view of segmented labour market pinpoint on how women are relegated inferior and low-skill and low-paid jobs. Men often are winners who find themselves working in primary sector. Although this conceptualisation is important it is extremely important to note that there are further asymmetries that move beyond the binary of male/female, or gender lens in a complex society like India, where caste is one of the central features of social stratification.

Therefore, besides the gender roles and sexual division of work, caste, tribe, class, region, ethnicity and geography are some of the essential features that produce complex segmented labour markets as such evidenced in Indian labour market. National Commission For Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS, 2009) also known as *Arjun Sengupta Report* point out that majority of the Indians are poor and about 77 per cent of Indians are stuck in life where expenditure on average is Rs 20 per day, per capita and categorised as poor and vulnerable. The remaining 23 per cent of them were middle class and higher income group who reaped the benefits of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation. Within the 77 per cent of poor and vulnerable, the characteristics of social aspects were stark and highlighted by the commission. It points out almost 88 per cent of SC/ST, 80 per cent of OBCs, and 85 per cent of Muslims in this country were extremely poor and vulnerable. Most of them were further without education, malnourished and socially discriminated (NCEUS, 2009: 3). Therefore it is extremely important to foreground and understand that Indian labour markets are not segmented along gender lines alone but along caste, tribe, and religion.

1.8 WORK AND GENDER ROLES, GENDER STEREOTYPE AND GENDER IMPLICATIONS

It is now already noted that women have double burden of work, paid and unpaid. In addition, the cultural and sociological stereotyping of women's role translates into job market segregation and thereby limiting women's opportunities to grow and excel. There are several sociological and anthropological studies undertaken in India which have pointed out there are several discriminations at play that impact women adversely and hinder overall progress of human society. There is sexual division of labour almost in all sectors of employment. Karin Kapadia (1992) in her same excellent study on Pallar women of Tamil Nadu points out that the agricultural labour is centrally divided between masculine and feminine. Ploughing, sowing, etc. were considered as "male/men's activities" whereas, women's activities included weeding. Women's activities were considered as inferior or lighter and men's activities considered as tough and important (Kapadia, 1992, p.228). Another interesting anthropological explanation that Kapadia offers is the attribution and meanings of men's vs. women's work in agricultural related activities. It was considered that men's work that is breaking of the soil (in local language, *mumbti*) was associated with imagery of sexual intercourse, where the male sperm, or seed was seen as invasive, a tough act, hyper masculine that enters into the womb of women (referred as field). These acts, sexual intercourse and "sowing of seed" in agriculture are seen as

“quintessentially male activity” (ibid, p. 229). Furthermore, women are the passive ones, who will nurture the seed and care for it besides doing female tasks of looking after both the crop/child and raise them. This analogy is interesting and significant considering similar patterns and imageries are observed in construction industry, mining, office work, education sector and so on. These role sets and constructions deeply impact the opportunities and jobs that women are assigned. Several studies conducted by Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) have pointed out this in construction industry where women are often barred from seeking skill based activities. They simply are the “carriers” of the materials, as pointed out by Kapadia earlier. Women are often the ones to pick and carry the material on the heads, and separating the fine sand with the coarse, as they would do in the kitchen related work. These segregated spaces that women are relegated create and reproduce gender stereotyping which impact their economic outcomes greatly.

1.9 SUMMARY

Gender although may be a construction, its outcomes are real. In this unit we have discussed the classic debate between paid/unpaid work, sexual division of labour, segmented/dual labour markets, gender roles, gender stereotypes and impact that these factors have on women and their work. It is clear that women are the victims of discrimination under the system of patriarchy, caste and capitalism. The cultural construction and notions of women being sensitive, nurturer, and homemaker have been the means through which women’s labour has been expropriated. Women have been exploited systematically and deprived of opportunities to excel and grow. These societal inequalities have created and reinforced gender inequalities. Therefore, it is extremely important to reconsider the role of social institutions such as family, economy, and state and its role in promoting and reinforcing these gender inequalities.

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Sample Questions

- 1) What is the difference between paid and unpaid work?
- 2) What is gender role and gender stereotyping?
- 3) Are women inherently sensitive, nurturers and caretakers and more suited in jobs of nursing and care taking?