
UNIT 2 DOMESTIC LABOUR AND GENDER

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Learning Objectives



After going through this unit you will be able to:

- discuss broader themes related to gender and domestic labour;
- examine embedded concepts such as what is the difference between sex and gender, sexual division of labour, gender stereotypes and its impact on women; and
- discuss and contextualise some of the concepts associated with domestic labour from gender perspective.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines work as “supply of physical, mental, and emotional efforts undertaken in order to produce goods and services for either own consumption or for consumption of others” (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 2009). In spite of this comprehensive definition of work, women's work has been historically unvalued and neglected. Women's work remains unaccounted in the official statistics of the governments, is statically rendered invisibility and their work unwaged and unregistered. This implies critical dimensions associated with work are contextual and gendered. Clearly, women and their work are not only rendered invisibility but they remain systematically discounted of their valuation, recognition and contribution. It is intrinsic to this discussion to understand sexual division of labour, nature of women's work and their circumstances and the multiple meanings associated with work such as paid/unpaid work, however this aspect remain under-emphasised. Therefore deliberation of “subjective meanings” associated with work become central in order to understand the historical, sociological and specific context of work besides understanding the overarching structural conditions under which women continue to undertake both paid and unpaid work.

Evidently, the idea of work is contested and has several meanings. From a feminist perspective, the concept of work needs to be revisited both conceptually and

historically. This can begin by asking central questions such as, what is so unique about women's work? What comprises women's work and how different is it from that of men's work? What is the politics of housework? Is child rearing, cooking and caring for spouse, sick in the family and kin, looking after elderly is form of work? Is sexual reproduction an unwaged work?

Before we begin to answer the above questions it is imperative to understand that work in broader and in general sense is mainly understood and divided into three divisions such as work performed as an economic activity, work done as unpaid domestic leisure and activity, and work done for community service.

Feminist movement has consistently challenged these narrower definitions of work, pointing to the linkages between domestic labour, reproduction and paid work. Explicit to this is the understanding that housework is unaccounted, unpaid (household labour) and "reproduction" is taken for granted and a matter of destiny, predetermined biologically. In the sense, questions such as work done by women is it of any value and worth, if yes, how do we measure this work and acknowledge their contributions? These have been already discussed in the earlier unit using Berneria Lourdes's classic essay on this debate.

Besides these critical questions, are other subset of radical and imperative questions to know if reproductive/domestic labour are choices available to women in order to engage/disengage in the unpaid domestic labour or they performed under coercive, forced conditions and compulsions? The ideal women be in under the Victorian Era or under caste system as envisaged by Manu, does reaffirm that the ideal woman has to engage in this labour of sexual reproduction and serve men/patriarchs. The idea to question some of the basic assumptions will help us navigate through some of the significant and critical themes that have emerged in the area of feminist and gender studies.

It is not surprising that all over the world history of women's work remains poorly documented. It was only in the 1960s there was an interest generated to understand women and the work they performed. Erstwhile, women and their economic life were considered unimportant. Women were assumed homemakers fulfilling natural duties of women, housekeeping, child rearing; they remained inside the houses were idle, unproductive who contributed less to the economy.

Although this circumstance changed during the Second World War as pointed out by many scholars, a large number of women entered into the labour market and women carried out "dual work", inside the household and outside the house. It was not difficult to assess and understand how sexual inequalities seen in everyday life at household level transmitted even in modern workplaces such as factories, hospitals, universities and corporations. Subsequently, studies undertaken by feminists raised questions about the nature of work women did, patterns of employment, discrimination faced by women, work conditions, and changing structural economic conditions and its impact on women. Women although have contributed immensely to humanity yet most of it has remained on the fringe. It is only through these efforts undertaken by women's movements and Marxist-feminist economists, activists, scholars we see how these articulations forced governments and scholars to examine the underlying assumptions of understanding nature of work itself and its consequences to women and society.

According to several feminist scholars, women's work is radically different from the work performed by men. Feminist scholars point out, all over the world women's work is often less valued, women workers are paid less than men, women are often stuck in occupations and at low levels typically associated with their gender roles as that of caretakers or as nurturers. In addition, women often engage in part-time work, is low- skilled, they are less in powerful administrative, managerial or professional positions bringing multiple disadvantages to women (Mackie and Patullo, 1977). The cumulative effect is women are stuck or caught up in cyclical poverty, end up with worst jobs that are low paid, without any social security and they continue to face multi-thronged discrimination.

Now, before we embark on understanding the plight of women workers in the following units we must attempt to revisit the history of women's work, it is imperative to acquaint ourselves with the classic debate over sexual division of labour and the domestic labour debate. Also it is imperative to foreground the distinction between sex and gender.

2.2 WHAT IS GENDER?

Unlike sex, gender is not a biologically determined category. Ann Oakley first introduced the concept of gender in sociology. She explained, "sex" refers to a biological division that we know of dividing them into female and male, whereas gender refers to a set of social divisions, unequal, mostly, with a binary of femininity and masculinity and other gender and a range of social meanings are associated with it. Therefore, gender is a socially constructed category prescribing certain expectations of performing masculinity or femininity unlike "sex" which is solely a biological category, based on biological division between female and male.

Several basic discourses on gender analysis suggests that although the concept of gender has potential of unfolding relations between sexes, power dynamics amongst the sexes, constructions around femininity and masculinity, social status and position of women in society yet the concept of gender came to be heavily criticised on two grounds.

At the foremost, was the re-examination of the concept of understanding sex as biological and whether it was really isolated and divorced from the social. This approach essentially points out "body" is not a neutral concept rather it should be understood as an "object of social analysis", therefore, in Foucauldian analysis "body" is understood as an object that has a social meaning and "sex" is not a neutral term or just biological, most importantly it is not divorced from sociological analysis. Therefore body and sex are just not biological abstracts rather they fall within the ambit of the sociological analysis (Foucault, 1980). Judith Butler, a renowned social theorist also tried to question the body, sexuality and even the fluidity of biological constructions.

Secondly, the essentialisation and homogenisation of the concept of masculinity and femininity was criticised particularly by Connel and Messerschmidt (2005) through the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" where they draw attention to sex role frameworks, workings of patriarchal power and factors such as social change. They also discuss implications for those who fall out of these frameworks and its grave consequences on their lives and other outcomes.

In spite of these critical limitations, gender as a concept can be used productively particularly to understand some of the key issues that affect women and their lives. This framework of gender is invaluable particularly to understand women's lives and oppressions. Gender is a process and it is intertwined with social structures such as race, caste, class, and ethnicity.

A remarkable introduction on understanding gender as a framework to understand race, class and women's work, feminist scholars Amott and Matthaei (1996) elucidates, "Gender is rooted in societies' beliefs that men and women as sexes are assigned distinct and opposed social beings by nature. These beliefs are converted and turned into self-fulfilling prophecies through sex-role socialization; the biological sexes are assigned distinct and often unequal work and political positions, and turned into socially distinct genders" (1996: 13).

They further elaborate that in almost all human societies women's work was almost defined. This is also corroborated in several studies of anthropologists who found that most societies have tended to assign females with infant care, raising children, whereas men looked after interfamilial activities, worked towards earning political dominance inside and outside the family (ibid: 14). However, there were some exceptions noted. For instance certain American Indian tribes allowed individuals to choose among gender roles wherein a female could choose men's work, man's role and even marry another female who performed out a woman's role (ibid: 14). This suggests women throughout history have attempted to subvert assigned roles yet each economic system has countered their subversions and reinforced them to continue to work that are devalued consistently.

Feminists have consistently pointed out that it was marriage and family that served as foundations to women's exploitation, oppression and expropriation of women's labour. This is reflected in modern workplaces too where one can see shadows of home groomed inequality reproduced in the so called impersonal modern organisations.

2.3 RE-IMAGINING WOMEN'S WORK

In almost all known societies work has been central to human beings. Work although performed by individuals and being subjective, the predominant idea of work is associated with it being performed "outside the realm of the house" and it being "paid." These two important aspects of understanding work unfolds the classic debate on sexual division of labour and the politics of housework.

The above understanding implies work performed by women is largely domestic as it is performed inside the house and it is subsumed to be unvalued therefore it is unpaid. This axis of understanding housework is "sexist" as pointed out by several feminist scholars. This understanding necessarily means women's work inside the house is not counted, unnoticed and her contributions are not only ignored but also consistently devalued.

Sociologically sexual division of labour is understood as division of labour based on sex and associated with specialised gender roles of women as mothers, wives, nurturers and caretakers, whereas men are central authority and breadwinners. This also foregrounds sexual roles ascribed to both women and men as nurturer

2.4 REVISITING UNWAGED DOMESTIC LABOUR

For the first time, at the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women in Nairobi, an NGO “Housewives in Dialogue” forced a paradigmatic shift in understanding domestic labour of women as unwaged work. This dialogue pushed government delegates to consider and account women’s “unwaged”, “unaccounted”, “unpaid” and “unremunerated” work done in household activities, reproduction, food production and agriculture to be accounted in the Gross National Product (James, 1994, p.173). Yet this is not incorporated in most of the countries in spite of the estimates that this unwaged work of women produce as much as 50 per cent of the GNP, as pointed by James (ibid: 173)

This was brilliantly summarised by James, (1994: 174) who noted, “unwaged housework is the heart of every economic sector, formal, informal, waged or unwaged, not merely presenting commerce and industry with a new generation of workers, but each day reproducing human mind and muscles which have been exhausted and consumed by day’s work. Overwhelmingly, the burden of reproductive work has been carried by the female half of humanity, consuming our time- which happens to be our life. And yet this work is hidden from history, politics and economic statistics.”

The above views essentially bring out attention to understand women, as half of humanity, are engaged into housework that is unwaged, unremunerated and not recognised. Women are involved in reproductive work, thereby continuity of humanity is not only dependent on women but she provides food for the minds and the muscles that end up in waged labour market. Women carry out this work, almost spending half of their life in cooking, cleaning, caring and reproducing. It is essentially this work of women that is not documented in history, politics and economic statistics.

One may wonder if women ever protested, did they try to rebel and subvert against such gender roles? Did they refuse to do the housework? Anthropological studies have suggested that there have been several African tribes where women have refused to work and there are reports documented about wives who refused to do the chores, agricultural work, production of cash crops unless they were paid for their work (James, 1994: 175). There are also evidences where women challenged patriarchal practices that controlled women’s sexuality, forced them to do housework and reproduction. In spite of these articulations and challenges, women’s work continues to be devalued and is rendered invisibility. Although women have continued to perform this work under almost all economic systems it is only recently that women challenged to re-imagine their domestic labour and unwaged labour from a gender perspective.

At the forefront were women’s movement and academia who are instrumental in bringing out these views on understanding women’s unwaged labour. This perspective essentially underscored women’s work as unwaged labour and contributions of women in social production, reproduction remained unremunerated or unrecognised. These aspects became foci of many Marxist-feminist analyses that attempted to understand women’s work sociologically and from a gender and class perspective.

The classical view of Marxist analysis on understanding women's work begins with emphasis on social institution i.e. emergence of family. According to Marx and Engels family served as one of the first institutions where property relations emerged. Engels gave more detailed analysis of the process by which women were pulled into the wage-labour process or social production but reckoned it as an emancipatory for women. He suggested that one way male domination can be ended through women becoming economically independent, participating in wage labour (Dex, 1985: 106).

In both the above views of Marx and Engels, both of them ignored the role of family, and position of women in proletariat households. They also systematically ignored whether domestic labour is of any value and why proletariats have continued with a system that marginalises, and oppresses women. This view was critiqued by Beechey (1977) and Humphries (1977). They foregrounded the necessity of examining women's labour in proletariat families besides as examined under the capitalist system.

According to Beechey and Humphries (as cited in Dex, 1985) both of them suggested the analysis of domestic labour is vital to understand and explore the continued existence of working class family and thereby unfolding women's oppression in a capitalist society (ibid, p.106).

In addition, Dex (1985) revisits and opens the debate with a philosophical and central question of examining women's domestic labour. She posits whether women's domestic labour is of any value at all, is it a "productive labour" at all? (ibid: 107).

Marxian analysis of sexual division of labour have their own limitation however it is imperative to foreground perspectives that aim to deepen our understanding of domestic labour of women. In this line is the view of Gardiner who suggests understanding sexism in relation between working class men and women and women's economic independence (Dex, 1985: 108). This view underscored understanding the place of women's domestic labour under capitalism and questioned why has this work continued under the yokes of all the systems. In addition, Coulson, et al. (1975) point out although there is necessity of recognising nature of women's labour under capitalism however it is also vital to understand the fact that "*women are both domestic and wage labourers*" (ibid: 108).

Moving ahead in this debate was a discussion around the dichotomy of understanding domestic labour. Dex points out the premise of understanding domestic labour on the notion of private/public sphere; both though are independent of each other. Women are thus considered as involved in domestic, carrying out domesticity and thus active in a private sphere and the public is disconnected, isolated and divorced from her private life.

The above assumption considers home, kitchen, bedroom, as sites of the private sphere. Therefore the sexist view presumes women's domestic labour is essentially private and it is natural for women to engage in that labour. Domestic labour is deemed as an activity private in nature. The public or outside the house domain is manly, and belongs to men. The relationship between private and public although has been examined by radical feminists it will be appropriate to bring Sylvia Walby's (1984) classic work on understanding patriarchy. She argues if

one has to understand devaluation of women and their life, it is important to reconsider housewives and husbands as classes. She pushes us to imagine a household not as a site of private but as a microcosm of patriarchal mode of production at play in which women are direct producers toiling and working whereas men are non-producers and a member of the exploiting-class (Dex, 1985: 108).

These discussions and debates open a critical examination of family as a social institution, the role of women within the family and the nature of labour performed by women within the so-called private sphere. It is not surprising that sexual division of labour continues and even the so called (liberal, who do not have Bourgeoisies concepts of shame, morality, sexism) proletariat families also continue to divide the work and render invisibility to women's work. Intrinsic to this is another concept i.e., of understanding *gender stereotype*.

2.5 GENDER STEREOTYPE

Historically, women have faced multiple levels of discrimination and gender stereotype is one of the examples of how women are systematically discriminated, excluded or limited to opportunities because of gender stereotyping. Dex provides an evidence of gender stereotyping by discussing how studies undertaken in modern industrial capitalism showed that even researchers upheld sexist assumptions. Feldberg and Glenn (1979, cited in Dex, 1985: 36) who came up with “gender model” and “job model” to explain different orientations that women and men respectively have towards their work, were the most influential in this area of work. Elucidating variables of job model, Dex points out the job model is premised to understand attitudes that workers have towards their work, whereas the gender model attempts to explain workers behaviour in terms of their personal characteristics or their family situation (ibid: 36). Men came to be analysed as workers fitting the job model and women came to be examined using the gender model. Dex concludes this approach as “sex segregated model” typically corroborating the perception of men as breadwinners, cardinal to protection and the sustenance of family and women in supportive roles as housewives.

Some of the very explicit and significant gender stereotyping has been enlisted by Dex (1985: 37). Interestingly, these types of stereotype were reported and upheld in the modern countries such as UK and America. Some of them reported are as follows:

- 1) “women find it hard to resist that their primary role was to serve the family and they should be servicing, whereas men should be the breadwinners,
- 2) women work for pin money,
- 3) women do not mind and at times prefer boring work,
- 4) women have certain purposes for working, younger women work in order to find a husband through work, whereas older women work to finance home improvements,
- 5) women do not show any initiative in their work and they are least interested in applying for promotions or working against challenges.”

These stereotypes have affected women severely depriving them of life chances, growth, and opportunities. Besides, women are at a disadvantage because of their gender roles and sexist mindsets that deprive them of equal opportunities. The cumulative effect of such factors on women's lives and development are immense and they need to be highlighted. Overall, the patriarchal and sexist practice of sexual division of labour continues to devalue women and their labour both inside and outside the house.

2.6 SUMMARY

This unit has attempted to discuss some of the most important concepts such as the classical debate of sexual division of labour, women's work, gender stereotype, and how gender roles impact women and their lives. It is important to note women's work has historically remained on the margins. Women are yet to receive attention in this domain. Although feminist scholars particularly of the Marxist school of thought have attempted to reveal the modes of production and relations of sexes within the class framework, these are not enough to understand intersections that emerge from multiple locations such as caste, race, gender, ethnicity, nationality and so on. Nonetheless feminist lenses and women's movements have contested the sexist ideas where women are deemed merely as idle, housewives, nurturers, caretakers and men as breadwinners. Such assumptions and notions about women and men were challenged by women's movements and feminists who have also insisted to revisit and re-examine domestic labour performed by women in the private sphere and its linkages with women's oppression, domination, subjugation, and exploitation.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss the concept of gender stereotype with some examples.
- 2) Describe the difference between sex and gender and how they influence women's work.
- 3) Can domestic labour of women performed inside the premise of home/private if accounted or remunerated, destruct the social institution of family?
- 4) How is family and marriage related to oppression of women from the Marxian perspective?

