
UNIT 1 GENDER AND SOCIETY

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1970s, the historical invisibility of women in productive work began to be documented by researchers and highlighted by the modern women's movement in India. It was clear that socio-cultural ideas about the capacities and abilities of women and men, and institutional structures, rather than their physique and biology were determining women's roles in the domestic and public spheres. Two decades later in the mid-1990s, this understanding was deepened by the feminist concept of gender and the significance of gender identities and gender relations in shaping people's lives. It has now become evident that multiple inequities, such as of gender, class, caste, ethnicity, religion and language, are interwoven and embedded in the organisation of society and in the institutions and processes of knowledge creation, including science. This impacts the bodies, lives and work of all persons. This introductory Unit is intended to familiarise you with basic terms and concepts. (Some of these will be developed in greater detail in later Units.)

Terms of discourse

Every discipline uses specialised 'terms of discourse' to improve communication. Such terms may be derived from normal usage, acquire a specialised meaning, and sometimes seep back into everyday language. Where the specialised usage has evolved recently, as with the word gender, the difference between the everyday word and the term can be confusing. Even a word like 'society' can be understood in different ways. Throughout this Unit, relevant terms will be explained and discussed.

1.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this Unit, you will be able to

- Explain how typical ideas of femininity and masculinity shape gender

identities;

- Examine how systemic male domination is varied in different patriarchies;
- Analyse the division of labour in caste societies which is unequal and gendered; and
- Examine why gender-power relations persist across class and caste.

1.2 FEMININITY, MASCULINITY AND GENDER IDENTITIES

The people who live in a particular geographic area, with a common history and features like languages, customs, belief systems and institutions, constitute a ‘society’. Historically, societies have developed ideas and norms about the traits, behaviours, roles, responsibilities and positions of individuals. These ideas typify what it means to be a woman, a man, or a person of the third gender (TG) – that is, a person with an intersex identity (born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit definitions of female or male); or a transgender person (not identifying with the sex to which they were assigned at birth).

These social norms are encompassed in concepts of femininity and masculinity, which shape the way in which individuals perceive themselves and live their lives. Women and men experience these ideas differently. As V. Geetha¹ points out, these ideas affect our food, our clothes, even our sexual relations and thoughts, shaping how we perceive ourselves and others. For instance, boys are taught to be bold and daring, while girls are taught to be modest and retiring. Boys are not supposed to cry, and girls are not supposed to climb trees. Anyone who seems like a misfit is ridiculed.

Ideas of femininity and masculinity vary across society, class, community and caste. Traits and behaviours that are considered feminine or masculine are specific to particular contexts. Having a muscular body is widely considered to be ‘manly’, but this is not so in parts of Southeast Asia, where many men have delicate bodies. So too, in all societies, some men are caring and gentle (not considered typically male) just as some women are assertive and bold (not considered typically female). Traits such as gentleness and toughness are human characteristics of both women and men.

People do not accept these ideas passively into their everyday practice, but struggle with them, re-working some, subverting or discarding others. Such negotiation involves both cooperation and conflict. For instance, it has been noted that high caste women accept their subordinated position in the family as a kind of ‘bargain’ with men because it enables the women to maintain their superior caste status in society. Typical ideas also change over time. Today, many girls wear jeans and boys wear brightly coloured shirts that would not have been acceptable in their grandparents’ times.

Femininity and masculinity are not the natural result of sexual differences or even of socio-economic relations but arise from systemic norms enforced by society. As the French writer Simone de Beauvoir² famously said, ‘One is not

born but rather becomes a woman.’ This insight laid the ground for the feminist understanding of ‘gender’ as being socially constructed. Feminism is the modern socio-political movement for the rights of women, for women’s voice and their resistance to invisibility and silencing. It encompasses many different threads. But broadly feminists view gender as the way in which people think about themselves and organise their societies, their belief systems and institutions. Gender is, thus, fluid and dynamic and a critical ‘analytical category’ to understand society.³

It is also useful to be clear about what gender is *not*. As **Sumi Krishna**⁴ has written:

- a) Gender is not a binary grammatical category to differentiate between the forms of words in a language (like *stree-ling/pu-ling* in Hindi).
- b) Gender does not mean women although the term gender has been widely and wrongly re-assimilated into common usage as an alternative word for women.
- c) Gender is not the same as biological sex, i.e. female/male anatomical, physiological and reproductive features and functions. (The gender-sex interaction will be discussed in Unit 2.)
- d) Gender is not fixed but is a process by which a person acquires certain traits, needs and interests and assumes particular roles and responsibilities.

The English language term ‘gender’ does not have a single-word translation in many languages. So, it is necessary to develop new meanings for existing words. Some Chinese feminists combine two words, ‘social + sex’, to denote gender. Women’s groups in Karnataka have used the Kannada word *lingatva* (derived from the word for sexuality in Sanskrit) to express the concept of gender.

Gender shapes every person’s identity, traits and behaviour, their roles, positions and responsibilities in society, and the meaning they find in their lives. One’s gender identification depends on one’s perception of oneself as a woman or a man, or as being in between or neither. Gender is not something we are born with but is shaped from birth throughout our lives by how we are brought up, by our relationships with family and relatives, and by interactions with the caste and community.

1.3 SYSTEMIC MALE DOMINATION AND PATRIARCHIES

Indian society and the social groups that constitute it are characterised by many diversities, and also by disparities of materials, social resources and knowledge. Both diversity (such as ethnic, social and gender differences) and disparity (such as economic levels) are related to the ways in which a particular society is organised. Social structures such as family and community occur across society; other structures such as economic class, social status or position create a hierarchy in society. Families too may be

internally organised as a hierarchy with the father or other adult male usually having the most authority.

Systemic male domination varies across communities, religious and ethnic/tribal groups. Among plains-dwelling peasant and caste societies, the control of productive resources, labour and knowledge is organised in a decidedly hierarchical manner. Ritual status among caste groups is based on concepts of purity and impurity – ranging from high status Brahmans to low status *Dalits* (ritually excluded as ‘untouchables’).

This is very different from the many hill-dwelling and tribal groups where the sharing of productive resources and the division of labour within the family, kin group or village is relatively more egalitarian. Until a few decades ago, women had a greater role in taking decisions and managing resources among certain Adivasi/tribal groups in central and north-eastern India who foraged for food and practised shifting (slash and burn) cultivation. When Adivasi/tribal groups adopt settled agriculture, the process of social stratification and women’s subordination begins.

Male dominated societies are marked by taboos against women using the plough, denying them rights to own land, the phenomenon of witch hunting and exclusion from social rituals and the political system. Commenting on the social transition (from tribe to caste) among tribal groups in Jharkhand in central India, **Govind Kelkar** and **Dev Nathan**⁵ have noted: ‘The absence of any seclusion of women in the tribal situation, the free mixing of adolescents of both sexes, the choice of women and men as regards to their marriage partners, the ease of divorce, the practice of widow remarriage – all come under severe attack in the period of formation of caste society.’

Similar transitions have taken place among the tribal societies of north-eastern India, where the transition from foraging to settled agriculture; communal to individual land ownership; and tribal belief systems to Hinduism or Christianity has affected the women’s roles and status. Although women have relatively more personal and economic autonomy, retaining some control over the income from foraged forest produce, they are subordinate to men in the religious and political spheres.⁶

There are different views about the emergence of patriarchy, which is the systemic privileging of male values and beliefs, and male domination of the family, household, and other institutions. Patriarchal societies are generally (though not always) patrilineal, that is, descent, inheritance and succession are traced through the male line. Such societies are often also patrilocal, as in much of northern India, where a married woman moves to the home of the husband or to his paternal home, and where authority vests with the patrilineal kin.

Patriarchy is manifested in ways that are specific to a social group, tribe or caste, although some patriarchal elements may be common across social groups. So, it is more accurate to talk of patriarchies, in the plural. Uma Chakravarty⁷ says: ‘As we explore different regions and different time periods, we can see that an evolved caste-based patriarchy is very different from tribal patriarchies.’ The most widespread form of present-day, caste-

linked male dominance in India is ‘Brahmanical patriarchy’, which has also influenced various tribal patriarchies.

Patriarchy is sometimes wrongly seen as a mirror-image of ‘matriarchy’, societies where female values and interests are supposedly valued and where institutions are dominated by women. There is, however, no evidence of functioning matriarchies in the past or in the present. There are a few communities that are matrilineal, tracing descent through the female line. The matrilineal communities in India include the tribal Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya, the Hindu Nairs of Kerala, the Bunts of Karnataka, and the Muslims of Lakshadweep. Matrilineal communities may also be male dominated because authority is exercised by a woman’s male kin, such as her brothers and maternal uncles.

Check Your Progress Exercise I

Note: I. Use this space given below to answer the question.

II. Compare your answer with the Course material of this Unit.

1. What is understood by patriarchy and matriarchy? Give examples.

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2. Write what doesn’t connote the term gender?

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1.4 UNEQUAL AND GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOUR

Gender is deeply intertwined with the unequal division of labour in caste societies. The patriarchal caste-linked system in India is a complex part of the social structure. The *jati* (also spelled *jat*) is a group into which a person is born. The British used the term ‘caste’ for the thousands of *jatis* (or *jats*) in the Indian subcontinent. The *jati* is specific to a region and should not be confused with the *varna*, which is a hierarchical ordering of society into four levels by brahmanical notions of purity and by occupation. The *varna* system excludes dalits/bahujans (who are now categorised as Scheduled Castes) and the adivasis / tribals (now Scheduled Tribes).

Social anthropologist **Leela Dube**⁸ has explained caste as operating on three levels which can be separately analysed but are interlinked: *jati* exclusion;

hierarchy; and interdependence:

- a) The *jati* is typically a group with a particular status into which an individual is born, and with rules that govern contact and exclusion or separation (such as for marriage).
- b) Hierarchy is the principle of order and rank based on status; and
- c) Interdependence is the division of labour among hierarchically different *jatis*.

Dube points out that women's work contributes to the 'occupational continuity' of a caste group. Women are also expected to maintain customs related to food and ritual practices and follow rigid prescriptions in the critical area of sexuality and marriage. The rules governing an individual's behaviour, actions, and interactions with other *jatis* are centred on the immediate relatives, i.e., the kinship unit of their family and household. Because the maintenance of *jati* falls upon women, their bodies are rigidly controlled. If an individual violates caste rules, the punishment usually applies to the family and household unless they disown the individual.

A *jati* or caste group is itself like a network of families and larger kinship units. The distribution of material resources among different *jatis* and within a *jati* is experienced by these family units. The unequal distribution and control of resources has led to exploitation both within the family and larger kinship units and between different *jatis*. Over the last century, the interdependence among different *jatis* has become much weaker because of urbanisation and the emergence of many new occupations. Yet, the division of labour and the control of women's bodies still persists to a considerable extent both within the family and in society. Across most of India, the degrading and low-paid occupation of sweepers and scavengers is still filled by dalits/bahujans who have been historically responsible for these tasks. Such labour is both degrading and low-paid, particularly so for women of these castes.

In the 19th century, the social reformers **Jyotibai Phule** (1826-1890) in Maharashtra and E.V. **Ramaswamy Periyar** (1879-1973) in Tamil Nadu linked the subordination of the low status castes in the community and the subordination of women in the family. Periyar also questioned conventional notions of femininity and masculinity. He argued that men's control over women's sexuality was related to their control of women's labour and that a woman who accepted the norms of an ideal wife was also accepting her servitude in the marriage. **Bhimrao Ambedkar** (1891-1956) had a key role in framing the Constitution of India that bans discrimination against so-called 'untouchables'. Ambedkar argued that the inferior status of women within caste groups was because of the violent control over women's sexuality and the prohibition of inter-marriage among castes.⁹

The ways in which labour is allocated among different groups in a community and among the members in a family sustain a diverse and unequal social and economic order. Historically, people who are categorised as 'third gender' (now legally recognised in India) include diverse groups who have

rejected typical male-female gender identities. The *hijras* known as *kinnars* in north India, the *aravani* in Tamil Nadu and the *jogappas* of Karnataka and Andhra have all had culturally assigned but economically precarious roles and been stigmatised for being different.

Gendered patterns of work are context-specific and change over time. Studies across the country have shown task-differentiation among women and men, but which specific task (collecting water, fuelwood, selecting seeds, winnowing etc.) is done by women and which by men varies in different locations. Among most farming groups, women are known as skilled seed-selectors and conservers but among some communities women's touch is believed to pollute food-crop seeds. Social practices rather than sex seem to determine the distribution of tasks.¹⁰

The most time-consuming and laborious tasks within a family are generally assigned to women and girls, and these tasks are devalued. The unequal division of labour by which women and girls are responsible for domestic work and childcare is so widely enforced that it seems 'natural'. But there is nothing natural or biological that ties women to household provisioning, cooking, cleaning and caring tasks. Indeed, when value is added to such tasks through machines and remuneration, men are quick to take over. In this case, the domestic social norms about femininity and masculinity are overturned in the public sphere (as with men serving as professional cooks).

1.5 GENDER-POWER RELATIONS

The social construction of gender is a complex and dynamic process which in turn shapes the gender relations between women, men, and third gender persons in the family, community and society. The gender relations between any two persons is a part of the hierarchical way in which the family and community control the organisation of society. Class and caste hierarchies are maintained by controlling women's sexuality and labour, and their access to ritual and modern knowledge. All hierarchical control is 'political', in that it is an exercise of power. For women and those with marginalized gender identities, their personal experience is connected to the structures of power in society – as in the feminist slogan, the 'personal is political'.

The gender-power relations within a particular social group reflect their belief systems, forms of social hierarchy and degrees of male domination. A person's position and power in society is the result of many factors or variables: their class, caste, community, ethnicity/race, gender, sexual orientation, even age. Each of these variables cuts across and intersects with the others creating a complex web of power, of domination and subordination, extending from the domestic sphere of intimate relations within the family to the public spheres of employment in society.

Gender identities are often paramount regardless of class and caste. This is particularly so when women (and those whose gender identity is not male) face sexual and gender violence, assault or harassment. Because the issue of violence is so pervasive, it brought women across society together, forming the crux of the women's movement in India in the 1980s. In more recent

decades, there has been greater awareness that women are not a homogenous group and that gender relations are different for women in different locations.

In the 1990s, dalit feminists¹¹ began to point out that the dalit woman's experience of violence and discriminatory practices was very different from that of the upper caste woman. Dalit and tribal women not only face violence from the men of their community, but also from upper caste men. For upper caste men, sexual assault and violence against poor and marginalised women is an assertion of their caste power over the woman and her community.

Indeed, poor dalit women are among the most sexually vulnerable groups. As caste operates even among non-caste-linked religions, poor Muslim dalit women may experience multiple marginalisation, because of their gender, caste, religion and poverty. The marginalised Muslim women are also the most socio-economically disadvantaged with the lowest levels of education and access to health care.

Class and/or caste sometimes reinforce and sometimes negate gender. Prejudices about caste and gender may affect, say, a woman dalit engineer, whose authority is not recognised by her privileged caste juniors, men and women. Yet, a rich or middle-class woman of a privileged caste who employs a poor dalit man to work in her house has authority and power over him, despite the social norms of masculinity in a patriarchal society. Age is also a factor. In parts of Africa, a woman over 50 is acknowledged as an 'honorary man' and treated as such. In India too, older women have certain freedoms that younger women do not.

The inter-meshing of gender with class, caste, ethnicity etc. makes it difficult to generalize about women's position. But some trends can be distinguished. Over time with increasing rural-urban migration and the anonymity of the city, certain caste rules have weakened, notably regarding food and the observance of rituals. National laws have also opened up spaces for women, such as the right to inherit property and to make an independent choice of the marriage partner through a civil marriage. But although enabling laws exist, social transformation is taking place very slowly.

Today, the family continues to be the site where hierarchy is reinforced. The joint family, with more than one generation living in the same residence, persists because of economic and cultural reasons, more so in north India (where married women move to the husband's home) than in south India. Gendered power in a patriarchal inter-generational household reinforces female subordination, taking away women's autonomy and power to make decisions, control over her sexuality, health, mobility, and material and knowledge resources.

Gender-power relations are diverse and changing in complex ways that are not necessarily empowering for women. The dalit/ bahun women's relative freedom to move about and work outside the household is lost when these castes improve their social position. The withdrawal of women from work is seen as a sign of status, conforming to privileged caste, middleclass gender norms. Economic pressures have compelled many lower middle-class families to send women out to work overcoming conventional gendered

barriers regarding night work or/and living away from home. The young women, who are employed in data processing (call centres) or move to other states to work in garment export factories, contribute hugely to the economic well-being of their families. But this rarely empowers the women to overcome their gendered environments. Their employment does not translate into greater freedom to take decisions about their life, which is still controlled by patriarchal authorities both at home and at work.

Check Your Progress Exercise II

Note: I. Use this space given below to answer the question.

II. Compare your answer with the Course material of this Unit.

1. List the three levels through which the caste system is functioning in India.

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2. “The Gender-power relations don’t necessarily empower women.” Justify the statement with the help of an example.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

Since the 1990s, the feminist term gender has been appropriated swiftly and very widely. But gender is used as a synonym for women without any concern for the patriarchal gender-power relations in society. When different gender roles are recognised, the tendency is simply to list what women do and what men do, without any attempt to understand why there are gendered patterns of work. Women are treated as a homogenous group without addressing the diversity of their caste-class locations. Third gender persons are barely recognised. The underlying assumption is that the gender norms of middle class Brahmanical patriarchy apply, or should apply, across society.

The result is that even so-called gender sensitive initiatives reinforce patriarchal norms in society, seeing all women as mothers and wives first and not as independent productive persons. Patriarchal ideas and the norms of femininity and masculinity seem natural because they are so deeply enmeshed in society and often internalised by women themselves. When dual norms are applied to groups of people who have very different levels of

power, the hierarchical relation between them is maintained. Thus, gender and caste discrimination and inequality persist.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. How do concepts of femininity and masculinity shape gender identity?
2. Why is it more accurate to speak of patriarchies (in the plural) rather than patriarchy?
3. How does the division of labour contribute to inequality in the family and society?
4. Why do dalit women or transgender persons face multiple marginalization's?

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