



## Review of Literature



### GENDERED FAMILY: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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#### ABSTRACT

**W**omen in India, even after five decades of independence, continue to be helpless victims of the male's chauvinism and high-handedness in every walk of life. Though the constitution has not only provided for equal rights and privileges for



both men and women but has gone a step further and made special provisions for women and children. In spite of these safeguards being taken, Indians in their family life are governed by 'personal religious laws', which have failed to give women their due. It is surprising that in spite of so many laws, women

still continue to live under the stress, strain of male domination that manifests itself in the form of various kinds of hardships and indignities meted out to them. To ensure equality of status for our women we still have miles to go

**KEYWORDS** :Sociological Analysis , in cultural practices and traditions.

#### INTRODUCTION

Gender refers to images, representations, expectations, norms, values, beliefs and conventions attributed to the biological sexes. Every society has commonly held ideas of what it means to be a woman or a man, a mother or a father, a girl or a boy. These ideas give rise to principles for organizing behavior, interests, work, appearance, child rearing practices and other aspects of life, and are initiated, learned and confirmed in cultural practices and traditions. The family constitutes one of the most important social arenas in which this takes place.

Both family and gender are socially constructed phenomena, created and re-created by people who share socio-cultural contexts. This means that neither family nor gender has a universal meaning

rather; meanings vary with time and place

The notion of 'Gendering' begins since childhood as children are assigned to the roles which can be termed as Gender roles, means the expected or preferred ways for people of each sex to behave, as men have traditionally been expected to be strong, aggressive, even domineering; the cliché that "big boys don't cry" typifies one aspect of the male role. Women have been expected to be nurturing, sensitive, emotional and relatively passive. Children are taught these values, both consciously and unconsciously, from a very early age. Toys represent one example; unless and until children make other preferences known, boys traditionally tend to be given toys that emphasize activity, even violence; girls are often given what might be termed gentler toys, small boys and girls play together quite freely, but increasingly as they grow older their play tends toward "boys game" and "girls' game", and boys refuse to play with the girls. They don't get together often, as they don't share the same play interests.

In western and southern India when a girl or a woman salutes the elders and priests, they bless her with these words- 'may you have eight sons and may your husband survive long'. Also in northern India, they bless her in the same manner by saying – 'putravati bhava'. In the form of a blessing the deity is never invoked to grant daughters. Therefore in many cases women's hope of winning her husband to herself hangs solely on her bearing sons. Especially in rural India it is honorable and lucky to be pregnant and there is little doubt that great emphasis is put on the hope of a male child, especially if it is the first child.

A son has been considered socially and religiously necessary, to support the parents in their old age and to ensure salvation for the father through the funeral rites. So, "women become happy when they have a son". It has also been observed that, the first question at birth is, "is it a boy or a girl?" and if in the first instance they have a baby girl it would be considered 'bad luck', in the second 'a disaster', and in the third 'a catastrophe'. If a girl is born after her brother's death, or if, soon after her birth, a boy in the family dies, she is in either case regarded by her parents and neighbors as the cause of the boy's death. She is then constantly addressed with some unpleasant name, beaten, cursed, persecuted and despised by all.

They are not given proper care in their childhood as Sen and Sengupta (1983), on studying two West Bengal villages, found a systematic sex bias in child nutrition reflected in the higher prevalence of malnourishment and the lower growth dynamics among girls, relative to boys, of under five years of age. Similar findings are noted by Taylor and Faruque (1983) in a ten village study in Ludhiana, Punjab – a state where female children are also noted to be breast-fed for a shorter time and given less supplementary milk and solid food.

Sex bias in food distribution is not confined to poor households, although it appears to be sharper under poverty conditions. Discrimination against females also tends to be more in times of economic distress, as during floods, etc. Rajivan talks of these Gender differences in terms of measurement, to him the prevalence of under nutrition and malnutrition, growth faltering, stunting (height deficits), wasting (weight deficits), morbidity and disease loads, care and attention received, can be measured.

Furthermore, not only girl child suffers but also at several places, the mother is considered unclean as a result of childbirth. After giving birth to a baby, women's responsibilities increase, like women who work in the fields, take their babies with them. In general, the birth of a child means and increasing differentiation of the female and male roles- the mother's task increase while the father's tasks remain static. It is considered to be her 'natural' duties.

Thus, from the above discussion, we can say that female children are again, typically worse off than male children (especially in rural areas). In terms of school enrolment and literacy rate, in rural

areas the percentage of girls attending school was merely 55% in 1994. This is a strikingly low figure and significantly lower than the respective for males. Furthermore, the school drop out rate of girls is higher than of boys. In the most backward states (e.g., Bihar) only every third women is considered literate which figures around 33.57% (Census of India 2001) which ranks last in the country.

In fact, girls are trained functionally for their future life, and as household are important, they become a large part of a girl's 'education'. Indian women in this country have often remarked on the ridiculousness of having 'domestic science' taught in schools. They cannot conceive of homes in which the girls don't learn this important aspect of feminine life. Girls are expected to help serve meals and to clean and polish the plates, unless there are servants – in some cases even if there are servants. Family incomes are totally inadequate in most cases, as much of India operates under an economy of scarcity. Under such conditions there are many families in which each mouth must earn its food.

This economic necessity, considering that most schools cost money (for fees, books, bus fares, etc.), and that little of the formal education has value in the practical world, means that large numbers of children ( and especially the girls) are not sent to school, particularly to secondary schools. However, the picture is changing rapidly, not only because of compulsory education laws and a national interest in education, but also because education increases marriage chances but higher education is still not encouraged among girls as it interferes with the marriage. At several places, the tradition is growing that "a girl must go to school if she wants a chance for a good marriage". Hence even modern education remains, for the girl., a road to marriage.

As the girls grow up they are given more protection than men by the society, as is evident from the provision of women's compartments on trains, high walls around schools, night watchmen, strict rules about men visitors, etc. In the joint family system, which is one of the peculiarities of eastern countries, discrimination is very deeply rooted in the society. With joint family system the age at marriage is generally quite low which leads to widowhood, early pregnancy, early death etc. and most marriages are arranged by parents and normally groom and bride have not met before the wedding day. But if there are cases of inter-caste and intra-caste marriages, which is said to infringe cultural norms and customary practices the social reaction is harsher towards women in comparison to men. The rural opinion is heavily in favour of punishing those who "violate social norms" of the rural society so that "other can learn a lesson".

After getting married, girls leave the home and become a part of another home, they'll have nothing to do with the continuation of this family. A girl is always taught that she will have to create a new family, and still it is prevalent in most families that she is denied property rights and the dowry which is given to the bride at her wedding is not considered as women's wealth, but wealth that goes with women. Women are the vehicles by which it is transmitted. In relation to this Bina Agarwal in her book "A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia: also raises the issue of women's land 'ownership'. The fact is that this book focuses not only on women' land 'ownership', but also on property control. She further argues that property advantage stems not only from ownership, but also from effective control over it. With the increasing greed for the easy inflow of money (i.e. dowry) on account of a bride the chilling stories of bride burning, torture, wife battering, domestic abuse, dowry death, female infanticide, rape, incest and other forms of sexual assault have started coming to light. Over 40% married women experience abuse at home. 1 in 10 experiences sexual violence, 1 in 6 experiences emotional violence by their husbands (Observations by NFHS-III).

However, this anti-female bias is by no means limited to poor families. Much of the discrimination is to do with social norms and cultural factors like health care neglect of girls, a greater percentage of females than males receive no treatment for illness, or treated with traditional

medicines. Women's ailments are usually ignored in the initial stages; medical aid is sought only when the disease becomes chronic or acute; also the male preference pattern is so strong (as they further drive the 'vansh' (family line), provide economy security etc.,) that lots of people aren't afraid to commit female infanticide.

There are several other factors of female infanticide and foeticide in India, such as the existence of a dowry system which requires the family to pay out a great deal of money when a female child is married. Punjab and Haryana which are considered to be very progressive states in the country have the lowest sex ratio. Since prenatal diagnostics and abortions are technically feasible and affordable for common people, this barbarical practice has become common. This has happened not only in urban areas, but deep within rural countryside also. The sex ratio has fallen to such unfavourable numbers that the government has to prohibit the abortion of healthy fetuses. Nevertheless, such services are still easily accessible and flourish underground and as a result the overall sex ratio (933/1000) has increased but the child sex ratio (0-6 Age Group; 927/100) has declined (Census of India, 2001).

Despite of the above fact, India is still a society with a strong preference for sons. Female foeticide and selective abortion, health care neglect and lower schooling duration for girls and women are brutal consequences of male preference patterns. Although the women is looked upon as an inferior being, the women who are married and who have given birth to several sons obtain the highest status in Indian society (particularly in rural areas).

On the other hand, women who are divorced, childless or widowed receive very little respect. They are also often deprived of good living. If the widow is a mother of sons, she is not usually a pitiable object. Although she is certainly looked upon as a sinner, yet social abuse and hatred are greatly diminished in virtue of the fact that she is a mother of the superior beings. The widow-mother of girls is treated indifferently and sometimes with genuine hatred, especially so, when her daughters have not been given in marriage in husband's lifetime. When the husband dies, women are deprived of every gold and silver ornament, of the bright-colored garments.

Earlier it was limited to only high-caste Hindu women but gradually it has spread to lower castes people who have started adopting the custom of shaving widow's heads, in the process of 'sanskritization' (Sociologist M.N.Srinivas introduced this term, the term refers to a process whereby people of lower castes collectively try to adopt upper caste practices and beliefs to acquire higher status). The widow must never take part in family feasts with others. She must not show herself to people on auspicious occasions. A man or woman thinks it unlucky to behold a widow's face before seeing any other object in the morning. A widow is called an 'inauspicious' thing.

Women are the worst sufferers in many situations as Eco-feminists also argue that owing to their living and working situations as nurturers and carers, women are much affected by ecological destruction in villages than men as this involve exhausting and long-distance walks to fetch water or to gather wood for cooking or heating as they in rural India are responsible for keeping house. Also, the migration of males from rural to urban not only increases the burden on women, but also affects even the children. Their educational opportunities do not increase. The husbands and sons maintain a visiting relationship with the women and exercise authority in major decisions in the family.

The females seldom visit the city. The reasons are segregation of the sexes, desire by the older members to keep the male migrant tied to the village home (which is possible if the wife and children continue to live in the village) and the perceived inability of the females to get work in the city. In spite of the long absence of males there is little change in the authority structure of the family, and major decisions regarding, purchase of household items, cattle, inputs for land, credit, expenditure on ceremonies, etc. are postponed till the migrants visit. The contact with the male migrant is one way, the

females spending most of their lives managing the home front, in many cases single handedly.

Since the family does not have enough of a material base to withdraw her from the work force, she continues to work till she is quite old, though the adult sons assume the power and authority. Two thirds of all agricultural work is actually carried out by women. Also she has to be a caring mother, raise children and be a nurse for the whole family. A strongly disproportionate share of the total workload lies on women's shoulders. Work carried out by women is mostly unpaid and not adequately recognized.

Taking on a large, and often disproportionately large share of the household's workload, or making a significant contribution to household earnings, does not ensure women a greater or even equal access to crucial needs such as food or health care. The distribution of these within the household generally favours males over females. On comparing estimates of the daily energy expended by women and men in rural Karnataka with estimates of their respective calorie intake, Batilwala (1983) finds that the women have an intake deficit of 100 calories and the men surplus of 800 calories.

Women in our country, even after five decades of independence, continue to be helpless victims of the males' chauvinism and high-handedness in every walk of life. Though the constitution has not only provided for equal rights and privileges for both men and women but as gone a step further and made special provisions for women and children.

In spite of these safeguards being taken, Indians in their family life are governed by 'personal religious laws', which have failed to give women their due. It is surprising that in spite of so many laws, women still continue to live under the stress, strain of male domination that manifests itself in the form of various kinds of hardships and indignities meted out to them. To ensure equality of status for our women we still have miles to go.

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