

Applications of Anthropology

Gender Issues: Biological and Cultural

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Introduction

Gender is equated with women or women's studies in most popular perceptions of what constitutes gender studies. However gender identifies the fact that differences of sex can be projected on to culturally constructed differences between humans that although a derivative of their genital differences are nevertheless quite independent of whatever characters such biological differences may entail. In other words put more simply it means that what is considered as masculine and feminine in any culture is not a derivative of biological fact of sexual dimorphism but a cultural understanding of how sexes are perceived and defined in cultural terms; such cultural constructs are informed by various facets of society and culture including world-view, religion, cosmology, economy and history. Gender constructs although varying across cultures are also not unchanging but are dynamic varying according to time and space and are often conditioned by social and economic transformations. Gender constructs as are also complimentary in that how women are conceptualized is intrinsically linked to how men are conceptualized. More over all men and all women in society are not conceptualized in the same way. Like for example gender constructs may vary by age and class position and also the social status of a person. Apart from recognizing its constructed character the concept of gender is also relational, and according to this view "women and men were defined in terms of one another"(Scott 1986:1054). Thus in this way gender becomes a much wider concept than women and involves a holistic perspective on society and culture that inform and constrain the relationships of women with men and every aspect of human life can be viewed with a gendered lens. Gender studies also need not imply that we are taking a political stand from the perspective of women. But in reality most studies based on gender take up a critical stand prioritizing women as it was realized that

women have occupied a marginal position in society both in social terms and intellectually.

Gender became an issue both theoretically and politically when it was realized by both scholars and women activists that what is generally assumed to be characteristic of being human was actually only centered on a world- view that granted central position to men. Thus the common English usage mankind is today regarded as a sexist statement as it refers to the entire humanity as men and not women. Towards the middle of the twentieth century there were social and intellectual stimulus that took a critical view of much that existed both intellectually and politically. There were many historical reasons for this including the spread of western education and universalistic values, de-colonization and the emergence of scholars from such sections of society such as the non-western people and women that threw a different light on the intellectual climate especially of the western world that was hitherto dominated by white men.

Although many of us today equate emancipation of women with westernization it was the western especially the Judeo- Christian tradition that regarded women as lesser human beings. For a long time western society was ruled by ideas such as 'biology is destiny'. Women in the west were considered not only inferior to men physically and intellectually but also morally. She was considered infantile, immature, driven by physical desires and intellectually inferior. It is well known that a famous British woman writer had to publish under the pseudo-name of George Eliot to have the readers accept her writings as that of a good writer. No one in England in the eighteenth or nineteenth century would have accepted the fact of a woman writing so well. The works of eminent nineteenth century scholars such as Sigmund Freud and Francis Bacon only served to strengthen the stereotypes often as in the case of Freud, with the backing of scientific methodology. A common world- view of the west was the equation of women with nature and men with culture. In all cultures gender constructions were seen as either god given or nature given and not something that was actually a creation of society itself. Thus whether woman was considered as *shakti* as in India or a weak and immature as in west, each culture vested their world view with the immutability that one assigns to the phenomenon of nature.

It was the twentieth century that brought the realization that masculine and feminine qualities are variable across the world and all cultures do not have the same perception of men and women as is found in western culture and that men and women can perform roles or be regarded in quite different ways than in the west.

Cultural Construction of Sexuality

Today gender is defined as the cultural construction of sexuality and it is recognized that such constructions vary across time and space and are informed by many other variables such as economy, history, politics and religion. The works of famous anthropologist Margaret Mead was one of those that worked towards dispelling the myth of 'biology is destiny'. On the basis of fieldwork conducted in tribal societies of the South seas and New Guinea, Mead (1935, 1949) was able to demonstrate how culture shapes the men and women in different societies often investing them with characters opposite to that

found in western societies. Thus the women of Mudugumoor were like the men in western societies, violent and aggressive with little of the gentle maternal qualities attributed to women in the west. The women of the Tchambuli too were masculine with shaven heads who spent all their time in pursuit of economic interests, producing and trading and supporting the men, who were frivolous. The men made up their faces and tossed their curls, trying to attract a woman to marry and support them. In spite of criticism of her ethnography by later day anthropologists, Mead succeeded in creating the awareness that being men and women was less a matter of biology than of culture. Her work was followed by that of many other anthropologists who not only made people aware of the cross- cultural differences in conceptualization of masculinity and femininity, but also introduced more radical ideas regarding the universality of sexuality as defined in the west. It was realized that in many societies there are more than two genders. In many societies the neuter or transvestite are socially recognized and given a proper social status and play recognized roles in society like the *hizra* of India and the *berdache* of the Comanche. While the former often recognizes genital abnormality, the latter took into account people's psychological inclinations towards roles played by the opposite sex. Thus while most men among the Comanche were warriors, a man who liked to be peaceful and sew and household work like a woman, was not ridiculed but was respected for what he did and granted a special status of *berdache*. Similarly women who did not like feminine tasks and wanted to lead men's lives were called 'lion hearted ' women and allowed to ride horses and fight. Such men and women were not forced into any particular kind of sexuality and could be sexually men or women, as they liked. Thus a *berdache* could marry a man or a woman according to his choice and be either heterosexual or homosexual.

Anthropologists also got ethnographical accounts of societies where men feared rather than desired women and homosexuality was the normal sexual practice. Heterosexual relationships were a necessary evil only limited to procreation. Thus data from the New Guineas (Feil 1987) (Herdt 1987) served to define the concepts of normal and abnormal with respect to sexuality.

The western stereotype of the passive and receiving woman was challenged by the existence of such societies. However the anthropological influence did not always go down well with the feminists, especially the first generation of them who wanted rather to emphasize upon the universal domination of women rather than on cross cultural variations in construction of gender. The feminist view- point became a dominant influence and served to make gender equivalent to women, as they emphasized upon the hierarchy between men and women and were keen to demonstrate a universal marginalization of women recognizing only the fact that different societies achieved this subordination in different ways.

Feminism: western and non-western

Feminism as the word is commonly understood was began in the west by white middle class women who rebelled against what they considered as a male dominated world. The unique feature of this movement as it began was the assumption that all women

experience the same kinds of discrimination and often this took the form of a concept of universal woman hood whose problems were best assessed by a certain section of women, the leaders of this movement. The remedy for overcoming discrimination was often to assume male roles and male stereotypes. Thus women shunned make-up, wore trousers and generally made an attempt to do what the men did. There was also the assumption especially by what is known as radical feminism that the root of all women's troubles lay in the heterosexual relationship that they had with men. Gender issues were largely reduced to issues of sexuality and rebellion against Freudian stereotypes of feminist sexuality. The feminist movement was thus often reduced to 'bra- burning' and lesbianism. It was this image that limited feminism and made it appear as nothing else but rebellion against men.

However soon the kind of women who entered into active dialogues and who acquired the right of speech through education and other wise participation in the public sphere transcended the earlier white, middle class tag. Many women from third world countries as well as women of colour, of poor classes and marginal groups began their own discourse. For the first time almost towards the end of the twentieth century it was proclaimed that 'Woman' is not a uniform category and is intersected by class, caste, race and ethnicity. It was realized that not all women have the same kind of problems and do not desire the same kind of things. To many women it was realized that poverty was of a far greater issue than sexuality. Racial and caste discriminations were much worse than sexual discriminations and most often several types of discriminations were bundled together to reinforce each other. Thus dalit women in India face discrimination based on caste, class and sex; African –American women like wise faced discriminations that were compounded by race, class and gender. Women from ethnic minorities, poor sections of society, marginal groups like tribes, proclaimed that there problems were not the same as that of white, middle class women and gender issues to them were concerning quite different things than that concerning women of privilege. To many such women it was the struggle for daily survival that was of critical importance than ideological issues involving sexuality.

Soon gender issues were concentrating more on down to earth issues like wages for work, definitions of work done by women, women's relationship to the environment, poverty, racism, structural reforms and other practical issues related to women's health, well being and survival. Sexuality still played an important role but it was linked to issues such as women's health, well- being and rights. Much of what women now said or demanded was subsumed under the language of rights and of humanity and universal principles of justice. It was being increasingly realized that women are not isolated from all other major issues facing the world. Women are related to both men and to the social, economic and environmental destiny of the entire world. At the Beijing conference on women, Hilary Clinton made the now much quoted statement that 'Women's rights are human rights and Human rights are women's rights'. Gender studies moved on from abstract intellectualism to issues based on women's rights and the discriminations suffered by them. However gender studies do not imply that at all times we are required to look upon women as downtrodden or discriminated. Many feminist scholars brought to light the strength of women. As more and more studies on these lines were conducted

many different issues came to light. It was agreed that women too have their strengths and often dominate certain spheres of life, especially in the domestic domain. Theoretically there is now a tendency to treat gender as a complex issue that involves many variables and many facets of life. It is also realized that women's status cannot be understood in simplistic terms and we cannot assume a universal subordination of women as a blanket category. Ethnographic and analytical works highlighted the complex relationships between society, culture, environment, kinship, religion and women's issues (Reiter 1975) (Raphael 1975). Women's status itself became a difficult term to define.

Status of women

A number of theories and debates exist as to how one can measure the status of women in any society. A popular and much used criterion is that of economy. The role played by women in economy is often taken as an index of their position in society. But often it is found that it is not simply the amount or the nature of work that women do that determines their position in society but the degree of control over resources and rights such as that of inheritance are important to understand her position. Even in societies that are matrilineal, it is often found that while property such as land and houses are in the name of women, the actual control and administration may be in the hands of men who are either brothers or husbands of the women.

An important distinction made was between the public and the domestic domain. It was found that even when women played important decision making roles in the domestic sphere their role in the public domain is minimal or absent in most societies leading the anthropologists to declare that even if we find societies that are matrilineal there are none that are matriarchal or ones that are ruled by women.

Feminist scholars like Maria Mies have attributed the lack of power for women in their inability or disinclination to take on violent roles. It is because men fight that women remain marginal as the history of human kind is a history of warfare. Women are more concerned in all cultures with subsistence and sustenance of life rather than the destruction of life.

The extent of women's decision making roles however vary from society to society and is often taken as an index of their status. It is also sometimes found that even when women may not overtly appear in the public domain they may covertly influence men who wield overt power.

Feminists have debated the issue of women's work being ignored and delegated to the category of non-work even when it involves hard labour and time as in household work (Hartmann 1981). In the capitalist system only work done outside the house in overtly economic institutions like factories and offices is considered as work. Women who perform the most important task of reproducing society that includes the reproduction of capitalist labour have their work masked as non work and accordingly exploited as free labour turned into profit in the capitalist economy. The unpaid work of women is masked as love for family and exploited. However outside of such Marxist thinking the family is

seen as both supportive of women's position in society by providing her a domain where she can rule and control resources as well as an exploitive. But the family or the home is also seen as a place where women may be subjected to utmost violence.

While inheritance patterns reflect women's position quite well the argument of Marxist scholars (Kuhn and Wolpe 1978) have also been that it is the evolution of private property that itself is detrimental to women's position in society. It is believed that women's position is strongest in such societies where there is no concept of private property and also there is no separation of the public and private spheres. Thus in hunting food gathering societies with an acquisitive economy, most good are free goods that no one owns, so men and women are equally placed in terms of not having any ownership at all. More over in non-capitalist economies there is no separation of household and place of work so that both men and women work in the sphere of the domestic. Like in households of crafts specialists or among shifting cultivators where land is communally owned the position of women is quite high. Yet in spite of the nearly equal position of women as among the !Kung bushmen the men still have an edge is being more heard, ahead as healers and having somewhat greater access to ritual powers. Thus even in symbolic fashion men are seen as superior to women in even the simplest societies.

In heritance patterns too reflect only half the story for as discussed earlier even of some property is in the name of the woman what is really crucial is the extent to which she is able to take decisions that affect her that includes basic things like food, health care, mobility and freedom of expression.

According to Marvin Harris (1993) the evolution of gender hierarchies have their roots in the physiological differences between men and women in the beginnings of society when men with greater muscle power were best suited to hunt and kill with the help of throwing weapons so that they had greater monopoly over the ability to use violence and kill.

Another index used by Harris was the existence of polygyny among peasants and band societies where the women were always at a disadvantage. The more violent the culture of a group the worse the position of women among them; thus in Papua New Guinea, while men are constantly feuding, practice of homosexuality is couples with a violent suppression of women. However where warfare took men away to distant lands and for long periods of time, women controlled much more of the domestic scene as among the matrilineal Iroquois. But while women had considerable power, they never abused or subordinated the men in ways that were done in patriarchal societies. Violence both domestic and public seems to have been a characteristic of men.

A marked difference in the position of women in agricultural societies is seen is whether cultivation done with a hoe or with a ox drawn plough. In case of West Africa where hoe cultivation was largely practiced the most equalitarian societies favouring women have been observed. West African women of the Yoruba, Ibo, Igbo and Dahomey tribes not only had considerable domestic power but also ruled in the public sphere as well. Yoruba

women occupied a special public position called 'mother of all women' and took decisions regarding many public issues like war, building of roads, trade etc.

Men are best at plough cultivation that is essential for hard baked earth that needs strength to break. Women, even if they did it would be much less efficient because of their physique and body mass. Therefore in areas like Northern Indian plains the position of women is quite low as expressed in female infanticide, low status of widows, neglect of girl child and practice of dowry. How cultivators always have bride price that indicates the economic contribution and importance of women.

Again wet rice cultivation areas where women do most of the productive work indicate a much higher position of women like in South India, South East Asia and Malaysia. In fact in all recorded ethnographies, South East Asia records the highest position of women.

However not every scholar is in agreement with the materialistic perspective of Marvin Harris and some other scholars like Omvedt (2003) attributes the higher position of women in South east Asia to the prevalence of Buddhism that is far more egalitarian religion than the Judeo Christian traditions and Hinduism.

This religion and cosmology are also seen as contributing factors and sometimes seen as more important than the economy. But Harris clinches his point by saying that women are claiming their position in contemporary times in a big way because technology has made them equal to the men. Thus modern weaponry enables a woman to fight as well as a man. A car can be driven as well by a woman as by a man and the equestrian skills of men in an earlier era become meaningless. But his arguments become a little hollow when we realize that women's position is not improving with any amount of technology and that women's bodies are still subject to violence as they were in earlier times.

Multiple anthropological perspectives have rooted women's domination to her reproductive roles. Because men do not have the power to reproduce they need to control the wombs of women in order to have social offspring, to have control over the future generations. Some theorists believe that in ancient times men were in awe of women's life producing properties giving rise to the cults of the mother goddess in many ancient cultures. Over a period of time the awe turned to a need for control as men gained in power through their control over production and warfare. Since menstruation is directly correlated with reproduction, menstruating women are often considered polluting or dangerous, the two being synonymous.

Violence against Women

There are many faces of violence. It is in relation to violence that often women speak of an universal women's experience for most women are recognized in most societies to face some or the other kind of violence. The forms of violence, their manifestation and their magnitude differs. Many feminists as already mentioned refer to the sexual act it

self as an act of violence. But even apart from normal sex, rape, molestation and the threat of violence often looms large on women.

Quite often the violence against women is idealized and disguised in such a fashion that it goes unrecognized even by the victims. Women often accept much violence done on their bodies in the name of tradition, duty or well being of their families and their husbands. Thus genital mutilation that is sometimes life threatening and always extremely painful and distressful, is undergone willingly by young girls in Africa. The mothers and grandmothers encourage this custom because they are actually made to believe that it is good for the girls. Western women fed on generations of Mills and Boon romance are made to believe that violence is pleasurable and sex is often equated with masochism and sadism that can even be life threatening. Thus the cultural stereotype of the macho man leads many women to accept violence at the hands of their spouse as something both normal and even desirable.

Women in India are taught from childhood that sacrifices for the sake of men is good. They would willingly give up their share of food or comforts for the sake of their sons, husbands and brothers. A girl child is discriminated against in favour of her brother from childhood. In most families even if they are well to do the better nutrition, educational facilities and a major part of household resources are set apart for the boys. The girls are made to accept that it is the right thing and they rarely if ever protest. A study conducted by a Delhi university researcher shows that a majority of organ donors, 80% in the country are women while the majority of organ receivers, 65% are men. Also the hospital records in Delhi indicate that 13 out of 18 families refused liver transplant to a girl also girls were forcibly married off to rich men from other countries to enable them to become donors as spouses.

Domestic violence is a feature of families allover the world but surprisingly it the First world countries that take the lead in this respect. Far greater incidences of violence against women within the family is recorded in countries like Canada and USA than in countries of Africa or Asia.

Violence against women affects not only the victim but has repercussions for the entire society. Thus mothers suffering from malnutrition produce children who may grow into unhealthy adults. Yet as in India the position of the newly daughter-in-law is the lowest in the family hierarchy and she may often get the least amount of food. A majority of mothers are anemic and produce babies with low birth weight and other complications.

The most drastic form of violence against women, namely female infanticide and now female foeticide may put the health and well being of the entire society in jeopardy.

A study conducted by V.V. Giri National Labour Institute in 1996 reported that while every year 12 million girls are born in India, 3 million or 25% do not survive to see their fifteenth birthday. A third of the deaths take place in the first year of life. girl children are killed in many ways, by sheer neglect, malnutrition, lack of medical care and exposure to hazardous situation like making a girl of five to eight years cook in the kitchen or fetch

water from the well. Early age of marriage and child bearing also reduces the life span of women. A UNICEF study confirms that malnutrition is a major contributory factor in the death of girls under five.

Scholars have pointed to several reasons for the violence against women. Kelkar(1992) has pointed to lack of property rights of women as a major reason for their vulnerability. In rural Uttar Pradesh where she conducted her study most cases of ‘dowry deaths ‘ were reported from the upper castes of Thakur and Brahmin caste groups. The lower position of women in the upper castes of India has often been attributed to the lack of economic value of women in such groups but one may go beyond economy and suggest as Eleanor Leacock and Mona Etienne (1980) has suggested that men of exploitative groups like the colonizers of the west turn the same kind of violence against their women as they do to outsiders. In other words where ever there is a tradition of violence in a culture women will be the victims of it. This is similar to the point of view of Marvin Harris and Maria Mies.

This is also the reason that in marginal and exploited groups like dalits, women suffer less at the hands of their own men than at the hands of outsiders. During the Ambdekerite movement in Maharashtra in the middle of the last century women were at the fore front and participated equally with men in their protest against exploitation (Moon and Pawar 2003). Similarly African American women have led from the front in their fight against oppression.

In a study conducted in a village near the city of Chandigarh , Mahajan and Madhurima (1995)found several reasons for domestic violence. Firstly there was a positive association between marital dependency and wife abuse, secondly women were unable to leave a situation of violence because of lack of support from outside and their own dependency. Thirdly and this is most distressing an independent women often became the subject of abuse by her husband because of his sense of inadequacy. Thus it seems that women are in a no –win situation whether or not they are dependent or independent.

In a revealing article Marianne Hester(1992) has analyzed the historical phenomenon when a very large number of women were accused of witchcraft in sixteenth and seventeenth century England and tortured and killed as witches.

According to her there were some historical reasons for the precipitation of violence against women that was reinforced by the Catholic Church’s view of women as sinful. This was a period of great social transformation when the Catholic Church was feeling threatened by the transference of power form Church to state and from Catholic to Protestant. There was the transition from tenant farming to wage labour; obvious areas of conflict developed between men and women in the rise of the capitalist sector, the rise of the textile industry that gave opportunity for women to support themselves financially by spinning, an exclusively feminine task.

Thus women become targets of violence when they threaten male bastions of power. Working women and modern women who are mobile and independent become targets of

male violence more often than their more submissive counterparts. An obvious illustration is in the rise of crimes against women in the city of Delhi, the capital of India and home to large numbers of independent, educated and working women. A report in the *Statesman*, dated 3rd June 2004, that over 200 women had been raped in Delhi till May that year, while 466 were raped in 2003. In fact the crime graph of Delhi is ever on the increase with most crimes directed against women.

Liz Kelly has defined femicide or killing of women by men as an act of sexual violence, “any physical, visual, verbal or sexual act, experienced by a woman or girl, at the time or later, as a threat, invasion or assault that has the effect of hurting, degrading her and/or takes away her ability to control intimate contact” (1988: 41).

As a last point in this section it has been recognized that the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS is often directly related to women’s helplessness against violence and women victims of rape and abuse become infected with the virus that then spreads to children through mother to child transmission. Although there are some aspects of the physiology of women that lead to a greater vulnerability of women to contracting the HIV virus (Kshatriya, et al 2005: 79) it is also the cultural marginalization of women that makes her even more susceptible, “In the study of 125 HIV seropositive drug abusers, women exhibited significantly poorer overall nutritional status defined by low prealbumen levels, had lower retinal binding protein levels and lower plasma selenium level, also significantly lower levels of vitamins A, vitamins E and selenium were observed in women, relative to men”

Gender Issues in environment management and sustainable development

Issues of environmental degradation, the threat of a global environmental disaster and the issues of sustainable development as against development *per se* have been central concern of enlightened persons by the end of the twentieth century.

At the end of the nineteenth century the world was dominated by the triumph of western science and the ideology of science dominating nature. The equation of women with nature went with it as while men dominated nature, they also dominated women.

As a reaction when the failure of western science and capitalist expansion to protect the environment became evident with evidences of global warming, deforestation and major environmental disasters coming up, women’s role as protectors and conservers of environment was the key issue brought by feminist scholars.

Quite early in the study of band societies by anthropologists it had been clarified that at the earliest phase of human adaptation it were the women who were responsible for basic subsistence of the bands, rather than the men. The food gathering activities of women provided that bulk of subsistence food and men’s hunting activity provided only supplementary proteins. Vandana Shiva (1988) has pointed to the fact that in India women are always responsible for providing those resources like water, fuel and fodder that sustain life. Thus women’s relation ship to the environment is life giving rather than

life taking. The Chipko movement in the Himalayas is an often- cited example of how women were ready to give up their lives to save the environment especially the trees. Contemporary environmentalists are turning to what they consider the wisdom of women to sustain the environment and to a perspective of development that is not oriented to exploitation but towards sustenance.

But women do not have a natural affinity towards nature or the kind of activities that they do. Women do what they are culturally expected to do and which is informed by the cultural perception of what women can do. For example in India women do not drive trucks but they work regularly at construction sites carrying heavy loads on their heads and doing back braking work like cutting stones. In the western countries women regularly drive trucks but are considered absolutely unsuitable work on construction sites. Any one in a European country would be shocked even at the idea of women working as a brick- layer. Thus what women do regarding providing for household requirements and the kind of dependency as well as knowledge that they have of the environment is specific to some women in some communities and also in some time periods. Thus some women especially of upper classes may engage in activities that are exploitative of nature. The wearing of animal fur as fashion is a case in point. But among most communities who are in the pre-industrial or peasant mode of existence women's role as reproducers and producers of subsistence goods does keep them in close touch with nature.

Theoretical works on the processes of industrialization and globalization have indicated that whenever there is technological advancement or capitalist expansion, women's resource bases are depleted and women's knowledge becomes trivialized. Thus women who had been closer to nature may over a period of time lose both their knowledge and their control over certain parts of the environment.

As Sumi Krishna (2004) has pointed out the invisibility of women's productive work has lead to policies of development that have been blind to the requirements of women and most developmental plans have actually served to marginalize rather than help women. Most South Asian data is focused on women's contribution to agriculture but little work has been done on what women do in mountainous areas, among pastoral communities, in waste lands and grass land ecosystems. Most investigations regarding work are done by men on men, little attention is paid to what women do specifically.

Whenever there is a transformation of work patterns gender roles are usually though not always adversely affected. When shifting cultivators transform into settled cultivators women's position always goes down as land is held individually by men and plough cultivation is also seen largely as the prerogative of men. But after the earthquake at Latur, in Gujerat, when agricultural activities were totally disrupted the women supported the families by their expertise in crafts with the result that many of these households have now turned to crafts production as their major source of livelihood and the women play a major role in household and economic decision making.

Now-a –days gender sensitive development programmes focus on self help groups for women, micro credit systems and rotating credit systems. At the village and community levels they draw the women closer and bring them together in co-operative support however women as a category is not uniform. Even in a rural society there might be enough cleavage within the category of women to create problems of taking a unified approach to women. Thus in the process of development the interests of one category of women and men may clash with that of another category, say for example the categories of the landed and the landless may be opposed in their interests. Moreover the men of the upper classes and castes who are usually the decision makers do not recognize the agency of the lower class or working- women. Thus even if there is consultation of one class with another it is usually a collusion of men with men. Thus Kapadia (1995) in her study of low caste, landless labour in south India has written that even while women do most of the work, the landowners who are men, give the bonus or extra payment to the men , who promptly blow up the money in drinks. She also notes and many other scholars would support this, that women usually take their entire pay packet home for the family and children whereas the men are more inclined to spend it on themselves in drinks and gambling. Among the upper castes and classes the man is recognized as the bread earner and the women do not work for wages. The upper class men therefore find it ideologically unacceptable to recognize that it is the women who support the family more than the men among the lower castes. Thus when policies are implemented or formulated, the representatives of the local community earmarked for consultation by the change giving agency, whether of the state or of an N.G.O. are usually men. It is only recently that development plans and practice is becoming gender sensitive and aspects such as sustainable development and Natural resource management are taking account of women as key players in these areas.

Gender and Kinship

Kinship forms an interface with the social and biological aspects of gender. Although the basis of kinship is that men impregnate women and women bear children and also lactate and feed the babies the cultural interpretation of something as fundamentally biological as conception varies widely across cultures. The role played by men and women in producing babies is differently understood in different cultures and societies across the world. In fact many cultures traditionally did not attribute any role to the man in producing babies, some considered children to be products of divine interventions or spirit children. Even when role of both parents is recognized the contribution of each is understood in a variety of ways. In a large number of cultures as among the New Guinea highlanders and also among the Tibetans, mother's blood is supposed to form the soft parts of the body like the flesh and father's semen forms the hard part of the body like the bones. The bones are seen as transmitted over generations thus giving importance to descent lines; whereas the link through women is seen as temporary and limited to one's own generation.

The symbolic significance of breast milk also differs from culture to culture. Among the Bhotiyas of the Himalayas, milk is equated with horizontal lines of bilateral kinship while blood is equated with vertical lines of descent. Thus men are credited with maintaining

lines of descent that pass from father to son. Women are responsible for maintaining kinship ties during the lifetime of a person and this includes cooperation in work, marriage and community life. Most cultures recognize the role of both parents irrespective of what their role is understood biologically. Even in strongly patrilineal societies the mother plays an important social and ritual role.

The woman's position in the kinship system also varies over a life span and usually she occupies different positions at different points of time. Again cultures differ in how they conceptualize the process of growing up and ageing. In some societies age raises the status of a person and in others it may lower it. In many pre literate and pre-industrial societies age is supposed to bring with it wisdom as knowledge is acquired not through books but by life experience. Older women in the family are regarded with awe and respected as they hold the key to much of life giving and life sustaining knowledge like of child birth, child rearing, treatment of diseases and appeasing supernatural beings. Also the younger women learn their productive tasks as apprentices to the older women. In such societies a younger woman like a daughter –in-law often holds a very low position in the family hierarchy. But where knowledge can be had from sources other than age, the younger people may often flaunt greater expertise and it is the older persons who get marginalized as the phenomenon seen in most of the developed nations. In countries with large resource bases and where production of wealth is geared to a rapidly developing knowledge system the older generations are left behind in the race for acquiring higher and higher technological knowledge. Thus to be old does not mean that one is wiser but that one has outlived one's usefulness. Women in such situations become doubly marginalized as most of them do not own property and are any way having less qualifications than the men.

However there is a reverse phenomenon also that is seen usually among the marginal groups in society such as the African Americans in the USA and the lower castes and land less labour in Third World countries such as South Asia, that families tend to be more matrifocal (Tanner 1974) even though society is ideally patrilineal and patriarchal. To maintain true patriarchy the men of the group must possess some resources that gives them the legitimacy to rule. In marginal communities where women often have to take up the role of bread winners the men are emasculated by the shame of their inadequacy. The ideological meaning system requires them to be the supporters and bread winners but the reality forces them to look for financial support from their wives or other women in the household. In such a situation the men often exhibit delinquent behaviour like alcoholism and may disappear totally from the scene. A large number of Black families in the USA are headed by women in the absence of men who could not cope with the disgrace or simply succumbed to the pressures of supporting a family. As most case studies indicate it is the strength of women that makes families survive in situations of poverty and stress. But again the commitment of women to their families is culturally imbibed rather than rooted in their biology.

The fact of giving birth and feeding the baby does induce emotional bonding between mother and child but this is nurtured only by cultural support and expectations. Earlier models of male dominance had often reduced it to biological and evolutionary

determinism. The presumption of similar hierarchy among the non-human primates had supported the idea that male dominance was evolutionary phenomenon linked to biological, ecological and social factors. In an excellent review of sexual dimorphism and patterns of dominance including infant care among non-human primates, Wright (1993) has analyzed the often accepted factors of male dominance among primates and found that the situation is highly complex and it is difficult to pin down any one or even a set of factors to explain male dominance or male care for infants. All stereotypical models break down in the face of actual data collected from the field based on first hand observations. The factors normally associated with hierarchization of gender such as division of labour, sexual dimorphism, male care of infants, female mating receptivity, and predation pressures exhibit no simple selective pressures over the dominance of one sex over the other. The actual evolution of gender hierarchy remains elusive and one can only explain the situational variables that seem to favour a particular pattern.

Thus since no definite biological or evolutionary theory to explain the sexual hierarchy is feasible most of the factors point to historical and cultural reasons.

The fact remains that the relationship between the sexes remains dynamic and varies within the same species also and the maximum variation is seen among the human species. The generalizations that we make are based on empirical evidences coupled with analytical explanations that seek to identify certain immediate causative reasons for certain situations. Like in the case of the occurrence of matrifocal families, the reason may be engendered in the situations of oppression, the psychological stress caused to the men by their culturally induced feelings of inadequacy, the lack of choices facing the women and lack of societal support.

It is also not necessary that in all situations men and women react in the same way. Men may also opt for child care and taking on household chores in situations of poverty and deprivation.

Another aspect of the interface between kinship and gender is the social expectation of motherhood for the woman. In almost all kinship systems the women are looked upon as the reproducers of kinship relationships and continuity by producing children. In case of unilineal systems of kinship reckoning like patriliney or matriliney it is imperative that children of the right sex are born who can continue the lineage. Especially in the case of patriarchal society, women are valued especially for their child bearing role. The higher the status of the community or family to which the women belong the more the pressure on them to reproduce the descent group of the husband. The contemporary case of the Japanese royal family that is unable to produce a male heir is a case in point. The pressure on the royal princess to produce a male heir was tremendous. In somewhat earlier time the King of Iran was forced to divorce his much beloved wife because of her inability to bear a child. In common families too a childless woman is considered an incomplete person. In many cases the husband is socially justified and sometimes even required to marry again in order to continue the lineage.

In ancient times as in ancient India there were many culturally sanctioned practices to ensure that male heirs were born to the lineage. In case the husband was impotent or even dead the practice of Niyoga gave the right to any classificatory or real brother of the husband to impregnate the woman. In some cases even the family priest(*kulpurohit*) could fulfill this function. Such practices indicate how a woman was valued only for her womb and not for herself in a patriarchal society. Even today in the most modern cities of India even among the most educated and modern families the pressure on the woman to produce a male child and the availability of modern technology of amniocentesis has led to the uncontrolled practice of female foeticide in India that is leading a ever falling sex ratio that favours the male to the tune of 1000 to 600 almost in some areas.

The woman's personhood is tied to that of a man in almost all kinship situations. She is recognized by her father's and her husband's status in almost all societies. We have the phenomenon of women especially widows succeeding to power in positions vacated by their husbands in South Asia where many women have become heads of state only by virtue of their kinship relationships. The identity of a woman is so closely merged to that of the men in her family especially father, husband and son that her identity is almost the same as that of the man. In such situations for a woman to gain status as an individual outside of her family is very difficult. Even in very individualistic societies like the USA it is the men of the family to which the woman's identity is tied. In a role reversal the husband's position is laughable and he is often in an embarrassing position.

In situations of polygyny there are further complications in the positions of wives as the position of each wife is different relative to both the husband and the family and also society in general. The favour of the husband the position of the children, her own seniority and the backing of the natal family, all play a role in the relative position of the wife.

Gender Issues in Demography and Health

The issue of women's health and its link with a small family has been realized even by policy makers and today the concept of family planning has been replaced with that of family welfare.

However the issue of women's fecundity and fertility and the demographic profile of any community including sex ratio are informed to a large extent by the link between child bearing and status of women. Also to the degree a woman's person hood is tied up with her reproductive role. In most patriarchal society a women is recognized only by her child bearing activity. Also the rationality of having many children among poor sections of the population and among marginal groups is related to both high incidences of child mortality which makes couples rationalize the large number of children in terms of the number they expect would survive. Another reason is that in the absence of any other security or support children are seen as the only form of wealth that a poor family has. The larger number of children both boys and girls are seen as additional sources of income as well as helping hands.

Women who are illiterate or less educated can only elevate their status by bearing children. To be the mother of sons in a patriarchal society gives both enhanced status to a woman and also provides her with a sense of security.

Religious dictates and patriarchal control are also factors that influence the production of large number of children. In some religions practicing of family planning is prohibited. It is no coincidence that such religions are usually highly patriarchal. Frequent childbearing by women is also seen as a method of social control. In marginal groups and communities in the absence of any other source of power men often feel empowered by having a large number of children. Father hood itself is seen as a status symbol. The more patriarchal the society the less the control women have over their own bodies. In the autobiography of a woman from a band society, Shoshtak (1981) has mentioned how the !Kung women go alone to the bush to deliver their babies. Child bearing is seen as natural phenomenon that involves only the mother. The woman is her has the choice to keep the baby if she wants or other wise she can bury it in the bushes and come back to the village. In some communities deformed or sickly looking babies may be abandoned. In most groups and cultures women are rarely given the choice to refuse impregnation although they may be allowed to dispose of the babies. More often it is the men who decide whether or not a baby is to live. Female infanticide is often dictated by the men in the group or is done to protect patriarchal interests.

However female infanticide is not always related to dowry or patriarchy. In an interesting case study Oldenberg (2002) has shown how British rule was instrumental in increasing female infanticide in Punjab in the middle of the nineteenth century. The British legal system created male individual property rights in land. Thus while women were beneficiaries in communally held land they were deprived of all interests in land because of such patriarchal norms. The Ryotwari system gave land rights directly to the peasant that was in effect to the male head of the household. Also the British required men for recruitment to the army. The more men a family had the better it was for them because they could join the army. The women became disposed of all land rights and were regarded as a burden because of the 'masculinization' of the economy. Thus the value of women deteriorated and families rationalized against having too many female children. thus while it was economically beneficial to have as many sons as possible girl children were not favoured. The psychological weightage given to men in a community that considered itself a fighting caste and glorified the martial traditions also served to devalue women.

Female infanticide had been a common practice in many parts of the world. Among some tribes such as the Inuit who live in harsh and inhospitable environments female infanticide may have been a way to control population. The Inuit who live in arctic region have a population density of .03 persons per square kilometer.

The perception of the biology and physiology of women also condition the way they are treated as child bearers and also in terms of their health. Some communities in the South of India believe that the child grows in the stomach of the mother, therefore a pregnant women must be fed less so that the child is not smothered by too much food and can

grow. Therefore instead of feeding the mother better they actually deprive her of much needed food. People in the Garhwal region believe that a pregnant or lactating mother should not eat fish as the bones of the fish come in her breast milk and choke the baby.

A survey conducted by ICMR in 1989 found that 87% of all pregnant women are anemic in India and this includes women from well off families also. The perception that some kinds of food like food considered “hot” are not suitable for women often deprives women of much needed nutrition. The reason why such “hot” food is not given to women is that it might make them more sexual or for young girls it is feared that they would grow up too fast or have early menarche. In Northern India the girls are never given non-vegetarian food even though the men eat meat and eggs.

Girls are regularly underfed in many communities in India to prevent their growing up too fast that translated in biological terms means that they should not menstruate too early. This increases the burden of marrying them off early and the risk of a dishonour to the family if the girl gets pregnant before marriage is increased. The boys on the other hand are fed with nutritious food to make them grow up healthy and masculine. The much needed nutrition required to make up for the monthly loss of blood in females is rarely given to them leading to India being a nation of anemic women.

The perception of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ foods exist in many other cultures also and so does the taboo of eating placed on women and on pregnant women and lactating mothers.

A reason why women are often deprived of even basic health care is that they are regarded as dispensable in many contexts. The very fact that in a country like India it is much easier for a man to remarry and much more difficult for a woman, either a widow or a divorcee to remarry makes a family put the treatment of women as low level priority in the household budget. Even older women are given the last priority in health care because the children especially sons stand to gain very little from their mothers. Most business interests and land and property is held by men and elderly men who still retain some control over resources may get better treatment in their old age. But elderly women, especially widows can expect very little from their families. A study (Kwatra 2004) conducted on elderly women in upper class Punjabi families in New Delhi indicated that elderly women, especially widows suffer from neglect and depression in even rich families and that sons and daughters-in-law are rarely caring for the health of the elderly women.

Although education of women and their emancipation in economic terms has been generally considered positive factors for limiting families and improved health conditions of women Perveen (2004) has reported that between the early 1970s and late 1990s urban Total Fertility Rate (TFR) fell from 3.9 to 2.4 but in rural areas the fall was sharper; it fell from 5.2 to 3.6 indicating that even in rural areas the rationality for having larger families is declining. Also that 6.5 % of all fertility decline between 1981 and 1991 in India occurred among women with no education. Thus education in itself is not the only indicator of women’s empowerment. Moreover the fall in TFR need not be ascribed to women alone as women are rarely alone in taking decisions regarding themselves and lest

of all regarding their own fertility. It could be due to the decline of the rural land based economy and greater migration of the men to the cities in search for jobs. Rapid urbanization also brings the rural areas closer to the cities and urban influences over the rural areas increase.

All human populations adapt physiologically to their environment and the bodily changes are common to both men and women. Thus people living in very cold places have shorter and wider bodies that conserve heat and those living in hot regions have taller and slimmer bodies that disperse heat. But some times some specific cultural practices may bring about startling results. Among the Fore tribe of New Guinea it was customary for certain close relatives of a dead woman to eat her body. Specific kin had rights to certain specific body parts. Only women and children ate a woman's body, men did not touch it as a woman was considered polluting. It was found that women became particularly afflicted with a disease called Kuru , that caused trembling of limbs and loss of muscular coordination resulting in inevitable death. Between the years 1957-1958 a total of 416 kuru deaths were reported, of which 63% were adults and 37 % were children. Out of adults there were 25 women to one man. Between 1957 and 1968 the number of kuru deaths was over 1, 100 in a population of 8000 (McElroy and Townsend 1979). But soon after it dramatically began to decline. Firstly among the younger generation and slowly disappeared from the population. It was found that the younger people had first given up cannibalism and the disease was never transferred to the younger children. Later it slowly disappeared from the adult population also as cannibalism disappeared as a cultural practice. This is a good example of how gender related cultural practices may affect health and mortality in women, sometimes as in this case, quite unknowingly.

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