
FAMILY LIFE AND SEXISM

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Abstract: The family is treated as sacrosanct and beyond the purview of the state. The institution of family, that basic unit of society is probably the most patriarchal. There is a hierarchy in which man is dominant and woman is subordinate. It is in the family that we learn our lessons in hierarchy, subordination, oppression and exploitation. Democracy embodies ideals of liberty, equality, individual dignity and justice. Since the family has been excluded from the public sphere the protection of vulnerable groups within the family like women and girl children are glossed over.

Sexism operates within the family in different ways. Certain forms of discrimination are glaring, blatant and visible like outright discrimination in matters of food, education, health, physical and sexual violence etc. There are other forms of discrimination, which are subtle, hidden, invisible and hence difficult to discern and perceive as instances of sexism. These biases are built into the socialization process, which makes them appear as part of a natural order of things thereby rendering them unquestionable and unassailable. Much of the subordination of women arises from the understanding that gender identities are innate and that human nature comprises two distinct halves. Adhering to masculinity and femininity seems so natural that this natural condition strips us of the resources that we need to fight against the system. We don't have to be battered or raped to be able to say that we have been discriminated against. We experience subordination in the daily context of our lives in numerous small ways.

Keywords: sexism, public and private, family life.

Introduction: The dichotomy between public and private that has shaped political theory and practice has serious implications for women. Everything that happens within the four walls of the house is considered a personal matter, an internal affair and no outside intervention is encouraged. The family is treated as sacrosanct and beyond the purview of the state. Glaring inequalities and grave assaults on women are thus allowed to continue. Wife battering, marital rape, girl child abuse both physical and sexual, mental torture of girls and women and general deprivation experienced by girls have till recently remained invisible, undiscussed and unchallenged. By treating the institution of family as sacrosanct and beyond the purview of state interference, the state in effect strengthens the oppressive relationships within the family.

The institution of family, that basic unit of society is probably the most patriarchal. There is a hierarchy in which man is dominant and woman is subordinate. It is in the family that we learn our lessons in hierarchy, subordination, oppression and exploitation. Boys learn to assert and dominate and girls to submit. Women within the family are denied basic fundamental rights like right to education, employment, movement, right to property and a complete denial of individuality. Democracy embodies ideals of liberty, equality, individual dignity and justice. But these notions of democracy are understood primarily with reference to the public sphere. Since the family has been excluded from the public sphere the protection of vulnerable groups

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Sexism operates within the family in different ways. Certain forms of discrimination are glaring, blatant and visible like outright discrimination in matters of food, education, health, physical and sexual violence etc. There are other forms of discrimination, which are subtle, hidden, invisible and hence difficult to discern and perceive as instances of sexism. These biases are built into the socialization process, which makes them appear as part of a natural order of things thereby rendering them unquestionable and unassailable. Much of the subordination of women arises from the understanding that gender identities are innate and that human nature comprises two distinct halves. Adhering to masculinity and femininity seems so natural that this natural condition strips us of the resources that we need to fight against the system. We don't have to be battered or raped to be able to say that we have been discriminated against. We experience subordination in the daily context of our lives in numerous small ways.

This paper makes an attempt to unravel these subtle forms of gender discrimination that operate within urban educated middle class families. It is based on the findings of an empirical study that was carried out in the two metropolitan cities Mumbai and Pune on sex role socialization within the family and its implications for the girl child. The focus in the study was on the role of the mother as a socializing agent. This paper focuses on socialization practices with

respect to three important and interrelated areas of a person's life i.e. marriage, occupational roles and housework and This paper argues that sexism is inherent in the socialization process and it results in polarization, binaries and fractured social identities that does not augur well for both the genders. This process discriminates against the female sex simply because it denies women the freedom to choose. Everything is predetermined, fixed and given. It constrains the behaviour of women more than it does in the case of men. This paper rejects any attempt to polarize human qualities into masculine and feminine and argues that this stereotyping is harmful not only for women but also for men and society in general.

The Family life in City: Both the cities have a patriarchal and patrilocal family system that emphasizes the collective well-being of all members over the personal desires of any one member and places value upon interdependence rather than upon independence and personal autonomy. A familial system that discourages the development of an autonomous self in women and where women have a vicarious identity. In the absence of independent and objective achievement women derive their identities only from their relationships as wives, daughters, daughters in law and mothers and their self-esteem and identity remains dependent on other people's acceptance and love.

Marriage: One chooses to focus on marriage because in the course of interaction with women and one believe that marriage for a woman is seen as the only means of her support and the sole justification of her existence. Marriage is projected as the ultimate inescapable destiny for a girl and the entire socialization process is geared towards preparing her for marriage and motherhood. Marriage is important for both sons and daughters. The only difference is that it becomes an all obsessive goal in the case of the daughter. For a son marriage is essential for companionship but for the daughter it is seen as guaranteeing her emotional and economic security. A daughter is considered as 'settled' only when she is married. Age is a very important criterion in the daughter's marriage. As soon as a girl approaches the "so called marriageable age" which is around 21 to 24, the parents start looking for a prospective groom for their daughter. One main cause of anxiety is that chances of getting a suitable groom diminish with increasing age. Second, it is widely believed that late marriages create problems in conceiving a child. Motherhood is central to patrilocal family structure and ideology and is highly elaborated in Hindu mythology. Motherhood enhances a woman's position in her in laws family. There is always this subtle pressure to start a family as early as possible.

Hence mothers are very concerned that daughters might not be able to conceive if they marry late. Third, daughters are still considered as '*parayadhan*'. Hence the sooner they are married, the better. At the time of marriage it is made quite clear through various rituals and ceremonies that the basic rights of the girl are being transferred to the husband's family. The change in the daughter's relationship with her natal home after marriage forms the content of many rituals. In the wedding, the bride pours rice and wheat into the *pallu* of her mother indicating that now she has returned the rice she had consumed and wheat that marks fertility.

Considering the importance of marriage in a girl's life, it is not surprising that the training to be a housewife and a mother begins quite early in a girl's life. Girls are socialized to be obedient, self-sacrificing and home loving so that they adjust well and contribute positively as wives and daughters in law in their new households. Mothers are very anxious that their daughters be proficient in culinary skills and housekeeping before they get married. Cooking, serving and distribution of food, familiarity with customs and traditions are important constituents of a valued role for a woman and contribute to her self-esteem and she is described as 'a good, nice and homely girl'. Whatever may be her achievements in the public occupational world, her first and foremost identity comes from her role as a homemaker and mother.

For men on the other hand, getting married is not an urgent business. Sons are never prepared for married life. While daughters are given endless discourses on how to be good daughters in law, a mother never trains her son to be a good son in law. Seymour writes that patrifocal family ideology stipulates that all the 'adjustments' have to be made by the girl. Girls should therefore be reared to be obedient, self-sacrificing, modest, nurturant, hardworking and home loving. They should always show self-restraint and contribute to family harmony. As the mothers themselves pointed out the idea here is that a son 'gets married' and brings his wife to his family whereas a daughter is 'given' in marriage and she goes into a different family, her husband's family and hence she has to adapt herself to her 'new' family.

For the son, education is seen as essential for preparing him for the profession for which he is suited but in the case of the girl education even though important is suddenly relegated to the background once the girl approaches marriageable age. As Friday points out there is a certain ambivalence that characterizes a girl's socialization. Young women are given ambivalent signals. They are given this terrific education so that they can compete. On the other hand, they are told that what they really

need is a husband. So they are asked to go slow on competition. It's a mixed signal. Compete but don't do it too well. Women are asked to play down their academic and professional achievements and to appear diffident before the husbands' so as not to hurt their ego or challenge them in any sphere of life.

Occupational roles: Economic independence can prove to be an empowering experience for women and can go a long way in achieving gender equality but for the daughters financial independence and financial stability before marriage is simply not considered and the issue is dismissed and discounted. For a woman, working, meaning working outside the home to earn money is basically seen as a matter of convenience. If it fits with their husbands' in terms of work hours and location its fine, otherwise not. Nobody ever suggests the opposite. Mothers are neither very enthusiastic nor emphatic about their daughters being well settled with a job before getting married. They emphasize on sound qualifications and recognize the importance of earning an income should it be necessary. But the job, they insist, should be one that does not come in the way of their primary role as homemakers. That a woman should be financially independent before marriage is not an accepted norm. If they wish they could combine marriage with careers, feel parents. But if a good marriage offer came along, parents feel, they should consider it.

Even when a woman works she is not regarded as supporting the couple in the same sense as a man does. Her income is seen as a source of secondary income. As Gordon writes career orientation is not a part of a daughter's socialization. If we define a career as a way of making one's living and as a source of one's identity which involves a continuous process of upgrading skills and achieving upward mobility, acquiring more status and responsibilities then definitely women didn't seem interested in this. One main reason responsible for this kind of cavalier attitude with respect to a daughter's occupational career is the pervasive fear that the home and children would be neglected if women get into full time careers. The reason why women have a discontinuous career pattern and are not able to make substantial contribution in the public occupational world is because child care and household responsibilities are thrust upon them. Their reproductive role places limits on their participation in the productive sphere.

Another reason for mothers preferring 'soft' options so far as their daughters' professional life goes is that hectic jobs contribute to role overload and stress. A primary source of stress for working women is 'double burden', which is the result of conflicting demands associated with the multiple roles of spouse,

parent and career person. Where both husband and wife have substantial commitments to the job world one would expect domestic responsibilities to be shared. But this does not happen.

Housework: The distribution of household tasks among children is gender based, with girls being asked to help with household tasks like cooking, serving the guests, cleaning and tidying up the house and boys asked to do outside jobs like getting vegetables, ration etc. Thus the indoor/outdoor divide is quite prominent. However this gender based division of housework is not evident during childhood. It manifests later as children grow older. Mothers train daughters to be homemakers but sons are never given such training. Mothers expect help from their daughters in household tasks, an expectation that is missing in the case of sons. Mothers are ever grateful to their sons if they happen to help with the household tasks but such gratitude is absent in the case of daughters.

However as Dubepoints out what is most striking is the naturalness, which imbues the gender based division of work. The naturalness of the work supposed to be appropriate for girls is conveyed effectively but without generating a feeling of discrimination to little girls. Beginning with, assistance in cooking, serving food, caring for younger siblings, preparing for the worship of family deities, girls learn to take over some of the responsibilities themselves. Housework is still defined as a 'feminine' responsibility. Women know that housework is their responsibility, whether they do it themselves or arrange for it to be done by others. Men may 'help' but they will never 'share'. The alternate phrasing, of a woman helping her husband with his household duties does not sound right. It does not accord with our traditions of sex role division of labour and responsibilities. So far as the concerns for child care goes, true the concerns are well founded, especially when in all known societies, women bear the primary responsibility for child care. However one point needs to be clarified. Why is child care defined as a female responsibility and why does it interfere with female and not male career development? Mothers who work full time feel stressed from having to maintain a traditional maternal role and simultaneously being in full time employment. Neither men nor society in general are willing to provide women with the structural means of handling both roles.

One factor responsible for this is the continuing belief in natural differences between the sexes. Housework is primarily seen as a feminine responsibility. This whole process of learning to be a housewife and seeing housework as a feminine responsibility begins in childhood. And it is the

mother who is the female child's role model for housework behaviour. It is during childhood that girls learn to equate their femaleness with domesticity and female identities are molded round the housewife image. A series of close mother daughter relationships presents an invaluable opportunity for the perpetuation of feminine domesticity.

While the intricacies of housework may not be directly taught from mother to daughter, they are indirectly and unconsciously assimilated. The daughter identifies with the mother and this identification instills in her a sense of housework as a feminine responsibility. Gradually a woman internalizes this domestic norm. Once a norm is internalized it is part of a person, automatically expressed in behaviour, rather than regarded in a more detached way as a rule external to the self. Through this process of identification, women are perpetually assigned to the housewife role. The motivation to be a housewife and to do housework is developed as an integral personality function.

Implications and Conclusion: Discrimination that begins at birth has a cumulative effect in producing the inequality and powerlessness for women in society. When women are denied democracy and human rights in private, their human rights in the public sphere also suffer since what occurs in private impinges upon their ability to participate fully in public arena. Sexist child rearing practices foster dependency, vulnerability, insecurity and helplessness in girls which makes them accept their daily subordination. Women begin to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and become implicit accomplices in perpetuating the sex gender system. Or they feel they can do nothing to change the system because they lack the 'necessary support structures'. Neither the state nor the larger community offers support. In the absence of such alternatives women depend upon the private, the family for their resources and identity and they follow societal norms and customs without questioning them. The lack of autonomy that girls experience in most spheres of life from the seemingly trivial (choice of clothes) to the more serious ones (decisions about education and marriage) paves the way to a lifetime

of passivity, lack of initiative and unquestioning acceptance of whatever life throws their way. The goal to be a wife and mother is offered to the girl overlooking the obvious costs to a young female through reduced capabilities and horizons. Her mode of being is defined only in terms of her biology, mate and mother. Surely girls need to gain self- fulfillment and self-esteem in areas other than marriage and parenting.

There an impassioned plea is made to discard and root out patriarchal structures and believes that this process must begin in the family. Family is the primary unit of reproduction, child care, health care, socialization and therefore it has tremendous impact on children's growth and development. Women should develop as self-reliant, self-propelled and self-directed individuals rather than being continuously protected. We must contest and challenge what has long been considered as natural, given and inevitable. As Bina Agarwal puts it, 'the undiscussed must be brought into the arena of contestation'. Yes indeed things are improving for women. Today women have more rights (right to vote, inherit) and more opportunities (education, employment etc), more aware of their rights. Still one is tempted to ask, do women enjoy freedom of thought and action, do they have the freedom to choose, do what they want, to be and become what they want and are capable of becoming. Do we have a situation where they are not pushed into typically feminine roles? Shouldn't we ask ourselves whether it is correct to label values and characteristics as masculine and feminine? Aren't these qualities and values human values? Don't both men and women need and develop both masculine and feminine aspects. Shouldn't women and men both be rational and emotional, self-assertive and sensitive to others, entrepreneurs and homemakers, public and domestic figures? These are questions which need to confront and address. They can no longer be swept under the carpet we need to ponder over them. These stereotypes might also appear as constraining to the male sex. But that is not within the purview of this study. This study has been done from a woman's perspective. It is projection of women's voice, which is often neglected, in planning, decision making.

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