



Social Construction of Gender-inequality at Family Level

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Abstract: Gender is a key form of social stratification in all the societies. Gender inequality infers that men and women differ in capacities and intellect and that gender directly affects the individual's life. Some of the distinctions are empirically grounded but many others are socially constructed and reproduced across generations. Family is the basic social institution that procreates and nurtures human beings so the role of family in the social construction of gender can't be undermined. This paper focuses on gender inequality within families by analysing how women themselves belittle the personalities of girl-children by underestimating their roles and providing them less space in family matters than boys. This paper also highlights the role of father in hegemonizing the gender-oriented system within the family. Parents tend to have gender-stereotypical expectations from their children and train them for gender-typed behaviours influencing the psyche of the children and hence gender inequality and gender-typed roles get reproduced in the society. Most of the parental behaviours, like speaking, playing, teaching, care taking and other social activities remain influenced by the gender of the child. Sons are trained for bread-winning roles while girls are generally directed towards household chores. Thus house-hold dynamics further advances gender-role expectations. The irony is that even children's toy-selection is significantly related to sex-typing, like, girls being given dolls and kitchen-toys and boys being lead towards sports equipment. Both parents consciously or subconsciously encourage gender-typed roles among their children. By choosing their children's activities and blocking their natural tendencies parents directly teach their children gender-typed behaviours, roles and occupations. This paper mainly focuses on the role of family as a mini-society that perpetuates gender-inequality and is based on the secondary sources of data.

Key words: Gender-inequality, Discrimination, Family, Socialisation, Conformity, Mother, Father, Children

1. Introduction

Gender inequality refers to the unequal treatment of individuals on the basis of sex. The issue of gender inequality is a historic phenomenon and lies at the very heart of the cultural and value system of all societies, though to varying degrees across time and space. It is linked to the kinship rules and patriarchal system around which human social life is organized. Gender norms and stereotypes reinforce gendered identities and constrain the behaviour of women and men in ways that lead to inequality.¹ For our society, any attempt to reform or address gender inequality is seen as an attack on the traditional and cultural ethos. The argument arises as to where from the gender differences perpetuate; are these rooted in our genetic makeup or socially constructed through everyday interactions. The fact that gender differences are socially constructed through complex interactional processes during the life course is supported by empirical evidence because lots of distinctions have receded with the passage of time with changing socialisation patterns.

In this paper, we focus on the role of family in *gendered socialisation* as to how a certain type of socialisation creates a certain gender-typed personality, that eventually leads to gender-based distinctions and inequalities. When sociologists turned serious attention to sex and gender, they too focussed on the differences between individual women and men rooted in childhood sex role socialisation.² Since the inequalities are favoured towards the men and women find themselves at a losing end, so the main interest is centred around the role of women as *mothers* in reproducing and passing on the inequalities to next generations. In the paper we also discuss the role of father in maintaining the status quo of gender conflict and hegemony.

There is no denying the fact that the biological orientation of women has always wanted them to be a child's primary care-giver and that the women's childbearing and lactation capacities foster a natural connection between a mother and a child that motivates her to become a primary parent but social research has proved that lots of gender-typed behaviours, viz masculine aggressiveness, gender-typed play behaviour, women's household responsibility etc. are unwanted and unnecessarily passed on to next generations through the agency of *mother*. Women's maternal role has profound effects on women's lives, on ideology about women, on the reproduction of masculinity and sexual inequality and on the reproduction of particular forms of labor power.³ Most of the gender typed behaviours are the outcome of behavioural conformity, like women's primary parenting. Though women, not men, have primary responsibility for house-keeping and children but many features of this social responsibility have changed and more can be changed and made gender-neutral. It is a fact that women in general have faced unfair treatment at the hands of their own men and their roles were totally characterized with dependency, inferiority, suppression and multi-dimensional exploitation but with the advent of education, modernisation and globalisation women have managed to emancipate themselves from the chains of patriarchal system and kinship rules. However, women as mothers have failed to socialise male children in a gender-neutral way that would influence the psyche of young boys so that they don't carry the gravity of superiority in their minds. Though, with the passage of time many gender-neutral families have emerged

in the recent past, but still most of the human race continues to develop as a gender-polarised society. The irony of the fact is that even our policy-makers don't keep fathers in mind while framing policies and programs for child development; most of our child and family welfare policies remain matricentric. Here, in this article I put the responsibility of gender-polarisation on parents; mother is the primary agent of socialisation and a child's first object of interaction through which he or she gets introduced to the larger social system and fathers have all along been all-powerful patriarchs.

According to Bandura's Social Learning theory people learn from one another through observation, imitation and modelling, that means a mother happens to be a child's first model of behaviour whose each and every gesture and behaviour has an influence on the young child. Researches have once and again proved that children in same-gender parent families have significantly less gender-stereotyped behaviour which infers that a particular type of mother behaviour and a particular type of father behaviour is imitated by the children consciously or subconsciously according to their sexes. According to social constructionism, lesbian and gay parents may be more likely to facilitate their children's cross-gendered play and activities by creating a social environment where such behaviours are not punished and may be encouraged.⁴

1.1. Role of *mother* in reproducing gender-inequality

Children don't inherit intellectual differences. They learn them. They are merely the outcome of what they are expected to be. When a mother encourages a male child to be brave, hide emotions, and retaliate, the child grows into an aggressive and a dominating human being. At the same time when a mother directs a female child towards being a nurturant and care-taking machine of the household, the child grows into a submissive human being who utilises all her time and energy in catering to the needs of her family members. So, we can say that a mother takes the control of the intellects of her children and grooms them with old-fashioned stereotypes. None of the cognitive skills, be it, reasoning, speaking, computing or any other, are fixed in our genes, all such skills are learned. "There is almost nothing we do with our brains that is hard-wired. Every skill, attribute and personality trait is moulded by experience (Lise Eliot, an associate professor of Neuroscience at the Chicago Medical School)". Even Mead, in his views on socialisation, does not see the '*self*' as an inbuilt biological creation, he rather submitted that the '*self*' results from an individual's social experiences and interactions. Mead even highlighted the importance of *significant other* in the process of socialisation, backed by both sociology and psychology so it can be inferred that the '*mother as a significant other*' creates the initial social context in the life of a child. Acting as a model for her child her acts are observed and imitated. The mother-child dyad is able to engage in interactions and activities that unquestionably have an influence on the social learning of the child but the mother seldom forgets to keep the gender-typed behaviours at bay thereby getting the gender distinctions introduced with the child's personality. Bronfenbrenner, in his Ecological Systems theory, maintained that a person's development was affected by everything in their surrounding environment. Calling the family a microsystem, he illustrated that how the individuals in the microsystem interact with the child affects how the child grows.

The propensity of passing on the gender norms to the kids starts right from the birth and extends throughout adolescence. It includes teaching boys to be dominant and responsibility holders and training girls for the roles of wife and mother. With the onset of puberty this process gets intensified both within the familial system as well as in the broader social settings which triggers increased pressure on the young children to confirm to the sex-typed identities and roles. So the unique opportunity in the hands of the mother to undo the hegemonic gender-norms goes waste even though today's mother has carved a space of her own in the family and is of course able to undo and underestimate many more unwanted gender norms.

The Object Relations Theory by Klein, Fairbairn and Winnicott suggests that a child's bond with his/her mother is stronger than with the father because the mother is the first object to which an infant clings to and finds warmth and care from. A child gets introduced to the larger social system at the interface of a mother and this mother happens to be the primary parent of the child who both consciously and subconsciously creates opportunities for the new member of the society to learn the social conduct. Most of the interactional processes in the child's early stage of life happen through the agency of mother and it is these interactional processes that socialise a child. In their classic article, '*Doing Gender*', West & Zimmerman emphasize the interactional level as a site where gender is invoked and reinforced. They illustrate that gender is performed in interactions and that behaviours are assessed based on socially accepted conceptions of gender. In their article, West & Zimmerman argued that gender is something we are held morally accountable to perform, something we do, not something we are.

1.2. Role of father

In a normal hetero-sexual family a child observes the interactions and activities of a male and a female parent which he internalises and imitates; their interactions with the child and their interactions with each other. In the course of life, the child gets acquainted with the chauvinism exercised by a husband upon a wife, which has been a prominent feature of families across time and space, it includes the restraints imposed upon wives on social activities, the decision-making role of husbands, the aggression manifested against a wife's objection, the financial dependency of females etc. During their transition from early childhood to later adolescence the children internalise the phenomenon of femininity and masculinity through the process of interactions with parents and other kinship members. A father concretises gender norms by two ways; firstly, by directly instructing children to behave in a gender-typed way, and secondly, by practising gender discrimination against the mother. So, the characteristics of the father as a parent and the characteristics of the father as a male adult both are significant. He influences his children directly through his attitudes and messages that he conveys. Men as husbands and as fathers are accustomed of using '*directives*' and '*imperatives*' during communication, thus giving their male children a wrong notion of masculinity; which includes the notion of being all-powerful, the notion of being disgraceful towards women, the notion of dispossessing parenting responsibilities, and in totality the notion of being a superior gender. Most of the fathers, till recent times, have been looking down upon the parenting responsibilities and perceiving it as infra dig, though many fathers are now doing this job with

pride, thereby, augmenting not only the dignity of the job but of their women as well. Coltrane (1992) evaluated the outcomes of father proximity measures and found that close father-child relationships were related to increased gender equality and that a father's involvement in parenting increases the regard of a man. Overall, the status of women increases when father involvement increases.⁵

Conclusion

In the light of the above theoretical illustrations it can be extracted that the macro forms of gender discrepancies that we witness in larger arenas of social life, be it, bureaucracy, politics, sports, entrepreneurship or whatever, have their roots in the micro system, called *family*. Family is a system in which each member has a role to play and rules to respect (Bowen, 1950). In his contribution, Family Systems theory, Bowen maintains that within the boundaries of the family system patterns develop as certain family member's behaviour is caused by and causes other family member's behaviour in predictable ways. Marxist feminists rightly assume that families help to preserve both capitalism and patriarchy. In fact, family is in itself a society based on male dominance. We can't undermine the fact that family has an unparalleled functional role both for the society and the individual but a critical and constructive approach to socialisation processes can of course help to undo the unnecessary gender bias to make it possible to have both *family life* and *gender equality*.

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