

PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

THE JOURNAL



Gender

280
(R)

Published biannually by the
Psychological Foundations Trust, New Delhi
Registration No. 71123/99

IX (2), September 2007

Reflections on Gender, Social Norms and the Conditions for Change

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This paper briefly argues that despite the commitments of the state and efforts of activists, culture and social norms continue to be a strong force directing women into largely traditional roles. Field work suggests that independent women's groups play a critical and non-substitutable role in providing the spaces and the support that allow women to question old ways and experiment with new and different roles.

I. The Influence of Ascriptive and Acquired Characteristics on the Social Construction of Gender

Traditional India had seen a woman only as a member of a family or a group — as daughters, wives and mothers — and not as an individual with an identity or right of her own. The radicalism of the Constitution and its deliberate departure from the inherited social system lay in its implicit assumption that every adult woman, whatever her social position or accomplishments, will function as a citizen and as an individual partner in the task of nation building. (GOI 1974, p. 7)

These words of the Government of India report *Towards Equality* (GOI, 1974) sum up the approach that policy makers in India have taken to bring about gender equality in the country. That is, it is the intention of the legal framework and the schemes that are initiated and supported by the government, to create new pathways for women, making new roles and responsibilities possible to aspire to, and assuring the support of the state structure in this endeavour.

For individual women, the guarantees and assurances of the state are extremely important, but remain in the background of their consciousness. The decisions they make reflect the influence both of prevalent social norms as well as awareness of newer opportunities. Which is the stronger influence will necessarily vary depending on how one is otherwise positioned (i.e. apart from one's sex) – caste/ class, education, upbringing etc. It is presumably the intention of the legal and policy framework to be able to influence social norms over time, so that women find it easier to take "different" decisions.

Assessments of progress show both that there has been a lot of change, and that we are still far short of many of the targets originally set (see for example GOI, 2005). The mean age at marriage for women has gone up from 15.5 years in 1961 to 19.5 years in 1997, but there are still over 44 percent of girls who are married before that age. In Jharkand more than 60 percent of girls are married before 18, and in Rajasthan around 57 percent. Early marriage is generally associated with a prioritising of a traditional role, the expectation that women will primarily cook, nurture, manage and organise in the private sphere of the household. As per the National Sample Survey (NSS), the work participation rate in 2004-5 is lower for women than men, being approximately 32 percent in rural and 16 percent in urban areas (compared to 54 percent for men). Moreover women are largely confined to casual and wage work in the informal economy, and in certain sectors (85 percent of women workers are in agriculture; in urban areas the largest single occupation is domestic workers). If we look at "place of work," 57 percent of women are home based workers, contributing to productive economic activities but often going unrecognised as such.

The reasons why the majority of women continue in largely traditional roles can be many, including lack of real alternatives or because they choose these roles over alternative ones; or some combination of the two. It has been well pointed out that there are

loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are - as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history.... (Sandel, 1984, p. 172)

It seems to be particularly apt to see many of the decisions women make in this light, particularly given that we live in an old culture. It is not just required of women that they do certain things (which go well beyond care work to encompass duties of family and community, religion, etc) but women often enjoy these roles, value

the sense of self worth they derive from them, and would feel deprived if they were to substitute new roles which lack the same historical and experiential wealth (see Menon, 2000).

II. Policies for Gender Equality and Expectations Regarding Behaviour

If we look at the ways in which effort has been put in both by the women's movement and by government policy and programmes, to advance women's equality, the focus has been very much on social and political empowerment by enhancing the abilities and opportunities of individual women. Thus, we seek gender parity in school enrolment, improvements in access and infrastructure to tackle health problems, provide reservations to allow women to be elected to panchayats. Since 1993, 33 percent of seats in panchayats are reserved for women and as a consequence we now have over a million elected women representatives. When it comes to economic empowerment there is recognition that at times a group approach may be more effective so that we have an emphasis on self help groups as the best medium of increasing the resources available to poor women, the development of co-operatives and so on. All of these actions are expected to change the public face of women's participation and therefore, to enhance their control over their own lives.

And yet there are many contradictions. One reason why women do not walk out of abusive relationships is economic dependence. Yet economically independent women too may refuse to leave an abusive husband. Women as well as men express a son preference that can take the extreme form of sex selective abortions. Educated women qualified to take on coveted positions at work may stop working after marriage. Elected women in panchayats may let their husbands or sons be the de facto leader and not use this office to advance the issues they feel are most important. The acquisition of skills, assets or positions of power does not easily translate into control over all aspects of one's life.

The efforts of policy to nudge and encourage women in new roles and new directions have to overcome opposition within the minds of women themselves. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005 gives daughters equal rights with sons to inherit land. For this legal right to lead to action and assertion that is different from what it was in the past, it is necessary that women feel certain that their immediate family/ community will support their actions.

The real target of policies and programmes is the social norm that influences gendered behaviour. Until the norms change, the degree of change in the lives of the average man or woman is likely to be relatively small. For example, the commitment to education for both boys and girls on the part of parents is generally high, and even though the enrolment level of girls is still a little behind boys, it is interesting to note that at the macro level drop out rates of both boys and girls between classes 1-8 is 50 and 51 percent in 2004-5 or almost the same. But when this data is disaggregated we find wide differences by social group, region and gender. The drop out rate in Class 1-5 of Scheduled Tribe (ST) boys is 4.88 in Karnataka and 59.58 in Orissa. The corresponding figures for girls are 4.96 and 63.19. The drop out rates from Class 6-8 of Scheduled Cast (ST) boys in Karnataka is 27.19 and in Rajasthan 69.65. The corresponding figures for girls are 51.61 and 80.07 (GOI, 2006). The reason behind higher drop out of girls, lower enrolment, and less parental expenditure is simply that education (and work) is secondary or subservient to the prior need to ensure security through marriage (see Karlekar, 2000; Banerjee, 1998). The strong and unequivocal statement from the government that children have a fundamental right to education, and that all children not in school should be seen as child workers – not legally permitted – has been internalised by people. We find therefore situations such as that discussed below.

Despite knowing that the legal age at marriage is eighteen, more than half of the girls in Rajasthan are married before this age, as mentioned earlier. Field observations from an on-going Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) study in some villages of Rajasthan showed that when a girl gets married, due to the implicit economies of scale, it was common to marry younger sisters too – so that there were cases of three year olds and even younger being “married” – of course, this is more in the nature of a commitment and it did not seem to be acceptable for marriages to be consummated before the age of fifteen or sixteen, and till such time girls continue to live with parents and go to school (field observations (ISST 2007). However there is clearly no intention that such schooling should lead to work or employment, unlike in the case of boys. It is in fact necessary (from the point of view of social stability) in such a situation, that the schools should reinforce the decisions already taken by parents and that gender stereotypes are reaffirmed. If not, the school becomes alien territory, not sufficiently embedded in the social system. This is a challenge faced by both government officers and activists in the region.

III. Solidarity as the Way Forward

One area of endeavour that has clearly made an impact, and which has been successful precisely because it recognises that Indian women are (consciously or otherwise) always juggling between inherited and chosen roles, is organising or group solidarity. There is no single programme or intervention that is referred to here, but rather processes found in many areas that emphasise the need to work in and as a group. This includes the mahila sanghas of the Mahila Samakhya programme; the mahila mandals of the Uttarakhand Sewa Nidhi; the SEWA movement; and so on. These are groups of women created and nurtured by NGOs/activists/ unions and what they have in common is the value given to solidarity per se. As part of a group, women can talk about the problems of the household at the same moment that they may discuss new ways of supporting livelihood. This allows a questioning of inherited traditions but in a non-threatening and "private" space. It allows individual women to feel that their decisions if different are not "wrong."

Collectivities of this kind are also substantively different from groups created for a narrower purpose (such as savings, credit) – although in a country as large as ours, there are certainly examples where such groups may have broadened their original mandate.

The idea that women can "change" and make new decisions is an articulation of "modernity." That is, we believe that it should be possible to act in a way that is different from what is prescribed by traditional norms of behaviour. What the success of women's groups re-affirms is that in practice women change more easily when they can see themselves as part of a larger change – and not when they see themselves as lone combatants engaged in a conflictual process of transformation.

To illustrate this, a study of women leaders carried out by ISST (2005) can be cited. All the women interviewed had demonstrated an ability to take difficult decisions in their own lives. They felt that the experience of being part of a group had been empowering and had enabled them to deal with crises in their personal life as well as the community level of more public activities that they engaged in. It is the need to deal with these two aspects of life simultaneously that unites women and that brings to the fore the perennial conflict between the traditional and the new.

From Himachal: Kamlesh said if the mahila mandal feels it has a point to make, it goes ahead and speaks in a collective voice and admitted that when women

speak in a collective voice they do get heard....

The members of the mahila mandals are generally from one village, and are united through the immediate issues in the village. Thus where the long term goal is financial security, there the short term goals are the issues that confront women in their day to day struggles. The mandal takes issues of domestic violence, deserted women, dowry and personal feuds....

The Mahila Mandal in Khajret is feared by many people, who now think twice before abusing or talking rudely to women....

From Uttaranchal: The strength of the mangal dal is the support structure it provides in the form of community decision-making. Also, rather than going to panchayats to resolve disputes, the women prefer to resolve it through the mangal dal. The meetings are productive according to Vimala because it involves the women and serves as a platform for information sharing....

Some of the issues which are dealt by the Mangal Dals are: guarding the farms and alcohol consumption by men. Infact alcohol is the main problem that the mangal dal is dealing with right now. She said women generally talk about these issues and if a man creates a mess or abuses in public the women go and talk to him. This has worked as many men have stopped drinking in public and abusing loudly, which was the most common scene before....

Kamlesh feels strongly that women have to take a stand at home before they go out and talk in the public against the men indulging in drinking. She asserts that even the daughters need to speak at home against the fathers if they drink and come home and said she encourages her daughter to speak against her father, as she believes only when girls are allowed to speak before marriage can they speak after marriage....

Janaki said, through her leadership, she often takes the issues regarding the village, to the panchayat and the difference that a collective voice can make is much effective from that of a voice of a single woman. Also through the collective women are much aware of the roles they have to play and most of them take out time more willingly from their daily life, to participate at the meetings. Their daily work is not an excuse for them.....(Extracts, ISST, 2005)

There are implications of this finding for how we design policies and influence norms. It is not acceptable that women should be confined to traditional roles and not have every opportunity for life long learning, for enhancement of their capabilities, for personal growth and development. But the clear message that comes from women themselves is that if we are to succeed in this endeavour we need to find ways of creating new collectivities with whose help women can re-negotiate their roles and responsibilities. Over time, such re-negotiation will create new social norms with, we hope, a smaller distance between what is prescribed by tradition and social norms and what is sought in individual aspiration.

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An Invitation to Write for PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS - THE JOURNAL

Psychological Foundations publishes Psychological Foundations-The Journal, (The Journal) twice a year. There are two issues a year, in March and September.

Written by mental health practitioners and professionals from associated fields as well as by informed lay people and mental health services' users, articles in The Journal typically deal with everyday mental health issues relating to the Indian experience. Meant to be a collective clinicians' diary, this journal provides a forum where ideas, perspectives, research findings as well as experience based contentions or disagreements are presented for review and analysis. We invite exploration and introspection into life experiences in order to expand our hands-on understanding of living, and to offer meaningful additions to the body of knowledge on psychology. We particularly invite articles on the personal development of psychologists and other mental health professionals.

We encourage discussion from a psychological perspective on current social issues and challenges within Indian society and welcome reviews of books, films, events, talks or conferences.

We also actively encourage mental health service users to write for us for they provide the most constructive evaluation of our work.

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