
Psychosocial Dynamics of Male Dominance and Status of Women

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Abstract

Rising levels of education has improved women's role at home with greater involvement in many of the activities -- household chores, helping children with education, paying bills, banking, and many more. But be it employed or unemployed, educated or uneducated, research on the status of women in India revealed unexpected trends. Several research studies have shown that higher educational and income levels have certainly not resulted in a decrease of male dominance. The employed women's work has become even more complicated due to lack of support by the husband. As a result women have developed dual role conflicts. It is interesting to analyze the reasons for lack of help by the husband. In this paper, an attempt is made to understand the psychosocial dynamics of male dominance and also the resultant status of women. Review of current research revealed that there is no decrease in husband dominance in spite of the changing social, cultural and economic conditions of women. That people continue to hold traditional beliefs, in spite of changes in psycho social frontiers might be a pointer to the root cause of continued male dominance in the society.

Keywords: dominance, male dominance, psychosocial dynamics, status of women.

INTRODUCTION

Women had a lower status compared to men from time immemorial. Whatever the cause for this might be, say either because of her different physical capacities, different roles, different psychological makeup or any other cause; women are considered as second citizens almost all over the world. Initially women were told that one of the major reasons is because of lack of education. Today women are being educated and are taking up careers, but has their status improved? In fact women are left doing both the activities today – the house work and job related works. Certainly traditional beliefs that, 'Husband is God and it is sinful to ask him to do housework,' and the like prevent most women from requesting their husbands for help and, the husbands from conceding to any such requests. Male dominance is not only evidenced in the Indian society, but is prevalent in most cultures around the world. It is sort of universal. In this paper an attempt is made to understand the psychosocial dynamics of male dominance and also the resultant status of women. It is argued that the low status of women has encouraged male dominance.

RESEARCH ON MALE DOMINANCE

Anthropological survey of traditional human societies universally indicates that humans have generally favored patriarchal residence. They have documented many folk tales directly supporting patriarchy and discouraging female insubordination. Patriarchy is defined as, "a system of organization in which the overwhelming number of upper positions in hierarchies are occupied by males" (Goldberg, 1993; p.14). Patriarchy literally means 'rule of the father', but in social terms, refers to the system of male dominance: that is, where descent is traced through the father, where the ownership, control and inheritance of all assets is in the hands of men, where males exercise the right of all major decision-making in the family, and hence maintain ultimate control over the family and its relations. It establishes unequal power between men and women, justifying the control of women by men. Smruts (1995) offers an account of the possible evolutionary genesis of patriarchy, which argues that female exogamy reduced female kin support and consequently the ability to resist male dominance.

Other research explanations for male dominance and aggressive tendencies include high levels of the hormone testosterone (Mazur & Booth, 1998). In support, several studies have reported links between testosterone and human dominance encounters (Booth, Shelly, Mazur, Tharp & Kittok, 1989; Dabbs, Bernieri, Strong, Campo & Milun, 2001; Neave & Wolfson, 2003). However, some researchers have criticized the simplicity of this theory in attempting to link single hormonal measure to certain behaviors (Mazur & Booth, 1998). Furthermore, Campbell, Muncer, and Odber (1998) note that dominant/aggressive behavior emerges early in childhood. Studies on children's social organization suggest that dominance is more central to boys than to girls (Archer, 1993; Geary, 1996; Maccoby, 1990; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987; Thorne, 1994).

The challenging and competitive style of boys is manifest in the dominance hierarchies that they form (Maccoby, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1977). On the other hand girls are more concerned with developing shared norms and cohesion within the group (Eder & Stadford, 1988) and when they try to compete they are more likely to be rejected by other girls (Hugges, 1988). However it is

interesting to note that these gender differences were not to be found in research involving 2 year olds (Coie & Dodge, 1998) suggesting the socio-cultural influence of socialization of gender stereotypes in older children.

STATUS OF WOMEN OVER THE AGES IN INDIA

During the Vedic period, women enjoyed equal status as men (Reddy, 1986). They were given equal rights and privileges (Nanda, 1976), were treated with respect by the husbands (Pandarinath, 1979), received co-education, and girls were considered to be a good omen (Rao and Nandini, 1982). The hymns of the Vedas repeatedly glorify women in the role of a mother and wife (Sastri, 1960). A married woman was respected as the other half (*ardhangi*) of the husband. However, this exalted position of women gradually declined during the post-Vedic period.

Aitareya Brahmana (Apte, 1954) lays down that, 'a daughter is a source of misery and that a son is a savior of the family'. Since it is the son who performs the ceremonial rites of the parents after their death which is believed to help them attain the higher worlds there has developed a prejudice in favour of the son in the Indian society. Although the Seers explain that the 'son' symbolically represents *one becoming self-realized*, the literal meaning has caught on thanks to the half-baked knowledge of the priests. Slowly there was change in the status of women.

In the epic period, a study of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* reveals that, women have started accepting the dominance of males but the value of women as a person was still intact. She was still regarded as Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth). But this did not hold for long. By the time of 2nd century B.C., men completely dominated women. This fact is evidenced in the treatise on social laws written by Manu (the codifier), the *Manusmriti*. *Manusmriti* is a record of the prevailing social and religious beliefs and rules. It has several laws regarding women in it that has degraded and devalued women. This could have probably sown the seeds for the continued husband dominance in the society.

According to Manu, a woman should never be given freedom and should always be under the protection of the father, brother, or the husband (V-148 & 149). That women need protection in the society is not underrated even in the present times, of increasing atrocities on women. However his other laws seem quiet prejudiced and unreasonable. Like, the wife should always obey the husband and if she controls her thoughts, words and deeds, shall join her husband after death and shall be called as virtuous (V-155 & 156). Women were enjoined to do no religious performances except to serve the husband as he commands (V-155). The ultimate sacrifice of women's status is recorded in the law (V-154) that '*though the husband is destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be regarded and constantly worshipped as a God*'. Manu considered women to be temptuous and hence be kept under control (Thomas, 1964). Several evils practices like of *Sati* (burning/suicide of the wife in the funeral pyre of the husband), cruelty to widows as they were considered to be an ill omen (somewhat like, witches), and unchallenged male dominance became the rule of the day. Though India like many other nations has patriarchal family system, the situation is demeaning. This

scenario continued and worsened during the Mughal invasion, during which time child marriages were at their peak as a reaction to Mughal abduction of unmarried girls.

During the 19th Century several social changes have taken place in order to improve the status of women. With the uprising of many social reformers like Gandhi, Dayanand Saraswati, and Raja Rammohan Roy and several others, brought in several reforms like education for women, widow re-marriage, abolition of *Sati*, eradication of untouchability, abolition of child marriages and employment for women. After gaining independence the Indian Government, National leaders, Women's organizations and several others interested in the cause of women advocated that an improvement in education and income shall facilitate the improvement in the status and projected that women then shall be treated with equality both at home and outside. As a result, several measures were taken to improve education, employment and involvement of women in all areas. The Indian Government has passed the bill of 'Equal Status for Women' in 1950.

Present scenario

In the Census of India report of 2001, the women's literacy rate is found to be 58% an improvement over 40 % in 1991. Due to the rising educational levels more and more women are being employed and are holding several key positions (Reddy, 1986). From the traditional female role oriented jobs the Indian women are entering such fields as engineering and even working in call centers (where they have to return home late-nights). Their income levels have greatly improved. Many Indian women are now no longer restricted to their homes. To a great extent the status of women outside the home has improved with reference to access to educational and vocational facilities. Though initially women who went out to work, and husbands who allowed them to go, were looked down upon by the society.

RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S STATUS

The status of women has been defined in terms of their autonomy in certain personal, material and domestic affairs. These include: consultation of women for finalizing their marriage, women's control over jewels brought from natal family, extent of sex-segregated interaction; extent of restrictions imposed by husbands on women to do certain tasks; and the extent of women's participation in decision-making on household matters. In Indian context arranged marriages are quiet common which takes away all the freedom of two concerned partners, especially that of the bride. Since women are rarely consulted it results in subordinate status of women (Dubey and Bardhan, 1972). Women's control over economic and material resources is considered to be one of the basic aspects of female autonomy (Dixon, 1978) which is in almost negligible levels in rural India.

The status of women, it has been widely discussed and argued by researchers, cannot be described or expressed by a single quantitative measure and is thus multidimensional in nature. It also highlights that women's status (autonomy) at the household (familial) level is the crucial one which will exercise a greater bearing on their reproductive behaviour (Audinarayana, 1997). Ramesh and Kalpana (2002) explore recent issues related to the socio-economic position of women in tribal and rural societies. The issues include – health, nutrition, education, adoption, inheritance, succession,

marriage, divorce and participation in Panchayat Raj. Although there is improvement still the survey data show that the percentages are below normal.

Although in our country women are worshipped as deities having supreme power, there does not seem to have been a perceptible change in the status of women, even after independence. Because they are still downtrodden, neglected and relegated to the background in a male dominated society. Women still do not enjoy full equality of status in society. Except for few exceptions, the status of women in India has been accorded an inferior or subordinate status. India women in general, poor rural women in particular are relatively powerless with little or no control over resources and little decision making power. Often the decisions made by others affect their lives. The inequality of Indian women is evidenced in the high mortality of women, preference for son (Miller, 1985; Sharma & Sharma, 1993), wage differentials (Devi, 1989; Sambamoorthi, 1984), increased domestic and societal violence (Krishnaraj, 1991), decline in the sex ratio and higher rates of illiteracy (Consensus of India, 2001).

Researchers argue that though we are progressing, a lot needs to be done for the upliftment of women, who constitute nearly half (927/1000) of the population of the country. It is especially true of the vast majority of the women in the country who are illiterates and confined to household responsibilities. In recent times most of the women are contributing to their family income by participating in activities like agriculture and allied sectors, business, small industries, crafts, services and many other callings. Several empirical studies in the field of population science research have confirmed that improvement in various dimensions of the status of women reduces the level of fertility, maternal mortality, infant and childhood mortality and promotes rapid implementation of family planning program (Mahadevan, 1989; Mason, 1984). In view of this fact, enhancement of women's status has emerged as an important policy objective in the development plans and population policies of many less developed countries. In demography, however, the role of the status of women did not receive adequate attention till recently.

However, several improvements in terms of education, income, status and participation of women are reported. Research of early studies in Independent India, by Myrdal and Klein (1956), Cormack (1961), and Kapur (1970) pointed out the improving conditions of women and the acceptance by the society, parents and their husbands, with regards to education and participation in economics of social work. While this trend should be heartening there is another dimension that is increasingly becoming a challenge to the women's role.

Arya (2000) in her book, *Women, Gender Equality and the State* points out that for women employment has become an addition to the new role of participation in labor force keeping the conventional role of mother/wife intact. This has resulted in dual role conflict. For the rural women it is much more difficult since most men are uneducated, do not involve in household work and mostly bring other additional trouble to the women especially by their drinking habit. Lower female literacy rates in rural areas are primarily due to the physical nature of work of agricultural labour and migration of literate near to towns. What is surprising is the wide inter-state variations in female literacy rates which shows that states like Bihar, Rajasthan, UP and MP have a female literacy less than 30 percent due to cultural perception of women and how it is different from cultural norms applied to women in south (Seth, 2001). This is affecting the status of women in

many ways across the regions among the religions and castes and the implications on girl child education.

The prevailing patriarchal ideology which promotes and values of submission, sacrifice, obedience and silent suffering often undermines even occasional attempts by women to assert themselves or demand some share of resources. There are social expectations that women should make do with less--less food, less education, less health care. Several studies on problems faced by the dual role of working women due to husband domination and lack of support brought in new problems unique to the Indian women. Several researchers, such as Goel and Goel (1996) in their analyses pointed that Indian women play both stereotype and modern roles irrespective of their educational level and majority of them confine to the stereotype roles. They suggest that women have to modernize their stereotype roles to achieve equality. A study by Dasgupta and Basu (1997) on Bengali couples showed that couples with traditional gender role attitudes had a healthier marital relationship. In another similar study on couples by Sharma and Vohra (1998) findings indicated that tradition-oriented conception of roles of husbands and wives were largely prevalent.

CONCLUSION

The results of these studies clearly point out that a majority of Indian women, hold several traditional beliefs and have to still come out of their cultural stereotypes. These traditional beliefs have been internalized into the culture that influence not only girls but also boys as soon as they were born. If a boy is born the celebration is pompous and joyous than when a girl is born. From then onwards every day of their lives is different. In studies on present day modern educated adolescents regarding their perception of feminine worth, Mohan, Bali, and Mohan (1998) found that males had lower perception of feminine worth compared to females. Sharma, Das, and Sinha (1999) have found that male adolescents perceived women's position more negatively than females. Another research finding is that as opposed to the commonsense, nuclear families are found to be more male dominated and report more psychological distress. Today most families are nuclear. Thus review of current research reveals that there is no decrease in husband dominance in spite of the changing social, cultural and economic conditions of women. That people continue to hold traditional beliefs, in spite of changes in psycho social frontiers might be a pointer to the root cause of this continued male dominance in the society.

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