

## ENHANCING FAMILY AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION: THE PRIMARY ROLE OF THE WOMAN

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**Abstract:** Even though the Constitution of India upholds gender equality, in many parts of the country, strong patriarchal values prevail and give an inferior status to the woman. Often her biological makeup is cited for her inferior status. But, sociologists point out that it is culture, more than biology, which determines a woman's position and role in the family.

As part of culture, religious values and beliefs are cited as upholding a woman's secondary role. This is true in major world religions whether Islam, Hinduism or Christianity. However, in all these religions, there are also verses in their holy books which uphold gender equality. This paper looks specifically at Christianity.

The concept of a symmetrical family wherein conjugal roles are similar in terms of the contribution each makes to the running of the household is considered in the paper.

An important development in modern industrial society is that the family becomes more self-contained and self-reliant. Interaction is limited mainly within the nuclear family. The woman in her 'expressive' role could provide warmth and emotional support to her family and encourage interaction and bonding with extended kin, particularly grandparents, which is good for enhancing family. When social networks extend beyond the immediate family, it would help the family to be better integrated into society.

**Keywords:** Enhancing family; religion vs culture as determinants of a woman's role; woman's 'expressive' role; women in traditional and contemporary societies

**Introduction:** The family in Indian society is largely patriarchal where the woman is given an inferior status. But the woman in fact is the nerve centre of the family playing a primary role in enhancing it. Enhancing family would mean improving the quality and effectiveness of this social institution for the individual as well as the society. In this paper, the traditional role of the woman in the family and the changes it is undergoing in the contemporary world is being examined.

### **Role of Woman - Biology Vs Culture**

**Determinants:** What is the kind of role women play in their families? Traditionally, and it is still true of many families in India, the woman's place is said to be in the home. Her role is that of a housewife which includes the wife-mother role, bearing and rearing the children, taking care of the men and the home while men are considered the bread-earners who go out to work. To some extent, the sexual division of labour is based on biological differences. The biological function of child bearing and nursing is tied to the home and because of her physique the woman is limited to less strenuous tasks. There are some sociologists like Ann Oakley who after examining a number of societies concluded that biology appears to have little or no influence on women's roles. She claimed that there are no exclusively female roles and that biological characteristics do not bar women from particular jobs. Women do carry out strenuous tasks, for example, at construction sites. Is not childbirth itself a strenuous act?

Many sociologists would argue that while biological differences between the sexes may provide the foundation on which gender roles are based, culture certainly plays a more determinate role. There is diversity in the role of women in different cultures and, within a society itself, women's role undergoes change. Today, women are doing many things which were regarded to be a part of men's domain.

The American sociologist Talcott Parsons characterizes the woman's role in the family as 'expressive' which means she provides warmth, security and emotional support. This he says is essential for the effective socialization of the young. The woman also applies these qualities to her husband who as the bread-winner spends his working-day competing in an achievement-oriented society. The 'instrumental' role of the husband involves stress and anxiety. The 'expressive' female relieves this tension by providing the weary bread-winner love, consideration and understanding. The instrumental and the expressive roles complement each other. In this context, mention may be made of what Mother Teresa had once said, viz. that a woman is the bank where her family deposits all anger, worries and hurt.

### **Religion and the Position of Woman in the Family with specific reference to Christianity:**

An important aspect of culture is the belief and value system existing in a society. It includes religious beliefs and values as well. Most societies in the world including the Indian society have been patriarchal societies where the men dominate and control the women. As it is, housework is unpaid and since men

are the bread-earners, women are economically dependent on the men. Religion seems to justify their domination.

Considering the specific case of Christianity, for instance, in the Old Testament Gen.2:22, woman is said to have been made from the rib taken out of man. This is taken to indicate perhaps that she is the weaker/inferior sex. Genesis 2:16 states in sorrow thou shall bring forth children and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee. This appears as a justification for male dominance and patriarchy. Also, there is St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians in which he asks wives to submit to their husbands (Eph.5:22). Some husbands and wives think that submission indicates that women are inferior to men. There are women who think that if they submit they will lose their identity and that they will be used or abused. However, submission which means yielding or consenting to the leadership of another cannot be demanded or enforced, but is voluntary. Within marriage, it is an act of love and respect. What was not emphasized was Genesis 1:27 'God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them'; neither was St. Paul's exhortation that 'there is no male and female, for all are one in Jesus Christ'. (Gal.3:28).

The Christian understanding of gender equality is based on Biblical verses like the last two mentioned above as well as on how Jesus treated women. A careful study of the Gospels shows that neither Jesus' teachings nor His behaviour reflected any discrimination against women. Jesus is depicted as helping women as seen in the following instances:

- (a) The woman who was bent over and could not straighten herself (Lk.13:11);
- (b) Peter's mother-in-law who was suffering from a fever (Mk.1:30);
- (c) The woman who had a flow of blood (Mk.25:34); and
- (d) The daughter of Jairus (Mk.5:41).

**Recent Changes in the Family:** Many changes have occurred in our society since Independence. The Constitution of India guarantees gender equality. Various laws have been passed so that women enjoy the same rights as the men - for instance, the right to inheritance. The State has adopted measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Various campaigns like 'Beti Bachao and Beti Pado' have been organised to create awareness about the girl-child. Despite all this, gender inequality is practiced within the family. A preference for the male child may lead to female foeticide and female infanticide. There is discrimination between male and female children in terms of nutrition, level of education, etc. So what is required is putting the laws into practice. With industrialization and globalization, women,

especially in urban areas are also playing roles outside their homes. To make use of their education, and to mitigate the hardships caused by rising prices as well as a desire to own goods advertised in the media, women seek to be gainfully employed. These changes have their impact on the family in terms of roles and relationships.

Earlier conjugal roles were largely segregated. There was a clear-cut division of labour between the spouses in the household. The husband was relatively uninvolved in domestic chores and raising the children. But now in the interest of peace and harmony and to enhance the family, conjugal roles have to become more joint. Although the wife still has primary responsibility for housework and child-rearing, husbands have to become more involved like shopping for groceries or doing the laundry. Husband and wife have to increasingly share responsibility for decisions which affect the family. A symmetrical family would be established when conjugal roles, although not the same, are similar in terms of the contribution made by each spouse to the running of the household. They share chores, they share decisions and they work together. Gender equality can only be achieved through equal partnership among and between women and men. A family therefore has two leaders enjoying equal partnership. Keeping the sacredness of marriage alive and the richness of family life is the concern of both husband and wife.

Another important development in the family in modern industrial society is that it becomes more self-contained and self-reliant. Interaction is limited mainly within the nuclear family. Members do not take moral or financial support from kin nor do they think they have any obligation towards them. Both spouses are gainfully employed and society provides various facilities for child care, health care, etc. Since the family is largely isolated from kin and the wider community, it looks inward upon itself. There is intensification of emotions. They have too much of each other. The result is emotional strain and quarrels between family members. We can even have a situation where the mother who is expected to display maternal qualities of love, care and sacrifice, could kill her own daughter as in the Sheena Bora case. That is not all. The isolated and close-knit nature of the immediate family could erect barriers between them and others which is not good for a diverse society like ours. It could encourage intolerance and violence in society. The women in her 'expressive' role could provide warmth and emotional support to her family and encourage interaction and bonding with extended kin particularly grandparents, which is good for family life.

**Conclusion:** The family is a vital institution of society. The warmth and supportive relationships found in the family counteract the largely impersonal relationships found in the rest of modern industrial society. The family provides the only opportunity to participate in relationships where people are perceived and valued as whole persons. Outside the family, individuals have to interact with strangers in terms of different roles like employee, customer, passenger, student, patient, etc. The family fulfils two basic and irreducible functions viz. the primary socialization of children and the stabilization of the

adult personalities. The woman has a primary role in fulfilling both these functions and can therefore be rightly considered the nerve centre of the family. Social networks should extend beyond the immediate family to wider kin and neighbourhood. When social interaction is limited to only the immediate family it can cause emotional strain and conflict between members. They would not receive the moral, emotional and physical support of others. When social interaction is limited, individuals would be less integrated into society. This is not in the interest of either the individual or the society.

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