



STATUS OF WOMEN - A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The status of women is an important social index of progress. Historically women have been subjugated and treated as the subordinate sex for several centuries. Unequal gender relations of power in which men's domination and women's subordination prevail as an institutionalized social norm in most of the societies calls for a systematic understanding of the roots which hold it strong despite the winds of change.

The interplay of the economic system, social institutions, cultural foundations and psychological factors has resulted in the institutionalized mode of interactions between men and women. The structural and ideological dimensions of gender inequality in a stratified society require a sociological analysis as they are extremely resistant to change. Even as the focus of modernization, globalization, women's liberation movement, and women's empowerment confer on women a seemingly higher status, they have neither brought about a universal change nor removed the discriminations based on gender.

A proper theoretical understanding of the status of women is a necessary first step in understanding the realities associated with the status of women. Theory seeks to explain why a particular phenomenon exists with all its processes, properties and peculiarities. A social phenomenon is highly complex due to the inherent complexity of human behaviour. A scientific explanation of a social phenomenon is possible only through the theoretical perspective. Various sociological theories such as functionalist, conflict and feminist theories explain the status of women.

The functionalist theorists such as Comte, Spencer and Durkheim lay emphasis in the "natural order" of male dominance. They justified the position of women as part of the natural order, considered the patriarchal role of men as essential for the functioning of society, held the view that the inherent natural state of women creates a division of labour and hierarchy and firmly believed that any intervention to change the "natural order" is dysfunctional and dangerous.¹ This is not surprising because sociology as a field had patriarchal origin and foundation. The early sociologists established a positivist bias following the order of natural science.

Most of the contemporary theories also justify the position of women in society as essential for the functioning of the society.

According to Parsons, women's role in the family is "expressive" - providing warmth, security and emotional support for effective socialization.² This "expressive" role of woman and man's "instrumental" role of a bread winner compliment each other. They are considered essential for the performance of 'irreducible functions' of the family.³

Murdock considers biological differences between men and women as the basis of the sexual division of labour in society. Through her biological function of child bearing and nursing, a woman is tied to the home base. Hence the advantages inherent in a division of labour by sex presumably account for its universality.⁴

Bowlby believes in a genetically based psychological need for a close and intimate mother-child bond.⁵

From a functionalist perspective it can be argued that what is functional for one part of the social system can be dysfunctional for another part.⁶

The functional analysts lay emphasis on the system and not on the individual. They prefer the smooth functioning of the system at the expense of the well living of the individuals. Thus women, irrespective of their positions in the class hierarchy, must tolerate alcoholism, extra-marital affairs, gambling and cruelty of their husbands in order to "save" their marriage and family. For children's sake, divorces are discouraged. The functional theories justify the inferior position of women and ignore the sufferings which suffocate women.

Conflict theories provide a better explanation of women's place in the society. Committed to Hegelian dialectics and humanism, Marx and Engels analysed the status of women in economic context. Both Marx and Engels believed that the demand for female wage labour would raise the status and power of the proletarian women within the family. While Marx and Engels viewed opportunities within the

economic context, Weber proposed a set of dimensions focusing on the relationship of class, status and power along with the economic reasons for inequality.

While the functionalist theories have an ideological bias, conflict theories lay more emphasis on the economic and class concept. The unequal status of women does not rest in economic and class foundations alone. It is the result of complex operations of economics, political, psychological, social and cultural factors. Therefore the economic aspects alone are inadequate to understand the complexity of the problems concerning the status of women. However the views portrayed by conflict theories do recognize the problems and provide scope for solutions within the economic context.

Feminist theories provide a deeper insight because feminists are the first to grow intolerant of the exploitation and victimization of women, revolted against the institutionalised devaluation of women and challenged the traditional society's role prescriptions. Gender justice being the central focus of feminist theories, they concern themselves not only with the material base of man's superiority but also have brought about the cultural, social and psychological foundations of female devaluation.

There are several strands of feminism such as Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Existentialist Feminism and Post-modern Feminism. But they all view gender as the central focus and do not accept the existing gender relationships as natural and immutable and they try to change a status quo that disadvantages and devalues women. In contrast to the functionalists, feminists have an emancipatory approach, focusing on the individual rather than the system.

Sex is the creation of nature and sexual differences are essential for the perpetuation of the human race. But the gender disparities in terms of personality traits and behaviour patterns associated with cultural constructs assigned by patriarchy need to be challenged as they exploit and victimize women. Feminist theories explain the oppression, repression and suppression of women and focus on a social philosophy which emits activism on a central component.

Liberal Feminist Mary Woolstonecraft presented the vision of a woman, strong in mind and body, who is not a slave to her passions, her husband and children. What she most wanted for a woman is her personhood. She insisted that a woman is not a mere means or instrument to someone else's happiness or perfection.⁷ She wanted women to be economically independent of men and be treated as autonomous decision makers. Harriet Taylor insisted that it is psychologically vital

for every woman to work regardless of financial necessity. In order to be the partners rather than the servants of their husbands, wives must earn an income outside the home.⁸

In her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) Betty Friedan says that the "feminine mystique" - that is, the idea that woman can find satisfaction exclusively in the traditional role of wife and mother - has left women feeling empty and miserable. Friedan recommended a career for every woman and also suggested that their partial absence due to work will make their family members independent and effective individuals. Friedan admitted the complexity of career - marriage combination and in the "second stage" she recommended a balance of women's assimilation into the work place with a counter-assimilation of men into the family although men would find it difficult.

Liberal Feminists are against gender stereotyping in work organizations. They advocate policies of preferential hiring and reverse discrimination. Besides the classical and welfare approaches, they believe in legal remedies and conceptual approach. Psychologist Sandra Ben observed that the brightest and most accomplished people are androgynous (Greek word for male andro and female gyn.)

By advocating suitable major alterations in the social structure, Liberal Feminists have improved the quality of life for women. We owe to the Liberal Feminists many of the educational and legal reforms and the new found professional and occupational success of women.

While Liberal Feminists believe in the liberal theory of human nature, Marxist Feminists emphasize on the means of subsistence. We are what we are because of what we do - our social existence determines our consciousness. Marxist feminists believe that if all women are to be liberated, the capitalist system must be replaced by a socialist system, where no one would be economically dependent on any one else, women would be certainly free from the dominance of men and therefore equal to them.

Fathers of Marxism have offered explanation for women's oppression. Engels wrote "The origin of Family, Private Property and the State" (1845). He explained that promiscuity slowly gave way to monogamy and early societies were matriarchal and matrilineal. Since most of the material goods were produced at home by women, women enjoyed superior position in terms of production and ownership. When the site of production changed she lost her superior position. The domestication of animals and the breeding of herds led to surplus in terms of accumulation of wealth and inheritance gained importance. Men's possessions had to be inherited

by their children and this led to patrilineal and patriarchal society. Engels regarded this conversion as pivotal in its importance on women's position in society because the "overthrow of mother right" constituted "the world historic defeat of the female sex."⁹ This led to the powerful propertied men and powerless and propertyless women. So for the Marxist Feminists, if women are to be emancipated from their husbands, they must be economically independent.

Margaret Benston a Marxist Feminist deserves the credit for driving home the truth that introducing a woman into occupations without simultaneously socializing the domestic work and child care will make her oppressed condition even worse. She also felt that the socialization of home work and childcare will end women's oppression and also enable everyone to recognize how socially important it is.¹⁰ What really angered the Marxist Feminists in the trivialization of women's work and they campaigned for the "wages of house work". They also advocated the concept of "comparable worth" by which the employers were to evaluate the employees objectively on their knowledge and skills and not on the basis of gender. Marxist Feminists identified the working women's revolutionary consciousness.

The Marxist Feminists also believe in biological revolution aided by technology that controls reproduction. Contraception, sterilization, in vitro fertilization, embryo transfer, test tube baby, artificial insemination by donor, cloning etc., with legalities such as contracted motherhood, a woman who begets a child need not bear it and a woman who bears a child need not rear it. When technology eliminates the biological family, the divisive hierarchy is eliminated.

Like the Marxist Feminists, the Radical Feminists also propose revolutionary concepts. Marge Piercy talks about an utopia where no one has private property or private children. Child rearing is a communal effort and children are precious human resources for the entire community. The Radical Feminists believe in working toward an androgynous culture in which male and female differences are minimized.

Mary Daly advocates the deconstruction of 'feminity' constructed by patriarchy. Since it is a man made construct having nothing to do with femaleness. She also observes that the courageous woman is attacked by the mutants of her own kind the man-made woman. Daly suggests that the courageous woman should take off and soar into other dimensions.¹¹

While most of the contemporary sociological theories focus on the relationship of the individual to the society as it exists and is maintained, the feminist theories have an emancipatory approach, focusing on the relationship of the individual to the society as it ought to be. The radical and revolutionary aspects of feminist theories are certainly the echoes of the flutterings of the wings of the birds caged.

They need to soar high towards new horizons.

End Notes

1. Quoted by Haralambos, Michael, with Heald Robin, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, p. 534.
2. p. 372.
3. Ibid., p. 372.
4. Ibid., p. 371.
5. p. 372.
6. p. 363.
7. Wollstonecraft, Mary, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Poston, Carol, H (ed) W.W. Norton, 1975, p. 56.
8. Taylor Harriet, *Entranchisement of Women in Essays of Sex Equality op.cit.*, p. 105.
9. Engels, Friedrich, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, International Publishers, New York, 1972, p. 180.
10. Benston Margaret, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation." *Monthly Review*, No. 4, September 1969, pp. 20-21.
11. Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1978, p. 336.

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