UNIT 3 AUTONOMY AND CONTROL

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the world women rarely experience the fundamental freedom as a human being, and are considered property of others throughout their lives. Their health, mobility, security and body are often beyond their own control. In India, the situation is complex because of the intricate link between women’s control and autonomy with the institution of caste, which you have already read in the first semester course MWG 002: Gender and Power. In this unit, you will focus on the aspects of autonomy and control which explain women’s subjugation within the caste system. As you have learnt in courses MWG 001 and 002, women’s control and autonomy are mediated through the caste system, often giving an invisible picture of the status of women in India. Indian women lack autonomy in many aspects compared to the men in the country. Women have no control over money, they cannot make decisions about reproductive issues, have no freedom to invest for their well being or get health care for themselves or their children. The customs and regulations related to caste influence the ideology and behavioural pattern of women with respect to themselves as well as towards the society. Complications increase as the lack of autonomy results in morbidity and mortality.

Control and autonomy are two sides of the same coin. Women are controlled in most aspects of their lives including their free movement, their voice in family affairs, reproductive choices, their economic independence, and
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The issues of women’s control and autonomy are manifested in various ways throughout the world. Large numbers of women are excluded from even the most routine decisions taken at household level. They are far more likely to be involved in decisions that are perceived as routine in the family economy, such as those relating to food purchases, than in decisions that involve major purchases. This is seen the world over though the degree of control may vary according to societies and cultures. Similarly, the issues involving investment, health care, mobility and reproduction are manifested more or less in a similar fashion across cultures implying curtailed autonomy and control of women world over. In this Unit we will try to understand how women are controlled by analyzing the related familial and social practices with special focus on caste. We will also discuss the concept of ‘autonomy’ and its indicators. Various indicators of autonomy like decision making authority, reproductive right and choices, freedom of mobility and economic independence will be analysed in the context of women and caste. Various sections in this unit focus on approaches meant for studying women’s control and autonomy. We will also discuss some suggestions that can help in enhancing women’s autonomy by carefully analyzing the influencing factors for autonomy.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- Understand what is control and autonomy with respect to women’s lives;
- Relate women’s control and autonomy in the context of caste; and
- Analyse various inter-linkages of women’s autonomy control.

3.3 WOMEN, CONTROL AND CASTE

Let’s start our discussion with a newspaper reported case of ‘honour killing’ which happened in 2007 in Kaithal district, Haryana. Honour killings which you have learnt about in your first semester course MWG 002 which explains that honour killings are committed in the belief that the victim has brought dishonour to the family, community or the caste. Men and women both fall victims to honour killing but more than men it is the women who are victimized. In 2007 a newly-wed couple, Manoj and Babli, were killed by the relatives of the girl. The killing was ordered by a khap panchayat (caste council) who ruled that the couple had married against the caste-based norms as both belonged to same gotra.

The above incident is just one among innumerable cases of violence, torture and crime against women in our country. The case represents a tragic and
brutal nexus of caste/community norms with issues of women’s control and autonomy. In extremely hierarchical and unequal society, the urge to control women’s sexuality is being deeply influenced by the norms of Indian caste system. Incidents like the one above are the expression of an underlying motive to continue the status quo with regard to women’s position in the society. The subordination of women and the control of female sexuality are crucial to the maintenance of the caste system (Chakraborty, 2003). The above incident shows a deeply rooted mentality of controlling and owning a female’s body and its link to social status of a family or community. Cases like this indicate that women in this country and many parts of the world do not control even their own body, sexuality, economy and other significant aspects of their lives and this lack of control is related to caste or other forms of social stratification.

The above example was violent and criminal in nature. But controlling women is also expressed through ordinary day-to-day social, familial, and institutional practices the world over. It is commonly observed that women face control in almost all aspects of their lives. You must have seen many instances of control over women in your own locality, neighbourhood or even in your own family. Women are not allowed to visit distant places unescorted, are not given the authority to decide about the family economy, are not allowed to take decisions about their own reproductive aspects and are not free to build their network of relationships. There are variations of the degree of control across societies. In many places it is also seen that women have neither control over production process and economic activities nor are allowed to enter into any social relationship outside of their family, caste, marriage and community.

What explains this control over women? Why do most women lack control over their own existence? Apart from the obvious factors like lack of education and economic independence the causes of women’s lack of empowerment and autonomy is linked to more subtle forces like caste system. It acts like a strong force influencing the pattern of behavior and attitude of women about themselves as well as towards their family and community. This explains the deep rooted control women experience from their family as well as society as a whole. The empowerment of women depends upon their ability to control their own economy and fertility, among other things. When a women’s fertility is controlled by her family or some other value system ignoring individual liberty and freedom, then her life becomes out of control. When a woman can plan her own family she can plan her life and she can be healthy. Planning for a family is linked to financial stability and autonomy. Caste system influences attitude and behaviour related to the above issues in a way which encourages and values women’s subordination. For a woman to be healthy, empowered and a significant
contributor to the society, the issues of her control and autonomy in the context of caste have to be properly looked into.

Various mechanisms of social stratification permeate through gender relations. Gender is inseparable from social institutions such as: caste, class, race, ethnicity and other vital determinants of our social organization. Caste distinctions infuse gender distinctions in such a subtle manner that sometimes it becomes very difficult to realize their impact. Thus, the patriarchal practices in Indian society are deeply linked to the ideology of caste system. The impact of patriarchal control on women is manifested in various ways. The impact of control on women is differential according to their position in caste hierarchy. Depending upon the position of the caste the women belonging to it may sometimes be subordinated and sometimes wield power. Often, women from higher castes wield some power due to their access to economic resources.

### 3.4 MANIFESTATIONS OF CONTROL OVER WOMEN

Caste and control over women are deeply linked with each other in Indian society. Women are restricted in many aspects and often face violence upon slight deviation from social rules and regulations. The oppression of women has a definite caste dimension. Even today violence against lower caste women is more pronounced. Violence and rape are primarily the acts of reinforcement of the power and higher social position of the higher caste perpetrators. Shocking reports by Human Rights Commission have revealed that rape is a custom in many villages, where girls from lower castes are forced to have sex with the village head man who invariably is from a higher caste (Orchard, 2004). Land disputes and debts often resulted in sex or rape (Orchard, 2007).

Control is manifested through various social/familial practices of which the crucial domains are sexuality and food practices. Female sexuality is the major aspect which has been the target of male’s control historically in many cultures. The domain which manifests control of female sexuality is through various practices and prohibitions of marriage. Caste, marriage and female sexuality are deeply linked to each other. The notion of upholding traditions is deeply linked to the duty and responsibilities of the women of a caste group. Women are expected to behave in ‘proper’ of ‘good’ ways so that the traditions can be maintained. The domain which plays crucial role in upholding tradition and values are marriage and sexuality. Thus women face tremendous control in these arenas and consequently compromise on many aspects of their individual rights. The other crucial domain pertains to issues of purity and pollution due to food habits. Leela
Dube (1997), the noted anthropologist has argued that women play an important role in maintaining caste boundaries through preparation of food and maintaining its purity. The bodily purity of upper castes is believed to be linked to what is ingested and how it is prepared. These codes and behavior impose implicit control on women who need to conform to them in order to be honoured and respected by family and society.

Men’s control over women’s reproductive behavior is another domain which needs crucial mention. Reproductive control occurs when women face explicit or implicit demands related to reproductive issues by in-laws, partners, and natal family members or more subtly by the rules and norms of the caste group or the society they belong to. Control over women’s reproductive issues involves direct conflict, threat, or actual violence. This can be economic (threatening or actual denial of money for going for contraception/abortion), emotional (various emotional tortures including accusing her of infidelity), or physical (physical torture, violence sometimes leading to death). Issues related to purity of caste, succession/inheritance, and continuity of caste/family name are linked to reproductive control of a woman.

Whereas women from lower-caste frequently suffer from rape and violence, the upper-caste women of the same village with equal economic conditions do not face similar sexual assault. It is also observed that compared to men, it is the women from the lower caste who suffer more. Being women and from a lower caste make them doubly vulnerable with respect to control of their sexuality. The violence and conditions become intolerable when an individual simultaneously belongs to both the minority groups (Orchard, 2007). Control over women is also expressed through female infanticide. By analyzing frequency of female infanticide and its link to various caste groups, Tulsi Patel (2007) has shown that the practice of female infanticide is embedded in the social structure of certain dominant castes. She further argues that caste groups who practice female infanticide also practice dowry, hypergamy, endogamy and clan exogamy. Girls are denied even the right to be born and this practice is firmly linked with the institution of caste.

‘Honour killing’, as was discussed at the beginning of this unit, is a prevalent way of controlling women’s lives, sexuality and her right to choice over marriage. In Indian context honour of a family or caste is deeply determined by the conduct of women. Both men and women embody notions of honour, but differently. The woman is the repository and the man is the regulator of this honour. Therefore, the greatest danger to the ideology of honour comes from the woman (Chowdhry, 2012). The honour of a woman is basically associated with her ‘purity’ in sexual conduct manifested through marriage and expression of sexuality. So caste imposes stringent rules and regulation on women so far as sexual behavior is concerned. The honour is believed
to be located in the ‘body’ of a woman. A woman dishonours her family by what is considered her shameful physical behaviour. This stretches from observing *sharm* and *lihaz* (modesty and deference) to her sexuality (Chowdhry, 2012). The control of female sexuality is thus deemed a necessity for the honour of the family and caste.

Further, social practices like dowry, *devadasi* system, and *purdah* are the evidences of subjugation of women where caste plays significant role in making the oppression worse. Control of women, in most cases, remains hidden and is taken as normal in many societies. Men and women get socialized in the gender norms of a society and continue to accept it as normal. Familial and social control lead to differential or lack of access to and control over resources such as money, transport and time, which ultimately leads to poverty, poor health and secondary status of women in many parts of the world. Thus, patriarchal norms put control on women and deny women the right to make decisions regarding their sexuality, reproductive rights, mobility, inheritance, and other related aspects. Control leads to many risks and difficulties for women to live a dignified life. Control on sexuality and reproductive issues also expose women to avoidable risks of morbidity and mortality. Control on mobility and social network increases the risks through sexually transmitted infection resulting from coercive sex, or death from septic abortion.

*Check Your Progress:*

*What is understood as 'Manifestation of control'. Give on example.*
3.5 WHY IS THERE CONTROL OVER WOMEN?

Why is there control of women in most societies? Is control and autonomy linked to sexual difference or gender difference? Why is control over women regarded as normal and natural in many societies?

Sometimes we tend to link the subordination of women with the biological difference between men and women. In all societies, sex and gender are so intricately linked that we have great difficulty separating them. Gender roles perpetuated over time and space are normalized and they come to seem as much the natural order as sex differences. Differences in chromosomes, genitalia, hormonal states and secondary sex characteristics form the core of sexual difference and determine male or female sex. However, sexual or biological differences are given social hues through distinct social roles, status, and positions in a society for men and women. Gender differences are thus taken for granted as biological differences. Biological differences also dictate what is superior and inferior in culturally defined value systems.

There are many explanations in academic circles on the question of why there is control over women in most societies. Some scholars tend to argue that in many societies women are considered as close to ‘nature’ and men represent ‘culture’. As Sherry Ortner argued, because of woman’s greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than man. Yet, in part because of her consciousness and participation in human social dialogue, she is recognized as a participant in culture. Thus, women are regarded as occupying a position intermediate between culture and nature, implying a place lower than men. Further, as Ortner argues, every culture asserts that proper relations between human existence and natural forces depend upon culture’s employing its special powers to regulate the overall processes of the world and life. This explains the superiority of culture over nature and by extension men over women.

There are other perspectives on why women are controlled in most societies. For example, Engels argues that the control over women began with the emergence of private property in the history of human society. Marxist scholars do not believe that the subordination of women can be absolutely separated from the other forms of exploitation and oppression which exist in capitalist societies, for example, class exploitation and racism. They argue that oppression of women needs to be regarded as simply a side-effect of class exploitation.

Control over women in society is also analyzed through the lens of kinship system by many scholars. They argue that women’s control and autonomy should be seen against the background of the kinship system in which
women grow. Kinship and its rules are highly influential in shaping our conduct towards gender behaviour. Most of the control owes to the kinship practices and rules. “The very notion of entitlement—whether to membership of a family, to access to strategic resources, to food and nutrition, to healthcare, to education, or to authority and decision-making—cannot be understood without accepting that the kinship system to a large degree provides the language for it and gives it legitimacy” (Dube, 1997, p.5).

Access to resources and participation in various social, community and familial activities are determined by imposing differential control and autonomy of women through gender ideology. Thus women’s control and autonomy takes a stereotyped form of behaviour. Women are controlled in many aspects including mobility, access to inheritance, fertility rights etc. Control is taken for granted and is apparent through various social practices in institutions such as caste.

### 3.6 AUTONOMY OF WOMEN

Autonomy can be understood as the ability of a person to access material, social and familial resources and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one’s private as well as familial/community concerns. The material resources may include food, income, land, and other forms of wealth and the social resources may include knowledge, power, and prestige derived as a member of a family/community/society. Autonomy is the control women have over their own lives—the extent to which they have an equal voice with their husbands in matters affecting themselves and their families, control over material and other resources, access to knowledge and information, the authority to make decisions, freedom from constraints on physical mobility, and the ability to forge equitable power relationships within families.

Dyson and Moore (1983) define autonomy as “the capacity to manipulate one’s personal environment. Autonomy indicates the ability—technical, social, and psychological—to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one’s private concerns and those of one’s intimates” (p.45). Autonomy in various studies has been operationalised as women’s ability to make decisions in personal life, household, work place, and community life.

Autonomy has also been defined as the capacity to manipulate one’s personal environment through control over resources and information in order to make decisions about one’s own concerns or about close family members (Basu 1992; Miles-Done and Bisharat, 1990). Women’s autonomy thus can be conceptualized as their ability to determine events in their lives, even though men and other women may be opposed to their wishes (Mason, 1984; Safilios-Rothschild, 1982).
There are several separate but interdependent components to autonomy. These include the autonomy conferred by knowledge or exposure to the outside world, autonomy to take informed decisions about one’s life concerns, autonomy to have a say in family decisions, physical autonomy in interacting with the outside world, autonomy to enjoy close bonds with spouses and that free from the threat of violence and abuse, and economic and social autonomy and self-reliance, namely the extent to which women have access to and control over their own and their household’s economic resources. (see, for example, Mason 1984; Caldwell1979; Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell 1982; Jejeebhoy 1995). Scholars have identified five dimensions of autonomy: (1) economic decision making; (2) physical mobility; (3) freedom from threat from husband; (4) access to and control over economic resources; and (5) freedom to take decisions about one’s sexuality and fertility.

3.7 WOMEN’S AUTONOMY AND CASTE

How is control and autonomy of women influenced by the institution of caste? Uma Chakraborty (2003) argues that gender stratification is a feature mostly seen in caste societies. Explaining this further by historical evidence she argues that the collapse of tribal/clan-based society and polity in the post-Vedic era had given rise to a system characterized by private control over land held and transmitted through patrilineal succession/inheritance. This was enabled by controlling sexuality of certain categories of women. Female sexuality was channeled into legitimate motherhood by ensuring mating with only one man to ensure patrilineal succession. When caste system was consolidating mating was restricted only to prescribed partners to ensure purity of caste. The ritualization and idealization of motherhood helped in the above process of controlling female sexuality (Bhattacharji, 1990).

Female sexuality is considered as less important than that of male as man’s ‘seed’ is regarded as more powerful than the ‘field’ represented by women (Chakraborty, 2003). This intricacy of caste-sexuality relations can be explored by analyzing some marriage violations practiced in caste India. In anuloma (hypergamy) marriage the man can have a wife from a caste lower in status than that of his own caste. This is considered natural. But pratiloma (hypogamy) is strictly prohibited and punished as it is considered ‘unnatural’. Women are considered as the carrier of status of a caste group or family and their slightest deviation from marriage prescriptions can affect negatively the status of the caste group. This exemplifies the lack of autonomy on the part of women in issues of sexuality. Another practice which is argued to be based on controlling women’s sexuality is the practice of varnasamkara. Varnasamkara enabled caste system to proliferate and to successfully control women’s sexuality differentially based on the position of the caste in the caste hierarchy.
Women have little autonomy in many cultures, so it is important to get a better understanding of its determinants. It is also necessary to understand the variations of autonomy across regions and socio-cultural contexts. In Indian context there is an intricate link between caste and autonomy of women.

Autonomy can be linked to caste by analyzing sex-ratios across various caste groups of India. Mary E John (2008) et al. in their study on ‘Planning Families and Planning Gender’ have shown that in rural areas scheduled castes have a very high sex ratios in sharp contrast to middle and upper castes. This shows a caste gradient in autonomy enjoyed by women of various castes. Though other factors play in deciding the sex ratios of a caste this also indicates comparatively higher autonomy for women of lower caste within the group. A woman’s autonomy to take decisions on reproductive issues is influenced by her caste. Tulsi Patel, in her study on sex-selective abortion shows that high caste women inform and consult their in-laws but low caste women obtain consent of only their husbands for abortion. The influence of joint/extended family is minimal in the decision making process for women from lower castes.

Autonomy is found to be directly related to women’s access and control over household finance. If a woman is employed and economically self-dependent she is in a better position to take decisions about her personal as well as family concerns. Studies show there is a positive correlation between working women and decision taking ability with respect to reproductive and fertility behavior. Studies show that higher caste women are not allowed to work outside the family and thus their work has no social recognition. The women of higher caste are seen as a burden. To compensate this economic loss the girl is side often gives huge dowry to the groom’s side. On the other hand women from lower caste work outside home and their work has social recognition. Women are treated as productive members of the community/ caste and dowry is rarely seen among low caste groups.

**Check Your Progress:**

**Define autonomy and explain it in relation to women’s issues.**
3.8 POLICY WAY FORWARD

Autonomy, caste and gender are related to each other in many ways. The use and abuse of women across caste groups gives an account of how women’s sexuality is controlled through social structure and is the basis of patriarchy. The importance of the notion of sexual purity in the upper castes and incidence of ‘honour killings’ stand testimony to cultural codes meant for keeping patriarchy intact. The intricate linkages between caste and women’s control/autonomy are manifested through various social practices in our society. Given the strong linkages between caste and gender, the issues of women’s empowerment and autonomy are extremely complex. Interventions are needed at the structural level which demand a long term approach. Changes at policy level and stringent laws against violence against women are what we need immediately.

It is accepted that women need autonomy to be able to take decisions on economic, reproductive and health care matters. Autonomy helps in empowering women in many aspects. Women’s autonomy is dependent on many factors which are closely linked to the ability of women to take part in the decision-making process in the household. It is the level of personal autonomy that appears to influence demographic behavior and resulting outcomes (Basu, 1992; Jejeebhoy, 1991). Women with autonomy have the capacity to manipulate their personal environment through control over resources and information in order to make decisions about their own and family concerns. When a woman has the ability to take decisions about her, she can determine the events in her life for better. This is closely linked to the economic, educational, reproductive and health care decisions in a family.

Understanding causes, nature and consequences of violence against women is a much required need in the contemporary times. The awareness of the caste-gender inter-linkages needs to be encouraged and accordingly various institutional practices to weaken the above links need to be put in place. Education and steady employment can lessen women’s dependency on the family members and husband/partner thereby enhancing autonomy. Improved communication in the household especially with husbands can bring positive changes in the decision making ability of women. Apart from education and employment, the other crucial need is to raise awareness about women’s autonomy. Awareness at the social level can be achieved through many governmental and non-governmental programmes, media content, and law and order system. But more crucially, educating at the school level is an urgent step towards women’s autonomy. School curricula need to incorporate the idea of women empowerment and should through light about the practices required at individual, familial and social level.
Support and care during pregnancy, reproductive health and child care, regulating child and maternal mortality, and many other crucial health indicators are linked to women’s autonomy. Various schemes need to be designed to cater to the needs of women in places where there is no school or for women who do not attend school. Gender education, awareness, and employment opportunities help substantially in this regard. Developing income generating activities for remote and rural women, creating self-help groups, and ensuring women’s involvement should get utmost priority. Women should be supported in entrepreneurship, including improved access to property and economic assets, training, microfinance and markets. Various women empowerment programmes, catering to specific needs of women in various socio-economic and geographical regions needs to be designed and implemented.

Women’s autonomy should not be seen as an isolated issues rather it needs to be taken up with the programmes of women empowerment. A comprehensive strategy needs to be developed including components of policy, institutional support, social practices, school curricula, and others. Empowering women to take part in decision making in household level, facilitating access to and control over economic resources, and enabling them to realize their rights are some of the crucial means to enhance women’s autonomy.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

The unit discussed the inter-linkages between gender, caste, autonomy and control. It analyzed how women’s mobility, sexuality, and rights are deeply rooted in the institutions of caste and community. It explained the aspect of autonomy and control with the help of scholarly works and case studies. Different case studies and examples reflected that how the nature and extent of autonomy and control on women’s freedom differ across castes, further making women’s empowerment as a challenging subject.

3.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) What are control and autonomy and how do they affect women’s lives? Explain this in the context of Caste in India.

2) Why are women controlled in most societies? Answer in the light of the argument given in the unit.

3) Why is honour killing a matter of concern in India? Write the causes and consequences of honour killing.

4) How is caste linked to violence against women in India?

5) How can women’s autonomy be enhanced? Discuss how women’s are empowerment and autonomy are interdependent.
3.11 REFERENCES


Autonomy and Control


**3.12 SUGGESTED READINGS**

