UNIT 3 DISCRIMINATION AND SUBORDINATION

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Learning Objectives

After having read this unit, you should be able to:
- define gender discrimination and subordination;
- understand the gender related paradox in Indian society;
- answer the question on universality of gender discrimination and subordination;
- understand, how gender roles are shaped in the society;
- appreciate the importance of gender equality; and
- understand the consequences of gender based discrimination.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Before moving on to understand the nature of discrimination and subordination in the context of gender, we should first look into the meaning of these two terms and also how they are linked together at literal and analytical levels. As per the Oxford dictionary, meaning of the term discrimination implies “the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex”. However in the Indian context we may also include caste in the above mentioned categories. If we deconstruct the above meaning for better understanding of the term then we may find certain key terms that are present in the meaning or which are otherwise implied implicitly. The English word ‘discrimination’ is made up of a battery of terms that together convey certain meaning. To begin with, discrimination is a prejudicial treatment which implies that it entails certain behavioural patterns that may be labeled as prejudicial towards a defined category or group of people. Now, one may ask this question
that how these prejudices develop at the first place? The answer to this question is engrained in the social structure of any society. These structures which are otherwise non-visible to a naïve eye can be detected and understood by anthropologists, who have always tried to understand basic structure of a society and how these structures get translated into behavioural patterns. For example caste is a reality in Indian context which formed the basis for division of labour and in turn gave rise to a bitter form of discriminatory behavioural attitude towards people labeled as lower caste. Such discriminatory attitudes are also patronised by religious texts and treaties. Similarly in the case of gender, prejudicial treatment stems from some more basic structural patterns that are passed on from one generation to other through the process of socialisation.

However the term discrimination cannot be seen in isolation from the term subordination. These two terms are complementary to each other. Subordination implies the “action of subordinating” or creating a hierarchy or strata. It can be argued that subordination validates discrimination. Therefore subordination becomes a tool or an ideological basis for discrimination. Gender discrimination in particular stems from the ideology that women are subordinate to men and therefore are not entitled for equal treatment in various walks of life. These flawed ideologies are also corroborated and integrated with people’s faith and values and therefore become well established at the structural and functional levels. The entire ideology of patriarchy is the result of such assumptions (Dube, 2009).

Discrimination and subordination should be juxtaposed with the ideology of equality to understand the meaning enshrined in these words. The Indian constitution is based on the notion that every citizen will have the right to equality and there shall be no discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, sex, race and place of birth. The preamble of the constitution states that equality of status and opportunity should be secured for all the citizens of India. It is in this background that we should try and understand that instead of state apparatuses designed to secure equality we still come across discrimination and subordination at various places and situations. This points towards a reality that there is a difference between the intention and practice of equality. The codified law is unable to alter the discriminatory attitude of people against specific groups of society. This in turn should be a ground for getting answers to such intriguing questions of gender inequality and discrimination. One needs to look deeper into the social structure and function in order to understand such gender based discrimination and subordination.

### 3.2 THE PARADOX

We are well aware of the fact that historically women have been agents of change in every sphere of life. How can we forget the contribution of Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi and her close aide Jhalkaari Bai who fought bravely against the mighty forces of the British empire in the first ever battle for Indian independence. Our history is full with such stories of bravery and the industrious nature of women. Even in the contemporary society women are making their mark and presence felt in the political-economy of India. But still one can factually argue that women are being treated as subordinates to the male members and are discriminated against. This assertion gets reflected objectively in the skewed sex ratio which is
in favour of the male child. Cases of female foeticide from across the length and breadth of the country conveys that society has used it as a mechanism for socially selecting the male child over the female. Dowry deaths, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, etc are just few visible examples of the kind of treatment that is being given to the women in our society. There are many other covert situations that are not quite visible but contribute towards gender discrimination and subordination. One such example is the gendered analysis of the use of public space. We would not generally think that space has anything to do with the larger social structure, but the post-modern conception of space argues that the architectural design and public space is not gender neutral. Shilpa Ranade in her ovular article on the gendered conception of public space points towards the fact that the use of public space is largely limited to the male and women have to legitimise their behaviour in order to use that public space. She writes that “women can access public space legitimately only when they can manufacture a sense of purpose for being their” (Ranade, 2007; pp. 1521).” She further argues that the gendered use of space becomes an instrument and an agent of reproducing gender inequality and power relations that exist in the society. This is an excellent example of how the use of space negotiates power and authority in the society. “The control of women’s movement has been central to the maintenance of a gender regime informed by patriarchy. So long as women reproduce the discourse of the hegemonic gender regime appropriately through their socio-spatial performance of femininity in public space, they can largely access it safely (Ranade, 2007; pp. 1525).”

**Activity**

Observe the public places and find out how it is being differentially used by males and females.

Gender discrimination also gets reflected in the form of women health and child malnutrition. It has been scientifically established that weight of a new born baby is directly related with the nutritional condition and health status of the mother. Especially India, Pakistan and Bangladesh accounts for holding almost half of the population of malnourished children in the world. This is linked to the poor health conditions and nutritional status of mothers in these countries (Mehrotra, 2006). Thus child malnutrition and gender discrimination are linked together. It has been observed that women are considered to be the primary care givers in a family set-up. Normally the household workload exceeds the caloric intake. It is also a normal practice in the patriarchal household set-up that women eat at last after feeding their children and husband which accounts for improper food management which works as a hindrance for better nutrition.

These examples and the paradox observed in the behavior lead us understand and ask certain basic questions regarding gender discrimination and subordination. One might ask that is the gender discrimination a universal phenomenon or is restricted to only few societies? A similar question that can logically follow the above one can be related with the origin of such discriminations and subordinations.
3.3 UNIVERSALITY OF DISCRIMINATION AND SUBORDINATION

The discipline of anthropology, since its inception, has been concerned with the dichotomy of local and global, idiographic and nomothetic, and universal and particular. This dichotomy in the beginning helped in explaining the evolution of society by locating the particular against the notion of universal. To some extent, any discipline that claims to be scientific in outlook must possess a universal, generalising character that can be law generating. In this respect anthropologists have always advocated micro-level studies with macro-level implications, which in turn helps in locating cross-cultural studies in a broader theoretical framework. The notion of gender discrimination and its universality also reflects the basic tension of the discipline.

Another dichotomy that helps in understanding the universal character of discrimination is that of public domain and domestic domain. It has been argued that patriarchal ideology has divided the entire world into two specific domains with specific roles, rules and regulations. The public domain is largely meant for the male members of the society where they can negotiate their roles and establish their supremacy over the ‘second sex’. On the other hand domestic domain is largely restricted to the female where they work as primary care-givers. In the domestic domain however, women are not entitled to take decisions pertaining to family matters which is largely taken by the males (Purkayastha et al., 2003). This dichotomous view has been criticised sometimes for being ‘western’ in outlook. It is said that it originated in the western modernised world and has been generalised to other societies without taking into account the specificities in those societies. This calls for a revisit to the entire debate of public-domestic domain and take a re-look through the lens of idiographic, particularistic, contextual knowledge which has become a hallmark of anthropology since the advent of functional paradigm and re-instated in the post-modern ideology, though not entirely but partially. Karen Brodkin Sacks breaks the monotony of universality by exemplifying the Iroquois society where the dichotomy of domestic-public is not found and women enjoy an enormous amount of decision making power in domestic, political, religious and economic spheres of life (Sacks, 1970). Similarly, Leacock has shown that among the matrilineal Native North-American Montagnais-Naskapi the division of labour between male and female members of the society is such that women are not dependent on their husbands (Leacock, 1981). Their economy is based on reciprocal division of labour between the sexes. In such societies there is no hierarchical division between the public sphere and domestic sphere, both the sexes produced goods that are necessary for livelihood. The above mentioned examples and many other similar cases reported by different scholars have revealed that there are societies where social relations are based on the principle of egalitarianism and men and women are placed equally in terms of their contribution to the society. However, even such cases do not account for superiority of women over men and the egalitarianism mentioned is only partial and not total.

3.3.1 Status of Women in Tribal Societies

It is a general conception that tribal societies are more egalitarian than the non-tribal societies or caste societies in the special context of India. It is a fact that tribal societies are not stratified on the basis of caste, but one might ask, that,
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what is the position of women in such societies and how is it different from other non-tribal societies? The answers to such questions are rather tricky and by no means straight forward. Considering the ethnic diversity in India, tribe is not a homogenous category rather it is heterogeneous based on language, geographical area, physical features, social organisation etc. This heterogeneity stops us from giving a sweeping answer about the position of women in these societies. If one wants to understand the position of women in these societies then one must understand that how work is divided between the sexes, who owns that work and to what extent it is considered important by the society. A shear division of work between male and female members of the society does not mean that women will be treated unequally, but the importance that is accorded to that work is more suggestive. It has been argued that position of women in societies with different economic and social organisation is different. Those societies where hunting and food-gathering/shifting cultivation is the basic source of sustenance accord better status and autonomy to women since collecting forest produce is considered important for sustenance. Also women in such societies are more autonomous since they have control over some resources and its distribution. As societies progressed from hunting-gathering to settled agriculture status of women started deteriorating since the ownership of land and its transfer followed the principle of lineage and such lineages were dominated by males. As Engles has rightly pointed out that the ‘world’s historic defeat’ of women at the hands of men began with the emergence of private property. In this context tribal societies must also be seen as societies in transition or transformation since they came in contact with the so-called ‘outside’ world. This has led to the emergence of the concept of private property instead of common property resources and dowry in place of bride-price which in-turn led to deteriorating women status (D.N., 1988).

Apart from the economic determinant of women’s status in the society, the social structure and organisation in a tribal society provides more autonomy to the women. Some tribes in the central India had an institution of youth dormitory. It is known by different names in different tribes like it is called ‘Dumkeria’ among the Oraons, ‘Giti-Ora’ among the Mundas and Ghotul among the Gonds. Such youth dormitories functioned as institutions where boys and girls could mix freely. They were a part of their socialisation process where they learned their gender specific roles, duties and reciprocity in behaviour while dealing with the opposite sex. This also regulated the behaviour between men and women and generated a sense of unity among them in society. Free mixing of boys and girls before marriage was never seen as a taboo in these communities (Bodra, 2008).

Activity
Collect more such examples from societies around you and discuss with your friends.

Such autonomy is also visible among the Bhil tribes where the institution of marriage has certain provisions that accord for greater autonomy for girls and lesser restrictions and taboo. Bhils are famous for ‘Bhagoria’ marriage where boys and girls elope together and when they return they are considered to be husband and wife after paying certain amount called ‘dapa’ by grooms side to the bride’s side. Such kinds of marriage largely take place during the festival of  

1 As per the primary data gathered during a fieldwork among the Bhils of Jhabua District of Madhya Pradesh.
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‘Holi’ (the festival of colors). Such festivals are marked with greater intermixing of young people who then chose their life partners. This should be compared with the autonomy and restrictions placed on the women in the larger society where arranged intra-caste marriages are the norm and any deviance from the norm is met with dire consequences in the form of honour killings.

Scholars have argued that tribal women also had certain rights over the land. The rights of unmarried daughters, wives and widows are clearly spelled out. These rights were largely of two types- a) in the form of having the right to manage a certain piece of land and b) in the form of having a claim or share in whatever the land produced. These kinds of rights gave some autonomy to women in terms of managing and accumulating resources. In this context, the position of widow in a tribal society is different from the one in Hindu society. In tribal society, a widow, continues to contribute both in field and forest and thus are able to generate independent income by selling forest produce or working on the field. This is in contrast to the traditional Hindu society where a widow is considered inauspicious and is barred from doing any work and mixing with the society at large. However, this situation has changed in the recent times and after several reforms in colonial and post-colonial era related to widow rights and obligations. With the advent of British rule, the position of tribal women and their rights in the landed property underwent a change which was a result of the British policy vis-à-vis land (Bodra, 2008).

The argument centering the subjugation and subordination of women also holds true in some of the matrilineal tribal societies. Although the position of women in matrilineal societies are much better than that of their patrilineal counterparts (Dubey, 2009) but the ideology of patriarchy and unequal power distribution is a reality that contradicts a very naïve understanding of matrilineal tribal societies. Tiplut Nongbri while discussing the transformation in gender relations in the context of Khasi women of Northeast India has highlighted the fact that position of women in these societies is comparatively better but they are still not free from subjugation and subordination. It is in the politico-jural domain that men assert their power which gives rise to a kind of political structure that excludes women. Men even use their position to generate a kind of ideology that is based on a hierarchical relationship between men and women. This kind of ideological churning is taking place with the help of state apparatuses that are being used to distort the matrilineal system. It has also being argued that traditionally women were not allowed to take part in the political domain of decision making (Nongbri, 2000). This is quite evident from the fact that women have been traditionally denied the membership of Khasi durbar (Agnihotri, 2012).

3.3.2 The Case of Matrilineal Nayars

Matriliny is also found among the Nayars of Kerala. Kathleen Gough and other scholars like C.J. Fuller have provided a detailed anthropological account of how matriliny is practiced and perpetuated among the Nayars (Schneider and Gough, 1961; Fuller, 1976; Gough, 1952). In this matrilineal organisation women were not dependent upon their husbands as they are the members of a matrilineal group known as taravad. A taravad consists of members belonging to the same matriline. The institution of marriage among the Nayars is characterised by tali-ketu-kalyanam and sambandham relationships. Tali-ketu-kalyanam is a ceremonial tali (gold neckless) tying ritual that marks the transition of a girl into
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A ceremonial marital alliance with a male member of the *enangar* (linked lineage). After this ceremony the girl is permitted to have several sexual unions with the other male members of the *enangar* who were also considered as “visiting husbands”. Children born out of such *Sambandham* unions belonged to the mother’s *taravad*. Even the dissolution of *sambandham* relationship was easy and was not looked down upon. Widowhood was not considered inauspicious and divorce and remarriage can easily take place without any social stigma attached to it. However, this kind of unique kinship and marriage pattern was located parallel to the socio-cultural matrix of high caste patrilineal Hindus and people from other religions. People from such communities do not approve of these relations and kinship patterns as they use to look at the practice of *sambandham* with disdain and disapproval. Many Nayar men with western ideas and education were also skeptical about their institution. It is in this context that Saradamoni has tried to understand the changing position of women among the Nayars and the transformation of matriliny. She has argued that the Nayar men were made to feel inferior and uncivilised by people who look down upon the practice of “visiting husband”. This led Nayar men to bring about certain changes in their institution to make them coterminous with the ideology of the west and other patrilineal communities. This so-called western and progressive ideology is based on the principal that after marriage a woman and her children become the responsibility of her husband and the husband is obliged to look-after his family. This is different from the Nayar’s institution where the *taravad* is responsible for the maintenance of women and her children. From the perspective of women, such changes resulted into subordination and subjugation of women in the matrilineal institutional set-up of the Nayars (Saradamoni, 1999).

It has also been argued in the context of status of women that we should not always talk and analyse in terms of low or high status for women in a society. Thus a dichotomous understanding in this context is not called for. There are also intermediary statuses in various societies depending upon rights and privileges accorded to women. It is for sure that in most of the societies across the world, the status of women is not as good as that of men and specially in patriarchal societies it is even worse. Patriarchal societies impose certain restrictions and taboos that need to be followed by women in order to get the label of ‘good women’.

### 3.4 THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

This section will deal with the question that, how socialisation as a process is linked with gender based discrimination and subordination? When we say that something is engrained in our culture or society at the level of its basic structure, then we must also realise that this culture and structure gets reproduced over generation after generation. Changes in cultural traits and social structure do occur either from within the society or forced and adopted from outside. However for a very long period these changes co-exist with the older or traditional patterns and show a spatial difference in their manifestation. This is quite evident in the context of rural-urban patterns that reflect this kind of co-existence to some degree.
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Socialisation is a process through which we learn our cultural values, traits, customs and rituals. We also learn behaviour patterns that are accepted and legitimised in the larger societal context. In this context gender specific roles are learned both at home and outside. This learning is largely observational in nature and both genders internalise the kind of behavior they receive which is later projected in their own behavior. Leela Dube, one of the pioneers in the field of gender studies had discussed about the construction and consolidation of gender identity. She is of the view that in a patriarchal, patrilineal society like ours in India, gender roles start taking shape very early in life. The difference in the enthusiasm of parents at the birth of male and female child is keenly observed by the female child and is internalised which becomes part of her psyche. Later in life she observes her mother, grandmother and other female members in the society and try to become like them in order to gain acceptance in the family and in society at large. The very notion of women being ‘paraya dhan (someone else’s property)’ that is largely held in our patriarchal society also contributes towards constructing the gender identity that leads to discrimination and subordination. A woman is never regarded as a permanent member of her natal family as she has to leave that family and move to her husband’s house. This gives rise to the belief that she will never contribute to the family income and instead she will take away certain part of the family income as her dowry. In contrast a male child is considered to be the saviour of the family and as a permanent member of the family, one who will contribute towards the family income and take care of aging parents. Such expected roles and identity formation leads to a stratified system where gender is placed in a hierarchical pattern (Dube, 1988).

3.4.1 The Objective Reality and Subjective Experience

It is an objective reality that women are being discriminated against and treated as subordinates in the society. This fact gets reflected in the child sex ratio across the country of India. As per the census report of 2011 the child sex ratio in the age group of 0-6 years is just 914 girls per 1,000 boys. This is more alarming in the context of the decadal decline in this ratio which was 976 in 2001. Even in states like Maharashtra which are still considered as progressive and where other development indicators are better than many other states in India, the child sex ratio stands at a meager 883 girls per 1,000 boys. In 2001 this ratio was 913. To understand the meaning of this ratio better, it should be kept in mind that as per the global trends a normal child sex ratio should be above 950. Therefore, this is an objective indicator of gender discrimination and preferential sex selection in favor of male child (Katakam, 2012).

Now one may ask that how this discrimination is manifested in lived experience of women. Do women really feel that they are being discriminated? What difference do they observe in terms of their experience in the treatment that they receive from family members? Such questions became part of a study that tried to understand the subjective experience of women vis-à-vis discrimination. The basic premise behind this study was the fact that what we believe has occurred to us is more significant than what has actually happened. This premise works at a psychological level where our perception of reality is more significant than the reality itself. Therefore it is important to know that what women perceive has happened with them in terms of discrimination and subordination.
It has been found in the study that there is a gap between the objective reality and subjective experience of that reality. This study was conducted among the girls between the age of seven and eighteen. These girls belonged to six hundred rural and urban households in eight different states in India. When they were asked that is there any gender-based discrimination that they face, then the answer was mostly ‘NO’. They did not report any difference between boys and girls with respect to health care and food either. No difference was reported in terms of rewards and punishments given to boys and girls. In the domain of education also more than seventy percent believed that education is equally important for both boys and girls.

One may wonder that instead of objective discrimination evident in the statistical data, the subjective experience is not in sync with it. Sudhir Kakar and Kathrina Kakar in their celebrated book ‘The Indians: Portrait of a People’ gives a possible explanation for such a discrepancy. They are of the view that such discrimination is not directly transformed into behaviour and is filtered and diluted through the institution of family where a girl child finds herself in a situation where one or more adult member of the family is sympathetic and loving in their behaviour and attitude towards the girl. This is perceived and memorised as instances contrary to the patriarchal dominating and discriminatory values. Also, existence of a sphere of femininity and domesticity gives women an opportunity to be productive and lively. This sphere includes other women in the household and it is here that women negotiate meaning of discrimination and subordination and their reaction towards discrimination gets diluted. However, in folklores, ballads and wedding songs women do react against discrimination by portraying men as faithless (Kakar and Kakar, 2007).

3.5 GENDER SUBORDINATION AND VULNERABILITY IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS: NEW FRONTIERS IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The discourse on gender discrimination and subordination has found some new grounds in the emerging sub-field of the ‘Anthropology of Disasters’. This new area of research tries to understand that how gender subordination leads to increased vulnerabilities in emergency situations. Disasters are seen not only in terms of hazardous climatic and man-made situations but are also largely understood as socio-economic, cultural and political vulnerabilities that are in-built in the societal structure. This view gives rise to a new understanding and analysis of women and their status in society and how this affects their vulnerability during and after natural or man-made calamities.

A study was conducted by a group of anthropologists in a flood affected district of Bahraich in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. It was a case-control study where levels of anxiety, depression and stress was measured among the flood affected and

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2 This study was a part of the European Union 6th Framework MICRODIS Project entitled-“Integrated Health, Social and Economic Impacts of Extreme Events: Evidence, Methods and Tools”. A group of Anthropologists headed by Prof. P.C. Joshi, Asia Co-ordinator of MICRODIS and Professor of Anthropology, University of Delhi conducted fieldwork in Bahraich district of Uttar Pradesh.
non-affected populations. It was found that in the flood affected zone the level of anxiety and depression and stress was more among the females than in males. The underlying reason for such a disparity was found embedded in the relative status of women in the society. The patriarchal system has clearly laid down rules for women and is almost restricted to their domestic domain. The main task of a woman is to feed their children and take care of the household.

Looking from a feminist political ecological perspective, women are seen as primary resource users and managers, and in terms of the responsibilities they have towards the dependents in the household and community (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter and Wangarai, 1996). This argument finds basis in the light of data collected from FGDs (Focused Group Discussions) among the women of flood affected area. Jum explains (name of the participant): “Men go out in order to feel some change but the mothers are the ones whom children want. As a man and a father, no one ever goes to the extent of seeking help at the cost of his self respect but women will not be able to withstand the hunger and plight of her children hence she would even beg for them in spite of being abused and ridiculed. Her only aim is to feed her children at the cost of her self esteem.” To this Sama, another participant in the FGD further adds: “There are times when the troubles of the women are more than that of men because men do not have to look after the basic needs of the children like where to feed them, what to feed them, where to make them sleep.” This exemplifies that how women subordination increases their vulnerability in the context of disasters. This is another objective reality of gender based discrimination and subordination that has obvious consequences for the well-being of women in special circumstances and for the society at large (Khattari et al., 2012).

3.6 SUMMARY

Discrimination and subordination are linked concepts. These two terms are complementary to each other. Subordination implies the “action of subordinating” or creating a hierarchy or strata. It can be argued that subordination validates discrimination. Therefore subordination becomes a tool or an ideological basis for discrimination. The very process of primary and secondary socialisation in our society clearly demarcates gender specific roles and hence creates a divide between the public and domestic domains. These two domains need to mix together. Women are actively coming forward in the public domain and its time for men to move towards the domestic domain and do not consider it something exclusively for women. It is only with this kind of sharing that we can achieve the goal of gender equality.

Gender based discrimination is a universal phenomenon with some exceptions where the status of women is to some extent equal with that of men. In the case of tribal societies in India and elsewhere as we have seen in the examples above that women have greater autonomy in these societies. We should also try to learn from these examples.

Throughout this unit we have seen that gender discrimination and subordination are embedded at the socio-structural level. The idea of gender equality enshrined in our constitution has not been fully realised. Even today we hear news of gender based discrimination in the form of sex selective abortions, female infanticide, domestic violence, molestations, rape etc. As responsible citizens of this country
it is our duty to stop such discriminatory and criminal behaviour. The first step towards this goal is to realise and understand the kinds of discriminations that are prevalent in our society and then to act accordingly. The need of the hour is to discard the patriarchal mindset and start thinking in a rational and scientific manner.

References


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**Suggested Reading**


**Sample Questions**

1) What do you mean by discrimination and subordination?

2) How are discrimination and subordination linked together?

3) Are gender discrimination and subordination universal phenomena?

4) How is the process of socialisation linked to gender discrimination and subordination?

5) What are the consequences of gender discrimination and subordination?