

Patriarchy and Gender: Exploring the Balance of Power in Heterosexual Marriages

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Abstract:

A heterosexual relationship is defined by intimacy, sex, and romance. It is commonly believed that romantic love serves as a transformative force capable of dismantling various social barriers and fostering equality between partners. In the context of working couples, the dynamics appear to be more pragmatic. This paper will be based on housewives, and it will show how a man often takes pleasure in exerting control over his wife. However, over time, men have begun to shift this perspective. They recognize that they cannot impose their will on their wives. Consequently, they seek alternative methods to maintain hegemonic influence over them. Although women of this generation assert their independence and empowerment through social and legal rights, they still experience various forms of domination. This study aims to explore the nature of this domination and its impact on the daily lives of women. The research is grounded in fieldwork conducted in 2017.

Keywords: Love, Patriarchy, Gender, and Inequality

Introduction

Love represents equality in its ideal form; however, it does not imply the absence of subordination and domination between genders, which is often perceived otherwise. This perspective is supported by numerous scholars. Langford (1999) asserts that love is inherently liberating and advantageous. Nevertheless, the current dynamics of heterosexual love challenge this notion. Love fails to create a private realm separate from the broader society, which is defined by patriarchy. Consequently, like other forms of relationships, heterosexual relationships are also influenced by power, hierarchy, and gender inequality. In this paper, the aim is to explore the social construction of the homemaker role and to comprehend how homemakers perceive love and their expectations surrounding it. Additionally, it will seek to understand the disparities between couples and analyse the challenges faced by homemakers. The primary objective is to illustrate how women, whether consciously or unconsciously, accept domination and discrimination under the guise of 'love.' To support my argument, I have conducted extensive fieldwork in a village named Matigara, located in the Siliguri subdivision of the Darjeeling district in West Bengal. The population mostly belongs to a poor middle-class economic background and are involved in agricultural activities or as labourers in the nearby city of Siliguri. The married women are mostly housewives. The field was based on convenience purposive sampling. I have utilized both primary and secondary sources for data collection. For primary data, I employed an ethnographic approach. I gathered responses from 25 (twenty-five) women residing in the area through simple random sampling. The research incorporated both interview and questionnaire methods, along with case studies. Data were collected via face-

to-face interviews, utilizing an interview schedule that comprised 41 questions, both open and closed-ended, to fulfill the objectives of my study.

Impact of patriarchy on homemakers

A homemaker is an individual responsible for managing a household. Consequently, women are often viewed as homemakers while men are seen as breadwinners (Andre 1981:46). This perception of men as the 'breadwinners' is perpetuated by men themselves. Through this ideology, women are conditioned to perform housework, although this arrangement can also provide psychological and economic support for both genders. Numerous studies indicate that girls are socialized from a young age to engage in more household chores than boys. This socialisation process imparts lessons for both genders. From childhood, boys observe their mothers and sisters performing household tasks, leading them to conclude that housework is primarily a female responsibility. In this regard, Andre (1981) argues that in the conventional family model, 'the wife is the full-time homemaker and the husband is the full-time wage earner'. Within this framework, husbands and wives are expected to fulfill distinct and complementary roles rather than identical and competitive ones, thereby fostering family stability. He further contends that the inherent biological role of women as mothers enables them to assume responsibility for the emotional well-being of family members, while fathers are tasked with ensuring financial stability. In the neo-traditional model, both husband and wife earn wages, yet the husband is still regarded as the primary breadwinner and the wife as the primary homemaker (Andre 1981:142). Thus, a traditional system has established the notion that housework is exclusively a female domain, with men occasionally assisting in these tasks. This paradigm persists in contemporary society. However, due to various feminist movements and the influence of media, there have been some shifts in the idealised role of a homemaker. Therefore, I will endeavor to analyse the role of housewives as homemakers and also seek to comprehend the recent challenges and issues they encounter.

Role of a homemaker

The position of a homemaker holds significant importance in a traditional household, as it contributes to the peace, happiness, and stability of the family unit. A homemaker is defined as an individual who oversees all domestic responsibilities and performs the majority of household tasks. As noted by Andre (1981), 'Housework takes place in the physical and mental peace we call 'home' and it is intimately related to the important values people hold about the home as a place for satisfying physical and psychological needs' (Andre 1981:45). According to Jaiswal and Singh (2016), homemakers are often restricted to domestic environments and are responsible for managing all household duties. The primary focus of a homemaker is the upbringing of children and the maintenance of the household. Homemakers are often conditioned to adopt an ideology that accepts their role and permits their subjugation. Geetha (2007) further contends that men frequently seek to validate and rationalize the notion that women are inherently more suited for caregiving within the family. She also emphasizes that women are perceived as affectionate figures and symbols of beauty, and they are encouraged

to aspire to be exemplary homemakers, adhering to societal ideals throughout their lives. However, it is essential to recognize that the home is often the starting point of inequality. The predominant challenges faced by homemakers include the unequal distribution of labor, their unpaid contributions which exacerbate their social vulnerability, a lack of decision-making authority, and the dominating influence of their husbands, both emotionally and sexually. I will now elaborate on each of these issues in detail. Homemaking is considered as a full-time job. A homemaker is always on duty and there is no concept of holidays from work. Even if she goes for vacation she has to look after her children and also her husband's needs. Whenever the wife is not at home or goes to visit her maternal home, the husband may work but only as a substitute for few days until his wife returns and joins her duty. The homemakers neither get any salary nor pensions or any special benefits such as insurances or credits. There is no scope for the individual's upward mobility for doing housework. The husbands are seen as the 'bosses' in the family. As the homemaker is not a wage earner her status is considered low since her work at home is unpaid. Often the housework is not calculated and sidelined from this notion of equality. Due to the women's movement, there has been an increase in the number of women in paid work, but equality in housework is still not achieved. Moreover, the unpaid labour of women's work in households increases their social insecurity, and they become more dependent on their husbands.

The authority to make decisions serves as a significant element when evaluating the power dynamics between couples. It has been noted that while housewives engage in various tasks, they are not entrusted with the overall responsibility for the decision-making process. For example, choices regarding hiring a servant or purchasing different household items are often made by the husband. The decision-making authority of homemakers is considerably limited. Despite the considerable effort homemakers put into their work, they lack the right to make decisions concerning family matters. There are instances where women may offer suggestions prior to decisions being made, yet these are frequently disregarded by their husbands, highlighting the lack of agency women have in making their decisions effective. The decisions made collaboratively tend to be minor ones that husbands do not prioritize, while they retain control over significant decisions such as acquiring land, buying a car, or obtaining insurance, among others. Furthermore, women's lack of awareness also contributes to their diminished power. Women often lack the confidence to make major decisions themselves, leading them to relinquish this authority to their husbands without voicing any objections.

The primary issue faced by homemakers is the unpaid labor they perform at home. While women may receive assistance from their families and have some personal spending money, they remain reliant on their husbands or family members. As noted by Andre (1981), compensating homemakers for their work would foster their independence and provide them with a sense of security. This financial autonomy would enable them to purchase essential items, thereby allowing homemakers to integrate into the economic mainstream (Andre 1981:111). Regrettably, it has been observed that numerous homemakers lack access to and control over resources. In this context Emma Goldman as cited by Andre (1981) said,

‘Marriage is primarily an economic arrangement, an insurance pact. It differs from the ordinary life-insurance agreement only in that it is more binding, more exacting. Its returns are significantly small compared with the investments. In taking out an insurance policy one pays for it dollars and cents, always at liberty to discontinue payments. If, however, women’s premium is a husband, she pays for it with her name, her privacy, her self-respect, her very life, “until death doth part.” (Andre 1981:14)

Consequently, this comparison between marriage and insurance reveals that women offer their entire selves—privacy, respect, career aspirations, and dreams—as premiums to ensure their husband's happiness, while they merely seek a small amount of love in return. Research indicates that 21 out of 25 homemakers are aware of their husbands' financial deposits. However, only two of these women possess joint life insurance. The remaining homemakers lack any form of social security. Their husbands hold land and property in their names. The husbands provide a certain amount of money to their wives as pocket money, when necessary, which serves as the sole source of income for these housewives. This situation illustrates that homemakers lack control over asset ownership, rendering them financially dependent on their husbands.

Nonetheless, household chores can be beneficial for women who are economically disadvantaged and have limited education. While modern appliances like mixers and crushers assist in alleviating the burden of household tasks and saving time, activities such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry often become tedious for them. If women were granted some respite from these daily responsibilities, they could engage in more fulfilling activities that they enjoy, such as handicrafts, knitting, or preparing special dishes. Furthermore, women have the potential to professionalize their efforts, enhancing the quality and creativity of their domestic work; however, regrettably, their skills and dedication often go unrecognized. The respondents express a sense of disappointment, feeling that their educational shortcomings hinder their job prospects. Additionally, they perceive household chores as a significant burden, one that their husbands would struggle to manage even for a single day. Consequently, they would appreciate it if their domestic labor were compensated, as this would provide them with a degree of economic independence.

Various forms of housework commence in the morning and continue until nightfall. A typical day for a homemaker starts with her rising early in the morning to clean the house. Following this, she prepares breakfast and tiffin for her husband and children. Subsequently, she gets her children ready for school. She also organizes and gathers the necessary items for her husband to take to the office. Therefore, the morning hours represent the busiest period for housewives. Once her husband and children have left, she attends to other minor tasks and then prepares lunch. If time permits before her children return, she may take a break by watching television. Later, when her children and husband come back home, she serves dinner and cleans the dishes. In the evening, she might engage in conversation with her neighbors, and at night, she prepares dinner once more. This illustrates an unequal distribution of labor. Based on my research, all 25 respondents surveyed indicated that they engage in cooking and other household chores daily. Their husbands do not assist with cooking but

occasionally participate in other tasks such as gardening or repairs. The majority of grocery shopping is conducted by husbands, as women are often occupied with other responsibilities.

According to Coltrane and Collins (2001), the primary household tasks include meal preparation, grocery shopping, dishwashing, and laundry. This routine work is not only time-consuming but also less optional, as it cannot be skipped or postponed. In contrast, tasks such as gardening, bill payment, or repairs, which are predominantly performed by men, can be delayed (Coltrane and Collins 2001:382). Consequently, this situation provides men with greater freedom to avoid the tedious and repetitive daily chores. Whatever men do is often perceived as merely 'helping hands' for women. Many housewives believe they are performing housework for the sake of their loved ones, even though they do not always find it enjoyable. Women exhibit mixed feelings regarding the unequal distribution of labor within the household. While women typically handle all household tasks daily, men tend to contribute only on weekends (Coltrane and Collins 2001:384). Women generally regard cooking as a more favorable task compared to others, whereas men prefer childcare over cleaning toilets, doing laundry, or washing dishes.

Women appreciate trustworthy men. They desire a husband who is both friendly and supportive; however, the dynamics often shift after marriage. Men may begin to assert dominance over their wives, relishing the power that comes with it. This observation is supported by my field data. When I surveyed 25 homemakers regarding their feelings about being controlled by their husbands and the legitimacy of such control, seven out of the twenty-five expressed that their husbands' authority is 'appropriate' and that they should comply to prevent family discord. Seven women indicated that they do not venture outside frequently, which limits their understanding of the outside world, leading them to believe it is wiser to heed their husbands' advice. They trust that their husbands will always act in their best interests. Conversely, 18 out of 25 homemakers disagreed with the notion of control being 'appropriate,' asserting that every individual should have the freedom to make their own choices. Some mentioned that they do not adhere to every directive from their husbands, as it often depends on the topic at hand. A few noted that to fulfill other responsibilities, they sometimes find themselves opposing their husbands. Therefore, while these women recognize that their husbands' control over various aspects of their lives is not 'correct' and that they should maintain some independence, they simultaneously harbor a belief that they are granted 'freedom' when necessary. This sentiment may stem from the love and affection their husbands demonstrate towards them.

Ensuring her husband's happiness is a primary responsibility for a homemaker. For instance, this includes dressing in a manner that pleases her husband, preparing meals according to his preferences, catering to his sexual desires, and engaging in various activities that he enjoys. In the process, she often sacrifices her individuality, self-respect, and independence. Concerning attire, 11 out of 25 homemakers reported that their in-laws preferred them to wear saris, while they themselves preferred salwar-suits and nightwear. Interestingly, their husbands also expressed a desire for them to don modern clothing. Some couples choose to wear contemporary outfits during outings. A few mentioned that their husbands encouraged them to wear what they

liked, while two out of 25 indicated that they strive to please both sides. Eight homemakers admitted to dressing according to the preferences of family members, as they lack the courage to voice their opinions to their in-laws and husbands, thus complying with their wishes. This illustrates the subordinate status of homemakers, where their right to choose their attire is not acknowledged. They even hesitate to engage in discussions about it. Consequently, their emotions are stifled, gradually fostering an emotional rift between the couples. The homemakers often feel isolated, keeping their feelings to themselves, which leads to a forced adjustment with their husbands and families.

Women are frequently regarded as 'household managers'. In families where some household responsibilities are shared by husbands, wives often worry about whether these tasks are completed properly. Husbands typically require guidance on what needs to be accomplished. Women plan meals based on the preferences of family members. They organize the home and manage domestic affairs. There are only a few instances where men engage in household chores. According to Colltrane and Collins (2001), husbands frequently assert that they cannot perform household tasks as neatly as their wives. Rather than improving their skills, men tend to flatter their wives by expressing gratitude for having a partner who manages the home so effectively. The husband acknowledges and appreciates her efforts and occasionally presents her with gifts. This behavior can be seen as a form of manipulation, encouraging their wives to continue performing household duties willingly and keeping them away from public life (Colltrane and Collins 2001:387). They further contend that women uphold their standards of cleanliness, which limits men's ability to improve or learn household tasks. Wives, acting as managers, often voice complaints about the minimal contributions made by their husbands, thereby reinforcing their dominance in private spheres. They also imply that women undertake household responsibilities in exchange for the financial support they receive from their husbands. The individual who can strategically allocate household tasks with minimal conflict wields greater power within the family. Consequently, this power remains concealed or invisible. Through this hidden influence, men typically distance themselves from all forms of household work, perpetuating the false notion that their contributions are more beneficial for the family. Wives often discourage their husbands from participating in housework.

The couples are dedicated to their lifelong marriage, adhering to the ideal that they should remain together until death parts them. Homemakers are responsible for caring for the children and also attend to their husbands' emotional needs, ensuring they feel comfortable upon returning home from work. In my research, homemakers generally expressed that they experience greater marital satisfaction when their husbands assist with household chores. Their husbands have not assumed responsibility for daily housework, possibly due to the lingering belief that such duties fall primarily to women. Marital satisfaction is further supported by their sexual relationships. According to my findings, three out of twenty-five respondents rated their sex life as excellent, while eleven described it as 'very good', six as 'good', and the remaining respondents categorized it as 'average'. Therefore, the majority of women report being satisfied with their sexual experiences. Although they sometimes feel compelled, they interpret this pressure as an expression of love. They mentally perceive that fulfilling their

husbands' happiness is their obligation, and in doing so, they hope to receive affection in return from their husbands.

In contemporary society, the majority of households consist of nuclear families, which contributes to the feelings of isolation experienced by women due to the lack of assistance or communication. In certain instances, if a woman resides in a neighborhood with other homemakers, they may occasionally engage in conversation for a change of pace. Wives often assert that their husbands enjoy more leisure time than they do. The division of labor between spouses does not guarantee an equitable distribution of tasks. Typically, women undertake a greater share of household responsibilities compared to men. Furthermore, wives tend to accept this imbalanced and unjust division of labor because they lack authority. Women frequently feel reluctant to request assistance from their husbands upon their return home, leading them to take on the 'extra work' themselves. Consequently, the leisure time that was originally designated for them becomes consumed by this additional workload. Although both men and women may spend the same amount of time engaged in their respective tasks, husbands often refuse to participate in household duties after their workday, viewing it as a 'second shift.' Men are generally unwilling to sacrifice their leisure time for extra responsibilities. Instead, they often prefer to socialize with friends, while women dedicate their entire day and night to managing domestic affairs.

The dynamics of power between a husband and wife can be analysed through the lens of their sexual relationship. Engaging in marital sex enhances the emotional connection between partners. Who takes the lead in initiating sexual activity? How frequently do they engage in sexual intercourse? Are the desires of the wife considered in these interactions? These are some of the inquiries posed during the interview process. Regarding the first question, it was discovered that men typically initiate sex more frequently than women, who often decline. My research indicates that out of 25 women surveyed, 10 reported that their husbands initiate sexual encounters, while 12 stated that they make decisions together, and the remaining three respondents did not provide an answer. This may be attributed to the fact that men generally possess a stronger sex drive than women and are also socialized to take the initiative. There are both sociological and biological factors that contribute to this phenomenon. The external social environment shapes women's feelings, experiences, expressions, and reactions to their husbands' behaviors. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that when women step outside traditional norms and initiate sex 'too often,' they may face negative responses, whereas men do not encounter the same backlash for similar behavior (Colltrane and Collins 2001:298). The act of men initiating sex also serves as an indicator of power dynamics. The socialisation process for women often discourages them from expressing their desire to initiate sexual activity (Colltrane and Collins 2001:298).

Men often feel entitled to demand sex, whether through coercion or consent, while women frequently feel compelled to provide it in order to sustain the relationship (Colltrane and Collins 2001:300). Among the respondents, 15 out of 25 indicated that their choice to engage in sexual activity is respected, whereas five reported that their decisions are disregarded, and the remaining five did not respond. Discussing private lives remains a sensitive topic in our society. Nevertheless, those who stated that they experience coercion in sexual

matters mentioned that men perceive sex as a source of pleasure for themselves and a duty for women. Consequently, the findings from this sensitive topic may not be entirely reliable. Numerous factors contribute to this situation. However, experts in intimate relationships have suggested that, on many occasions, the honeymoon phase can be traumatic for women, leading to negative sexual experiences (Colltrane and Collins 2001:307). Marriage is often viewed as an institution characterized by sexual possessiveness. As a result, husbands may regard their wives as permanent possessions, both sexually and emotionally, labeling this as 'love.' For men, sex is often seen as a recreational activity, a source of enjoyment, and an act of conquest, while for women, it can sometimes transform into a painful experience rather than one of fulfillment. Men are more inclined to pressure women into sexual encounters, yet women may engage in sex even when they do not desire it for themselves. The typical frequency of sexual activity within marriage is once or twice a week. However, it has been observed that younger married couples tend to have sex more frequently than their older counterparts (Colltrane and Collins 2001).

One of the participants in my research recounted her experience of her initial wedding night. She felt exhausted from the various rituals associated with their marriage, and thus desired to rest and sleep. However, her husband was quite enthusiastic about their first night together and did not wish to ruin the occasion, so he proceeded to engage in sexual activity despite her objections. The participant felt anger towards her husband. Her first sexual experience was extremely distressing. She was upset that her husband failed to comprehend her feelings and that she was involved in sexual activity without her consent. This situation occurred multiple times after their marriage. Over time, she has managed to adapt to engaging in sexual activities with her husband.

Conclusion

The labour performed at home is not compensated and frequently goes unnoticed by those who benefit from it. It has been observed that love and romance tend to gradually fade, as premarital affection stems from emotional experiences, but after marriage, it transforms into a laborious effort to maintain the family. The home is a setting where power is distributed unequally, leading to struggles and conflicts. One is required to undertake various tasks at home, such as cleaning, shopping for daily necessities, and other chores. Research indicates that this labour is comparable to the time invested in paid employment; however, domestic work remains unpaid. Feminists contend that if domestic labor were compensated, women would gain more empowerment and a better standing in society. Nevertheless, housework often goes unrecognized because it is presumed that wives will perform family duties without charge for their husbands. Husbands typically handle external work while wives manage domestic responsibilities. Consequently, there is no competition between them in conflicting situations. In contemporary times, husbands do contribute some time to household tasks, yet they do not regard it as a responsibility. Therefore, the division of labor and the obligations associated with household tasks shape the power dynamics within the home. The partner who shirks household responsibilities is a clear indication of who holds power in the household.

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