

## Gender Role Expectations within the Institution of Marriage

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**ABSTRACT** This paper aims to observe gender roles in the institution of marriage and investigates how fairly these are distributed to wives and husbands. The paper argues that gender roles are socially and culturally constructed, disadvantaging women as compared to men. The paper is of the opinion that, in addition to the household chores and the upbringing of children, women continue to provide care that directly impact on men's well-being. The present study, therefore, explores the issues of motherhood and the reliance of men on gender roles that are more in their favour. The research further explores gender relations that are skewed in favour of men, and argues that this is the result of the historically evolved system of patriarchy and male hegemony.

### INTRODUCTION

Gender roles are socially constructed, which implies that each society allocates roles to girls and boys, men and women according to what the society considers appropriate. If gender roles are historically and culturally specific and what it means to be a man or a woman varies over place and time, definitely these variations need to be investigated. Unequal roles are allocated to members of society and are learnt through the process of socialization. These gender roles are differentiated and allocated according to what is considered suitable for men and women. Women are generally allocated roles that are primarily with household chores and nurturing, while men are allocated roles that are associated with the public domain.

Besides, men are allocated roles that are considered to be masculine, such as providing for, and protecting the family. The concept of gender was used over the past two decades by social scientists to describe a fundamental axis of social differentiation alongside class and race. Many sociologists and psychologists used gender synonymous with socialization.

Gender was seen as boys and girls being socialized into different roles which are gendered. On that notion, gender was a social construct hence gender differences were seen as the product of social relations (Flax 2000).

For a long time, there were roles taken as suitable for men or women. Attention has been focused on the ways in which masculinity and femininity are using gender as a set of roles into

which people are socialized. Feminist paradigms have characterized gender relations as relations of inequality and subordination (Hill-Collins 2000). Hill-Collins, further, defines the social organization of gender as the social construction of sexuality and kinship. Gender differentiation is inextricably intertwined with politics of domination and subordination.

Gender roles are infringed in the word 'equality'. South Africa's definition of goals towards achieving gender equality is guided by a vision of human rights which incorporates acceptance of equal and inalienable rights of all women and men. This ideal is a fundamental tenet under the Bill of Rights of 1996 (Act of 1996) of South Africa. This Act promotes that the democratic society should respect the rights of all its citizens irrespective of race, gender, class, age, disability, etc. However, this bill does not specifically deal with gender oppression where women are subservient to their male counterparts. The constitution is also silent when it comes to the distribution of family chores. In most cases, it favours the present patriarchal allocation of family chores.

Gender roles have caused a big confusion to most of South Africans. Men pretend not to understand that gender roles are culturally designed and that culture is never static but dynamic. The oppression of women, that was traditionally constructed, does no longer fit the modern family. The ever-changing concept of motherhood also has to be looked at in the context of the evolutionary nature of the family since it was conceptualized (see Collins 2000).

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MARRIAGE

Marriage is known as a social and legal agreement between a man and a woman with the sole purpose of having a family. It is a kind of social institute where interpersonal relationships, (intimate and sexual) are acknowledged in different ways, depending on the culture in which it is found. Marriage entails the process of wedding and other customary actions to seal the bond between the married couple. Marriage creates legal obligations between those who get married. In some societies, the obligations go to an extent of binding the family members of the married people.

Most of societies see marriage as a sacrament, a contract, a sacred institution or a covenant, while others sees it as a serious and major covenant between man and God, and a final seal that ensures procreation.

The issue of marriage should be seen in the context of what motherhood means in our societies. The concept of motherhood and womanhood cannot be divorced from the relationship between the wife and the husband. This relationship, in most cases, is more inclined towards a patriarchal discourse (Ramaite 2010). Historical evidence is filled with overlapping of meanings around women's roles. In South Africa, the concept of motherhood (or womanhood) was first put into perspective by women's organizations such as the African National Congress (ANCWL) and Imbeleko, to mention just but a few. These organizations helped to bring into sharper focus women's socio-political identity, and a gendered struggle which women played and continue to play within the larger or broader context of the liberation struggle. The "triple" position that women played, that is, that of homemakers, wives, and later workers, was bearing heavily on the shoulders of women (Thobejane 2012).

Ramaite (2010) argues that women bring life to this world and they have a duty to make sure that life is preserved and protected. Women, therefore, have to come together regardless of their colour, creed or religion, to look at their collective form of oppression and subjugation in order for them to challenge the forces that keep them at the periphery of development.

Women are in agreement that mothers have to nurture, to preserve and to protect because

they are mothers and life-givers at the same time. The present paper therefore seeks to de-bunk the myth of what womanhood is all about. This process of exposing the myth will help in locating the constructions of "womanhood" or "motherhood" within the confines of patriarchal discourses and probably set the tone for an anti-sexist approach in the broader struggle for democracy.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been various definitions and approaches to the concept of motherhood. This concept encapsulates family systems and productive rights. This is done to understand genders role expectations within the institution of marriage and what constitutes motherhood. Motherhood may also mean the process of procreation and childbirth (Mojapelo 2011:77; Maqubela 2014).

Motherhood, when used in revolutionary terms, may be defined as a concept that rallies women against all the forces that militate against them. However, in practice, it may mean emotional care and nurturing of the offsprings. A mother may be defined as a person responsible for the nurturing of kids, taking care of family needs, and household chores. A good mother is seen as a woman who does care physically for her children (Maqubela 2014).

Further, little is said about men who should do the same because of the patriarchal beliefs that are so embedded in our psyche. Before delving deeper into the various definitions and cultural contexts of motherhood and/or womanhood, it is befitting to try and understand terminologies such as sex and gender which are interchangeably used (Mojapelo 2011).

### SEX AND GENDER AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

The term sex and gender are commonly used interchangeably by feminist scholars. Social scientists make a distinction between these concepts. Sex refers to the biological characteristic of being female or male. Gender refers to masculinity and femininity- the social characteristics associated with being male or female. Most of the cultures have traditionally associated instrumental character traits, skills that are goal and task oriented, character traits that involve nur-

turing and sensitivity, have been traditionally associated with the female sex. Gender roles are associated with social responsibility. Women, for instance, have been expected to assume most of the responsibility for child care, because nurturing has been expected to put their energy into protecting and providing for the family (Mojapelo 2011:85). In the Western countries during the early part of the twentieth century, it has been generally accepted and natural that men would leave their homes to provide for their families. Women need to balance their desire to be employed or the economic necessity of employment against a cultural expectation that their primary responsibility is to nurture their families.

For thousands of years prior to industrialization, both men and women participated in the provision of food, shelter and clothing for the families. Most of this production took place in the household. There was no discussion about women, or for that matter men working outside the home, because most of the work that needed to be done was done at home. People who were not employed were involved in maintaining the home and producing goods and services for their families and others (Demmitt 2003). Recently, women find themselves participating in both gender roles, whether they are employed or not. Men are sometimes unemployed, staying at home for the whole day and not participating in anything, but expect their wives to do everything for them. This expectation may be resulting from the historically evolved system of patriarchy and the gendered division of labour within the household. Historically, the married woman remained at home to do housework and rear children. Before industrialization, women produced goods and income by working on family farms. That effort extended to the caring of the sick and the older persons in their families (Demmitt 2003).

Many women are unfairly treated, and they are fully aware of their frustrating situation. A woman in most societies is the first to wake up, works hard for the whole day, serves meals for the family but is the last to eat if there is any food left and is also the last to retire. The lifestyle is quite bad for her physical and mental health status. Division of labour between men and women would seem to occur in all societies, from the ancestral hunter-gatherer pattern to agricultural and herding societies, through to the industrialized world. The form it takes is variable (Demmitt 2003).

In the social sciences, there is a long tradition of explanations for the origins of gender roles that have concentrated on patriarchy, and male domination of women. The origins of gender roles are bonded with the origins of male domination and the division into the public and domestic sphere of work (Hill-Collins 2002). The role of housewife is described in terms of four characteristics (Oakley 1977a). Firstly, it is allocated almost exclusively to women and secondly it is associated with economic dependence because the homemaker must lean on her husband for support. Thirdly, it is defined generally as non-work or as not real work. This is illustrated by the responses given by some of the homemakers when they are asked if they work. They respond by saying they do not work and that they are just homemakers. House-care and child-care are considered as primary responsibilities of the housemaker and are expected to take priority over anything else that a woman does.

Many people act as if patriarchy is not there because it is a silent predator in many families. Men oppress women, abuse them overwork them unnecessarily and when they meet people outside, they pretend to be a kind and loving to their families. As long as this practice continues to happen, patriarchy and oppression of women will never end (Thobejane 2012).

### GENDER ROLES AND THE FAMILY

Gender is a word which, until very recently, was rarely used by people in everyday life. In technical writings, the two are often used interchangeably and confusingly. Women's work, in most instances, is not valued in spite of the fact that this is the engine that keeps most of the families going. For women, this is one of the many ways in which they and their contribution remain undervalued. Researchers suggest that women are mainly or solely responsible for three quarters of all housework (Ramaite 2010). There are also major differences between the kinds of domestic tasks performed by men and women. Family diversity is a social fact, but this reality is often obscured by a set of taken for granted beliefs about the family. Together, these beliefs represent a set of cultural assumptions about how families are and should be. When people refer to "the family", they often have a nuclear family in mind, consisting of wife, husband and children. A family is therefore construed as a

heterosexual unit, containing one woman and one man. Women are mothers and family caretakers, and men are fathers and breadwinners.

### **Patriarchal Relations**

The system of patriarchy was conceptualized as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. There are six structures of patriarchy; that are household production, Gender relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions (Walby 2004). The domestic gender setup is based upon the exploitation of a woman's labour and sexuality. The household does not cease to be a relevant structure in the public form. In the domestic form, the beneficiaries are primarily men (Maqubela 2014).

### **Marriage in South Africa**

Within the South African context, there are three kinds of marriage contracts in South Africa. The civil marriage (marriage without a joint agreement), the customary marriage, and the religious marriage, which may be Christian, Jewish or Muslim. The State recognizes the civil or traditional customary marriage and Religious marriages. Legally, women get married at the age of fifteen and men, at the age of eighteen. The consent of both parties is required before marriage. There are certain ethnic groups that allow earlier marriages. Although arranged marriages are not encouraged, they still exist within other religious groupings.

Customary marriages oblige a widow to marry another man who is a family member after her husband's death. Polygamy is prohibited in civil marriage but practiced within customary marriages (Ramaite 2010). In both of these marriages, women are at the forefront of rearing their siblings as well as making sure that household chores are done. This, in spite of the fact that they are not getting paid for their labour.

Inheritance rights of married women in South Africa differ according different types of marriages. In civil marriages, Women either inherit half of their household property (in community of property system) or keep their own property, which is called separation property. In customary marriage, widows have no access to any

inheritance. The family controls the deceased's property such as immovable property or livestock. A son to the deceased or any male member of the family manages the property. The widow and her daughters can access the property through a will. The gender roles put a woman in a position where she is to be responsible for doing all household work (Maqubela 2014). This paper suggests that some of these marriage laws that are somewhat gender stereotypic have to be re-visited in order that there is gender parity between women and men.

### **Gender Oppression**

The dominant patriarchal structures within marriage may be seen as responsible for women's subjugation and oppression. Most of the women have been unable to spend time to talk about the alternative conceptualizations of marriage within their socio-cultural milieus. They should empower themselves to challenge the long held patriarchal beliefs that are alienating and oppressive to them. By so doing, this will undoubtedly set them on a path to reconceptualizing relations of power in the society. Their experience as mothers, community leaders and nurturers can enable them to resist oppression. Women headed households can be further empowered to challenge the masculinist society which is a result of many years of patriarchal domination.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present paper investigates gender roles that are socially and culturally constructed and also disadvantage women more than men. The paper is of the opinion that in addition to the household chores and the upbringing of children, women continue to provide care that directly impacts on men's well-being and their families at large. The paper is also of the opinion that to transcend gender stereotypes, both men and women have to embrace egalitarian ideals that are devoid of sexism, classism and racism.

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