

Gender Roles In Contemporary Societies

Posted on October 10, 2019

Introduction

In all societies of the world today, there are certain notions about the societal roles of men and women. These roles are very different from one another and correspond to varying beliefs about each of the sexes. People in society have certain expectations from both men as well as women regarding the activities that they are supposed to engage in, the roles that they are supposed to perform, the way they are supposed to dress, talk, walk, and so on. These gender roles are often times very rigid and work in the favor of men. They are suppressive and sometimes oppressive to women and perpetuate patriarchy, thereby excluding women from the most important activities of society and community.

The common explanation provided to justify such gender roles and norms is that they correspond to nature. Women are, for example, confined to the domestic sphere because the idea is that they are naturally weak and taking care of the house and bearing children is their natural duty. This paper argues against such perceptions. It seeks to prove, through using examples of our ancient ancestors, that women are just as capable as men are. They are equally competent, and gender roles are not natural. They do not correspond to the natural behavior of males and females, rather they are set in place by the men to perpetuate and uphold patriarchy in a way that they can benefit from it.

Gender Roles Of Contemporary Societies

Gender roles are cultural in the sense that they vary from culture to culture. What women do in one society might be very different from what they do in another. Or what is acceptable in one culture might be something completely condemned in another. In American societies, for example, it is okay for women to go out of their houses, get a job, earn their own living, be independent, wear jeans and shorts, and so on. In Middle Eastern societies, Saudi Arabia in particular, a woman is not even able to think of doing these things. A society in which women are punished even if their skin shows slightly is very different from a society in which seeing women in bikinis is very common (Rose, 2010). This stark contrast between America and Saudi Arabia proves how gender roles can vary considerably depending on the cultural contexts being analyzed. However, despite these sharp differences, it has been observed throughout the world that gender roles in most societies of the world promote patriarchy. They work towards suppressing women, alienating them and treating them as being inferior to men.

In the contemporary societies of today, the common perception is that men are supposed to be the breadwinners of the house whereas the women are the homemakers. The justification provided for

the perpetuation of such ideas is that the natural responsibility of women is giving birth to children. Since their bodies are naturally designed to perform this function, it is only natural for them to be better at child rearing as well. Thus, it makes sense for them to stay at home while the male members of their households go out and earn money to feed them and their children. Moreover, women are considered to be impure because of their bodies and sexuality. This is another reason provided to keep them confined within their homes. Sometimes religion is used to justify female subordination, at other times culture. The usage of culture is particularly interesting.

If the culture of our ancient ancestors is considered, one realizes that women were not at all subordinated during those times. In fact, they used to actively engage in all the activities that the men engaged in. They were neither considered to be inferior to men nor were they deemed to be less capable. Both men and women were equally respected during those times and the contribution of both the sexes towards the community was the same. The women even used to engage in physically challenging and arduous activities. The details of their social position and perception during the time period of hunters and gatherers will be discussed in the following section of the paper in greater detail and depth.

Gender Roles During The Time Of Hunters And Gatherers

The earliest historical records of humankind that exist go back all the way to the time period of people who practiced hunting and gathering. Before discussing the gendered division of labour among these people, it is important to give a brief introduction to what their lifestyle was like. People of ancient times were engaged in hunting and gathering practices about ten thousand years before agricultural practices came into being. The hunters used to travel the land and look for game that could be hunted and consumed by the humans whereas the gatherers used to search for plants and herbs that could be gathered and prepared to be eaten. These people kept travelling around according to their consumption needs (Devlin, 2015). They used to stop at points where abundant game and plants could be found. They would move from the area only when it ran out of resources. Since they had to constantly move around all the time, their homes were made out of sticks and large leaves that could be used for sheltering purposes. They were rather temporary and easily movable.

Though men and women were treated equally during those times, their roles were significantly defined and well differentiated from each other's. The women were, for instance, responsible for gathering plants, herbs and shrubs that had to be prepared for consumption as well as for the preparation of food. They also had the duty of giving birth to and raising children. The men, on the other hand, were responsible for hunting animals that could be eaten later on, together with the items gathered by the women (Botting, 2016). Because the men were physically stronger, it only made sense for them to travel to far-off places and hunt down animals, something which required a lot of energy.

However, it is important to note that oftentimes, the women had to perform extremely physically challenging tasks as well, given the arduous topography of the land of the time period. Finding and extracting plants from the ground required not only a significant amount of strength but patience as well, which the men often did not have. Moreover, there have been records of women sometimes practising hunting as well. In the area which has today become the Philippines, historical records show that women used to practice hunting together with the men. They used to aid men in hunting, but the men restricted themselves to hunting only; they did not help out the women in gathering plants. This shows that women, even several thousand years ago, were more capable and had greater potential as compared to men.

Even though gender roles at that time were strictly defined and divided, society was a lot more egalitarian as compared to the societies of today. The social standing of both men and women was equal and no one group had power over the other one. No one was considered to be superior, and no one was considered to be inferior. There was equality and that is something to be appreciated. Every single person, regardless of gender, age, or kin group, had equal power as well as respect. The hunted animals and the gathered plants were always divided equally among all members of the group which is why there were no class divisions either (Botting, 2016). Everybody had equal wealth, equal power and equal respect. Everything was shared, and there was greater solidarity among the people. Even those who hunted or captured the animals or the women who gathered the plants were not given special praise or extra respect. Examples of such cases are present in the ancient records of the African Kung society. The person bringing in the food was not praised, nor was he/she given more food as compared to others. Instead, all of it was distributed equally amongst all the members of the society, something which was essential for engendering group solidarity and unity.

Many historians, scientists and anthropologists agree that the societies of the hunters and gatherers were based on enlightened principles of equality and egalitarianism. According to the information derived from the historical records of these ancient societies, the idea that the concept of gender equality is new is challenged. The historical information available to us today suggests that gender equality has, in fact, been the norm for our ancestral societies. This means that though a fraction of the entire population of the world has come to realize that patriarchy is wrong and oppresses women, this perception is not at all new (Devlin, 2015). This was the view of the people before technological advancement began. This view prevailed in all ancient communities since the time of the Ice Age until agricultural practices came about. With the advent of agriculture, gender roles evolved. The ways in which they changed put the men at an advantage. The next section of the paper discusses the evolution of gender roles with the passage of time and the ways in which they made people move away from egalitarianism.

The Road From Australopithecus To Homosapiens

The Evolutionary theory of Darwinism shows that human beings were once similar to animals that resembled monkeys. Biological as well as historical evidence shows that the earliest form of human

beings that existed about four million years ago from today was called Australopithecus. Australopithecus are a group of species very similar to apes that are obviously extinct now. It has been proven that human beings are actually descendants of Australopithecus. According to fossil evidence, Australopithecus had the traits of both human beings as well as apes. Australopithecus are believed to be the earliest ancestors of human beings (Falk, 2012). As time passed, they began to evolve, which caused their physical features to change. Over the course of thousands of years, they kept on evolving and their brains became more developed. They gained certain characteristics that helped them to think better and made them smarter and more innovative. From Australopithecus, they became evolved into Homo Habilis. These species were still very similar to apes but had significant differences from the Australopithecus species. Their fossils were discovered in about 1959 in Tanzania, and archaeologists claimed, after analyzing them, that Homo habilis must have existed around two or three million years ago. Because genetic similarities were found with Australopithecus, biologists claimed that they are an evolved version of them. The main differences of Homo habilis and Australopithecus are in terms of their physical structures. Homo habilis are more similar to human beings than Australopithecus. The main evidence that proves their existence, as well as the fact that they were a form of Australopithecus, is their bones, which were found in parts of Africa around 1963. Anthropologists worked together with historians to draw the links between them and Australopithecus and showed how the Australopithecus had evolved into Homo habilis.

Homo habilis, in the same way, evolved and developed further physical traits over the years. Their later forms came to be known as Homo erectus, Neanderthal and Homo sapiens, respectively. Each of these species is associated with different levels of biological development of human beings. The Homo sapiens are the species who have the greatest similarities with human beings. It is the Homo sapiens who developed certain physical traits that eventually made them smarter, innovative and intelligent. As their brains developed, they came up with more advanced lifestyles. It is these physical changes that have brought human beings to the point where they stand today. They helped the human race advance from simple lifestyles to more advanced and complex ones. All of these have been proven through archaeological and fossil evidence. The bones and remains of Australopithecus as well as homo sapiens, were found in various parts of the world, particularly in Africa. They were analyzed and used to draw conclusions about human ancestors and their evolutionary trajectories. The end result was the creation of the human beings (Falk, 2012).

Before the homo sapiens became evolved into human beings, they were also living an egalitarian lifestyle. In fact, they did not even differentiate between men and women. Their lifestyles were close to those of animals. There were no social divisions whatsoever, nobody was marginalized, and everybody had equal power and authority. Gender roles can be traced to some extent in the sense that the women remained closer to the children and seemed to be looking after them. But that is primarily because they breastfed them. After a couple of years, however, the young ones became distant from their mothers and lived amongst others. In fact, it might even be argued that they did not differentiate between their parents and other adults. Everybody was the same for them. Moreover, everybody engaged in the same kinds of activities as one another. The males also did what the females did and vice versa.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the ancestors of human beings that lived on the earth millions of years ago from today. By discussing some of their features and lifestyles, it has been shown that they did not have any divisions based on differences of sex among them. The social standing of men, women and even children was the same. Their lives were highly egalitarian as compared to those of the human beings of today. What is important to note here is the fact that the people living in the simple societies were, in fact, much better off than us today. We only tend to view them as primitive and uncivilized. However, upon closer examination, one realizes that their ways were much better than ours. There was no oppression, suppression, marginalization or exclusion. Everybody participated equally in all activities. Furthermore, the argument that perpetrators of patriarchal norms present by saying that it is only natural for women to remain at home is completely ruled out when one considers the lifestyle of the human ancestors who lived millions of years ago. Though the gender roles of males and females were different then, and they can still be different today, this by no means suggests or should be taken to mean that women are somehow inferior to men. Historical and anthropological evidence shows that women are just as capable and competent as men are, which is why gender roles in today's societies should be a bit more relaxed.

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