

FAMILY, GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND QUALITY OF LIFE: A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Engels traces the rise of patriarchal society through the increasingly sophisticated economic and social configurations, from primitive communal society to modern class society based on private property, production and reproduction. The type of family that existed in the primitive age would have been uncertain to identify who was the father of a child, but it was certain who the mother was. According to the social customs of that time, men was the owner of the instruments of labour and also the owner of new sources of subsistence, but his children could not inherit those properties because of the custom of mother's right. As wealth increased, the mother's right within the family was eventually overthrown and men acquired more important status within the family than women, and in favour of their children they required to overthrow the earlier social customs of inheritance. The exclusive supremacy of man established the patriarchal system in the family. According to Marxism, gender discrimination is entirely the function of socio-economic factor on the one hand. Engels's explanation is that it arose together with the class society, private property and the state. Therefore, the oppression and discrimination is all as old as the division of society into classes. The emergence of class society and private property transformed the immense structure of society including the position of woman. In this article, it is attempted to analyse the quality of life from the Marxist view of the origin of family and private property.

Key Words: Private Property, Gender Discrimination, Family, Patriarchy, Relations of production.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Frederick Engels was influenced by the research of Lewis Henry Morgan to elaborate the materialistic view of mankind's earliest period of civilization - the epoch of primitive communism and the emergence of class society. In his writings Engels took over Morgan's historical classification of savagery, barbarism and civilization that divided into upper, middle and lower stages of social evolution. In the "*Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*" Engels traced the first two social classifications of primitive communism with the emergence of private property and the state, as well as the victory of patriarchal family over mother right. While Marx, on the other hand, reached his conclusion about the evolution of society from the historical evidence of class society, such as slavery, feudalism and capitalism. The paper analysis represents of Marxist understanding of family, gender discrimination and the quality of life. For a deeper and broader understanding, the paper is concerned with the following three basic aspects: (1) Private Property and the Origin of Family, (2) Family and Quality of Life under Capitalism; and (3) Women, Gender Discrimination and Quality of Life.

2. PRIVATE PROPERTY AND THE ORIGIN OF FAMILY:

In his book "*Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*" Engels traced out the rise of patriarchal society through increasingly sophisticated economic and social configuration, from primitive communal society to modern class society based on private property, production and reproduction. In his own words, "According to the materialist conception the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tool requisite therefore; on the other hand, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social institutions under which men of a definite historical epoch and of a definite country live are conditioned by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour, on the one hand, and the family, on the other." [Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1986:446] In other words how people live is determined by the stages of development of the productive forces, on the one hand, and the organization of family, on the other.

In the primitive age, it would have been uncertain to identify who was the father of a child, but it was certain who the mother was. Because of the complexity of family system, the inheritance of a primitive communal society was identified through the mother line. According to Engels, "In all form of group family it is uncertain who the father of a child is; but it is certain who its mother is. ... It is therefore clear that in so far as group marriage prevails, descent

can only be proved on the mother side and that therefore only the female line is recognized. And this is in fact the cause among all people in the period of savagery or in the lower stages of barbarism.”[Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1986: 449]

Engels and Morgan both hold the view that the era of primitive communism was dominated by the mother right. This view was largely based upon the evidence of Morgan’s close association with the Iroquois tribe. The Iroquois tribal society was entirely matrilineal, the descent through the mother, and had an exceptionally higher regard for women. However, this does not mean that Iroquois society was mirror opposite of a male dominant society or patriarchal society. Nevertheless, it is certain that there was no female oppression in the early societies. This arose with the development of private property and the division of society into classes. [Rob Sewell, Origin of the Family: In Defence of Engels and Morgan, www.marxist.org]

In the early primitive societies the division of labour emerged between sexes, where women concentrated on household work, while men concentrated on hunting and food gathering. Therefore according to the social custom of that time, men were the owner of instrument of labour and also the owner of new sources of subsistence, like cattle etc. But according to social custom his children could not inherit those properties because of the custom of mother’s right. Engels says: “At first, according to mother-right – so long, therefore, as descent was reckoned only in the female line – and according to the original custom of inheritance within the gens, the gentile relatives inherited from a deceased fellow member of their gens. His property has to remain within the gens. His effects being insignificant, they probably always passed in practice to his nearest gentile relation – that is, to his blood relations on the mother’s side. The children of the dead men, however, did not belong to his gens, but to that of their mother; it was from her that they inherited, at first conjointly with her other blood relations, later perhaps with rights of priority; they could not inherit from their father, because they did not belong to his gens, within which his property had to remain. When the owner of the herds died, therefore, his herds would go first to his brothers and sisters and to his sister’s children, or to the issue of his mother’s sisters. But his own children were disinherited.”[Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1986: 449]

That women was the slave of man at the inception of society, is one of the most absurd notion. The primitive communistic household implies the supremacy of women in the family. Women occupied not only free but also highly respected position among all savages and all barbarians of the lower and the middle stages and partly even of the upper stages. As wealth increased, on the one hand, the mother’s right within the family was eventually overthrown and men acquired more important status within the family than women. On the other hand, in favour of their children they required to overthrow the previous social customs of inheritance. According to Engels, the exclusive supremacy of men over the wealth established the patriarchal system and the paternal law of inheritance. “Thus, on the one hand, in proportion as wealth increased, it made the man’s position in the family more important than the woman, and on the other hand created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow, in favour of his children, the traditional order of inheritance. This, however, was impossible so long as descent was reckoned according to mother-right. Mother-right, therefore, had to be overthrown and overthrown it was... A simple decree sufficed that in the future the offspring of the male members should remain within the gens, but that of the female should be excluded by being transferred to the gens of their father. The reckoning of descent in the female line and the matriarchal law of inheritance was substituted for them.”[Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1986: 450]

Therefore, with the predomination of private property over common property, father’s right and monogamy acquired ascendancy; marriage becomes increasingly dependent on economic conditions. Here, the important thing is to understand that in the patriarchy system, monogamy was required necessarily to protect the large amount of wealth in the hand of single individual and the wish to bequeath this wealth only for his descent, not for others. Because of this purpose the system of monogamy was enforced only for the women. As Engels says: “Monogamy arose from the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of a single individual man and from the need to bequeath this wealth to the children of that man and of not other. For this purpose, the monogamy of the woman was required, not that of the man...” [Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1986: 451]

3. FAMILY AND QUALITY OF LIFE UNDER CAPITALISM:

According to Marx, family along with all others social institutions in the modern society, serve the benefit of capitalism. Marx divided the society into two broad classes - the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. According to him, the family serves the ideological basis for the bourgeois in order to maintain and keep the hierarchy in the society. In the modern capitalist society, family act as a unit of consumption and teaches passive acceptance of social hierarchy. Through the institutions of family the bourgeoisie pass down their private property to their offspring and thus reproducing the class inequality.

The form of family depends on the context of a particular society. More specifically, the nuclear family in the modern capitalist system emerges not only because of the industrialisation, but also because of the needs of the capitalists. According to Engels, monogamous nuclear family emerged with the privatisation of social property. Before the emergence of private property there were classless ancient tribal societies and they practiced a kind of

primitive communism in which no property was held individually. In such societies, property was collectively owned by the clan and there was no structure of family as it exists now, but only groups existed in a form of promiscuous horde and no restrictions were there on sexual relationship. However, with the emergence of private property, the earlier family structure got transformed into a monogamous nuclear one. The modern capitalism is one of the social systems that entirely depend upon private ownership along with domination, exploitation and oppressions of the rest for profit. The bourgeoisie use their wealth to own personally and want to invest it in business in order to make more profit, not for the benefit for everyone else. Therefore they begin to find ways to pass their wealth to the next generation, rather than share it with the masses, and this is why the nuclear monogamous family is much more important for the bourgeoisie. The best example is that we are all passing our property to our offspring. In the monogamous nuclear relationship, we have the clear idea of who are our own children. Ultimately, the arrangements of private property reproduce inequality in the society where the wealthy people became wealthier and the poor remain poor. Thus in the capitalist system nuclear family is benefiting the bourgeoisie more than the proletariat. [The Marxist Perspective on the Family, <https://revisesociology.com>]

The rise of capitalism separates the family or household work from commodity production and further strengthens the control of men over women. Consequently women became a class of economic dependent to men. The amount of unpaid labour performed by the women in the family is very large and very profitable to the capitalists. Therefore, women's labour under the institutions of family, ultimately benefiting the capitalists because they only have to pay one person in the family- the wage of the male bread-winner. The nuclear family not only helps to produce cheaper physical labour for the bourgeoisie, but also teaches the ideas that capitalist class requires the future worker to be passive. [Marxist Feminist Perspectives on Family Life, <https://revisesociology.com>]

Family is an authoritarian unit dominated by the husband and the father in particular and by adults in general. It has an authoritarian ideology that teaches passivity, not to rebellion. Children, under the bourgeoisie mode of family, learn to submit to potential authority and thereby learning to accept their place in the hierarchy of power and control in capitalist society. Family is also socialising the children to fit into an ideology of dominant system. The dominant ideology teaches them from the early age that they are always under the domination of bourgeoisie and are less powerful. This keeps the dominant ideology to run without obstruction and in turn it ensures its survival as people generally accept it from a young age. In the dominant system, family also socialises the children to accept the norms and values of the system without questioning so that they fit for the system in which they are born. Family plays the role of ideological apparatus. It socialises the people to think in a way that justifies inequality and encourages people to accept the dominant system as natural, true, just and unchangeable; though in reality it is unjust and unfair. Thus the modern nuclear family has the function to promote the value that ensures the reproduction and the maintenance of dominant system. Family is a unit of consumption in the capitalist system. The dominant or the bourgeoisie class want to make profit as much as possible, but in doing so they must have to create the demand of products. The demand of products is created by the capitalist system keeping family as a unit of consumption. [The Marxist Perspective on the Family, <https://revisesociology.com>]

Marx and Engels argue that family in the capitalist system is primarily based on management and transformation of property, and is in a state of dissolution. The material conditions that lead to this form of family is disappearing within the proletarians because they have no property to give their successor. As they have no property to transmit to their successor after their death and to control the labour power of their family during the life time, the father's power was diminished significantly, that leads the family into a different form. What would come after dissolution of this form of family was not discussed by Marx and Engels. But we can find a little glimpse in the "*Communist Manifesto*". In the "*Communist Manifesto*" Marx and Engels has discussed about the abolition (*Aufhebung*) of family. According to them, as the modern industrial capitalism is introducing more machinery which requires less physical labour, consequently the workers have less value as labour force. Modern capitalism finds these workers particularly valuable, since they are from an oppressed group that can be compelled to work for less. Therefore, the capitalist system does not only disarticulate the relations of family, but also reduces the wage labour as the only source of livelihood. But quite a large number of people are unemployed. According to Marx, these unemployed workers are used as the reserve army in capitalist mode of production. Therefore, capitalism does not only remould the family of previous class society but also constantly reproducing it to suit its need. In doing so, the capitalist mode of production is transforming the entire socio-economic quality of life that makes the proletariat to suffer more and more. [Heather Brown, Marx on Gender and the Family: A Summary, monthlyreview.org]

According to Marxism, capitalism is destroying the proletarian quality of life through its growing exploitation in the private and public work place. But on the contrary, the functionalists argue that Marxist theory ignores the benefits of family life. According to functionalists, Marxist scholars have thrown light only on one side of the story and therefore do not offer any true valuable and complete explanation of the family. According to warm bath theory of Parsons, the family is a safe haven. According to the warm bath theory, a man comes home from work and has all his frustrations washed away by the family, ready to go back into work next day and fulfil his role. But Marxist feminists

here argue that the family does absorb the husband's frustration in a dominating way, rather than an empathetic way. According to Marxist scholars, family looks like a safe haven apparently, but in reality this is just an illusion as they cannot meet each other's needs.

4. WOMEN, GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND QUALITY OF LIFE:

According to Marxist feminist's point of view, the gender discrimination is entirely functioning on the basis of economic factor on the one hand. The patriarchy system rooted from the same economic factor on the other hand. With the emergence of classes the gender discrimination and oppression came to exist. In fact, the form of family as we know today did not exist earlier; it existed in a transient form according to the economic factors of that epoch. Engels's explanation is that it arises together with the class society, private property and the state. Therefore, oppression and discrimination are all as old as the division of society into classes. The emergence of class society and private property had transformed the immense structure of society including the position of woman. [Alan Woods, Women and the Struggle for Socialism, www.marxist.com] As Engels says, "The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage was a great historical step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development of some is won through the misery and frustration of others. It is the cellular form of civilized society, in which the nature of oppositions and contradictions fully active in that society can be already studied." [Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1986: 461]

The more important fact is that "what for woman is a crime, entailing grave legal and social consequences, is considered honourable in a man or, at the worse, a slight moral blemish which he carefully bears." [Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1986: 457] Engels considered that the great revolution in pre-history is the overthrow of female's right or the great defeat of women right in the world history. He says: "The overthrow of mother-right was the world historical defect of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. This degraded position of the woman, especially conspicuous among the Greeks of the heroic and still more the classical age, has gradually been palliated and glozed over, and sometimes clothed in the middle form; in no sense has it been abolished." [Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1986: 457]

Engels's famous analysis of gender discrimination and condition of women in the different economic structure of the society is that women were originally equal to men in the communal form of production with matrilineal family system. They have lost the power over family when private property comes into existence as a mode of production. Men's control over property and the ability to generate surplus transformed the form of family into a patriarchal one where women became the property of their husband or father. As Engels explained, the origins of enslavement of women are to be found in the system of private property. [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Feminist Perspectives on Class and Work, plato.stanford.edu]

According to Marxist feminists like Margaret Benston and Peggy Morton, mostly the entire life of a woman is bound within the social customs and norms under the system of patriarchy family. They argue that there are comprehensive social phenomena associated with female gender, such as virginity, sexual purity, submissive role of women to her husband and violent punishment for committing adultery etc. From these social phenomena, Marxist feminists have drawn the exclusive development of private property by the patriarchal system. The patriarch system uses these social phenomena for the subordination of female to male so that it ensure the system of inheritance passes to their own offspring. As obedient follower of this system, women were rewarded for their chastity, fidelity and the virtuosity etc. because they guarantee the exclusive access to the male passed their private property to their offspring. As gender discrimination and gender oppression is closely associated with property ownership, it is similar to the relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, because it serve the interest of dominant or ruling class (e.g. bourgeoisie and male within the system of capitalism and family) against subordinate class (e.g. proletariat and female) and it divides the people into two opposite class and gender. In a short, husband plays the role of bourgeoisie, where as women plays the role of proletariat in the family. [Marxist Feminism Wikipedia, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>]

According to Engels, gender discrimination arises from the division of labour along with private property. Marx and Engels both pointed out that the division of labour in the earliest society was not completely natural, but also based on gender. In their brief discussion of the development of family they demonstrate that gender based division of labour is only natural for every undeveloped productive relations, where the biological differences of women make difficult to carry out certain physically demanding tasks. This distinct biological factor makes the women inferior to the men. Thus, in terms of understanding women's relationship to social life, a logical formulation within the Marxist thought would point out that biology is certainly relevant. However, for Marx, biology can never be viewed as such outside of the social relations. According to Marxist view, the world is not entirely socially

constructed; rather biology and nature are important variables when viewed within a socially mediated framework. [Heather Brown, Marx on Gender and the Family: A Summary, monthlyreview.org]

According to Marxist feminists like Margaret Benston and Peggy Morton, the division of social life into public and private sphere is the key to devaluation of women. Family or private life is the fundamental source of women's oppression. In the capitalist system, labour is divided into two spheres- productive and reproductive. The productive labour is associated with industry and result in goods by the producer in a form of paid wage. On the other hand, reproductive labour is associated with private sphere including labour of people for themselves and is not receiving any wage (e.g. domestic work). In the capitalist system, the role of women is assigned to domestic or private sphere where labour is reproductive and thus uncompensated and unrecognised. For the capitalist, this means the higher profit. In order to secure their profit and to legitimate the capitalist system they refuse to pay the domestic labour assigned to women. The nuclear family in the capitalist system dictate that domestic work should exclusively to be done by the women of the house hold, and thus liberating the rest of the members for their own necessary reproductive labour. The capitalist uses these people those who are free from house hold work, to give much more time into their industrial production. In the public sphere women are also exploited by the capitalists by paying less wage than a man. Thus, the labour of women is exploited in the sphere of private and the public institutions as an inexpensive method of supporting a work force. According to Marxist feminists, the exclusion of women's labour from productive labour leads to male domination over both private and public spheres. [Marxist Feminism Wikipedia, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>]

Moreover it can be said that both Marx and Engels identify the root of women's oppression in their role within the family in a class society. According to them, the role of women as biological reproducers results in their subordinate status. According to Marx and Engels, women in the bourgeoisie family reproduce heirs to transit the private property; whereas women in the working class family reproduce generation of labour power of the bourgeoisie. In the process of private reproduction, the bourgeoisie must have to depend upon working class family because it lessens its own financial responsibility for the reproduction of labour power which is instead largely supplied by unpaid domestic labour, performed by the women. In both cases women are used as the tools of capitalist production. [Sharon Smith, Women's Liberation: The Marxist Tradition, isreview.org]

Engels understood the position of women in the family as open or concealed domestic slavery. Women in a domestic labour are tied in a particular house hold and family; like cattle slave in the capitalist era she cannot move freely. Under the capitalist system women have to subordinate herself to the relation between labour power and capital. Like a slave she is not directly ruled by any master and provide for her welfare. Rather she has to depend upon an indirect payment of the capitalists for the maintenance and production of labour power. The capitalist pays wages only to the worker that interchanges into family wages and she receives her share as a form of family wage. [Women and The Capitalist Family: The Ties that Bind, <https://www.marxist.org>]

Marx had a much more nuanced view about position of women in the work force under capitalism. According to him, as women entered into the capitalist work force, they potentially acquired the power in their private life since they contribute monetarily to their family welfare and no longer under the control of their guardians for a large portion of the day. This has a significant effect over family and quality of life under the capitalist mode of production. Marx here discusses the two sides of this development. First: the long time work in the private sphere alienates them from their family life, and consequently which tend to undermine the traditional structure of family. As women were masculinised by their work force to a certain extent, they were incapable of taking care of family to the same extent that they had been able to do in the past. Therefore, the alienation from family by the work force in the bourgeoisie mode of production gradually abolished the traditional structure of family. Second: Marx says that this seeming deterioration of character of family lead towards a higher form of family wherein the status of women would be of true equals of men. [Heather Brown, Marx on Gender and the Family: A Summary, monthlyreview.org]

5. CONCLUSION:

The overall Marxist understanding of family does offer much credible insight into how family actually functions and how it transforms the quality of life. Family performs the functions of ideological control and convincing the masses that the present unequal system is inevitable, natural and just. Women chiefly became the prey of dominant system within and outside of family. Therefore, its abolition is entirely depending upon the demolition of classes, i.e. on the socialist revolution. Both Marx and Engels suggest that the major premise for the emancipation of woman is the reintroducing of entire female sex into public industry. When the means of production become common property, the individual family will cease to be the economic unit of society. Hence, the economic foundation of monogamy as it presently exists will vanish along with the institutions of the state which preserved them: "The position of women, of all women, also undergoes significant change. With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and the education of children becomes a public affair; society looks after all children

alike, whether they are legitimate or not. This removes all the anxiety about the ‘consequences’, which today is the essential social-moral as well as economic-factor...” [Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1986: 462]

In his “*Economic and Philosophic Manuscript*” Marx argued that women’s position in the society could be used as a measure of the development of society as a whole. The Great Russian revolutionist Leon Trotsky also says same thing: “In order to change the conditions of life, we must learn to see them through the eyes of women.” [Leon Trotsky, *Against Bureaucracy, Progressive and Unprogressive*, <https://www.marxist.org>] For Marx, in order to develop the society beyond its dominating and exploitation form, new social relations have to be constructed in such a way that did not rely solely upon a crude, alienated formulation of value. Human beings would have to become able to see each other as valuable in themselves. In this regard women would be a special significant as they have tended to be a marginalized group within the society. Thus, “to alter the position of woman at the root is possible only if all the conditions of social, family, and domestic existence are altered.” [Leon Trotsky 2011: 45] Henceforth, man and women would have to reach a state of development where an individual is valued for who they are, rather any abstract category of man and woman, male and female etc. Marx and Engels both believed that this is only possible through the socialist revolution.

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