

Importance of the Study of Gender Issues in Geography

Priti Kumari

Assistant Professor of Geography

Sir Chhotu Ram Govt. College for Women, Sampla, Rohtak, Haryana

Abstract

Feminism has had an impact on the discipline of geography since the 1970s. In the 1980s, several articles in Anglophone geography journals lamented the lack of female scholars within the discipline while calling for more research that incorporated gender as a category of analysis. Two organizations, the Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers and Royal Geographical Society, and Geographic Perspectives on Women Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers formed in an effort to draw greater attention to the study of gender within the discipline of geography. Present paper has made an attempt to analyse the importance of the study of gender issues in geography. The study of gender within geography has introduced new theoretical concepts such as the gendering of public and private spaces, gendered divisions of paid and unpaid labour, and challenges to the gender assumptions reminiscent in much of Marxist geography. Much of this scholarship included women as a previously absent group into the study of place and space. In the 1990s gender studies grew extensively with several foundational texts that questioned existing research methodologies, ontologies and epistemologies, while providing different frameworks for teaching and scholarship.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender issues, Women, Geography and Inequality etc.

The Geography of Women

The geography of women focuses upon description of the effects on gender inequality. In terms of theoretical influences, it focuses on welfare geography and liberal feminism. Geographically, feminist geographers emphasize on constraints of distance and spatial separation. As Seager et al. argues, gender is only the narrow-minded approach when understanding the oppression of women throughout the decades of colonial history. In such, understanding the geography of women would mean taking a critical approach in questioning the dimensions of age, class, ethnicity, orientation and other socio-economic factors (2004). An early reproach of geography of women approach was that gender roles were mainly explained as gender inequality, such as housewives and mothers, in combination with some concept of spatial constraint. However, Foord and Gregson (1986) argued that the concept of gender roles narrows the focus to women, emerges from a static social theory, and presents women as victims. Furthermore, it gives a narrow reading of distance even though the geography of women displays how spatial constraint and separation enter into the construction of women's position. Theorist Edward Said critiques the idea of geographical spaces in such a context where our actions on gendered practices of representation are fabricated through dominant ideological beliefs (2004). In relation to the misrepresentation of gender roles and taken-for-granted movements on feminine rights, we see that the challenges of the colonial present lie within the confinement of women in limited spatial opportunities. Hence, feminist geographies should consider and trace the inter-connections in all aspects of daily life; in other words, gender should be applied and developed in terms of space.

Socialist Feminist Geography

Socialist feminist geography seeks to explain inequality and the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. It uses Marxism and Socialist feminism to explain the interdependence of geography, gender relations and economic development under capitalism. Socialist feminist geography revolved around the questions of how to reduce gender inequality based on patriarchy and capitalism. It has theoretical influences on Marxism, socialist feminism. The geographical focus is on spatial separation, gender place, and localities. One of the key theoretical debates within socialist feminist geography revolved around the question of how best to articulate gender and class analysis. For instance, drawing on of married mainland Chinese immigrant women living in New York City. While women remain the primary object of analysis, and gender remains the primary social relation, Zhou is intensely aware that many other factors, such as class, also affect women's post-migration experiences and circumstances.

There are two scales that socialist feminist geographers first worked primarily. First, at the urban scale, Anglo-American feminist geographers focused on the social and spatial separation of suburban homes from paid employment; this was seen as vital to the day-to-day and generational reproduction of workers and the development and maintenance of traditional gender relations in capitalist societies.

Socialist feminist geographers widely attending to the ways that gender relations differ from place to place not only reflect, but also partly determine local economic changes. Judith Butler's idea of citationality expands on the concept of the lack of agency to facilitate the presence of women within the discipline of geography. In such, we come to the awareness that whenever performative measures are taken to diminish women's rights in geographical space, the conventions around it adapt around this context to make it seem as the norm. Likewise, feminist geographers are also drawing on a broader range of social, and particularly cultural theory, including psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, in order to develop a fuller understanding of how gender relations and identities are shaped and assumed. This has led to fundamental rethinking of the category gender, and the contradictions and possibilities presented by the seeming instability and insistent repetitions of gender norms in practice. The focus on multiple identifications and the influence of post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories has brought feminist geographers into dialogue with other strands of critical geography. But another consequence is that theoretical differences among feminist geographers are more obvious than in

the past, but according to Monk 1994 the national differences between America and British geographers may be diminishing as both parties pursue new directions.

Feminist Geographies of Difference

Feminist geographies of difference concentrate upon the construction of gendered identities, differences among women, gender and constructions of nature by using cultural, post-structural, postcolonial and psychoanalytic theories, which writings of women of colour, lesbian women, gay men and women from third world countries. In terms of geography, feminist geographers emphasize on micro-geographies of body, mobile identities, distance, separation and place, imagined geographies, colonialism and post-colonialism, and environment or nature.

Since the late 1980s, many feminist geographers have moved on to three new research areas:

First, feminist geographers contest and expand the category of genders between men and women. The difference in the construction of gender relations across race, ethnicity, age, religion, sexuality and nationality, becomes interesting for feminist geographers. Additionally, feminist geographers are also increasingly attentive to women who are positioned in various ways along the multiple axis of difference.

Second, in order to get better understanding of how gender relations and identities are formed and assumed, a broader extent of social theory, particular culture, are drawn by feminist geographers. Feminist geographers are able to discuss and debate after the focus on multiple identifications and the influence of post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories.

Third, a key area of discussion is about the difference between relativism and situated knowledge, and ways to reconcile partial perspectives with commitment to political action and social change.

Critical Human Geography

Critical human geography comes from Anglophonic geography in the mid-1990s. It presents a broad alliance of progressive approaches to the discipline. Critical human geographers draw on theoretical approaches such as anarchism, anti-colonialism, critical race theory, environmentalism, feminism, Marxism, nonrepresentational theory, post-Marxism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, queer theory, situationism, and socialism. Much of the focus is on some of the key publications marking different eras in critical geography. Critical human geography must be understood as multiple, dynamic, and contested.

Rather than a specific sub-discipline of geography, feminist geography is often considered part of a broader postmodern, critical theory approach, often drawing from the theories of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler among others. More recent influences include critiques of feminism from post-colonial theorists. Feminist geographers often focus on the lived experiences of individuals and groups in their own localities, upon the geographies that they live in within their own communities, rather than theoretical development without empirical work.

Many feminist geographers study the same subjects as other geographers, but often with a focus on gender divisions. This concern has developed into a concern with wider issues of gender, family, sexuality, race, and class. Examples of areas of focus include:

- Geographic differences in gender relations and gender equality
- The geography of women: spatial constraints, welfare geography
- The construction of gender identity through the use and nature of spaces and places
- Geographies of sexuality (queer theory)
- Children's geographies

Emergence of the Gender Issues as an Important Area of Concern

Sex and Gender

The term “sex” and “gender” are concepts used by academicians, researchers and feminist writers to make a distinction between the biologically different “male” and “female” and between the socially different “man” and “woman”. Feminist sociologists suggest that there is a need to understand and distinguish between the two terms “sex” and “gender” in academic discourses and writings.

Sex

In a very broad way, “sex” refers to the biological and physiological differences between male and female sex. The term sex is a physical differentiation between the biological male and the biological female. Thus, when an infant is born, the infant comes to be labelled “boy” or “girl” depending on their sex. The genital differences between male and female are the basis of such characterization. There is a biological difference between the sexes and most people are born (except for a few ambiguous cases) as one sex or another. However, it has been argued that having been born into one sex or another, individuals are then socialized according to specific gender expectations and roles. Biological males learn to take on masculine roles. They are socialized to think and act in masculine ways. Biological females learn to take on feminine roles. They are socialized to think and behave in feminine ways. As the feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir puts it “one is not born a man but becomes one”, “one is not born a woman but becomes one.”

Gender

The concept of gender in feminist writings and other sociological discourses became popular in the early 1970. In simple terms, gender explain the differences between men and women in social terms as men, and as what a man can do; as “woman”, and as what a woman can or cannot do. Therefore, gender is an analytical category that is socially constructed to differentiate the biological difference between men and women. The term gender is also used to describe the differences in behaviour between men and women which are described as “masculine” and “feminine”. Feminist writings focus on this aspect and claim that these differences are not biological but are social constructions of patriarchal society. Some theorists suggest that the biological differences between men and women also result in their mental and physical differences. They argue that biologically, men are physically and mentally superior to women. Other theorists suggest that the biological difference between men and women are exaggerated. The differences are socially constructed by the patriarchal system of society by which men are described as superior to women. Therefore, women become subordinate to men in the society.

What Do Men Control in the Patriarchal System?

Different areas of women’s lives are said to be under patriarchal control:

1. Women’s Productive or Labour Power:

Men control women’s productivity both within the household and outside, in paid work. Within the household women provide all kinds of services to their husbands, children and other members of the family throughout their lives. Feminist writer Sylvia Walby calls this as the “patriarchal mode of production” where women’s labour is expropriated by then husbands and others who live there. She calls housewives as the „producing class” and husbands are the „expropriating class”. The work done by housewives is not considered as work at all and housewives become dependent on their husbands. Men also control women’s labour outside the home. They make women to sell their labour or they may prevent their women from working. They may appropriate what women earn often women are excluded from better paid work. They are usually working in jobs with low wages; or work within the home in what is called home based production, which is itself an exploitative system.

2. Women’s Reproduction:

Men also control women’s reproductive power. In many societies women have no control over then reproduction capacities. They cannot decide how many children they want, whether to use contraceptives, or a decision to terminate pregnancy. In addition, men control social institutions like religion and politics which are male dominated. Control is institutionalized by laying down rules regarding women’s reproduction capacity. For example, in the Catholic Church, the male religious hierarchy decides whether men and women can use birth control contraceptives. In modern times, the patriarchal state tries to control women’s reproduction through its family planning programmes. The state decides the optimum size of the country’s population. In India for example the birth control programme limits the family size and discourages women from having more than two children. On the other hand, in Europe, where birth rates are low, women are lured through various incentives have more children. Women are given long paid maternity leave, child care facilities and opportunities for part-time jobs.

3. Control over Women’s Sexuality:

Women are obliged to provide sexual services to their husbands according to their needs and desires. Moral and legal regulations exist to restrict the expression of women’s sexuality outside marriage in every society, while male promiscuity is often condoned. Another way of exercising control over women’s sexuality is when men force their wives, daughters or other women in their control into prostitution. Rape and threat of rape is another way in which women’s sexuality is controlled through notions of „shame” and „honour”, family honour. Lastly, women’s sexuality is controlled through their dress, behaviour and mobility which are carefully monitored by the family and through social, cultural and religious codes of behaviour.

4. Women’s Mobility:

Besides control of women’s sexuality, production and reproduction, men also control women’s mobility. The imposition of purdah restriction on leaving the house, limit on interaction between the sexes are some of the ways by which the patriarchal society controls women’s mobility and freedom of movement. Such restrictions are unique to women, while men are not subject to such restrictions.

5. Property and other Economic Resources:

Most property and other productive resources are controlled by men and are passed on from father to son. Even in societies where women have legal rights to inherit property, customary practices, social sanctions and emotional pressures that prevent them from acquiring control over them. According to UN statistics, “Women do more than 60% of the hours of work done in the world, but they get 10% of the world’s income and own 1% of the world’s property”.

We have seen how men control different areas of women’s lives through the patriarchal order of the society.

Some Important Critical Areas of Concern Include:

1. The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women.
2. Unequal access to and inadequate educational opportunities.
3. The equalities in access to health and related services.
4. Violence against women.
5. Advance peace, promote conflict resolution and reduce the impact of armed or other Conflicts on women.

6. Inequality in women's access to and participation in the definition of economic structures and policies and the productive process itself.
7. Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and 'decision-making at all levels.
8. Insufficient mechanisms at all levels promote the advancement of women.
9. Lack of awareness of and commitment to internationally and nationally recognised human rights of women.
10. Inequality in women's access to and participation in all communications systems, especially the media; and their insufficient mobilisation to promote women's contribution to society.
11. Lack of adequate recognition and support for women's contribution to managing natural resources and safeguarding the environment.
12. Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child, Survival, protection and development of the girl child.

The Making of Gendered Geography of India

In our Constitution, Article 14 ensures equality before the law. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on basis of sex. Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matters relating to employment. Article 39 guarantees equal pay for equal work. Article 42 says it is the duty of the state to provide for maternity relief. All this gives an impression that equality and protection from sex discrimination has been handed on a plate to Indian women without their even demanding it-leave alone fighting for it.

1. Gender Inequality in Well-being in India

Dr. Amartya Sen and others have found significant differences between 28 states in terms of well-being and wealth indices based on National Family Health Survey 3 (2005–06) data. Overall, women were found to be far behind men in terms of well-being. The well-being of women was found to decline with age and when they were in larger families, unlike men. While upper-caste women were not found to be doing significantly better than Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women, upper-caste men were better off. And the women in the northern mountainous regions were found to be doing better than women in the Indo-Gangetic plains. However, the well-being of both men and women was found to be significantly related to the wealth they possessed.

2. Gender-Related Development Issues in India

In India, we can see the gender related development issues in rural as well as urban areas. There can be seen the gender based inequalities in workforce participation rates and wage rates. Women in the lower strata are not only exploited economically but are also socially oppressed much more than the male working poor. Economic stratification implies that the nature and level of oppression as well as relative access of females to social and family investment in education and health care differs according to class. Community level factors such as physical and social environment have a much larger impact on the lives of poor women in rural areas.

3. Culture, Gender Bias and Beliefs

In rural Maharashtra, many parents have named their daughters "Nakusa/Nakoshi." In Marathi that means "unwanted." The parents hope the next child will be a boy. Most of these girls are the third or fourth daughters of their parents and their names have caused them socio-psychological problems. Discrimination against the girl child in India is an existing reality and it reflects serious sex-based differences, inequalities and neglect. The complex interplay of culture and socio-economic factors combines to deprive the girl child in many ways. Parental attitudes toward children are shaped by the culture of the community, which leads to different kinds of treatment based on their sex (Miller 1981). In India, the general perception about the low value of the girl child in comparison to her male counterpart is reflected clearly in a Tamil proverb, "Having a daughter is like watering a flower in the neighbour's garden."

4. Premarital Sex in India: Issues of Class and Gender

In each society, there are different expectations of boys and girls, which have an impact on sexual behaviour, sexual responsibilities, and the ability to access information about sex and healthcare. Sexuality in India has to be understood in terms of economic class and gender differentials, since each dimension influences an individual's behaviour through the power he or she has to acquire information as well as make decisions. The percentages of premarital sexual activity among unmarried and married women found in the NFHS-3 raises an interesting question: how much of the pattern in the relationships between premarital sex and age, education, and wealth status were caused by these factors, and how much by biases in reporting, primarily because of gender and class issues. It is more than likely that the data that has been collected on sexual intercourse before marriage has been seriously under-reported, especially by women.

5. Gender-based Crime and Gender Inequality in India

Gender-based crime, particularly sexual violence in India has captured national and international attention. The rising graph of various gender-based crimes (National Crime Records Bureau 2011) poses a serious question on the safety of women and girls at homes as well as in public spaces. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (hereafter, NCRB), the rate of total crime in 2011 reported a decrease by 7.4% while that against women increased by 7.1% over 2010. Incidents like the Park Street rape in Kolkata, Nirbhaya gang rape in New Delhi and Shakti Mills gang rape in Mumbai have created headlines in the last two years and a current gang rape in UP remain afresh in public memory. The Nirbhaya case which involved the brutal gang rape and death of a college student in Delhi (rechristened Nirbhaya by the media) generated nationwide protest and called for reforms in rape laws.

Baxi (2014) observes that the Nirbhaya case brought sexual violence against women, which had largely remained confined to feminists and queer movements, to the public discourse.

6. Gender Question and the CPI(M)

Though the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is very supportive and vocal about the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament and outside, the party's record in ensuring representation of women in its own organisation or in fielding women candidates in elections to Parliament and state legislative assemblies has been very poor. There is a huge gap between precept and practice. The forthcoming plenum of the party in December 2015 needs to take a serious note of this shortcoming.

7. Female Deselection and Gender Violence in India

Issues related to female foeticide, violence against women and girls (VAWG) and generally gender-based violence (GBV) are much discussed in various quarters including among political leaders and policy framers. However, no amount of discussion will be able to bring an end to such violence because both VAWG and GBV are extremely complex issues and deeply rooted in the complexities of societies needing close scrutiny and awareness. Emanated in societies where asset worthiness of sons and the burden of rearing daughters made a crucial difference to the economic survival and growth of the family that was organised through intergenerational dependency through the male lineage and kinship. Girls were silently annihilated. The micro study data for Haryana and Punjab also reveal similar scenarios and more importantly this data shows that "female deselection was more widespread in educated and upper income groups in comparison to lower income groups in the locality" thus shows that in all the states of India technologies may not always be used for female deselection but the life chances remain unequal because of cultural neglect. This neglect in the long run leads to GBV because the state and social institutions have developed various mechanisms to legitimise this violence.

8. Understanding Issues Involved in Toilet Access for Women

The problem of inadequate access to toilets assumes a serious dimension when it comes to the immense Difficulties faced by women who have to make do with both inadequate and dysfunctional toilets in places not safe all the time. This translates directly into hazardous outcomes such as stunted growth, and diarrhoeal and urinary tract infections, among other chronic illnesses Another important concern is the increasing number of incidents of sexual assault and violence on women in the vicinity of public toilets or fields used for open defecation. Women are obviously unable to access toilets when they need to. Many of them visit the toilet only once a day. Given the unclean and unsafe environment of the toilet, the only exception was when they had a bad stomach. Not only married women but also teenage girls visit the toilet in Bawana only once. They are conscious of boys loitering around, and as a girl put it, "Accha nahi lagta" (Doesn't look decent). While this is disquieting, the findings in Annanagar and Sanjay Colony are alarming. Here, the condition of toilets is so deplorable that a woman said she does not go to the toilet for three or four days at a stretch.

Though she was aware it was unhealthy, she said the filth and stink forced her to delay till her body began giving up. Another respondent's testimony was, "If you go to these toilets with as little as a sip of tea, you'll vomit that too."

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that feminism started in 1970s but gender issues are becoming more critical day by day. Women are not feeling safe and comfort in our society. Indian government passed many Act and Laws in the favour of women but we can see that these Act and Laws are not implemented properly. So we can say that gender issues are becoming more important in the study of Geography. Women must first become fully aware of their legal, constitutional and human rights at the work place. They must work to get these incorporated into, and protected by their service conditions. And they must demand appropriate machinery for redressed when these rights are violated. And side by side with all these safeguards, equally important though probably far more difficult—is the intensive education of people, both men and women, at all levels of policy planning and decision-making, to remove old-fashioned, sexist notions of women and their work. For women, 'one half of the sky' and earth, much is at stake. They remain the prime architects and actors in preventing whole communities from collapsing. They remain the authors of a palpable struggle against the dehumanising trends of globalisation, of private accumulation and of untold violence against the poor, the disadvantaged, women and children. Women globally have struggled. They have underscored at the earlier negotiating grounds their strong and uncompromising roles as: Full and equal participation in all spheres of public and private life, based on full economic, social and political citizenship. They have asserted that social rights and entitlements are part of constitutional obligations.

References

1. Ann M. Oberhauser, edited by Barney Warf, *Gender and Geography*, Encyclopedia of Geography.
2. Bondi, Liz (1990). *Progress in geography and gender: feminism and difference*, Progress in Human Geography, Vol 14 (3).
3. Butler, Judith P. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
4. Dyck, Isabel (2005). *Feminist Geography, the 'Everyday,' and Local–Global Relations: Hidden Spaces of Place-making*, The Canadian Geographer 49 (3), 233–243.
5. Fluri, Jennifer (2015). *Gender and Geography*, Oxford Bibliographies: Your Best Research Starts Here.
6. Grosz, Elizabeth A. (1994). *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
7. Krijnen, Tonny; van Bauwel, Sofie (2015). *Gender and Media: Representing, Producing, Consuming*. New York: Routledge.
8. Marston, Sallie A. (2000). *The Social Construction of Scale*, Progress in Human Geography 24.2, 219–242.
9. Mohanty, Chandra T. (2004). *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
10. <https://www.slideshare.net/maamlumanglas/gender-and-geography>