Power and Politics: The Psychology of Gender

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Power, often seen as a tool for control, extends beyond individuals to encompass decisions and resources. Various groups hold varying degrees of power in society, employing tactics to gain and expand it. Politics is essentially the use of power to achieve goals, often stemming from conflicts between personal and organizational objectives. This occurs in situations marked by autocratic decision-making, unclear authority, resource scarcity, and uncertainty, when organizational politics contradict employees’ interests, trust erodes, prioritizing individual concerns over collective goals. Constructive politics, however, empower and differentiate between ethical and unethical behavior. Gender, a socially constructed variable, is influenced by psychology and sociology literature, affecting power dynamics. This paper explores the interplay of power and politics in society, striving for a more equitable and progressive outcome while addressing their contribution to gender inequality. Globalization and economic restructuring impose changes, fostering discrimination and preferential treatment. We examine policy implementations in food, agriculture, health, and education, finding that despite significant changes, they often fail to benefit disadvantaged populations.

Keywords: organization, power, politics, gender

Introduction

Power and politics are intertwined concepts. There’s a saying that goes, “Politics is the art of the possible.” This could also mean that politics is the art of preventing people from participating in matters that matter most to them. Generally, the common perception of politics is that it’s limited to what governments or states do. This implies that other institutions, such as family, schools, educational and business institutions, and civil society, fall outside the realm of politics.

However, it’s essential to broaden our definition of politics beyond government, the state, or the public sphere. We must understand how politics operates in all social activities and aspects of human existence. Politics influences every level of social interaction, from families and friend groups to nations and the global stage. This brings us to the concept of politics as power.

From this standpoint, politics is fundamentally about power—the ability to achieve desired goals, by any means necessary. Harold Lasswell’s (1936) book, Politics: Who Gets What, When, How, encapsulates this notion. Politics involves diversity and conflict, with society as its essential backdrop. It underscores that human needs and desires are limitless, while resources to fulfill them are always limited. Consequently, politics can be seen as a contest over scarce resources, with power serving as the means to attain them.

Power is an instrument used in various ways to influence individuals or groups to achieve certain objectives. It is inherently linked to one’s ability to allocate resources and command others to do what they desire. In essence,
power can be defined as the capacity to compel someone to act in accordance with one’s wishes. It represents the ability to shape the behavior of others in order to achieve goals. Consequently, politics lies at the heart of public life.

According to Fleming and Spicer (2014), power is the potential that an individual within a social or organizational structure possesses to pursue their goals or personal interests despite encountering resistance. Politics, on the other hand, involves the tactics and strategies individuals employ to either assert this power or resist it.

The significance of social intelligence among the indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh could serve as an enlightening example for the rest of the world in the fields of agriculture and soil management. Their continued existence and survival, despite a lack of support, extreme poverty, and disasters like COVID-19, stand as a testament to their age-old, tried-and-tested methods and knowledge. They have not succumbed to a handful of manipulators in the name of state service. However, Indian agricultural policy, following the G-20 agreement, has worked against rural individuals and small-scale holders, leading to widespread deterioration of Indian soil and traditional technologies. There is also a lack of resources, particularly indigenous knowledge.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the government’s efforts in the northeastern regions of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Garo Hills to implement welfare schemes have met with limited success. In the Himalayan hills of Arunachal Pradesh, tribal and indigenous communities have continued to engage in their traditional land management and irrigation practices, eschewing modern urban technology. In 2021, their sex ratio in the age group 0-6 years was observed to be 972, which is the highest in comparison to Haryana’s 834.

The Nature of Power

The politics of inclusion and empowerment are closely linked to issues of economic inequality and cultural differences. The politics of inclusion combines redistribution and recognition in a productive and innovative manner, ultimately creating a welfare state. Modern democratic welfare states have undergone transformations due to globalization since the 1990s, reshaping the dynamics of redistribution and recognition. This implies citizen empowerment—an awareness and capacity-building process that enhances citizen participation and decision-making power.

To understand the role and nature of the State’s power, we will explore some theories of power in this section.

Theories of Power

Political power is often seen as deriving from economic ownership. In this context, the ruling class controls the means of production, distribution, and dominates political power institutions. Power, in this sense, represents the ability to mobilize society’s resources to achieve social goals. According to Parsons, power is exercised in the general interests of society as a whole, although some groups may hold more power than others. This is necessary because:

- Realizing collective goals necessitates cooperation.
- Cooperation requires organization.
- Organization necessitates authority.
- The ability to command requires power.

As with all modern functionalist theory, power disparities are functional to the extent that they don’t become imbalanced. When power becomes too one-sided, it becomes dysfunctional, and powerful groups pursue short-
term, sectional interests that may not align with long-term social development. Cooperation is a structural imperative for a society to progress and expand.

From the above discussion, it becomes evident that power and politics are inseparable tools used to exert control over various groups in society. We will now explore how gender and power relations are wielded by political groups.

**Gender, Power, and Politics**

The interplay between gender, power, and politics is intricate and ever-evolving. It underscores a form of “socially constructed inequality between women and men.” Feminist theory directs attention to the distinctions between men and women regarding roles, interests, and capabilities, advocating for the empowerment of women and perspectives that rectify gender disparities (Grant & Newland, 1991). These arguments find support in reality. However, their chief limitation, as critics of feminist theory point out, lies in the potential to unintentionally reinforce the very gender stereotypes they aim to challenge (Grant & Newland, 1991, p. 511).

The concept of power can be viewed as the control exerted by one individual over others. It signifies the capacity of one person to influence the thoughts and actions of others (Morgenthau, 1978, p. 9). Power can also be described as “the ability to persuade people to do what you want or to refrain from doing things you do not want them to do” (Barry, 2003, p. 323). Tickner (1991; 1988) argued that political realism, by heavily relying on assumptions about human nature, exhibits a partial and masculine approach. Masculinity and femininity, in this context, refer to “socially constructed categories that vary in time and space rather than biological determinants” (Tickner, 1991; 1988). Hannah Arendt defined power as “the human ability to act in connection with others who share similar concerns” (Tickner, 1991). According to Tickner (1991), this definition aligns with characterization of female power as “shared rather than assertive” (McClelland, 1961). Power remains central in understanding gender discourse. Considering power as a “resource”, any means to attain it, following the Machiavellian tradition, can be deemed justifiable. Regardless of the motivation for seeking power—whether personal, collective, or psychological—holders of power seldom voluntarily relinquish it. The responsibility falls upon power seekers to vigorously pursue it at any cost, for politics revolves around the relentless struggle for power where “the ends justify the means”.

**Gender and Health**

Females possess a natural biological advantage over males. India stands as one of the few countries worldwide where males significantly outnumber females. In India, females up to the age of 30 experience higher mortality rates than males. Elevated female mortality rates point to underlying social factors. Discrimination manifests in new forms as technology advances, as seen in sex-specific abortion. Gender disparities are reflected in morbidity levels. Research indicates that the loss of healthy life due to non-fatal diseases and pathological conditions is greater for females compared to males. The higher morbidity among girls under five and women aged 15-44 underscores gender discrimination. A community’s health serves as a vital indicator of economic and social development. Achieving positive health outcomes among the populace is a fundamental aspect of societal development. Nevertheless, the benefits of modern medicine remain accessible to only a select group. Disparities in healthcare accessibility and affordability are especially pronounced between urban and rural areas. For quality healthcare services, preventive health programs, and public health initiatives, a focus on the economically disadvantaged is imperative to enhance access to affordable healthcare.
The availability of clean water and sanitation significantly impacts the well-being of women and men engaged in productive activities. This includes their leisure time, child mortality rates, and water-related diseases. Thus, public health plays a crucial role in safeguarding populations from preventable health hazards. Unfortunately, public health in India faces significant challenges. This weakness is shared by many impoverished nations, driven by concerns about the spread of infectious agents across borders. In such a context, control measures must be collective, as viruses respect no boundaries. The World Bank’s health orientation in 1993 sparked controversy (Ray, 2003). The influx of reforms, spurred by international pressure, has shifted the priorities of nations and weakened their role in healthcare.

Global public health institutions appear relatively feeble, and they lack a unified voice. For instance, during debates surrounding structural adjustment, UNICEF challenged the liberalization policies promoted by the World Bank, advocating for an approach with a “human face” (Walt, 1998). Presently, both the World Health Organization (WHO) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) question the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) decisions concerning the intellectual property of healthcare products. In matters of health, as in broader political contexts, political interference reflects the unequal distribution of global power. As health constitutes a precious resource, the most powerful nations often assert their dominance. Several multilateral agencies formed influential coalitions to reduce the prices of critical medicines for AIDS, even in violation of WTO regulations. Under WTO rules, pharmaceutical industries must pay royalties to the inventors of new medications, and the resulting increased costs can impede access to crucial medicines for patients in need.

In 2021, the prevalence of anemia among women in the age group of 15-49 years increased from 53.1% in 2015-2016 to 57.0%. This increase was observed in 22 states and union territories, with a rise of more than 10% in Assam (19), Chhattisgarh (13), Gujarat (11), Jammu and Kashmir (17), Ladakh (14), Odisha (13), and Tripura (13). In 2011, the highest sex ratio in the age group 0-6 years was observed in Arunachal Pradesh (972), while the lowest was in Haryana (834).

**Gender and Food Security**

A research study was conducted to record a 24-hour dietary intake survey and gather time-use information from individual surveys using a questionnaire among poor urban individuals in India (2016). The study revealed gender discrimination in the intrahousehold allocation of food and the distribution of work over a 24-hour period. Women were found to be overburdened with unpaid domestic work and did not receive their fair share of compensation compared to their husbands. There is a chronic energy intake deficiency (186.30 Kcal) that is higher in wives than in their husbands. The gender gap in food insecurity was identified in 2021, with 31.9 percent of women worldwide experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity compared to 27.6 percent of men, according to a report titled “The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World” (SOFI, 2022). This indicates a gap of more than 4 percentage points from the data in 2020 (Roy, 2022).

In a joint report by FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO (2022), it was pointed out that repurposing food and agricultural support to promote nutritious foods, especially in cases where per capita consumption falls below recommended levels for healthy diets, may be achievable during economic recovery. An analysis suggests that if governments redirect their resources from incentivizing the production, supply, and consumption of nutritious foods, they can help reduce the cost and increase the affordability of healthy diets for all. Another analysis highlighted that, according to WTO rules (2017), India has been procuring food grains at an administered price.
instead of the market rate, exceeding the levels permitted by WHO. This practice was protested by members of the G33 group of developing countries, calling for a permanent solution.

Another study has reported that the production of goods for self-consumption, i.e., subsistence, is now included in the production bracket of UN-SNA. This inclusion is due to the fact that goods produced for self-consumption also have value in the market. These non-marketed goods include the free collection of basic necessities such as water, fuel, and wood (Hirway & Jose, 2011).

Food security is a critical concept for survival. The World Bank defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life.” Achieving this goal requires an understanding of the evolving nature of the food system and the interdependence of policy areas affecting food security.

**Women in the Labor Force**

Gender disparities in income and wages persist in Indian labor markets. While wage differentials exist across regions, occupations, and sectors, inequalities between male and female workers vary. Given the predominance of informal, unorganized work, discrimination and gender bias against women are evident in hiring, promotion, segregation, and compensation (Rustagi, 2005). Despite increasing female workforce participation over time, far fewer women enter the labor market as workers compared to men. Women typically enter the labor market in their thirties, often after fulfilling their reproductive roles of childbearing and childcare. This delayed entry can be attributed to socially defined household roles and the gendered division of labor. Furthermore, a significant number of women join the labor force later in life, reflecting the pursuit of education and the socially prescribed roles for women and men (Sundaram, 2001). This phenomenon highlights India’s underutilization of women’s skills and potential in the labor force.

In 2022, Indian women constituted 23.5% of the labor force, according to the World Bank. On a global scale, women made up 39.5% of the workforce in 2022. The total participation rate in India’s labor force for individuals aged 15 and above was 52.4% in 2022. Children and females aged seven and above worked an average of four hours per week in India. Female workers, on average, worked longer hours (24.5 hours) compared to their male counterparts (9.2 hours), as reported by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2020.

The Time Use Survey (TUS) conducted in December 2019 measured the participation of men and women in paid and unpaid activities. TUS serves as a vital source of information on the time allocated to unpaid caregiving activities, volunteer work, unpaid domestic services, and household production activities, offering insight into the often-overlooked aspects of women’s labor. The survey revealed that while 57.3% of males participated in employment-related activities compared to only 18.4% of females, this percentage surged to 81.2% for unpaid domestic services within households, with women spending an average of 243 minutes per day in such activities.

The Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for the female population is noticeably higher in rural areas than in urban areas across various years, including 2017-2018 and 2018-2019.

**Women, Globalization, and Poverty in India**

Farmers who traditionally cultivated pulses, millets, and paddy have been enticed by seed companies to purchase hybrid cotton seeds, with the promise of turning them into millionaires. Unfortunately, these endeavors have led to financial ruin. Native seeds have been supplanted by new hybrid seeds, which cannot be saved and must be repurchased each year at a high cost. Hybrid seeds are also highly susceptible to pest attacks. Pesticide
expenditure in Warangal, India, skyrocketed by 2,000% from $2.5 million in the 1980s to $50 million in 1997. As a result, some farmers have resorted to consuming these same pesticides as a means of ending their lives, escaping insurmountable debt (Shiva, 2000).

Women and small farmers, who work with biodiversity, are the primary food providers in the Third World. The destruction of rich sources of nutrition and sustainable food production systems has occurred in the name of increasing food production. However, in terms of nutrition per acre and from a biodiversity perspective, the so-called “high yields” of industrial agriculture do not equate to greater food and nutrition production.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Women often shoulder the burden of domestic responsibilities alongside their careers, putting them at a disadvantage in terms of career prospects. Gender disparities continue to hinder equal and fair participation in the workforce globally. In the unorganized sector, where infrastructure and social conditions often lack adequate support, women face consistent challenges. In such an environment, women often pay a higher price for success. The enduring undervaluation of girls and women results in restricted access to the best opportunities.

To overcome these barriers amid technological and economic transformations, women need to explore new digital and social spaces. Gender norms and traditional roles, along with limited family and social support, often hinder women’s access to leadership roles and necessary resources.

The consolidation of economic power among a minority of influential groups or individuals strengthens the social cohesion of the power elite. Despite their crucial role in agricultural production, women face severe disadvantages, including landlessness and vulnerability in cases of family disruption due to death or divorce. Discriminatory inheritance laws and customs further compound their challenges. Agricultural development programs are frequently designed by men and target men’s activities and crops, sideling the needs of women. In some regions, this bias may prioritize the production of cash crops (often men’s crops) over subsistence food crops (often women’s crops), leading to a decline in family nutrition. Approximately 74% of the female workforce is engaged in agricultural operations, and women handle around 60% of activities such as seed sowing, sapling transportation, winnowing, grain storage, and more. This article has examined the growing gender gap and disparities perpetuated through the exercise of power and politics by governments. It offers an analysis of gender relations in agriculture, food, and work, supported by empirical evidence. Gender discrimination is evident in the diffusion of global norms, values, and the proliferation of international agreements and treaties, including those related to environmental and human rights (Sen, 2010).

**References**


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