

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES

[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 7 | Issue 5

2024

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Evolving Gender Roles from Traditional Norms to Modern Realities: Towards a More Inclusive Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transformation of gender roles from traditional norms to contemporary practices in diverse sociocultural contexts. Historically, gender roles were rigidly defined by binary understandings of masculine and feminine behavior, rooted in patriarchal structures and societal expectations. However, contemporary gender identities reflect a more fluid, multifaceted, and inclusive understanding of human identity, shaped by globalization, feminism, LGBTQ+ movements, and shifts in economic and social structures. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of these transformations, analyzing key theoretical frameworks and case studies to understand the dynamic interplay between historical gender norms and their evolving contemporary manifestations.

Keywords: *Gender Roles, Womens Rights, Modern Realities, Human Rights.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender has always been at the forefront of societies, from ancient to modern and its depiction can be found in literature of all times. The concept of gender roles, traditionally understood as a set of expectations regarding behaviours, duties, and functions associated with one's biological sex, has undergone significant transformations over the past century. In many pre-modern societies, gender roles were largely prescriptive and binary, with men and women assigned distinct responsibilities based on patriarchal norms. The modern era, however, has seen significant challenges to these roles due to changes in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres.²

This piece explores the shifts in gender roles over time, analysing how traditional gender expectations, rooted in patriarchy, religious doctrine, and cultural beliefs, have evolved into a more nuanced and fluid understanding in the 21st century. This paper also examines the roles

¹ Author is a student at the Amity Law School, Amity University, Noida, India.

² For a general overview of the topic, please refer to, Baker M., & Cornelson K. (2018). Gender-based occupational segregation and sex differences in sensory, motor, and spatial aptitudes. *Demography*, 55(5), 1749–1775 and Benería L., Berik G., & Floro M. S. (2015). *Gender, development, and globalization: Economics as if all people mattered* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

of industrialization, feminism, globalization, and the LGBTQ+ movements in shaping these changes and their effect, making the case for a more inclusive approach in the Indian legal system.

The evolution of gender roles from traditional norms to modern realities is a complex, multifaceted process shaped by historical, social, economic, and cultural forces. While significant progress has been made in challenging and transforming traditional gender roles, persistent inequalities remain. The rise of feminist movements, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and new understandings of masculinity and femininity has created a more inclusive and diverse landscape for gender identities. However, the full realization of gender equality requires continued efforts to challenge entrenched norms and address the intersections of gender with race, class, and sexuality.

In examining these shifts, it is essential to recognize that gender roles are not static but are continuously negotiated and redefined in response to broader social changes. As societies move toward greater recognition of individual autonomy and diversity, the future of gender roles promises to be more flexible and inclusive, accommodating a wide spectrum of identities and experiences.

II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER ROLES

(A) Traditional Gender Norms in Pre-modern Societies :

Historically, most societies maintained strict gender divisions, where men were typically viewed as the breadwinners, warriors, and decision-makers, while women were often relegated to domestic roles such as caregiving, child-rearing, and homemaking. These roles were not only societal expectations but were often enshrined in religious and legal systems.³

For example, in many pre-industrial Western societies, men controlled political power, while women had limited rights. This division was mirrored in educational systems, religious teachings, and the economy. The man as the “head of the household” and the woman as the “nurturer” became central archetypes of Western civilization, a pattern seen in many other global cultures as well.

(B) Gender Roles in Non-Western Cultures :

Many non-Western societies also exhibited rigid gender roles, though the expressions of masculinity and femininity varied greatly. For instance, in many African, Asian, and Middle

³ Berridge D., Penn R., & Ganjali M. (2009). Changing attitudes to gender roles: A longitudinal analysis of ordinal response data from the British Household Panel study. *International Sociology*, 24(3), 346–367.

Eastern cultures, women's roles were confined to domestic work and childbearing, while men held political and social power. Yet, despite these restrictions, there were often subtleties and nuances in how different cultures perceived gender. For example, in Native American 'Two-Spirit' traditions or ancient Hindu notions of androgyny, there were early understandings of gender diversity that contrast with rigid binary structures.⁴

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: UNDERSTANDING GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT- A LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociological and feminist theorists have extensively debated and discussed gender as a social construct rather than an inherent biological determinant. Key theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault have influenced contemporary discussions about gender. In her seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argued that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.; she emphasized that gender roles were culturally imposed rather than biologically determined.⁵ Beauvoir's existential feminism laid the groundwork for understanding gender as a social construct, arguing that women had historically been relegated to a secondary, oppressed status under patriarchal structures.⁶

Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), introduced the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not something one "is" but rather something one "does." Butler suggests that gender is enacted through repeated actions, thus challenging the binary views of masculine and feminine identities. This perspective has been particularly influential in postmodern feminist discourse and in challenging essentialist views of gender.⁷

Michel Foucault's work on power, discipline, and biopolitics in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) also contributed to critical understandings of gender. Foucault focused on how power operates in subtle ways to normalize certain behaviors and roles, thus influencing gender identities and expectations.⁸

(A) Industrialization, Feminism, and the Changing Gender Landscape

The Industrial Revolution marked a turning point in gender roles, as the shift from agrarian

⁴ Boehnke M. (2011). Gender role attitudes around the globe: Egalitarian vs. traditional views. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 39(1), 57–74.

⁵ For a more recent perspective on her work, please see, Gines, K.T., 2017. Simone de Beauvoir and the race/gender analogy in the second sex revisited. *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, pp.47-58.

⁶ For a more nuanced view, please see, Butler, J., 1986. Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. *Yale French Studies*, (72), pp.35-49.

⁷ Butler, J., 2014. Excerpt from gender trouble. In *Feminist Social Thought* (pp. 112-128). Routledge.

⁸ Foucault, M., 1990. *The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume I*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 95, pp.1-160.

economies to industrial production led to changes in labor dynamics.⁹ While men traditionally worked in fields, factories became the new domain of masculine labor. Women, particularly working-class women, entered the workforce in large numbers, primarily in textile factories. This shift began to blur the lines between public (male-dominated) and private (female-dominated) spheres, although it also reinforced new forms of gendered labor division.

First and Second Wave Feminism-The feminist movements of the late 19th and 20th centuries were pivotal in challenging traditional gender roles. The first wave of feminism, which primarily focused on women's suffrage and legal rights, began to question women's exclusion from political and economic power. The second wave, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, further challenged patriarchal structures by addressing issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and the social expectations surrounding femininity and domesticity.¹⁰

Key thinkers like Betty Friedan, whose work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) critiqued the limited roles available to suburban housewives, spurred an ideological shift, advocating for women's right to self-determination beyond traditional roles.

Global Feminism and Intersectionality By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, global feminism and intersectionality became critical frameworks for understanding gender roles. Feminists such as Bell Hooks¹¹ and Kimberlé Crenshaw¹² argued that gender cannot be understood in isolation but must be considered alongside race, class, and other social categories. This intersectional approach illuminated how different groups of women experienced gender roles differently depending on their race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. While much of the discourse around gender roles has focused on the emancipation of women, masculinity has also undergone significant transformation. Traditional masculinities, often characterized by strength, stoicism, and dominance, have been increasingly questioned.

The Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity and Challenges to Traditional Masculinity R.W. Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' refers to the dominant form of masculinity that reinforces men's power over women and other men. This model of masculinity has historically marginalized men who do not conform to its ideals, such as gay men or those who adopt non-

⁹ Rose, S.O., 1986, March. 'Gender at work': sex, class and industrial capitalism. In *History Workshop Journal* (Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 113-132). Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ For understanding the first and second wave feminism, please refer to, Thornham, S., 2004. *Second wave feminism*. In *The Routledge companion to feminism and postfeminism* (pp. 25-35). Routledge.

¹¹ Hooks, B., 2000. *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Pluto Press.

¹² Crenshaw, K., 2013. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. In *Feminist legal theories* (pp. 23-51). Routledge.

traditional roles.¹³ In recent decades, the notion of a “crisis of masculinity” has gained prominence. Men, especially in Western societies, are experiencing new pressures as traditional male roles as breadwinners and heads of households decline in relevance. Economic changes, particularly the decline of manufacturing jobs and the rise of service and knowledge economies, have disrupted traditional masculine identities. Movements like #MeToo have also prompted men to rethink power dynamics, consent, and responsibility.¹⁴

As a result of these pressures, new masculinities have emerged that emphasize emotional intelligence, nurturing, and egalitarian relationships. Men’s roles in child-rearing and domestic duties have also evolved significantly, with greater societal acceptance of stay-at-home fathers and men in caregiving roles.

(B) Globalization, Media, and the Representation of Gender

Globalization has played a key role in reshaping gender roles. The interconnectedness of cultures through media, trade, and migration has facilitated the cross-pollination of ideas about gender and identity. Women in developing countries, for example, are increasingly entering the workforce and gaining political power, though traditional gender norms continue to hold sway in many regions.¹⁵

Media representations of gender have had a profound influence on societal perceptions. Traditional media often reinforced stereotypical gender roles, with men portrayed as strong, independent, and active, while women were shown as passive, nurturing, and dependent. However, contemporary media, particularly in the digital age, has begun to challenge these norms. Social media platforms, for example, have provided a space for LGBTQ+ individuals and movements like feminism to disseminate alternative narratives about gender roles.¹⁶

(C) LGBTQ+ Movements and the Expansion of Gender Identities

One of the most significant shifts in the understanding of gender roles in recent decades has been the increased visibility and recognition of LGBTQ+ identities.¹⁷ The binary gender model has been challenged by transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer individuals, who have advocated for a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender. The transgender rights

¹³ Connell, R.W., 2020. *Masculinities*. Routledge.

¹⁴ Jaffe, S., 2018. The collective power of #MeToo. *Dissent*, 65(2), pp.80-87.

¹⁵ Beneria, L., Floro, M., Grown, C. and MacDonald, M., 2000. Introduction: Globalization and gender. *Feminist Economics*, 6(3), pp.vii-xviii.

¹⁶ For an Indian perspective, please refer to, Derné, S., 2008. *Globalization on the ground: New media and the transformation of culture, class, and gender in India*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

¹⁷ For a general introduction, refer to, Russell, S.T., Bishop, M.D. and Fish, J.N., 2023. Expanding notions of LGBTQ+. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 49(1), pp.281-296.

movement, which gained prominence in the late 20th century, has been crucial in expanding the definition of gender beyond binary male and female roles. Legal and social recognition of non-binary and transgender individuals has forced societies to reconsider the fixedness of gender categories. Queer theory, which emerged in the 1990s, further deconstructs traditional understandings of gender.¹⁸ Scholars like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argue that gender and sexuality are fluid, performative, and contingent.¹⁹ This perspective has been instrumental in challenging the idea that gender roles are natural or immutable.

Workplace Equality and Gender Parity- In many parts of the world, women have made significant strides toward workplace equality. However, disparities in wages, representation in leadership positions, and occupational segregation persist. Gender roles in the workplace continue to evolve, with men increasingly taking on more collaborative and caregiving roles, while women challenge traditionally male-dominated professions. The division of domestic labor remains a central issue in discussions about gender roles. While women continue to take on a disproportionate share of household responsibilities, there has been a shift toward more egalitarian family structures, particularly in Western societies. Paternity leave policies and a greater acceptance of stay-at-home fathers have contributed to these changing dynamics.²⁰ Apart from it, sexual violence remains a significant challenge to achieving gender equality. Movements such as #MeToo have brought attention to the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and assault, particularly in the workplace. These movements have also sparked discussions about toxic masculinity and the need for a more empathetic and respectful understanding of gender relations.²¹

(D) Shifting paradigms of gender roles:

Gender roles, defined as societal expectations regarding behaviour, responsibilities, and norms based on perceived biological sex, have historically been deeply embedded in patriarchal structures. In most societies, men were seen as the primary breadwinners, while women were expected to handle domestic tasks and caregiving responsibilities. This division was not only social but also legal and religious, shaping the lived experiences of individuals across centuries.²² With the rise of industrialization, feminist movements, and globalization, the

¹⁸ Jagose, A. and Genschel, C., 1996. *Queer theory* (p. 47). Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

¹⁹ Butler, J., Cornell, D., Cheah, P. and Grosz, E.A., 1998. The future of sexual difference: An interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell. *diacritics*, 28(1), pp.19-42.

²⁰ Tyson, L., 2015. *Promoting gender parity in the global workplace*. McKinsey & Company.

²¹ *Supra* n 14

²² Dreyer, Y., 2005. Sexuality and shifting paradigms-setting the scene. *HTS: Theological Studies*, 61(3), pp.729-751. For an Indian case study, refer to, Tharayil, M., 2014. *Shifting paradigms: Gender and sexuality debates in Kerala*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, pp.70-78.

rigidity of these traditional gender roles has begun to erode, giving way to a more nuanced understanding of gender. This paper aims to explore these changes in detail, analyzing the shifts from traditional gender norms to modern, fluid, and more inclusive conceptions of gender. Traditional gender roles were largely constructed in patriarchal systems, where power was concentrated in the hands of men. Patriarchy as a system originated with the establishment of private property and class societies, where control over women and their reproductive capacities was central to maintaining economic and social order. In ancient Greece and Rome, for example, women were often relegated to the private sphere, while men dominated public life, including politics and philosophy.²³ In religious traditions such as Christianity and Islam, gender roles were further codified through sacred texts. For instance, in Christian Europe during the Middle Ages, the church promoted the ideal of the woman as the “virtuous mother” and “obedient wife,” while men were seen as protectors and providers, a division legitimized by biblical teachings.²⁴ Similarly, in Islamic societies, the roles of men and women were clearly delineated in legal and religious practices, although interpretations varied depending on the region and historical period.²⁵

(E) Global Variations of Gender Norms

While Western patriarchy is often the focus of gender studies, many non-Western societies also had strict gender roles. For instance, in traditional Chinese Confucian society, the concept of ritual propriety dictated that women should be subservient to their fathers, husbands, and sons, reflecting a rigid patriarchal order.²⁶ However, gender roles were not static; they were often mediated by class, region, and historical circumstances. For example, in parts of Africa, women could hold significant political power, such as in the case of the Queen Mothers in Ashanti society, though this power often existed within the framework of male-dominated structures.²⁷

In Indigenous cultures, there was often greater fluidity in gender roles. Many Native American tribes, for instance, recognized "Two-Spirit" individuals, who embodied both masculine and feminine qualities, disrupting binary constructions of gender. This demonstrates that traditional societies did not always adhere to rigid male/female roles, a complexity that has often been

²³ Lerner, G., 1986. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. U of Oxford P.

²⁴ Connell, R.W. and Messerschmidt, J.W., 2005. Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & society*, 19(6), pp.829-859.

²⁵ Ahmed, D.S., 2006. Gender and Islamic spirituality: A Psychological view of ‘low’ fundamentalism. *Islamic masculinities*, pp.11-34.

²⁶ Rosenlee, L.H.L., 2012. *Confucianism and women: A philosophical interpretation*. State University of New York Press.

²⁷ Amadiume, I., 2015. *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. Zed Books Ltd..

overlooked in Western gender discourses.²⁸

(F) The Industrial Revolution and the Division of Labour.

The Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries transformed gender roles by shifting the economic basis of society. Previously, men and women often worked together in agrarian economies, with clear but complementary roles. However, industrialization moved work outside the home, placing men in the public sphere of factories, while women were increasingly confined to domestic tasks. This shift reinforced the separation of the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres, a division that has been extensively critiqued by feminist scholars such as Nancy Fraser.²⁹ At the same time, the rise of factory work also provided new opportunities for women, particularly in the textile industry, challenging traditional domestic roles. Nevertheless, women’s labour was often devalued and poorly compensated, reinforcing gender hierarchies within the workforce.³⁰ There was also the influence of waves of feminism. The first wave of feminism, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily focused on legal equality, including women’s suffrage. Feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft argued for women’s education and equal participation in public life, critiquing the notion that women were naturally suited for domesticity.³¹ The second wave of feminism, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, expanded the critique of patriarchy to include issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and gendered domestic labor. Betty Friedan’s famously critiqued the limited roles available to middle-class suburban housewives, sparking widespread debate about women’s dissatisfaction with domesticity. Second-wave feminism was also marked by the introduction of consciousness-raising groups, which helped to bring attention to the personal as political, particularly in areas such as sexual violence and reproductive autonomy.³²

(G) Global Feminism and the Impact of Globalization:

Globalization has played a crucial role in the transformation of gender norms worldwide. The proliferation of global media, the spread of capitalist economies, and the rise of international feminist movements have led to the cross-pollination of ideas about gender and identity. However, as some scholars have argued, globalization has also had contradictory effects. While it has facilitated greater gender equality in some contexts, it has also reinforced traditional

²⁸ Roscoe, W., 1991. *The Zuni man-woman*. UNM Press.

²⁹ Fraser, N., 1989. *Unruly practices: Power, discourse, and gender in contemporary social theory*. U of Minnesota Press.

³⁰ Scott, J. and Tilly, L., 1978. *Women and Work*. New.

³¹ Wollstonecraft, M., 2016. Vindication of the Rights of Woman. In *Democracy: a reader* (pp. 297-306). Columbia University Press.

³² Ibid

gender norms in others, particularly where global capitalism exploits gendered labour.³³ The role of media in shaping gender norms cannot be understated. Traditional media often reinforced stereotypes, portraying men as dominant, active figures and women as passive and nurturing. However, in recent years, there has been a growing representation of gender diversity in films, television, and digital media.

(H)Addressing the Contemporary Challenges and Realities

Despite significant advances in gender equality, disparities in the workplace remain. Women, particularly women of colour, continue to face wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and sexual harassment. Movements in recent times have brought attention to the persistence of gender-based violence and inequality in professional settings, while also sparking debates about power, consent, and accountability.³⁴ One of the most visible changes in gender roles has been the shift in parenting responsibilities. In many Western countries, men are increasingly involved in child-rearing, with policies such as paternity leave supporting this shift. However, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate amount of domestic labour, reflecting the ongoing influence of traditional gender norms.³⁵

IV. CONCLUSION

The evolution of gender roles from traditional norms to modern realities is a multifaceted process shaped by historical, social, and cultural forces. While significant strides have been made toward gender equality, particularly through the work of feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, traditional norms persist in many areas. The future of gender roles promises to be more fluid and inclusive, reflecting the diverse experiences and identities of individuals across the globe. However, achieving true gender equality will require continued efforts to dismantle patriarchal structures, challenge binary gender frameworks, and address the intersections of race, class, and sexuality in shaping gendered experiences. This paper investigates the shift in gender roles from traditional binary expectations to modern, fluid understandings shaped by globalization, feminist thought, LGBTQ+ activism, and economic and social changes. Grounded in sociological, anthropological, and feminist theories, the article traces the historical trajectories of gender roles and examines contemporary realities that challenge binary,

³³ Moghadam, V., Mohanty, C.T., White, S., Wolf, D.L., Shankaran, D., Beneria, L., Sev'er, A., Fernandez-Kelly, M.P., Ehrenreich, B., Hochschild, A.R. and Herzfeld, B., 2011. *The women, gender and development reader*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

³⁴ Bennett, L.A., 2019. "Counted and seen": complicating the governance of (a) gender (s) by university registrar practices. The University of Alabama.

³⁵ Blair-Loy, M., Hochschild, A., Pugh, A.J., Williams, J.C. and Hartmann, H., 2015. Stability and transformation in gender, work, and family: Insights from the second shift for the next quarter century. *Community, Work & Family*, 18(4), pp.435-454.

hierarchical systems. Through the lens of critical theory, the paper provides a comprehensive examination of how these evolving norms reflect broader transformations in societal structures and individual identities.
