



Role Conflict and Accommodation in the Hmar Household

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines gender role differentiation and its effect on conflict in the Hmar household and its coping mechanisms. Categorizations of human is crucial based on sex; however, it is the culturally constructed gender differentiation and perceptions into man and woman, feminine and masculine that is fundamental in defining gender roles and behaviour. The division of roles along gender lines places women in a subordinate position. The paper, therefore, argues that gender role differentiation and perception restrict women to claim their position and maintain a submissive role as perceived by the society.

Introduction

Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do (West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender refers to the meaning ascribed to the sexes and to the beliefs, values and norms that are attached to masculinity, femininity and any other expressions of gender. Gender highlights the social interaction and cultural context shapes gender. In turn meanings and values are ascribed to individuals. So, gender roles are a set of social and behavioural norms that are socially considered appropriate for individuals of a specific sex. The perception of gender roles includes the attitudes of an individual, the actions and personality traits associated with a particular gender within that culture. The differences, inequalities and the division of labor between men and women are often simply treated as consequences of 'natural' differences between male and female humans. Such a view informs most commonsensical understandings of what it means to be a man or a woman in any society and has been intrinsic to worldviews prevailing across different societies throughout much of human history. The idea that natural differences between the sexes are the source of all that makes men and women distinct has also been deeply embedded in scientific discourses (Agrawal 2004).

The sheer variability of the roles and relations of men and women across different societies and social groups presents itself as one of the first evidence against the crude biologically determinist view. That gender is a social construct is obvious from the fact that it has a variety of manifestations and that it has more to do with institutions than with individuals (ibid). Therefore, this paper argues that gender role differentiation and perception restrict women to claim their position and maintain a submissive role as perceived by the society.

Theoretical Framework of Gender Role

Anthropologists have always been interested in understanding gender in the society though its meaning and significance shifted. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s, with the rise of feminist anthropology that gender as a distinct area of theoretical and methodological interest took hold within the discipline. Margaret Mead, an American anthropologist, was one of the first to empirically ground the distinction between the biological and social characteristics of men and women. She did this rather dramatically through her study of the conceptions of masculinity and femininity among the Arapesh, Mundugamor and Tchambuli, three societies in the New Guinea Islands (Mead 1935). On the basis of this study, she argued that the western equation between masculinity and aggression on the one hand and femininity and nurturance on the other is but one among a number of possible permutations of traits which have no intrinsic relation with biological sex (Agrawal 2004).

Ann Oakley (1972) was one the first social scientists to distinguish the concept of gender from the concept of sex. According to Oakley, gender parallels the biological division of sex into male and female, but it involves the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity. In other words, gender is a concept that humans create socially, through their interactions with one another and their environments, yet it relies heavily upon biological differences between males and females. Because humans create the concept of gender socially, gender is referred to as a social construction. The social construction of gender is demonstrated by the fact that individuals, groups, and societies ascribe particular traits, statuses, or values to individuals purely because of their sex, yet these ascriptions differ across societies and cultures, and over time within the same society (Blackstone 2003).

Many contemporary social scientists understand gender as a social phenomenon and socialization is attributed as the factor that created the distinctions between male and female. If gender flowed naturally from sex, one might expect the world to sit back and simply allow the baby to become male or female. But in fact, sex determination sets the stage for a lifelong process of gendering, as the child becomes, and learns how to be, male or female. Names and clothing are just a small part of the symbolic resources used to support a consistent ongoing gender attribution even when children are clothed. That we can speak of a child growing up as a girl or as a boy suggests that initial sex attribution is far more than just a simple observation of a physical characteristic. Being a girl or being a boy is not a stable state but an ongoing accomplishment, something that is actively done both by the individual so categorized and by those who interact with it in the various communities to which it belongs. The newborn initially depends on others to do its gender, and they come through in many different ways, not just as individuals but as part of socially structured communities that link individuals to social institutions and cultural ideologies. It is perhaps at this early life stage that it is clearest that gender is a collaborative affair – that one must learn to perform as a male or a female, and that these performances require support from one's surroundings (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013).

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, autoethnography was employed as the method of field study. This refers to an individual researcher's study of his or her own life and its context (Reed- Danahay 1997). This means, studying one's own culture or one's own group of people. This method of study facilitated the researcher to participate closely in the lives of the people under study and collect detail account of their daily lives. Nonetheless, autoethnography brings with it a set of its own dilemma, of being a native at one point and yet, not a native at another. There was constant shift in identity of being an outsider and an insider (Khawzawl 2015). So, ethnography's repertoire of techniques including

observation, in depth interview and case studies were used for collection of data. Married couples, both husband and wife were interviewed for the purpose.

The Hmar

In North-East India, the Hmars inhabit Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. In the state of Assam, they are found in the two hill districts- Dima Hasao (earlier known as North Cachar Hills District) and Karbi Anglong. Haflong is the headquarters of Dima Hasao District. Two villages namely, Muolhoi and Tuolpui were selected for the purpose of the present study.

The Hmars are a tribe belonging to the Kuki- Chin- Mizo group of the Sino- Tibeto- Burman family. The Hmars were recognized as belonging to the Scheduled Tribes of India in 1956. They have been widely confused and commonly clubbed together by the colonial writers as Kukis. It was J. Shakespeare (1912) who included the Hmar in the old Kuki clans and also interchangeably used the term *Khawtlang* (people who lived in the west) and *Khawsak* (people who lived in the east). It was only in 1904 that the term Hmar spelt as Mhar was first formally used by G.A.Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India. With no written records, the Hmar believe Sinlung, somewhere in China, to be their ancient home based on oral traditions and songs (Thiek 2013). The coming of Christian missionaries paved way to innumerable changes in the lifestyle, culture and belief system of the Hmar. Today, the total population of the Hmar tribe in all parts of Northeastern India adhere to Christianity and modern education and are found to be greatly influenced by modernity and western culture.

Understanding Role Conflict in the Hmar Case

The term is broad and its usage embodies a number of different meanings depending on the context. Several terms describe this one particular term in the Hmar language each varying in some degree, meaning, there is not just one term that can explain this phenomenon. The nearest term that can be used to understand conflict in the familial context is *inkal/ inrem naw, inrem lo*. The conflictual situations locate itself in the role expectations. Being a patrilineal-patriarchal society, where the rule of the father is practiced, the authority of the father over the household, the family members, women and children, and property leads to women subordination. This is garnered by the fact that the key factor in patriarchy is the notion of gender roles. Gender roles are based on the different expectation that individuals, groups and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender. They are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environments, and they give individuals cues about what sort of behaviour is believed to be appropriate for what sex (Blackstone, 2003).

Traditional Role of Hmar Women

In the Hmar society, it is usually believed that a woman's place is in her home. The role of a woman is to maintain the house and keep its members close and united. The maintenance of the house in the Hmar society pertains to all the production activities especially that of jhum as even in the traditional society, jhum cultivation was the basic occupation. Once a Hmar woman is married, her husband's home becomes her home. The notion can be best exemplified with the traditionally comparison of a woman to a rusted iron. The phrase *nuhmei thanaw le thir thanaw (bad woman and bad iron)* is meant not only as a complete understanding of where a woman belongs, but it is also used to symbolize her place after marriage. This means, like a rusted iron sees more of the blacksmith, so do an evil woman or a bad woman sees more of her parental home, which in the Hmar society is regarded as

substandard or faulty. It is the duty of a woman to rise early and cook meal, feed the livestock and start early for the jhum fields. On returning from the jhum, a woman is seen with a basket loaded with firewood or produce from the jhum field. After dinner, a woman would be often found spinning her yarn or smoking *dumbel*, tobacco. A woman was expected to carry out her duty without complaint. The female informants too said that “*these traditional roles are partly inherent in the society. The female character should possess mild and retiring virtues and be hardworking.*”

In the olden days, the husband was solely responsible for all the affairs outside the home. That means, the woman had no place in the societal affairs. The woman was just a passive member and played a subordinate role. The ideological disposition also clearly manifested this point. “*Women should know their place and position. The head is the man and if she believes in God, then she must as well accept this fact,*” said the informants.

The woman’s most important traditional role is widely considered to be that of caring for the home and the family. In the family, the relatives, kith and kin are all involved. The man’s role as a provider and the woman’s role as the one that supports and supported are regarded as natural. The housewife- mother role has been considered to be very important both in production activities as well as in managing the home and family. Women play their role in agriculture and domestic services. A man interprets his marriage role in terms of his ability to provide for the economic needs of his family.

Perception of Women’s Traditional Role

Most informants were clear about their conception of traditional role. They had learnt it from their parents or grandparents. Highly educated informants had better knowledge of a woman’s traditional role. According to them, a woman’s primary role is reflected in her duties towards her husband. From her very childhood she is trained to be a good *female to be later on inducted as wife and mother*. She is well trained and informed which kind of behaviour she has to refrain from and which to follow. A boy, however, is not much aware of his role, but a girl is made conscious of her role early. Thus, there is difference in the socialization process of a boy and a girl. Even though a girl is not regarded as guest in her family (her father’s house), but she is at times joked upon by her brothers as a ‘*Mikhuol chamsawt*’ (literally meaning, a guest who had overstayed or has been staying for a long time) for she has to go to another family after her marriage. She is being groomed to be mentally prepared for the marriage after which she will have to leave her parent’s home to play the important role of a good wife, a good daughter- in- law, a good sister- in- law as well as a good homemaker. Apart from that, she will also have to play an important role as a mother in the rearing of her children.

Some of the informants were of the opinion that this kind of role expectation is still prevalent in the society. Even though they were not directly taught, they had a clear idea of what their said duties and responsibilities are. As one of the informants pointed out, a woman is supposed to ‘*be*’ the ‘*ideal wife*’. She said that “An ideal wife is one who listens to her husband and has to be submissive, subservient and docile. If she crosses the line of answering to her husband and triggers his anger, she may even be physically assaulted. If she wants to become an ideal wife, she has to sacrifice her interests and personal understanding and comply to her husband.”

Most of the informants acknowledged they *performed the traditional role*. They were of the opinion that they must look after the comforts and conveniences of the parents- in- law as the latter have all the consideration for them. In their old age, they have many expectations from the daughter- in- law.

One of the male informants resented to the change in the expected role of daughter-in-laws in the younger generation. According to him “*women or married women were submissive and hardworking. They knew their duty and responsibilities so well that without any complain they carry out their work silently even if it was too demanding. This is not seen or present among the younger generation. They get up late, way after food has been cooked by their in-laws. They answer back when questioned and are ready to even shout at the in-laws. All these were never part of the traditional society. We belong to the generation where immense respect was given to the in-laws remaining silent and listening. Now that the scenario has changed drastically, it saddens me.*”

Modern Role of Hmar Women

The traditional Hmar family was essentially an economically integrated and self-sufficient production unit. Every member was required to contribute to production, each according to his/her ability. This family role has seen some changes in the recent past with many employment opportunities opened for the younger generation. This saw both men and women taking jobs outside of the traditionally integrated jhum work. This change saw the importance of relatives for companionship, collaboration and support diminishing. The importance of neighbors or fellow community members also reduced. Due to all these changes in the social group structure, family roles also changed progressively. Thus, in the new family, we find that both partners may be gainfully employed or even if not, they may be involved in activities that may generate income for their family.

In such a scenario, the woman continues with the traditionally assigned roles of fulfilling all the household chores and then carry on with her work outside the home. This has created double burden for the woman. On one end, she has to cater to the needs of all her family members and children (if any) and on the other, she is also faced with sharing the financial burden with her husband. Contemporary Hmar society is in transition. Tradition is undergoing continuous change. However, modernity has not been fully accepted. In such circumstances, there is a great deal of confusion in the social and cultural norms. In the transitional phase in which the dual-career families find themselves existing, the traditional role is not adhered to rigidly and the modern one is not yet settled. This vacuum makes members of such families cling to the fulfillment of their own demands and claims. There is great uncertainty regarding husband, wife and other relations in the family. In the absence of clear prescribed roles, one is likely to be unmindful of one's duties while at the same time be unduly conscious of the other's obligations.

The ambiguity and uncertainty in the roles in a dual career household, together with the complexity of modern life and exaggerated emphasis on individuality and individual gratification make it difficult for both husband and wife to adjust to their marital obligations. Here, with the onset of a dual career, there is high expectation from the opposite partner. Earlier, household chores that were regarded as a women's duty are now under scrutiny or are being questioned. The wife seeks the help of the husband in the household chores, which in the traditional times were deemed unfit for a man's work. The society had different perception when a man starts behaving or doing a task meant for women. The wife as the 'owner' of the household in the traditional society was expected to discharge all the duties of the home without any expectation from her husband. However, with dual career options that have started booming up, this notion has changed. A wife expects the partner to assist in the housework and childcare. Hence, what has been found is that the views about husband- wife relationship and their expectations and demands out of matrimony have changed. Many women desire to have a relational co- partnership with their husbands. Women put more emphasis on their privileges than on their obligations. This indicates the change which has taken place. Thus, due to disappointment,

greater frustration takes place and there is a deeper basis for friction.

Perception of Women's Modern Role

A working woman has to juggle both the household responsibilities and her work. When working women were asked whether they were able to perform their duties as they would like to, most of them replied in the negative. The reasons stated were lack of time and strain of work outside. Some of them also said that they are tired and strained when they are back home from work. If they have daughters who could share their work, these women were more than delightful and relieved.

With regards to the modern role of women, the change is evident. Today, with the advancement of science & technology, household work has been facilitated by the introduction of different types of time saving gadgets and machines. As a result of which, women are now able to multitask. As education is fast growing, girls believe that the modern role of a woman is to look after her home but the total responsibility is not only theirs. Most of them believe that a woman has many duties towards her husband and children and family, but also expressed that husbands too have to share in the workload.

Sources of Conflict in the Hmar Household

The Hmars in the sampled villages are undergoing change. From the kind of role perception that a woman has to play, it can well be said that the Hmars in the sampled villages are in an in-between phase of traditional and modernity. This kind of role perception has led to many sources of conflict which we shall deal with in this section. Some of these conflicts are related to household responsibility, issue relating with behaving with relatives and parents-in-law, control over income and expenditure, general character of the partner, conduct of the partner in a marital relation and controlling and taking care of children.

Relation to Household Responsibility

The household is considered an important institution in the Hmar society. With the prevailing role perception, a woman finds herself caught in between, juggling household chores and work. This has led to quarrels at home for expecting members of the household to share the burden and when this expectation is not met, exhaustion and frustration leads to conflict. The female informants in the sampled villages are of the opinion that *“the result of these works is not just to be enjoyed by the female members; if the house is clean and tidy it is not just me who will feel relaxed. All will benefit. Besides, we are all hoping for the betterment of our family; hence, work should be shared equally.”* One male informant, however, was of the opinion that *“men should be kept away from trivial works for they are burdened with much heavier work and duty.”*

When new expectations are met, there problems also arise with adjustment as have been stated. In the Hmar society, adjustment from traditional to modern norms finds special mention. Adjustment to societal norms and beliefs were found to be difficult as they are deep-rooted.

Further, it has been found that a profound thrust for the overall development of the household leads an individual towards achieving such desire and at the same time it raises the level of expectation

from other members. This desire for the welfare of the household increases the workload and when the individual is insistent, the other members may even resent this attitude.

Relation to Behaviour With In- Laws and Relatives

In the two Hmar villages, problems with in- laws were more reported when the daughter- in- law was young, working and with children. What has been found is that age and position had an indirect role to play in the division of labour and participation in decision- making process apart from the house arrangement. What has been observed was that young married women were more burdened with household chores and other responsibilities. They are bounded by the traditional role perception of a woman and yet being from a period where modernity has shown its radiance, these women are in-between the change process. Their ideal type is that of *shared labour*, however, this could not be materialized because of the said existing perception. What has been reported and found is that these categories of women work extra time, yet they hear complaints from their in- laws, and there are times they are not able to remain silent, they retort. Besides, a daughter-in-law like in any other known society is expected to behave in a manner pleasing to everyone. She has to be kind and gentle. Further, she is also expected to know and visit relatives, help them in times of need and keep the relationship alive. Hence, the role strain creates more problems.

The ingrained notion in people's minds that household chores are meant for the women folk has created problems in the transition from traditional to modern. Expectation exists not only between partners but also between parents and children, parents-in-law to daughters-in-law or son-in-law and the like. It is as old as the traditions are. As one male informant mentioned, 'gender roles have changed with the changing time'.

Relation to Control over Income and Expenditure

It has been observed that though women were equally involved in income generating activities, control over the expenses was not fully in their hands in both the villages. Apart from meeting the daily needs, women's autonomy was within the concept that prevailed in the society called *thil lien le chin*, things of importance. This would include purchases made for the household, property, movable and immovable. Women were rendered incapable of making decision for these 'important milestones' for the family. Hence, besides being able to do small purchases for the daily requirements, Hmar women looked up to the men in the family for any decision. Hence, their role as the partner in the functioning of the household was quite limited and powerless.

Relation to General Character and or Conduct of the Partner in Marital Relationship

The problem of adjustment becomes more difficult for working men and women or when only the wife is working on account of husband's inability or unpreparedness to change himself in the light of the new conditions. In this condition, it is important for working wives to make efforts to achieve marital adjustment as men find it more difficult to adapt to changing functions of the family. Most husbands in the two villages believed that they need not share the household activities. Besides carrying this attitude, some of the men were alcoholics. Hence, apart from spending their earned money, they also tried and spent their wives's hard-earned money. Further, their behaviour changed after consumption of alcohol. Thus, some of the female informants reported of physical assault.

Controlling and Taking Care of Children

Childcare is also regarded as women's work in the villages. Rarely were men seen with kids. There are two categories of men who helped in child care- the first category belonged to the younger generation who baby-sit while their wives were busy and the second category of men were the older generation who baby sat their grandchildren. Under such circumstances only were women free from childcare. Besides, childcare, there were reports of women nagging men to control their sons. It is said that women were more regular in advising their children than the husbands, while children especially sons, feared the father more. Hence, tussle arise among parents when their perceived role is not played by the latter.

Coping Mechanisms and or Accommodation

In spite of the dilemma faced by the families, there are certain factors that make them viable. At the heart of these factors are the motivational syndromes, of which the most important is financial security. Although the economic factor is not equally important in all cases, an additional income does provide an advantage to such families as it brings the possibility to maintain a higher standard of living. Some working wives reported that their children show independence and resourcefulness by helping with the family tasks. They feel they are contributing to family welfare. Often the children show pride in their parents' accomplishment. They take interest and have a feeling of involvement with the work both parents are doing. The very fact that both parents are employed and share domestic interests and roles allow a greater range of role models for children of both sexes.

It has also been found that men supported women to take up jobs or start business. In fact, among the sampled villages, men showed pride in their family and their achievements. By and large, what is reported is that the support of the husband is critical. Learned patterns of behaviour make it possible for the couples to organize their time, energy, finances and other resources that the kind of life they have chosen can be seen as feasible. In this sense, the family framework may be viewed as a management framework. Some couples are better than others managing their resources, delegating housework, making decisions, delineating issues and drawing boundaries about what is a legitimate and possible way of involvement.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that role conflict situations may arise from a variety of circumstances and the contexts in which the role is performed is an important determinant. Despite variations in the terms used, the central component of all the formulations is incompatibility. Thus, role conflict, role strain or role stresses are all concerned with problems for the individual which arise as a result of role incompatibilities (Grace 1972).

Thus, it is essential to discuss the ways through which conflicts are resolved, so that the effects and consequences which put many adverse impacts upon the incumbents as well as other members of the family could be avoided. Getzels and Guba (1954) claim that being confronted with role conflict situations the actor is forced to choose one of the several alternatives; s/he may abandon one role and cling to the other, or s/he may withdraw either physically or psychologically from the role altogether.

Blake and Mouton (1964) have suggested five conflict resolution strategies, namely confrontation, compromise, forcing, smoothing and withdrawal. These strategies will be used to explain how in the sampled villages the Hmars tried to resolve their conflicting situation.

Confrontation

This involves rooting out the causes of conflict. A focal person with such an orientation would meet his superiors and subordinates to discuss the area of conflict and work through the problems. In the sampled villages, there were reports by male informants who preferred to confront the problem. They were willing to face the worst situation while confronting rather than keeping the matter. Among the female informants, however, confrontation was not common. In fact, many female informants avoided confrontation.

Compromise

This strategy involves seeking a middle ground or permitting an accommodation of two opposed alternatives by splitting the difference. Thus, a focal person would seek to compromise the pressures from the opposing role senders regardless of what is the best solution. Informants in the sampled villages informed of cases where a compromise had to be struck between brothers. Neither was happy with the outcome.

Forcing

Basically, this orientation assumes that a man is a commodity like a machine and conflict or disagreement is intolerable. Thus, when conflict arises, a focal person with this orientation would suppress it. This kind of situation was commonly reported in both the sampled villages especially among couples whose husband had more influence over the wife in the family.

Smoothing

This type of conflict involves taking people out of conflict or in other words, glossing over it. The focal person adopting this strategy would do anything he can to maintain harmony. This was one way of staying away from conflict among many of the informants.

Withdrawal

Strict neutrality is maintained in this strategy. The focal person would then keep his eyes closed and does not voice any personal opinion. In the sampled villages, this was mostly reported among the elderly. According to the informants, some of the elders in the family do not voice their opinion but when the situation worsens, they interfere in the conflict to resolve the situation.

Inphahnuoi, Submission

Besides the above-mentioned conflict resolution, there is one striking mechanism that have been observed. This is *inphahnuoi* and when translated it would mean to submit oneself or be submissive. This trait is related to a personality type of individuals but it is interesting to note that it is one of the perceived roles a Hmar woman has to play. This is regarded as a virtue among the Hmars of the sampled villages. When the husband raises his tone, the wife is supposed to submit herself and bear quietly. In other words, the wife has to lower herself even if she may be right. Here to raise one's self-

esteem, one has to stoop. Or by lowering your self-esteem, one rises above others. This is an expected role of a woman because women are by nature regarded as soft and tender, submissive and compliant.

The image portrayed by this trait was not well accepted by many female informants in both the villages. They were of the opinion that “*they too had the rights to stand and speak for themselves.*” Hence, what has been observed was that, whenever a situation flared up in the family, and relatives and friends enquired about it, the passing judgment was “*had the wife been submissive, she would not have been physically assaulted (a nuhmei lem in pha hnuoi nachang hre sien ding ana, hi chen an phak naw ding veia).*”

Inbiekrem, negotiation

The other important principle followed for conflict resolution is *Inbiekremna*. *Inbiekremna* meaning, negotiation or to come to terms after discussion is deliberated by members in the family. This kind of situation occurs when the wife after a conflict with her husband (most of the time) or her in-laws leaves her husband's house and returns to her parental home. Or it may so happen that the couple is not in talking terms or the daughter-in-law is not in terms with her in-laws. During this kind of crisis, *Inbiekremna* is initiated by close members, relatives and friends or during the worst situations, the clansmen who are involved settle the dispute. In this case, all the differences are deliberated and the members try to come to a solution. That means negotiation happens to come to terms.

Prayer

Many of the informants resorted to prayer as have been reported. When faced with difficulties, the female informants are of the view that “*if Christ dwells in the person, there is nothing that can move them to anger or frustration. It is accepted as their burden here on earth. Instead of stooping down to the position of the person who tries to misbehave, it is better to uphold the person in prayers.*” The narratives indicate that Jesus Christ holds the center stage in their life and that nothing else is permanent. As such, in spite of continuous struggle within their family, one female informant said that, “*life is too short to fill with problem. Instead try and see and understand people from their perspective. It will be clearer.*”

Conclusion

The persistent traditional role and the modern role perception are constantly confronted and encountered in the Hmar society. Basically, with the kind of workload that a woman has to carry, the expectation from the partner too increases. And if for any reason this expectation is unmet, anger and frustration occur leading to a conflicting situation. The inequitable division of labour in the home front and other tasks and errands were the major concerns of the respondents. It is also observed that incongruence in a parent-child relationship also leads to a conflicting relationship. In the present day, individual and societal norms collide at certain point.

In conclusion, gender differentiation and perceptions into man and woman, fundamental in defining gender roles are found to exist in the Hmar society. The emphasis on traditional gender role exists to show the difference in behaviour and attitude between men and women and this adherence is influenced by the rules learned through the process of socialization.

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