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# UNIT 1 MATERIAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL BASES OF WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION

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## 1.0 AIMS AND PURPOSE

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In this unit we have discussed the major processes and institutions responsible for subordination of women. After you have read this unit you should be able to:

- explain the material basis of women's subordination;
- analyze the institutional basis of women's subordination; and
- discuss empowerment as a strategy to end subordination.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit gives you a theoretical background to understand the basis of women's subjugation in society. Their subordinate status is reflected in the unequal access to economic resources, political power, educational opportunities, and health care facilities, etc. Inequality and vulnerability of women in all spheres of life point out to the fact that there are several social processes and institutional arrangements responsible for such prevailing inequality. For this we need a) to locate the sources and bases of subordination of women, b) to identify its nature and different forms, and c) find out the ways and strategies to bring to an end to such subordination.

At the outset, let us understand the concept of subordination. The Oxford Dictionary defines subordination as, 'Condition of being subordinate.' Any society with hierarchy and inequality has unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and power. This leads to social relationships based on the principle of domination or subordination. The segment of the population possessing more resources, opportunities and power become dominant. These dominant sections make the other sections with less or no resources, opportunities and power to become subordinate. With this definition if we analyse the situation of women in Indian society we realise that women are subordinated in multiple ways. In any society with hierarchy or inequality, subordination of one section to another can be observed. In Indian society in addition to subordination of lower castes by upper castes and subordination of lower classes by upper classes, subordination of women by men can widely be seen.

Subordination of women originates from various sources: property relations, distribution of income, goods and services, religious ideologies, social patterning of relationships like family and education. In this way, the subordination of women is a socially constructed and socially patterned phenomenon. (You may like to read Unit 1, FEW-01 again to get greater clarity on this issue.)

In this unit we have elaborated the major facets of subordination of women in the society. We have discussed the theoretical foundations of women's subordination as given by Marx and Hartmann; the institutional basis of women's subordination in the society; the ideological basis is also examined with suitable illustrations. These sections would help you to understand the processes of subordination of women in the society and formulate strategies to end such subordination. Can empowerment of women be a strategy to end of such subordination? Let us read this unit to find answer.

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## **1.2 MATERIAL BASIS OF SUBORDINATION**

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Subordination of women is an end product of various social processes and institutional arrangements. Thus subordination is systematically arranged, sustained and perpetuated by different social arrangements. Women's subordination has material, institutional and ideological basis.

Subordination-dominance relationships are concretely rooted in material reality. The material base of any society means the way production process is organised, the way in which economic resources, property and goods and services are allocated to different sections of the society. We come across a vast body of theory on material basis of subordination. Two main theoretical stands on material basis of women's subordination are relevant for our understanding.

### **1.2.1 Marxist Feminist Perspective**

The first proponent of this stand is Fredrick Engels. He stated that subordination of women originated from the development of private property. This itself was the 'historical defeat of the female sex' according to him. The property was transmitted to own progeny by controlling women and confining them to the four walls of the domestic sphere. Even the modern family system continues like this. With the rise of State, monogamous family was converted into patriarchal family. In this structure women were excluded from the public sphere and their work is reduced to 'Private Service'.

Engels differentiates between the middle class women and working-class women. According to him the middle class woman is totally dependent on her husband and is therefore his property. The women of working class by participating in the production in a way challenge their exploitation. Engels expects that subordination and exploitation of women would be eliminated after the class revolution whereby the State would wither away.

The limitation of Engels is that he analysed women's subordination only in terms of the economic factor (class situation) and therefore he slipped in utopian belief that class revolution will automatically end gender exploitation. But he indeed presented a powerful theory of gender subordination and oppression and analysed how it is sustained by the institution of family considered as almost sacred by most of the societies.

Women in the working-class also experience subordination. Low paid jobs, heavy burden of domestic work, marginality in the labour force are some of the indicators. They emphasise on the problems of class oppression, alienation, property inequality and exploitation of labour etc. A working-class revolution was believed to end all these phenomena.

### **1.2.2 Socialist Feminist Perspective**

This is not a unitary body of theory but represents a cluster of theoretical formulations. It is called as the synthesis of two most important feminist traditions namely, Marxian and Radical Feminist thought. Socialist Feminist thought can be classified into two: The first focuses on class oppression and gender oppression. Analysis of women's subordination is therefore sought through the analysis of capitalist patriarchy. The second type focuses on all forms of oppression-race, ethnicity, age, sexual preference and location within the global hierarchy of nations and so on. The concept, central to this variety, is domination.

Both of these varieties draw a great deal from Marxism and historical materialism which is the main methodological tool of Marxism. They however, broaden the meaning of the 'material conditions' of human life. Marxists focus on relations of production and forces of production and the way goods are created and exchanged in the Market. Socialist Feminist analysis primarily includes the following: First, relations of reproduction along with material conditions and study of other conditions of human existence such as the human body, its sexuality, involvement in child bearing and procreation, home-tending and the production of knowledge itself.

Secondly, they reevaluate the significance of consciousness, motivation, ideas, social definitions of the situation, knowledge, ideology and the will to act in one's interests. They argue that social structures are intertwined with the aspects of human subjectivity as much as by material conditions. Human personality, human action and the structures of domination empower some and impoverish or immobilise others.

Thirdly, they not only focus on class oppression, but also analyse the multifaceted system of domination and the wide range of social inequalities. This is done by portraying social organization in which the **public structures** of economy, polity and ideology interact with the **intimate, private processes** of human reproduction and domesticity of interpersonal relations. The strategy for change is then a deeper understanding of discovery of oppressed persons and groups to pursue collective emancipation.

To translate these theoretical propositions to everyday Indian social reality, we could ask what are the components of material base of subordination? Ownership of property is in the hands of men: houses, farms, industries, assets and goods, everything, while women have very little or no access to it. Men dominated society decides the value of productive work and activities. Women's productive labour including domestic work is not recognised and not paid. The role of family in strengthening sexism, nature and role of patriarchy is also focused on in this theoretical formulation. Women's work in and out of the house, their participation in the unorganised sector, devaluation of any economic activity of women, ownership of land and land produce are some of the issues taken up by the socialist feminists.

#### **Activity 1**

Write a small essay on how women's position is affected by the perception that she is not a "bread earner". Base this essay on the experience of your surrounding.

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## **1.3 INSTITUTIONAL BASIS FOR SUBORDINATION**

All basic social institutions like the market, the state, the family, the stratification, the judiciary and the education and so on define and reinforce the subordination of women. In the earlier section we discussed how the economy in every society controls women and their position in the society. In this section we review the contribution of some social institutions in keeping women subordinate in the society.

### **1.3.1 Family**

Family is the basic social unit which binds men, women and children in network of mutual ties and obligations. But its significance for defining the life options of men and women is totally different. Family as an institution defines and controls the sexual division of labour, marital norms, system of property division, right, duties and privileges of the members. Here the following aspects are worthy of discussion:

- i) Position of woman in the family
  - ii) Inheritance and woman
  - iii) Motherhood
- i) **Position in the Family**

In patriarchal families, women's position is subordinate to its male members. The eldest male is the 'Karta' who controls property, takes decisions regarding all aspects of her life. She is burdened with the domestic work. Her mobility and participation outside the house is linked to her role in the family. In short, she shoulders many responsibilities, but she has very little role in decision-making.

The Indian joint family structure situates a married woman in a number of role relations through her husband. Except in the role of a mother and of mother-in-law (specially after middle age) she does not enjoy power in family relations. Marriage is considered as the only role alternative to woman. If single or widowed, her situation in the family worsens. The rate of desertion of women is also on the increase. These women represent single-parent, female-headed households.

ii) **Inheritance**

In most religious communities, women do not get equal share of ancestral property. This makes their subordinate status even more pronounced. Even if the women are working (in the unorganised or organised sector) they do not have rights over their income. This resourcelessness increases their dependence on the family and male members who on the other hand inherit property and 'own' incomes and assets.

Property inheritance laws do not make women co-owners of family property (of ancestors, of the father or of the husband) by default.

Deserted and divorced women can demand alimony through judicial procedures. But the law does not ensure equal share to women in income, assets and property. Moreover evidence all-over India suggests that implementation of decisions regarding alimony, the actual transfer of money and assets is very rare and worst of all is that the judiciary in the present legal framework can not ensure actual implementation. A woman, therefore, in case of marital problems, unhappy marriage, desertion, divorce or widowhood, is rendered totally resourceless and therefore subordinated.

iii) **Motherhood**

Patriarchy is sustained and reinforced through the glorification of motherhood. It is perceived as the most important aspect of marriage. A woman is perceived by the society as 'nurturant by nature' and thus her child-bearing and child-rearing is looked at as 'natural' and 'essential' for society. Social celebration of motherhood puts it as the supreme goal for women. Women's lives are usually described in terms of motherhood, while men's lives are usually characterised as heads of household or wage earner.

Begetting a son is considered the highest. In India it is perceived as socially prestigious and ritually rewarding and desirable. This puts specific pressures on a woman's reproductive capacity. Her sexuality and reproductive capacity is controlled in the framework of socially acceptable form of marriage (e.g. among Hindus a marriage within caste or sub-caste) and patriarchal dominance.

Motherhood and the ideology glorifying responsibilities and duties of a mother as the most important for the family and larger society, define and constrain her mobility and participation in public life.

In short family as an institution determines the framework of women's relation to the society. It drains their productive capacity, (unpaid domestic work and paid or unpaid productive work) reproductive capacity (sexuality, fertility and social celebration of motherhood) and participation in the public sphere.

### 1.3.2 State

All the political arrangements in general and the State in particular are almost universally patriarchal in nature. This institution decides and shows whether male dominance is legally and publicly formalised. It connotes women's relative powerlessness in a given society.

In modern times the policies of the Welfare State as the 'benevolent public patriarch' are worth studying because they signify women's subordination and dis-empowerment.

In the whole of South Asia a dichotomy is observed in polity. There have been some women in the highest political office in these countries (Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Sirimavo Bhandarnayake, Khalida Zia, etc.) and yet we have to accept that South Asian women are so powerless. These are not more than 10% elected representatives in the formal decision-making bodies of these countries.

Comparatively, India has quite progressive laws for women. Indian women enjoy equality before law, equal opportunities, right to vote and the fundamental liberties. But in reality we observe several gaps and loopholes in the legal procedures which makes it easy to either misuse or evade. Hence through these loopholes and gaps the subordinate status of women is either maintained or reinforced by the law.

### 1.3.3 Religion

Most modern religions view women as subordinate entities. Feminists observe that justification of patriarchy and male dominance are the essential features of all religions.

Religion views women as biologically defined and therefore socially dependent and inferior. Hence women are believed to be lacking spiritually. Women have no place in the religious authority structure. Mother Goddesses were slowly replaced by male Gods during the evolution of all modern religions. Thereafter respectable women or even goddesses have been convinced as mother or consorts of gods. (e.g. Virgin Mary or Parvati) As per the role in different religious rites and rituals is concerned, women either do not have a role or play a secondary role.

More important aspect of religion affecting women is the ideological support provided to patriarchy. Religion naturalises and even justifies women's subordination in every field of life. Religion constructed morality, ethics and the definitions of social conformity and deviance. As powerful means of social control, religion controls women's sexuality, relations of reproduction, their mobility in the public sphere and ensures their conformity by justifying violence against women in private or public sphere.

Modern law in most of the societies is based on religion and therefore reinforces the structures of subordination by maintaining the traditional base of marriage, family and stratification. In India, for instance, most of the documents—governmental, non-governmental or the application forms—demand that a woman describe her identify in terms of her father's/husband's name and address. Religion thus maintains and reinforces women's subordination to men.

#### Activity 2

Prepare a list of major religious activities which are usually done by women of your own community. Compare these activities with those of the religious activities of men of your own community. Do you find a difference in these activities? Do these activities contribute to the process of dominance of one gender by another?

### 1.3.4 Caste System

The caste system in India establishes relations of subordination and dominance. It subordinates the lower castes and it highlights gender subordination. Caste system in

India has both religious and secular implications for men and women. To maintain the segmental division of society based on Varna hierarchy women's sexuality was strictly controlled. Endogamous marriages control women's sexuality. There are restriction on women's labour. Caste system determines sexual division of labour. It decides which tasks women should perform. The higher the caste status the more the withdrawn and guarded are the women. The women of lower castes on the other hand are available to various types of activities both in the field and in the household. Their works, however are devaluated and remained derecognised.

### **1.3.5 Education**

Education system in the past was an expression and extension of religion. From the time it became a formal institution, it was controlled by men. Knowledge as practised by men was the only recognised form and hence only men were regarded as the creators, practitioners and users of knowledge. The formal institution of education was thus instrumental to women's subordination as women had very limited access to these institutions.

#### **Do You Know? 1**

Gerda Lerner says that while constructing theology men replaced the symbol of mother goddess by the goddess of fertility and thereby showed how women's existence was very limited and sexually dependent. The view emerging from this was that of man as the creator and 'Woman was not' (a deviation from the original standard), man as complete and powerful and women as incomplete and mutilated and lacking autonomy.

In modern times also the formal education system reinforces patriarchy and women's subordination in direct and indirect ways. In the last century education was prescribed for women as a part 'upliftment of women and enlightenment of women' project. The objectives of education as laid down by the social reformers and political leaders were an expression of traditional role requirement of women, that is women's education was perceived as the foundation of a good home, good family and good children. The role of wife, mother and home tenderer was highlighted in this education process.

What is of importance again is the content of education. If the curricula are designed to do away with traditional gender-stereo-typing and aims at empowerment then education will be of real use for the largest segment of women. The message of education should improve a woman's self-image, help discover herself and enable her to participate in public life fruitfully and meaningfully. Many studies have shown the gender-blindness, gender-neutrality and outright gender-prejudices in school and college curricula and textbooks. Women are exemplified as nurturant, self-sacrificing, ever-available mothers and wives and as obedient daughters rather than self actualising individuals with dignity.

Our present day pedagogical methods are also based on 'prescription by authority' than participation of the students. This also results in discouraging girl students. Even if the course content is not gender-prejudiced and gender blind how the courses are taught is also worth scrutinising.

Thus, education and their social institutions play a major role in maintaining and reinforcing women's subordination.

#### **Think It Over 1**

Do you think that subordination of women is mainly rooted in material terms? How would restructuring of the process and of the relations of production empower women?

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## **1.4 IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF SUBORDINATION**

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Every aspect of the social structure is supported and maintained by an ideology. As we have seen earlier ideology is produced by the social structure and the same sustains it. The Socialist Feminists therefore emphasise on consciousness, motivation, ideas, social

definition of the situation, knowledge – the subjectivity of human beings. Feminists argue that the material conditions of production are reinforced actively and coercively by a dominant ideology which presents itself as inevitable and immutable. They focus therefore on social construction of individuality and selfhood, unconscious internalization of subordinate position and the normative structure that 'naturalize women's subordination and portray it as 'immutable'.

In this section we analyse some of the ideological elements in Indian social setting which contribute to the subordination of women.

#### 1.4.1 Varnashramadharma

The Varna model of stratification is based on the concepts of purity and pollution. It divides the Hindu society into four vertical strata namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. It assigns roles and delineates privileges and resource allocation to these sections of the society on the basis of ascription. Varna system constructs a scale of purity wherein the Brahmins are believed to possess highest amount of purity followed by Kshatriyas and Vaishyas whereas the Sudras have total absence of ritual purity and are therefore considered as 'polluted' and able to 'defile' others. Ritual and physical segregation of Varnas is best sought through the system of marriage. The ideology of Varnashramadharma perceives women also as 'impure' and 'defiling' – making them subordinate to 'pure' men.

To put the ideology of Varnashramadharma into practice, Anuloma and Pratiloma forms of marriage are practised.

- i) *Anuloma* form is marriage between man of higher Varna or higher Caste with woman of lower varna or lower caste. This enhances of superiority of men of all castes against women and men of higher castes against men of lower castes. This form of marriage resulted in dowry offered to higher caste men and polygamy of higher caste men. Also women's age at marriage got lowered and there was a decline in the overall status of women.
- ii) *Pratiloma* is that form of marriage where a woman of higher varna or caste (ritual status) marries a man of lower varna or caste (ritual caste). This form was prohibited and condemned and was treated with most severe punishments including ex-communication and death sentence. Behind both of these rules is the ideology which makes a woman of any caste the 'guardian' of caste-purity.

The ideology of varnashramadharma also prescribes several sacraments and rites for men of different varnas in a different way according to four stages in life called Ashramas. Out of these four women are allowed to enter only the second stage, Grihashthashrama, as a wife. Vivaha is the only sacrament possible for women.

#### 1.4.2 Yonishuchita

'Yonishuchita' literally means sexual purity of women. It is expressed in the emphasis on chastity and fidelity of women. This emphasis clearly reflects double standards of morality in our society. If the society demands that she should establish sexual relations with any man as told by the family she should comply obediently. Also a woman is constantly asked to remain chaste but it is merit worthy if a man can attract more than one woman. The principle of 'legitimacy' of children originates from the religious and cultural assumption that a woman is 'Kshetra' (field) and the man is the 'beej' (seed) as far as reproduction is concerned. As Leela Dube comments 'this symbolism shows how the two partners are situated in the process of reproduction. Two partners are not on par with one partner' (Dube, 1978). The child's identity is derived from the father – the seed.

#### 1.4.3 Pativrataadharma

Patriarchal ideology states that the salvation and happiness of women revolve around their virtue and chastity as daughter, wives and widows. This ideology is expressed in overt rules prohibiting women from specific activities and denying certain rights and in more subtle forms like different rituals and legends and practices (Vatasaavitri, Karva Chauth etc.) worshipping for the well-being of father, brother, husband and son.

Slowly women internalise their inferior position through patriarchal practices woven into their daily routines. Many studies have shown that the subordination is accepted by women themselves and is therefore translated into various everyday life practices. The period of breast-feeding for daughters and for sons is different, the daughters being breast fed for shorter periods. In the house, the men and sons eat first followed by women and daughters resulting in low consumption of proteins and vitamins. Women are the ones who generally finish the left-over.

Health problems of women are neglected, overlooked and if acknowledged, treated mostly by home-remedies. Malnourishment, exhaustion and alienation are commonly experienced and are considered as 'natural'.

The ideological basis of subordination thus comes from theology, religion, stratification and the ideologies related to these. The feelings of inferiority, being incompatible with men are produced and sustained with naturalising myths. The ideal woman is portrayed as self-sacrificing, self-effacing, chaste, devout, non-assertive and non-complaining. Her role and position in family and larger society is put in terms of her role in reproduction. She is socialised and groomed in such a way that she will recreate and sustain patriarchy as an agent.

**Think It Over 2**

Critically review the functioning of various institutions in your familiar surrounding – your family, caste, religion, education etc. Does it reinforce and perpetuate subordination of women?

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## **1.5 EMPOWERMENT AS A PROCESS TO END SUBORDINATION**

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'To empower' means 'to give power or authority to act'. If we take this as our starting point, then empowerment of women means 'Being accorded the power to act' suggesting that this power is being relegated from 'outside'. The source of women's power in this case then is not their enlightenment or collective fight for emancipation, but the welfare state.

In the Indian context right from the British rule women were seen as 'victims' of some customs who needed help and protection. Legal reforms initiated by social reformers and sanctioned by the colonial rulers were the first source of 'empowerment'. But the help and protection sought through these laws was a part of the typical imperial agenda to 'protect' Indian women within the given structure.

After Independence the Indian State passed progressive laws to enable women to vote, to take education, to fight against various customs like dowry, child marriage etc. Under the Plan process women were perceived as the section deserving help and special assistance.

Some important aspects of empowerment can be identified as follows:

- a) Legal Measures
- b) State Support
- c) Welfare Schemes
- d) Conscientisation of Women

### **1.5.1 Legal Measures**

India is one of the countries with the largest number of laws for women and yet women in India are subordinated in many ways. The Age at Marriage Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, Maternity Benefit Act, Equal Remuneration for Equal Work Act etc. were efforts to protect Indian women and enable them to participate in the process of India's development [For details please see WED-02].



## **1.5.2 State Support**

Towards Equality-review of women's status, Shramashakti—first-ever note on self-employed women, National Perspective Plan-policy document of future plans, Five Year Plans, etc. are some of the documents which focuses on the issue of women.

## **1.5.3 Welfare Schemes**

As a disadvantaged section women are believed to be helped through governmental welfare schemes. Some of the schemes are also for education of the Girl Child.

Credit support through nationalised banks, IRDP Loans, Indira Gandhi Awaas Yojana, DWCRA etc. are some other prominent schemes meant for women in India.

## **1.5.4 Conscientisation of Women**

This is a process of change from within in which empowerment occurs as a person realises the causes and sources of subordination and awakens to one's potentialities. The women's movement in India, specially the post 1975 movement, believed firmly in conscientisation as a strategy to end subordination of women. To achieve this women's organisations and groups have used different strategies – songs with messages of undoing subordination, posters and slogans offers reasoning for subordination, discussions, demonstrations, street plays, films, talks, conventions and so on.

The movement has been making a number of demands suitable to changing times, highlighting women's participation in the economy, in the polity and as equal citizens of India. Issues of rape, dowry harassment, battering of wives, female foeticide due to aminocentesis, equal pay for equal work, more employment opportunities in the organised sector, maternity benefits, stable prices of basic goods and commodities, reservation of seats in the bodies of elected representatives are some of the demands.

### **Think It Over 3**

What is ideology? Do you think the failure to address the ideological issues make many empowerment programme ineffective?

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## **1.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

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In this unit we discussed that women have a subordinate status in society which manifests itself in varied forms. Various scholars have put forth theories of subordination of women. Conventional theorists explain subordination of women in biological terms thereby implying that it is natural, universal and therefore unchangeable. Matriarchy theories do not accept women's subordination as historically 'given' and 'natural'.

Further, we talked of the material, institutional and ideological basis of women subordination. The material basis of a society, i.e. the organisation of the production process, distribution of economic resources, goods and services leads to the emergence of class system. Men become the owner and controllers of the production process and property while women are marginalised with little or no control over resources. Their participation in the economic activity remains invisible and unaccounted for.

Institutions in the society—economic, polity, family, religion and caste etc. reinforce and sustain subordination of women. They do not question patriarchal values and structures which maintain an unequal position of women in the family, provide unequal inheritance, lay emphasis on the importance of the motherhood, non-implementation of legal measures related to women. Finally, the dominant ideology of the society plays an important role in prescribing the behaviour and attitude towards women which is largely discriminatory.

Empowerment of women is the solution to end subordination. Through empowerment women would acquire economic, social, political power and take part in the decision-making. The process of empowerment to achieve gender equality can begin with supportive legal measures, state intervention, welfare schemes, policies oriented towards women, conscientisation of women and a positive attitudinal change towards women as a whole.

**Think It Over 4**

Are the present measures to empower women enough? What more according to you, needs to be done to step up the efforts? What are the future challenges?

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## **1.7 CLARIFICATION OF THE TERMS USED**

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- **Institutional:** A set of rules and regulations governing the members of the society
- **Patriarchal:** Domination of women by the authority of men.
- **Ideology:** Organised body of thought providing legitimacy of various systems, actions and processes.

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## **1.8 SOME USEFUL READINGS**

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Anderson, M.L. 1988. *Thinking about Women: Sociological and Feminist Perspectives*. (2nd ed.) New York: Macmillan.

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Blumberg, Race Lesser. 1978. *Stratification: Socio-economic and Sexual Inequality*, Iowa City: William C. Brown.