

Gender Inequality Within The Household: Revisiting Whitehead And Palriwala Through Contemporary Evidence

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Abstract

Gender inequality within the household has been a central concern in feminist sociology particularly in questioning the assumption that the family is a naturally cooperative and unified unit organised around shared interests. Ann Whitehead in "I'm Hungry Mum: The Politics of Domestic Budgeting" and Rajni Palriwala in "Negotiating Patriliney: Intra-household Consumption and Authority in Rajasthan (India)" both critically examine the internal dynamics of the household to demonstrate that it is a site of power, conflict and unequal distribution rather than harmony. This analysis draws specifically on Whitehead's comparison of household organisation in North East Ghana and industrial Britain, further focusing on the internal organisation of household relations through the concepts of the conjugal contract and the sexual division of labour, while Palriwala focuses on the sub themes of economic processes, patriliney, intra-household authority and the discourse of food distribution and she provides a detailed ethnographic account of how these operate in rural Rajasthan. Together, these seminal texts bring to light that gender inequality is systematically produced and reproduced through everyday practices of labour allocation, resource control, kinship organisation and ideological justification within the household. The review argues that despite significant changes in welfare provision and economic development, the mechanisms identified by Whitehead and Palriwala continue to shape gendered inequalities within households, demonstrating the enduring relevance of feminist sociological analyses of domestic power.

Keywords

Gender inequality; Household; Conjugal contract; Sexual division of labour; Patriliney; Intra-household authority; Food distribution; Resource control; Women's agency; Feminist sociology

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I. Review

Ann Whitehead's analysis begins by challenging the idea of the household as a unified and cooperative entity. She argues that the household must be understood not as a "black box" but as a site where "relations of exchange, distribution and consumption" are structured by power. The concept of the conjugal contract which she defines as "the terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes and services including labour within the household" remains central to her argument. This concept highlights that relations between men and women are not based on equality but rather on negotiated arrangements

that reflect unequal power. The conjugal contract varies across economic contexts but consistently demonstrates that men and women do not have equal access to resources. Whitehead also builds on insights from Edholm et al, who argue that sexual division of labour renders men's and women's work "non comparable" thereby making it difficult to assess equality within the household. This reinforces the need to analyse the household to arrive at a precise and real understanding of its internal dynamics.

A key mechanism through which inequality is perpetuated is the sexual division of labour. Whitehead emphasises that this is not simply a division of tasks but also a system that decides, who does what kind of work and who gets control over what is produced from that work. This means that even when women contribute significantly to production their labour is not valued equally and does not grant them control over resources. Women are largely responsible for domestic labour, childbearing, childcare and subsistence production while men are more closely associated with income earning activities and control over cash. This structural arrangement ensures that women remain economically dependent despite their contributions. She also critiques mainstream economic analysis as "sex blind" as it treats labour and production as gender neutral and fails to account for how gender shapes access to and control over resources within the household.

Whitehead further critiques the assumption that households distribute resources according to their needs. She notes that several analysts assume that an equal distribution is made between all active members of

the household but her work demonstrates that this is not the case. Conversely, access to resources is shaped by institutional arrangements that privilege men. Women often lose control over resources they have produced and receive less than an equal share of consumption. The household is therefore not a space of equality but of conflicts of interest between husbands and wives. These conflicts are often hidden by the ideology of sharing which portrays the household as a cooperative and cohesive unit operating in the interests of all its members. Whitehead explicitly challenges this idea of the household as a neutral or harmonious space and instead presents it as a structured arena of power, where inequality is actively produced and maintained through gendered relations.

This is clearly illustrated in “The Household Common Fund in North East Ghana” where the household is organised around a common subsistence fund controlled by the male head. While all members contribute labour, access to this fund is unequal and women remain dependent on allocations of millet for daily subsistence. This structure of unequal access is further reflected in the organisation of agricultural production within these households wherein the distinction between household farms and private farms is crucial. Household farms produce staple millet under male control, while private farms generate individual income, largely benefiting men. This creates a structural imbalance as women’s access to independent income is extremely limited. The “Input of men and women to agricultural tasks” reinforces the earlier point that the sexual division of labour structures not only work but also control, as women’s contributions do not translate into ownership or authority over what is produced.

Another important aspect of Whitehead’s argument is the relationship between the household and the wider economic system. She shows that changes such as commoditisation, alter the terms of the conjugal contract in ways that often disadvantage women. For instance, the increasing importance of cash income allows men to retain control over resources while women remain responsible for daily sustenance. She notes that such processes lessened men’s dependence on the household common fund while reinforcing the dependence of women on it.

Thus, economic change does not necessarily lead to greater equality but can intensify existing inequalities within the household.

Whitehead contrasts this with “The Family Wage and Household Budgeting in Industrial Britain” where the household functions primarily as a unit of consumption rather than production. In this context, goods are acquired through wages rather than direct production and the ideology of the male breadwinner positions men as the main earners, while women are given a housekeeping allowance to manage everyday expenses. As a result, income enters the household through male wages and although women are responsible for organising daily consumption and maintaining the household, they do not control the income itself. This places them in a dependent position despite their central role in running the household. Thus, despite differences in economic organisation, both contexts reveal a similar pattern in which men retain control over key resources while women are responsible for sustenance without equivalent authority.

Rajni Palriwala’s study builds on these insights by examining how gender inequality is structured through patriliney and kinship in rural Rajasthan. She argues that economic processes and kinship structures are deeply interconnected and shape women’s position within the household. Patriliney defines “group membership and inheritance of property” and places men at the centre of the family as male agnates. Women by contrast are marginal members whose rights are limited and contingent. During the process of marriage women move from their natal homes to their marital households and in doing so they are positioned in a way that limits their entitlements to maintenance and gifts rather than granting them any substantive share in property. This exclusion from property ownership leads to an unfair arrangement wherein women’s access to resources and security is closely tied to their relationship with their husbands and other male kin, making their position within the household dependent rather than autonomous. Her analysis situates these inequalities within broader economic changes in the region particularly the growing importance of non agricultural employment, migration and the increasing reliance on individual male earners within household strategies.

Moreover, Palriwala highlights how patriliney is actively manipulated to maintain male control over property. She explains that kinship structures are used in such a way that both women and extended kin are excluded from property rights, while at the same time the extended family is retained as a source of social support and authority. This demonstrates that gender inequality is not simply inherited from tradition but is continuously produced and adjusted in response to changing economic and social conditions. Even where legal rights exist for women, social practices limit their ability to claim these rights, ensuring that control over property remains largely in male hands.

Within the household, authority is structured hierarchically with the senior most male as the head and all other members are expected to submit to his authority. Although consultation may occur the male head retains ultimate authority over labour allocation, income pooling and major decisions affecting the household reflecting a hierarchy justified in terms of collective family interest. Women are subject to what she describes as “the triple authority of the head, their husbands and the senior woman”. This layered authority limits women’s

autonomy and reinforced their subordinate position. Although women may manage certain aspects of household life such as food preparation, their authority is restricted and operates within boundaries set by men. However, in practice authority is also shaped by age, absence of men due to migration and household composition which may slightly alter women's roles without fundamentally challenging male dominance.

Additionally, the control over intra-household consumption particularly food distribution is a crucial site where gender inequality is enacted. Women are responsible for managing grain stocks and preparing meals but their control is limited. Palriwala notes that women "managed only that grain which was brought to the house and even then could not deny men access to it". Men control the sale of agricultural produce and major financial decisions which means that women's authority is dependent on male provision. At the same time women bear the responsibility for ensuring that household members are fed which exposes them to blame and conflict when resources are insufficient.

In continuation of the same context, food distribution follows clear hierarchies that reflect gender inequality. Adult male earners are given priority as they are seen as the primary contributors to the household economy. Women often eat last and may reduce their own consumption in times of scarcity. The access to food is structured by kinship status, labour contribution and gender with the male head and main earner occupying the highest position in the hierarchy of consumption. Palriwala describes how the person who cooked and the youngest daughter in law usually ate last. This practice normalises women's sacrifice and reinforces the higher value placed on male labour. These practices are governed by norms and values that are internalised over time, making unequal distribution appear natural and legitimate within the household.

The differential treatment of sons and daughters further illustrates the gendered organisation of the household. Sons are prioritised because they are regarded as the future of the patriline and as providers of economic and social support, resulting in preferential access to nutrition, care and household resources. This contributes to discrimination against daughters, reflected in unequal investments in their wellbeing and skewed sex ratios. Women's own status within the household is similarly tied to their relationship with male kin, particularly their sons.

Consequently, the mother-son bond emerges as a crucial source of security, shaping women's emotional attachments as well as their strategies for negotiating power, status and support throughout the life cycle.

These gendered inequalities are further reinforced by broader economic transformations. Palriwala argues that the growing importance of individual male incomes, migration and non-agricultural employment has intensified dependence on male earners while simultaneously marginalising and devaluing women's labour. Rather than weakening patriarchal relations, these economic changes further erode women's control over resources and strengthen male authority within the household. Women therefore continue to invest in kinship ties as their principal source of security, even though these very relationships reproduce and stabilise their subordinate position.

This raises an important question central to Palriwala's analysis: why do women often appear to support and reproduce the very structures that disadvantage them? She argues that women's dependence on family and kinship networks for survival compels them to maintain these relationships. Although women negotiate their position through subtle strategies, such as managing food distribution, regulating household consumption and building alliances within the family, these practices do not fundamentally challenge patriarchal authority. Instead, they constitute a limited space of manoeuvre that enables women to secure survival while ultimately reinforcing the existing structure of inequality.

Although Whitehead and Palriwala wrote in different historical contexts, their arguments remain highly relevant to understanding contemporary patterns of gender inequality within Indian households. A recent secondary analysis of NFHS-5 data by Raghavendra et al. (2023), comparing the nutritional status of over 19,000 pairs of male and female siblings in India, found little overall difference in anthropometric indicators between girls and boys within the same household. The study therefore suggests that explicit gender disparities in childhood nutrition may be narrowing. However, it also notes that nutritional outcomes alone cannot fully explain intra-household inequality and that broader social and economic factors continue to shape access to resources and opportunities. Rather than contradicting Whitehead and Palriwala, these findings strengthen their central argument by demonstrating that gender inequality cannot be reduced solely to measurable outcomes such as food intake or nutritional status. The household continues to operate through unequal relations of authority, ownership, labour and decision making that remain largely invisible in quantitative indicators.

This broader perspective is also reflected in more recent scholarship on gender and household inequality. Anuradha Seth argues that gender disparities in intra-household consumption continue to persist despite improvements in aggregate welfare, demonstrating that equal household resources do not necessarily translate into equal access or decision-making power for women. Similarly, Vandana Shiva highlights how women's indispensable role in food production, food security and household sustenance remains systematically undervalued, reflecting the continued devaluation of women's productive and reproductive labour identified by

Whitehead. The 2026 PRS Legislative Research analysis of the Department of Food and Public Distribution further demonstrates that although public food security programmes have expanded significantly, policy largely focuses on household level food access rather than inequalities in intra-household distribution. Together, these contemporary studies reinforce the continuing significance of Whitehead's and Palriwala's analyses by showing that patriarchal power continues to shape resource allocation even where food availability and state welfare have improved.

More than four decades after Whitehead's (1981) analysis and over two decades after Palriwala's (1999) study, successive scholarship and policy reports continue to document the same enduring patterns of gendered inequality within households.

Despite sustained academic attention and the expansion of food security programmes, the unequal allocation of food, resources and decision making within households remains inadequately addressed. These inequalities are often perceived as private family matters however, through the lens of C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination, they are more accurately understood as public issues rather than merely personal troubles. Their recurrence across diverse contexts, from rural Rajasthan and industrial Britain to contemporary national studies, demonstrates that they are embedded within broader social structures rather than isolated household experiences. The continued recurrence of these findings illustrates that the challenge lies not in recognising the existence of these inequalities but in identifying effective means of addressing it. It necessitates broader public debate, policy engagement and structural reforms that confront its underlying causes. This, in turn, raises a fundamental question: what interventions are required to transform decades of evidence into meaningful and lasting change?

Hence, addressing intra-household gender inequality requires interventions that extend beyond food provisioning to the social organisation of the household itself. First, gender equality and the sociology of domestic labour should be incorporated into school curricula from the secondary level onwards, enabling children to recognise unequal divisions of care, consumption and decision making before these norms become deeply internalised. Second, in line with Whitehead's critique of the household as a "black box," food security and welfare policies should move beyond measuring household level access to food by introducing an Intra-household Gender Equity Index within the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and other major government welfare surveys. Such an index could assess intra-household distribution of food, decision making authority, control over income and assets and the division of unpaid domestic labour, thereby making inequalities that remain hidden within household level data visible to policymakers. Importantly, this index would complement existing household level measures rather than replace them.

Finally, existing community based institutions such as Anganwadi centres and Self Help Groups should be strengthened to facilitate regular discussions on equitable household practices and women's economic decision making. Together, these interventions would shift policy from ensuring that households are fed to ensuring that resources and power within households are distributed more equitably.

II. Conclusion

The analyses of Whitehead and Palriwala collectively demonstrate that gender inequality within the household is not the product of isolated acts of discrimination but of deeply embedded social structures that systematically privilege men over women. The sexual division of labour, the conjugal contract, patriliney and hierarchical authority together organise unequal access to labour, resources, property and decision making, while everyday practices of food allocation and consumption reinforce these disparities. Simultaneously, dominant ideologies of family unity and prescribed gender roles obscure these unequal power relations, allowing them to persist across generations. In this sense, the household is far from a neutral or egalitarian institution. Rather, as Henri Lefebvre argues, space is socially produced and shaped by relations of power and the household constitutes one such social space where gendered inequalities are continually created, negotiated and reproduced. The continued relevance of Whitehead's and Palriwala's analyses within contemporary scholarship further demonstrates that these inequalities remain structural rather than incidental. Recognising the household as a site of power rather than merely a site of care is therefore essential to developing more equitable social policies and transforming the everyday relations through which gender inequality continues to be reproduced.

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