Sociology Essay: Assess The View That the Main Role of Families is to Maintain Male Dominance in Society

There are a plethora of perspectives revolving around families and society in general, with some presenting the main role of families as being one that reinforces male dominance – those of which shall be elaborated on, amongst others.

A view that supports this is that of the Marxist-feminists. Many see the family as patriarchal, with symmetrical conjugal roles being a myth. Family is considered to be the first conditioning tool in that children are made to obey authority figures through discipline instilment (which often comes from the father). However, this could be criticised in that the nature of the family is portrayed as predeter mined with the members being incapable of changing the situation, which is supported by the fact that many families are built upon negotiation so that men aren’t necessarily the giver of discipline, as well as the fact that due to new ways of thinking, parents/guardians can often provide discipline without establishing a clear cut hierarchy of power within the household.

Furthermore, outside of the household, the Government social policy reiterates the point as it assumes that there is no need for state provisions of free childcare as women are content to sacrifice work in favour for looking after children. Said social policy implies that the nuclear family is the main family type; on the contrary, other types exist such as lone-parenthood, in which some women are not economically reliant and so may need the aid of the welfare state. Due to this policy with strong undertones of the nuclear family, women remain the housewife, performing tasks that don’t provide liberation (such as providing emotional and sexual support for the husband and maintaining the place of living’s hygiene). To add to this, in terms of the workplace, men are regarded as more reliable than women due to the fact that they wouldn’t leave on a maternity leave, which shows that men can be more dominant and secure career wise. This is evidenced by how surveys show that employers regard women as unreliable due to their family commitments. Murdock (1949) sees marriage as based on a natural/biological processes and that division of labour is such that women are responsible for nurturing children, whilst men are responsible for the economic maintenance of the household. Women are regarded as stay-at-home mothers, unable to experience life in the sense that men can. On the other hand, this viewpoint doesn’t take into account modern social processes such as increased employment for women; the decrease in male employment opportunities and the recognition from the 1970s onwards in that family life doesn’t benefit all members.

In addition, Parsons introduces the warm bath theory that shows male workers yield enough power to be treated to the ‘warm bath’ upon arrival at home to ease the stress of modern day living. Additionally, Christopher Murray (an American Neo-Marxist cultural critic also supports the view of the family as a haven. Meanwhile, Michelle Zedner and Mary McIntosh (feminist writers) disagree with the support for patriarchal authority in that women are oppressed as men remain the symbols of authority. Whilst the warm bath theory can prove true for some families, it holds an overestimation on the matter as it fails to take into account that not all men receive consideration and sympathy upon arrival at their household, and that they may be subjected to domestic violence.

Moreover, many New Right thinkers argue that social change post a threat to traditional norms of marriage and instead desire a return to the traditional family unit in order to stop poverty in modern society ie: child poverty, educational underachievement and juvenile delinquency (though it could be debated that the social changes are just being utilised as a scapegoat for these matters). In essence, they yearn for women to assume the responsibilities of caring for the home and family whilst the men work, as well as for the popularity of the nuclear family to rise (though this reinforces patriarchy due to the division of labour between the economically successful husband and the stay-at-home wife). Conversely, Feminist Ann Oakley states that the New Right thinkers falsely assume that the roles of husbands and wives are fixed by biology as cross-cultural studies have revealed that variation is present with the roles undertaken within the family between men and women.

Plus, Delphy and Leonard (1992) view the family as an economic system with labour relations as the foundation where men benefit from and exploit the work of women. Male dominance in society is prevalent in the sense that females do unpaid domestic housework, inherit less than sons and risk having less spent on education in comparison to sons. To build on from this, women contribute a great deal to family life (one could say more than a typical husband) by pandering to the husband’s sexual and emotional desires in an almost therapeutic (for the husband) manner – the stress from the husband can sometimes be redirected as anger and thus domestic violence is born, that of which women take the brunt of and often won’t leave this situation due to being financially dependent on the husband, which only further proves the prevalent male dominance.

In spite of this, there is information to suggest that the main role of the family isn’t just to emphasise male dominance. The Marxist perspective dictates that the family has a variety of functions to maintain the capitalist society: to aid with inheritance of private property (in that monogamy means that the paternity of men’s children is legitimate so property can be inherited), socialisation into acceptance of inequality (for instance, parental power accustoms children to the idea that someone is always in charge to prepare them for the working life, and to generate profits by money being spent on purchasing the most modern pieces of technology).

Besides, according to some Liberal Feminists, social progress in this area has been made over time and this change has been shifting towards egalitarianism.

Difference feminist Cheshire Calhoun states that the exploitation of women/male dominance only arises from the heterosexual family as with lesbian families, there is no opportunity for women to become dependent on men and hence be exploited by them, thus showing that family diversity (homosexual couples) can result in the absence of male dominance in favour of more equal domestic relations.