

# Great Divides: The Cultural, Cognitive, and Social Bases of the Global Subordination of Women

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*Categorization based on sex is the most basic social divide. It is the organizational basis of most major institutions, including the division of labor in the home, the workforce, politics, and religion. Globally, women's gendered roles are regarded as subordinate to men's. The gender divide enforces women's roles in reproduction and support activities and limits their autonomy, it limits their participation in decision making and highly-rewarded roles, and it puts women at risk. Social, cultural, and psychological mechanisms support the process. Differentiation varies with the stability of groups and the success of social movements. Gender analyses tend to be ghettoized; so it is recommended that all sociologists consider gender issues in their studies to better understand the major institutions and social relationships in society.*

The world is made up of great divides—divides of nations, wealth, race, religion, education, class, gender, and sexuality—all constructs created by human agency. The conceptual boundaries that define these categories are always symbolic and may create physical and

social boundaries as well (Gerson and Peiss 1985; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Today, as in the past, these constructs not only order social existence, but they also hold the capacity to create serious inequalities, generate conflicts, and promote human suffering. In this address, I argue that the boundary based on sex creates the most fundamental social divide—a divide

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rial help over many incarnations of this paper and to Kathleen Gerson, Jerry Jacobs, Brigid O'Farrell, Valentine Moghadam, Carol Sanger, and Hella Winston for helpful comments on versions of the address to the ASA.

that should be a root issue in all sociological analysis if scholars are to adequately understand the social dynamics of society and the influential role of stratification. The work of many sociologists contributes to this claim, although I can only refer to some of them in the context of a single article.

The conceptual boundaries that determine social categories are facing deconstruction throughout our profession. Once thought stable and real in the sense that they are descriptive of biological or inherited traits, social categories such as race and ethnicity are contested today by a number of scholars (Barth 1969; Brubaker 2004; Duster 2006; Telles 2004). Indeed, sociologists are questioning the underlying reasoning behind categorical distinctions, noting their arbitrariness, and further, the ways in which they tend to be “essentializing and naturalizing” (Brubaker 2004:9).<sup>1</sup> Yet, not many of these critical theorists have included *gender* in this kind of analysis.<sup>2</sup> Where they have, such work tends to be relegated to, if not ghettoized within, the field of “gender studies.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the categories of race, ethnicity, and gender are real in the sense that—as W. I. Thomas put it in his oft-quoted observation—“if men [*sic*] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (cited in Merton [1949] 1963:421). Categorization on the basis of observable characteristics often serves as a mobilizing strategy for action against (or for) people assigned to the category and may even force them into a grouplike state (Bourdieu 1991; Brubaker 2004). Alternatively, categorization may create conformity to a stereotype—in the process known as “the self-fulfilling prophecy” (Merton [1949] 1963). But it is one thing for individuals to engage in categorical thinking, and another for social scientists to accept a category with its baggage of assumptions. Today, many social scientists use popular understandings of race, ethnicity, and gender as if they were descriptive of inherent or acquired stable traits, and they treat them as established variables that describe clusters of individuals

who share common traits. In this manner, social scientists are no different from the lay public, who, in their everyday activities and thinking, act as if categories are reliable indicators of commonalities in a population.

The consequences of such categorization may be positive or negative for those in a given category. For example, people of color face far more suspicion from the police than do whites, and favored male professors benefit from the evaluation that they are smart and knowledgeable while comparatively, favored female professors tend to be evaluated as nice (Basow 1995). Yet, unlike the basis on which social *groups* may be defined, categories include individuals who may never know one another or have any interaction with each other. However, they may all share selected physical traits or relationships. Skin color, hair texture, genitals, place of birth, and genealogy are among the determinants of categories.

I consider *gender* to be the most basic and prevalent category in social life throughout the world, and in this address, I explore the life consequences that follow from this designation for the female half of humanity. Gender is, of course, based on biological sex, as determined by the identification of an individual at birth as female or male by a look at their genitals. This first glance sets up the most basic divide in all societies—it determines an individual’s quality of life, position on the social hierarchy, and chance at survival. The glance marks individuals for life and is privileged over their unique intelligence, aptitudes, or desires. Of course, persons who are transgendered, transsexual, or hermaphrodites<sup>4</sup> do not fit this dichotomous separation, but there is little recognition of categories based on sex other than male and female in almost every society (Butler 1990; Lorber 1994, 1996).

## SEX DIVISION AND SUBORDINATION

The sexual divide is the most persistent and arguably the deepest divide in the world today. Of course, it is only one of many great divides. Boundaries mark the territories of human rela-

<sup>1</sup> Brubaker also cites the contributions of Rothbart and Taylor 1992; Hirshfield 1996; and Gil-White 1999 to this perspective.

<sup>2</sup> Duster (2006) does include gender.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Epstein 1988; Lorber 1994; Connell 1987; Ridgeway 2006; Bussey and Bandura 1999; Tavis 1992.

<sup>4</sup> I have used these commonly used terms, but alternative words such as “trans” and “intersex” are deemed more appropriate by some scholars and advocates.

tions. They are created by “cultural entrepreneurs”<sup>5</sup> who translate the concepts into practice—rulers behind the closed doors of palaces and executive offices; judges in courtrooms; priests, rabbis, and mullahs; leaders and members of unions and clubs; and teachers, parents, and the people in the street. The great divides of society are enforced by persuasion, barter, custom, force, and the threat of force (Epstein 1985). The extent to which boundaries are permeable and individuals can escape categorization, and thus, their assignment to particular social roles and statuses, is a function of a society's or an institution's stability and capacity to change. The ways in which boundaries may be transgressed make up the story of social change and its limits. They are the basis for human freedom.

Of all the socially created divides, the gender divide is the most basic and the one most resistant to social change. As I have suggested before (Epstein 1985, 1988, 1991b, 1992), dichotomous categories, such as those that distinguish between blacks and whites; free persons and slaves; and men and women, are always invidious. This dichotomous categorization is also particularly powerful in maintaining the advantage of the privileged category. With regard to the sex divide, the male sex is everywhere privileged—sometimes the gap is wide, sometimes narrow. Some individuals and small clusters of women may succeed in bypassing the negative consequences of categorization, and in some cases they may even do better educationally or financially than the men in their group. Among women, those from a privileged class, race, or nationality may do better than others. But worldwide, in every society, women as a category are subordinated to men.

I further suggest that the divide of biological sex constitutes a marker around which all major institutions of society are organized. All societal institutions assign roles based on the biological sex of their members. The divisions of labor in the family, local and global labor forces, political entities, most religious systems, and nation-states are all organized according to the sexual divide.

Cultural meanings are also attached to the categories of female and male, which include attributions of character and competence (Epstein 1988, see Ridgeway 2006 for a review). These situate individuals assigned to each category in particular social and symbolic roles. There is some overlap in the roles to which females and males are assigned, but in all societies sex status is the major determinant—it is the master status that determines the acquisition of most other statuses.

Of course, biological sex does prescribe humans' reproductive roles (e.g., child bearer, inseminator). But there is no biological necessity for a woman to become a mother, even though only women can become biological mothers, and a man may or may not choose to become a biological father. Therefore, we can conclude that *all* social statuses and the roles attached to them are *socially* prescribed. Further, norms prescribe (or proscribe) detailed behavior fixed to all social roles. And, because statuses are universally ranked, the statuses women are permitted to acquire usually are subordinate to men's statuses. Furthermore, women's roles are universally paired with roles assigned to men, in the family, in the workplace, and in the polity. Virtually no statuses are stand-alone positions in society; all are dependent on reciprocal activities of those who hold complementary statuses. These too are socially ranked and usually follow the invidious distinctions that “male” and “female” evoke. Almost no statuses are free from gender-typing.

These observations lead me to proposals that I believe are essential for comprehensive sociological analysis today, and to call for the elimination of the boundary that has separated so-called gender studies from mainstream sociology.<sup>6</sup>

Given the ubiquitous nature of sex-typing of social statuses, and social and symbolic behavior, I propose that the dynamics of gender segregation be recognized as a primary issue for sociological analysis and attention be paid to the mechanisms and processes of sex differentiation and their roles in group formation, group main-

<sup>5</sup> I offer this concept following Becker (1963) who writes of “moral entrepreneurs;” Brubaker (2004) who writes of “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs;” and Fine (1996) who writes of “reputational entrepreneurs.”

<sup>6</sup> A number of sociologists have specifically called for a greater integration of feminist theory and studies within the mainstream of American sociology (e.g., Chafetz 1984, 1997; Laslett 1996; Stacey and Thorne 1985).

tenance, and stratification.<sup>7</sup> I further suggest that

- Females' and males' actual and symbolic roles in the social structure are a seedbed for group formation and group boundary-maintenance.
- All societies and large institutions are rooted in the differentiation and subordination of females.
- The more group solidarities are in question in a society, the stronger the differentiation between males and females and the more severe is women's subjugation.

The enforcement of the distinction is achieved through cultural and ideological means that justify the differentiation. This is despite the fact that, unlike every other dichotomous category of people, females and males are necessarily bound together, sharing the same domiciles and most often the same racial and social class statuses. Analyses of these relationships are difficult given the ways in which they are integrated with each other and the extent to which they are basic in all institutions.

There is, of course, variation in societies and the subgroups within them, and a continuum exists in the severity of female subordination. Indeed, subordination is not a static process and it varies from almost complete to very little. The process is dynamic in shape and degree. Women gain or lose equality depending on many elements—the state of an economy, the identity politics of groups or nations, the election of conservative or liberal governments, the need for women's labor in the public and private sectors, the extent of their education, the color of their skin,<sup>8</sup> the power of fundamentalist religious leaders in their societies, and their ability to collaborate in social movements. But even in the most egalitarian of societies, the invidious divide is always a lurking presence and it can easily become salient.

It is important to note that women's inequality is not simply another case of social inequality, a view I have held in the past (Epstein 1970). I am convinced that societies and strategic subgroups within them, such as political and work institutions, *maintain their boundaries*—their very social organization—through the use of

invidious distinctions made between males and females.<sup>9</sup> Everywhere, women's subordination is basic to maintaining the social cohesion and stratification systems of ruling and governing groups—male groups—on national and local levels, in the family, and in all other major institutions. Most dramatically, this process is at work today in the parts of the world where control of females' behavior, dress, and use of public space have been made representations of orthodoxies in confrontation with modernism, urbanism, and secular society. But even in the most egalitarian societies, such as the United States, women's autonomy over their bodies,<sup>10</sup> their time, and their ability to decide their destinies is constantly at risk when it intrudes on male power.

The gender divide is not determined by biological forces. *No society or subgroup leaves social sorting to natural processes.* It is through social and cultural mechanisms and their impact on cognitive processes that social sorting by sex occurs and is kept in place—by the exercise of force and the threat of force, by law, by persuasion, and by embedded cultural schemas that are internalized by individuals in all societies. Everywhere, local cultures support invidious

<sup>9</sup> Martin (2004) and Lorber (1994) both consider gender to be a social institution.

<sup>10</sup> The most obvious example is the right to have an abortion, which through *Roe v. Wade* (1973) withdrew from the states the power to prohibit abortions during the first six months of pregnancy. In 1989, *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* gave some of that power back. Since that time, President Bush and other legislators proposed a constitutional amendment banning abortions, giving fetuses more legal rights than women. This remains a deeply contested issue in American politics (Kaminer 1990). The National Women's Law Center has expressed concern that the current Supreme Court cannot be counted on to preserve women's "hard-won legal gains, especially in the areas of constitutional rights to privacy and equal protection" (2006). In many other places in the world women are not protected by their governments. In 2005, the World Health Organization found that domestic and sexual violence is widespread. Amnesty International reports tens of thousands of women are subjected to domestic violence, giving as examples Republic of Georgia and Bangladesh where, when women go to the authorities after being strangled, beaten, or stabbed, they are told to reconcile with their husbands (Lew and Moawad 2006).

<sup>7</sup> I am not the first to make this plea (e.g., see Acker 1973; Blumberg 1978; Chafetz 1997).

<sup>8</sup> There is, of course, a growing body of scholarship on women of color. See for example, Baca Zinn and Dill (1996); Collins (1998); and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003).

ious distinctions by sex. As Jerome Bruner (1990) points out in his thoughtful book, *Acts of Meaning*, normatively oriented institutions—the law, educational institutions, and family structures—serve to enforce folk psychology, and folk psychology in turn serves to justify such enforcement. In this address, I shall explore some spheres in which the process of sex differentiation and the invidious comparisons between the sexes are especially salient.

## THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES AND IN THE PROFESSION OF SOCIOLOGY

It is fitting that my presidential address to the 101st meeting of the American Sociological Association should begin with an analytic eye on our profession. I became the ninth woman president in the ASA's 101 years of existence. The first woman president, Dorothy Swaine Thomas, was elected in 1952, the second, Mirra Komarovsky, almost 20 years later—two women presidents in the first seven decades of the existence of the association. Seven others have been chosen in the 23 years since.<sup>11</sup>

We nine women are symbolic of the positive changes in the position of women in the United States. Our case is situated at the high end of the continuum of women's access to equality. Similarly, our profession has devoted much research attention to women's position in society, though the findings of scholars on the subject are often not integrated with the profession's major theoretical and empirical foci. Many radical voices in the discipline refer to "gender issues" only ritualistically. This is so even though sociological research on gender is one of the major examples of "public sociology" of the past 40 years.

When I was a sociology graduate student at Columbia University in the 1960s, there were no women on the sociology faculty, as was the case at most major universities. The entire bibliography on women in the workplace, assembled for my thesis (1968) on women's exclusion from the legal profession, was exhausted in a few pages. However, it included Betty Friedan's ([1963] 1983) *The Feminine Mystique*, with its

attack on Talcott Parsons's (1954) perspective on the functions of the nuclear family and his observation that women's role assignment in the home had exceedingly positive functional significance in that it prevented competition with their husbands (p. 191).<sup>12</sup> She also attacked Freud's ([1905] 1975) theories that women's biology is their destiny, that their feelings of inferiority are due to "penis envy," and his contention "that the woman has no penis often produces in the male a lasting depreciation of the other sex" (Freud 1938:595, footnote 1).

Friedan contributed to both the knowledge base of the social sciences and to the status of women. I believe she did more than any other person in modern times to change popular perceptions of women and their place in the world. While not the first to identify the dimensions of women's inequality,<sup>13</sup> Friedan put theory into practice, building on the attention she received when *The Feminine Mystique* was published. At a moment made ripe by the sensibilities of the civil rights movement and the growing participation of women in the labor force, she took up a challenge posed to her by Pauli Murray, the African American lawyer and civil rights activist, to create "an NAACP for women."<sup>14</sup> With the encouragement and participation of a small but highly motivated group of women in government, union offices, and professional life—white women, African American women, and women from Latin-American backgrounds (a fact that has gone unnoticed far too long)—and with the participation of the third woman ASA president, Alice Rossi, Friedan founded the National Organization for Women in 1966. Working through NOW, Friedan set out to pro-

<sup>12</sup> It is curious that his further observation that the relationship was also "an important source of strain" (p. 191) has rarely been acknowledged, although Friedan did note this in *The Feminine Mystique*.

<sup>13</sup> These include (but of course, the list is incomplete) John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emmeline Pankhurst, W.E.B. DuBois, Emma Goldman, and in the years just preceding Friedan's book, Simone de Beauvoir (1949), to whom she dedicated *The Feminine Mystique*, and Mirra Komarovsky (1946; [1953] 2004).

<sup>14</sup> I interviewed Friedan in 1999 about the origins of NOW for an article I was writing for *Dissent* (Epstein 1999a).

<sup>11</sup> Information from ASA: <http://www.asanet.org/governance/pastpres.html>. The current president, Frances Fox Piven, brings the number of women presidents to 10 in 102 years.

vide political support for implementation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race, color, religion, and national origin. The changes accomplished by the organizational work of Friedan, and a number of other activists<sup>15</sup> and scholars,<sup>16</sup> were nothing short of a social revolution. It is a revolution of interest to sociologists not only for its creation of women's rights in employment and education but because *it became a natural field experiment establishing that there was no natural order of things relegating women to "women's work" and men to "men's work."* Yet, like most revolutions it was limited in its accomplishment of its stated goals and its principles are constantly under attack.

But the revolution did motivate research. There has been an explosion of scholarship on the extent of sex divides on macro and micro levels. Social scientists have documented in hundreds of thousands of pages of research the existence and consequences of subtle and overt discrimination against women of all strata and nationalities and the institutionalization of sexism.

The number of studies of the differentiation of women's and girls' situations in social life has grown exponentially in the 40 years since the beginning of the second wave of the women's movement. This work has pointed to women's and girls' vulnerabilities in the home and the workplace; their lower pay and lesser ability to accumulate wealth; their exploitation in times of war and other group conflicts; and the conditions under which an ethos of hyper-masculinity<sup>17</sup> in nations and subgroups controls women's lives. Some of the work of sociologists

and of our colleagues in related disciplines has persuaded legislators and judges in many countries to acknowledge the inequalities and harsh treatment girls and women face. Pierre Sané, the Assistant Secretary General of UNESCO, has noted the synergy between social research and human rights activities, and he stresses in international meetings<sup>18</sup> that women's rights must be regarded as human rights and enforced by law.

Let us remember that the "woman question" as a serious point of inquiry for the social sciences is relatively new. In the past, wisdom on this subject came primarily from armchair ideologists, philosophers, legislators, judges, and religious leaders. With few exceptions,<sup>19</sup> these theorists asserted that women's subordinate position was for good reason—divine design, or for those not religiously inclined, *nature* mandated it. Today, a new species of theorists hold to this ideology—fundamentalist leaders in many nations, churches and religious sects in particular—but also scholars, some in the United States, in fields such as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology (e.g., Alexander 1979; Barash 1977; Trivers 1972; Wilson 1975). This was perhaps predictable, if my thesis is correct, because women had started to intrude into male ideological and physical turf in the academy and elsewhere in society, upsetting the practices of male affiliation. The prejudices that pass as everyday common sense also support this ideology, often with backing from sophisticated individuals responsible for making policies that affect girls and women.<sup>20</sup> They have been joined by some well-meaning women social scientists—a few possessing iconic

<sup>15</sup> One was Gloria Steinem, who worked with Friedan to establish the National Women's Political Caucus. Steinem became a notable public speaker on behalf of women's rights and established the national magazine *MS.*, which reports on serious women's issues.

<sup>16</sup> Friedan recruited me as well in the formation of the New York City Chapter of NOW in 1966. Through her auspices I presented a paper on the negative social consequences for women of segregated help-wanted ads in newspapers at hearings of the EEOC in 1967 on Guidelines for Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and to establish guidelines for the Office of Federal Contract Compliance in 1968.

<sup>17</sup> For work on men see especially the work of Kimmel (1996); Connell (1987); Collinson, Knights,

and Collinson (1990); and Collinson and Hearn (1994).

<sup>18</sup> The most recent was The International Forum on the Social Science-Policy Nexus in Buenos Aires February 20 to 24, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> For example, John Stuart Mill (1869) *The Subjection of Women*.

<sup>20</sup> A pinpointed policy was enacted recently. Seeking to override a 1972 federal law barring sex discrimination in education (Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), the Bush administration is giving public school districts new latitude to expand the number of single-sex classes and single-sex schools (Schemo 2006). My own review of studies on the impact of segregated education shows no benefits (Epstein 1997; Epstein and Gambis 2001).

status<sup>21</sup>—who have affirmed stereotypes about females' nature on the basis of poor or no data.<sup>22</sup>

## FEMALE SUBORDINATION IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

The "woman question" is not just one among many raised by injustice, subordination, and differentiation. It is basic. The denigration and segregation of women is a major mechanism in reinforcing male bonds, protecting the institutions that favor them, and providing the basic work required for societies to function. To ignore this great social divide is to ignore a missing link in social analysis.

I will not illustrate my thesis about the persistence of the worldwide subordination of the female sex with pictures, graphs, or charts. Instead I call on readers' imaginations to picture some of the phenomena that illustrate my thesis. Imagine most women's lifetimes of everyday drudgery in households and factories; of struggles for survival without access to decent jobs. Imagine the horror of mass rapes by armed men in ethnic conflicts, and of rapes that occur inside the home by men who regard sexual access as their right.<sup>23</sup> Imagine also women's isolation and confinement behind walls and veils in many societies. Some examples are harder to imagine—for example, the 100 million women missing in the world, first brought to our attention by the economist Amartya Sen (1990), who alerted us to the bizarre sex ratios in South Asia, West Asia, and China. He pointed to the abandonment and systematic undernourishment of girls and women and to the poor medical care they receive in comparison to males. International human rights groups have

alerted us to the selective destruction of female fetuses. It is estimated that in China and India alone, 10,000,000 females were aborted between 1978 and 1998 (Rao 2006). Also hidden are the child brides who live as servants in alien environments and who, should their husbands die, are abandoned to live in poverty and isolation. And there are the millions of girls and women lured or forced into sex work. In the Western world, only the occasional newspaper article brings to view the fact that African women face a 1 in 20 chance of dying during pregnancy (half a million die each year).<sup>24</sup> The persistent segregation of the workplace, in even the most sophisticated societies, in which girls and women labor in sex-labeled jobs that are tedious, mind-numbing, and highly supervised, is out of view. Unseen too are the countless beatings, slights, and defamations women and girls endure from men, including intimates, every day all over the world.

### INSISTENCE AND PERSISTENCE ON "NATURAL DIFFERENCES"

These patterns are largely explained in the world as consequences stemming from natural causes or God's will. Here, I limit analysis mainly to the view of *natural causation* as the *master narrative*—the narrative that attributes role division of the sexes to biology. Some believe that early socialization cements the distinction. It is clear that strong religious beliefs in the natural subordination of women determine the role women must play in societies.

Biological explanation is the master narrative holding that men and women are naturally different and have different intelligences, physical abilities, and emotional traits. This view asserts that men are naturally suited to dominance and women are naturally submissive. The narrative holds that women's different intellect or emotional makeup is inconsistent with the capacity to work at prestigious jobs, be effective

<sup>21</sup> Here I refer to a number of "standpoint" theorists such as Belenky et al. (1986), Smith (1990), Hartstock (1998), and of course Carol Gilligan (1982) whose initial study showing a difference in boys' and girls' moral values and moral development was based on eight girls and eight boys in a local school and 27 women considering whether to have an abortion. See also Helen Fisher (1982), an evolutionary anthropologist. These views typically assert that women are naturally more caring, more accommodating, and averse to conflict.

<sup>22</sup> See my analysis of this literature in Epstein (1988).

<sup>23</sup> For more horrors see Parrot and Cummings (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the best known eye into this world is that of Nicholas Kristof, the *New York Times* writer, whose Op Ed articles chronicle the horrors faced by women in Africa and the inaction of Western societies to redress them (for example, the United States cut off funding to the United Nations Population Fund, an agency that has led the effort to reduce maternal deaths, because of false allegations it supports abortion) (Kristof 2006).

scholars, and lead others. Popularized accounts of gender difference have generated large followings.<sup>25</sup>

But the set of assumptions about basic differences are discredited by a body of reliable research. Although there seems to be an industry of scholarship identifying sex differences, it is important to note that scholarship showing only tiny or fluctuating differences, or none at all, is rarely picked up by the popular press. Most media reports (e.g., Brooks 2006, Tierney 2006) invariably focus on sex differences, following the lead of many journals that report tiny differences in distributions of males and females as significant findings (Epstein 1991a, 1999b). Further, the media rarely reports the fact that a good proportion of the studies showing any differences are based on small numbers of college students persuaded to engage in experiments conducted in college laboratories and not in real world situations. Or, in the case of studies indicating the hormonal relationship between men's aggression and women's presumed lack of it, a number of studies are based on the behavior of laboratory animals. Other studies compare test scores of students in college, rarely reporting variables such as the class, race, and ethnicity of the population being studied. Even in these settings, the systematic research of social scientists has proved that males and females show almost no difference or shifting minor differences in measures of cognitive abilities (Hyde 2005) and emotions.<sup>26</sup> And there may be more evidence for similarity than even the scholarly public has access to, because when studies find no differences, the results might not

<sup>25</sup> The works of John Gray (1992), the author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* and spin-off titles have sold over 30 million copies in the United States. See also Deborah Tannen's (1990) *You Just Don't Understand* on the presumed inability of men and women to understand each other on various dimensions, repudiated by the work of the linguistic scholar Elizabeth Aries (1996).

<sup>26</sup> There has been a recent flurry over reported differences in male and female brains (cf. Brizendine 2006; Bell et al. 2006) and reports of a 3 to 4 percentage difference in IQ. The brain studies are usually based on very small samples and the IQ studies on standardized tests in which the differences reported are at the very end of large distributions that essentially confirm male/female similarities (see Epstein 1988 for a further analysis).

be published in scholarly publications. The Stanford University cognitive psychologist Barbara Tversky (personal communication) notes that when she has sought to publish the results of experiments on a variety of spatial tasks that show no gender differences, journal editors have demanded that she and her collaborators take them out because they are null findings. Even so, we can conclude that under conditions of equality, girls and women perform and achieve at test levels that are the same as or similar to males—and, in many cases, they perform better.<sup>27</sup>

The American Psychological Association has reported officially that males and females are more alike than different when tested on most psychological variables. The APA's finding is based on Janet Hyde's 2005 analysis of 46 meta-analyses conducted recently in the United States. They conclude that gender roles and social context lead to the few differences. Further, they report that sex differences, though believed to be immutable, fluctuate with age and location.<sup>28</sup> Women manifest similar aggressive feelings although their expression of them is obliged to take different forms (Frodi, Macaulay, and Thome 1977). A 2006 report from the National Academy of Sciences found that after an exhaustive review of the scientific literature, including

<sup>27</sup> A 2006 *New York Times* report shows that women are getting more B.A.s than are men in the United States. However, in the highest income families, men age 24 and below attend college as much as, or slightly more than their sisters, according to the American Council on Education. The article also reports that women are obtaining a disproportionate number of honors at elite institutions such as Harvard, the University of Wisconsin, UCLA, and some smaller schools such as Florida Atlanta University (Lewin 2006a). A comparison of female and male math scores varies with the test given. Females score somewhat lower on the SAT-M but differences do not exist on the American College Test (ACT) or on untimed versions of the SAT-M (Bailey n.d.).

<sup>28</sup> Girls even perform identically in math until high school when they are channeled on different tracks. In Great Britain, they do better than males, as noted in the ASA statement contesting the remarks of then Harvard President Lawrence Summers questioning the ability of females to engage in mathematics and scientific research (American Sociological Association 2005; see also Boaler and Sengupta-Irving 2006).



studies of brain structure and function, it could find no evidence of any significant biological factors causing the underrepresentation of women in science and mathematics.<sup>29</sup> Sociologists too have found women's aspirations are linked to their opportunities (Kaufman and Richardson 1982). I observe that like men, women want love, work, and recognition.

So, given similar traits, do women prefer dead-end and limited opportunity jobs; do they wish to work without pay in the home or to be always subject to the authority of men? In the past, some economists thought so. The Nobel Laureate Gary Becker (1981) proposed that women make rational choices to work in the home to free their husbands for paid labor. A number of other scholars follow the rational-choice model to explain women's poorer position in the labor force. Not only has the model proven faulty (England 1989, 1994), but history has proven such ideas wrong. The truth is that men have prevented the incursions of women into their spheres except when they needed women's labor power, such as in wartime, proving that women were indeed a reserve army of labor. As I found in my own research, when windows of opportunity presented themselves, women fought to join the paid labor force at every level, from manual craft work to the elite professions. Men resisted, seeking to preserve the boundaries of their work domains—from craft unionists to the top strata of medical, legal, and legislative practice (Chafe 1972; Epstein 1970, [1981] 1993; Frank 1980; Honey 1984; Kessler-Harris 1982; Lorber 1975, 1984; Milkman 1987; O'Farrell 1999; Rupp 1978).

Social and economic changes in other parts of the West, and in other parts of the world, provide natural field experiments to confirm this data from the United States. In the West, where women have always been employed in the unpaid, family workforce, a revolution in women's interest and participation in the paid workplace spiraled after the First World War. In the United States, from 1930 to 1970 the participation of married women ages 35 to 44 in the labor force moved from 10 percent to 46 percent

and today it is 77 percent (Goldin 2006). The opening of elite colleges and universities to women students after the 1960s led progressively to their increased participation in employment in the professions and other top jobs. This was the direct result of a concerted effort to use the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to force the opening of these sectors. Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her associates in the Women's Rights Project of the ACLU fought and won important battles in the Supreme Court and Judge Constance Baker Motley, the first African American woman to become a federal judge, ruled that large law firms had to recruit women on the same basis as men to comply with the equal treatment promised by the Civil Rights Act.

Yet even as the ideology of equality became widespread and brought significant changes, the worldwide status of women remained subordinate to that of men. Stable governments and a new prosperity led to something of a revolution in women's statuses in the United States and other countries in the West, notably in Canada with its new charter prohibiting discrimination. There was also an increase in women's employment in the paid labor force in the 15 countries of the European Union, including those countries that traditionally were least likely to provide jobs for women, although the statistics do not reveal the quality of the jobs (Norris 2006). And, of course, women's movements have been instrumental in making poor conditions visible. In countries of the Middle East, the East, and the Global South, women are beginning to have representation in political spheres, the professions, and commerce, although their percentage remains quite small. Women's lot rises or falls as a result of regime changes and economic changes and is always at severe risk.<sup>30</sup> But nowhere are substantial numbers of women in political control; nowhere do women have the opportunity to carry out national agendas giving women truly equal rights.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> The panel blamed environments that favor men, continuous questioning of women's abilities and commitment to an academic career, and a system that claims to reward based on merit but instead rewards traits that are socially less acceptable for women to possess (Fogg 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Hartmann, Lovell, and Werschkul (2004) show how, in the recession of March to November 2001, there was sustained job loss for women for the first time in 40 years. The economic downturn affected women's employment, labor force participation, and wages 43 months after the start of the recession.

<sup>31</sup> In Scandinavian countries, women have achieved the most political representation: Finland (37.5 percent of parliament seats), Norway (36.4 percent of parliament seats), Sweden (45.3 percent of parliament

Structural gains, accompanied by cultural gains, have been considerable in many places. Most governments have signed on to commitments to women's rights, although they are almost meaningless in many regimes that egregiously defy them in practice. And, of course, in many societies women have fewer rights than do men and find themselves worse off than they were a generation ago.<sup>32</sup>

In no society have women had clear access to the best jobs in the workplace, nor have they anywhere achieved economic parity with men. As Charles and Grusky (2004) document in their recent book, *Occupational Ghettos: The Worldwide Segregation of Women and Men*, sex segregation in employment persists all over the world, including in the United States and Canada. Women workers earn less than men even in the most gender-egalitarian societies. Charles and Grusky suggest that the disadvantage in employment is partly because women are clustered in "women's jobs"—jobs in the low-paid service economy or white-collar jobs that do not offer autonomy. These are typically occupational ghettos worldwide. While Charles and Grusky observe that women are crowded into the nonmanual sector, women increasingly do work in the globalized manufacturing economy—for example, in assembly line production that supplies the world with components for computers or in the clothing sweatshops in Chinatowns in the United States and around the world (Bose and Acosta-Belén 1995; Zimmerman, Litt, and Bose 2006; see also Bao 2001; Lee 1998; Salzinger 2003).

Many women in newly industrializing countries experienced a benefit from employment created by transnational corporations in the 1980s and '90s. They received income and independence from their families, but they remained in sex-segregated, low-wage work, subject to cutbacks when corporations sought cheaper labor markets. As to their suitability for heavy labor, it is common to see (as I have personal-

ly witnessed) women hauling rocks and stones in building sites in India and other places. Throughout the world, where water is a scarce commodity it is women who carry heavy buckets and vessels of water, usually on foot and over long distances, because this has been designated as a woman's job and men regard it as a disgrace to help them. Apparently, in much of the world, the guiding principle of essentialism labels as women's jobs those that are not physically easier, necessarily, but rather those that are avoided by men, pay little, and are under the supervision of men.

Of course, women have moved into some male-labeled jobs. As I noted in my book on the consequences of sex boundaries, *Deceptive Distinctions* (1988), the amazing decades of the 1970s and '80s showed that women could do work—men's work—that no one, including themselves, thought they could and they developed interests no one thought they had, and numbers of men welcomed them, or at least tolerated them.

My research shows that women may cross gender barriers into the elite professions that retain their male definition, such as medicine and law (Epstein [1981] 1993), when there is legal support giving them access to training and equal recruitment in combination with a shortage of personnel. Women made their most dramatic gains during a time of rapid economic growth in the Western world.

I first started research on women in the legal profession in the 1960s, when women constituted only 3 percent of practitioners (Epstein [1981] 1993). When I last assessed their achievements (Epstein 2001), women composed about 30 percent of practicing lawyers and about half of all law students. The same striking changes were happening in medicine (they are now almost half of all medical students [Magrane, Lang, and Alexander 2005]), and women were moving into legal and medical specialties once thought to be beyond their interests or aptitudes, such as corporate law and surgery. Yet, even with such advances they face multiple glass ceilings (Epstein et al. 1995). Only small percentages have attained high rank.<sup>33</sup> And it should come as no surprise that

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seats), and Denmark (38 percent of parliament seats) (U.N. Common Database 2004; Dahlerup n.d.). Of course, women in some societies still do not have the right to vote, and in a few, like Kuwait, where they have just gotten the vote, it is unclear whether they have been able to exercise it independently.

<sup>32</sup> This is the case in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Gaza, and Lebanon as fundamentalist groups have gained power, even in those regimes that are formally secular.

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<sup>33</sup> The current figure for women partners in large law firms (those with more than 250 lawyers) in the United States is 17 percent, although women are one-half of the recruits in these firms (National

men of high rank,<sup>34</sup> the popular media (Belkin 2003), and right-wing commentators (Brooks 2006; Tierney, 2006) insist that it is women's own choice to limit their aspirations and even to drop out of the labor force. But this has not been women's pattern. Most educated women have continuous work histories. It is true, however, that many women's ambitions to reach the very top of their professions are undermined. For one thing, they generally face male hostility when they cross conventional boundaries and perform "men's work."<sup>35</sup> For another, they face inhospitable environments in male-dominated work settings in which coworkers not only are wary of women's ability but visibly disapprove of their presumed neglect of their families. Women generally face unrelieved burdens of care work in the United States, with few social supports (Coser 1974; Gornick 2003; Williams 2000). And they face norms that this work demands their *personal* attention—a *female's attention*.

Even in the most egalitarian societies, a myriad of subtle prejudices and practices are used by men in gatekeeping positions to limit women's access to the better, male-labeled jobs and ladders of success, for example, partnership tracks in large law firms (Epstein et al. 1995). Alternative routes for women, "Mommy tracks" have been institutionalized—touted as a benefit—but usually result in stalled careers (Bergmann and Helburn 2002). Husbands who wish to limit their own work hours to assist working wives usually encounter severe discrimination as well. Individual men who are seen as undermining the system of male advantage find themselves disciplined and face dis-

crimination (Epstein et al. 1999, Williams 2000). In the United States this may lead to the loss of a promotion or a job. In other places in the world, the consequences are even more dire.<sup>36</sup>

In the current "best of all worlds," ideologies of difference and, to use Charles Tilly's (1998) concept, "exploitation and opportunity hoarding" by men in control keep the top stratum of law and other professions virtually sex segregated. Gatekeepers today don't necessarily limit entry, as that would place them in violation of sex discrimination laws in the United States or put them in an uncomfortable position, given modern Western ideologies of equality. But powerful men move only a small percentage of the able women they hire (often hired in equal numbers with men) upward on the path toward leadership and decision making, especially in professions and occupations experiencing slow growth. Most rationalize, with the approval of conventional wisdom, that women's own decisions determine their poor potential for achieving power.

Inequality in the workplace is created and reinforced by inequality in education. Newspaper headlines reported that more women than men get B.A.s in the United States today (Lewin 2006a), "leaving men in the dust." But a report a few days later noted that the increase is due to older women going back to school, and that women's degrees are in traditional women's fields (Lewin 2006b).

But women's performance and acceptance in the world of higher education in the United States is the good news! Consider the rest of the world. In many countries girls are denied *any* education. Consider, for example, the case of Afghanistan, where the Taliban still are attempting to resume power. In July 2006, they issued warnings to parents that girls going to school may get acid thrown in their faces or be murdered (Coghlan 2006).

Consider that in Southern Asia 23.5 million girls do not attend school and in Central and West Africa virtually half of all girls are also excluded (Villalobos 2006). While poverty con-

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Association for Law Placement cited in O'Brien 2006; Nicholson 2006).

<sup>34</sup> A national survey of 1,500 professors (as yet unpublished) at all kinds of institutions in the United States conducted by Neil Gross of Harvard and Solon Simmons of George Mason University shows that most professors don't agree that discrimination—intentional or otherwise—is the main reason that men hold so many more positions than do women in the sciences (Jaschik 2006).

<sup>35</sup> In studies of jobs dominated by men that are seen as requiring traits that distinguish men as superior to women in intellect or strength, it is reported that men's pride is punctured if women perform them (see Chetkovich 1997 on firefighters; Collinson, Knights, and Collinson 1990 on managers).

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<sup>36</sup> For example, when the magazine publisher Ali Mohaqeq returned to Afghanistan in 2004 after a long exile he was imprisoned for raising questions about women's rights in the new "democracy." Afghan courts claimed his offense was to contravene the teachings of Islam by printing essays that questioned legal discrimination against women (Witte 2005).

tributes to poor educational opportunities for boys as well as girls in many parts of the world, girls' restrictions are far greater. Some fundamentalist societies permit women to get a higher education, but this is to prepare them for work in segregated conditions where they serve other women.

The sex segregation of labor as measured by sophisticated sociologists and economists does not even acknowledge women's labor *outside* the wage-earning structure. Women and girls labor behind the walls of their homes, producing goods that provide income for their families, income they have no control over. Thus, millions of girls and women are not even counted in the labor force, although they perform essential work in the economy (Bose, Feldberg, and Sokoloff 1987).<sup>37</sup>

In addition, females can be regarded as a commodity themselves. They are computed as a means of barter in tribal families that give their girls (often before puberty) to men outside their tribe or clan who want wives to produce children and goods. Men also trade their daughters to men of other tribes as a form of compensation for the killing of a member of another tribe or other reasons.<sup>38</sup> Harmony is re-equilibrated through the bodies of females.

There is much more to report about the roles and position of women in the labor force worldwide—my life's work—but there are other spheres in which females everywhere are mired in subordinate roles. Chief among them are the family and the social and cultural structures that keep women both segregated and in a state of symbolic and actual "otherness," undermining their autonomy and dignity. Nearly everywhere, women are regarded as "others."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Women have been unpaid workers on family farms or in small businesses, taking in boarders, and doing factory outwork (see Bose et al. 1987 for the United States; Bose and Acosta-Belén 1995 for Latin America; and Hsiung 1996 for Taiwan).

<sup>38</sup> There are numerous references on the Web to the use of women given in marriage to another tribe or group in the reports of Amnesty International, for example in Papua New Guinea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Fiji.

<sup>39</sup> The characterization of women as "other" was most notably made by Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 1993) in her book, *The Second Sex*.

## MECHANISMS CREATING "OTHERNESS"

To some extent, women are subject to the process of social speciation—a term that Kai Erikson (1996) introduced (modifying the concept of pseudospeciation offered by Erik Erikson) to refer to the fact that humans divide into various groups who regard themselves as "the foremost species" and then feel that others ought to be kept in their place by "conquest or the force of harsh custom" (Erikson 1996:52). Harsh customs and conquest certainly ensure the subordination of girls and women. I shall consider some of these below.

**KIN STRUCTURES.** In many societies brides are required to leave their birth homes and enter as virtual strangers into the homes of their husbands and their husbands' kin. Because of the practice of patrilocality they usually have few or no resources—human or monetary. Marrying very young, they enter these families with the lowest rank and no social supports. About one in seven girls in the developing world gets married before her 15th birthday according to the Population Council, an international research group (Bearak 2006). Local and international attempts to prevent this practice have been largely unsuccessful.<sup>40</sup>

In exploring the actual and symbolic segregation of women I have been inspired by the work of Mounira Charrad in her 2001 prize-winning book *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco*. The work of Val Moghadam (2003) and Roger Friedland (2002) also informs this

<sup>40</sup> Struggles between human rights activists in and out of government and fundamentalist regimes have shifted upward and downward on such matters as raising the age of marriage of girls. For example, attempts by Afghanistan's King Abanullah in the 1920s to raise the age of marriage and institute education for girls enraged the patriarchal tribes who thwarted his regime. Fifty years later a socialist government enacted legislation to change family law to encourage women's employment, education, and choice of spouse. The regime failed in the early 1990s due to internal rivalries and a hostile international climate (Moghadam 2003:270) and the Taliban took power. In the early 1990s they exiled women to their homes, denied them access to education and opportunities to work for pay, and even denied them the right to look out of their windows.

analysis. Writing of the relative status of women, Charrad points to the iron grip of patrilineal kin groups in North African societies. She notes how Islamic family law has legitimized the extended male-centered patrilineage that serves as the foundation of kin-based solidarities within tribal groups so that state politics and tribal politics converge. This supports the patriarchal power not only of husbands, but also of all male kin over women so that the clan defines its boundaries through a family law that rests on the exploitation of women. Her study shows how Islamic family law (Sharia) provides a meaningful symbol of national unity in the countries of the Maghreb. This has changed in Tunisia, but it remains the case for other societies—Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Afghanistan, southeastern Turkey, parts of Iran, and southern Egypt. As Moghadam (2003) points out, the gender dimension of the Afghan conflict is prototypical of other conflicts today. During periods of strife, segregation and subordination of women becomes a sign of cultural identity. We see it clearly in the ideologies of Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran, Chechnya, and other Islamic groups and societies, and in the ideologies of fundamentalist Christian and Jewish groups. Representations of women are deployed during processes of revolution and state building to preserve group boundaries within larger societies with competing ideologies, and when power is being reconstituted, linking women either to modernization and progress or to cultural rejuvenation and religious orthodoxy.

Few social scientists have paid attention to the role of kin structures and their accompanying conceptual structures in the minds of players in national and international politics, but I believe this negligence persists at our peril as we experience conflicts between kin-based collectivities in the world.

Of course, human sexuality has much to do with the cultural sex divide. The fact that men desire women sexually, and that women also desire men, means that they are destined to live together no matter what the culture and family structures in which they live. And sexuality could, and can, create equality through bonds of connection and affection. As William Goode (1959) points out in an important but perhaps forgotten paper, "The Theoretical Importance of Love," love is a universal emotion. As such it threatens social structures because the ties between men and women could be stronger

than the bonds between men. Thus, everywhere the affiliations made possible by love are contained in various ways.

In societies in which marriage is embedded in a larger kin structure beyond the nuclear family, the practices and rules of domicile and the conventions around it have the potential to undermine the possibility of a truly affective marital tie, one that could integrate women in the society. A couple may face a wall of separation—apartheid in the home in separate parts of the compound or house. Or, they may be community-bound or home-bound in fundamentalist religious groups within larger secular societies such as the United States (e.g., the Jewish Satmar community in New York [where women are not permitted to drive] [Winston 2005] or some Christian fundamentalist communities where women are required to home-school their children).

I shall now focus on some other symbolic uses of sex distinctions that facilitate the subordination of women.

**HONOR.** Females are designated as carriers of honor in many societies. Their "virtue" is a symbolic marker of men's group boundaries. As we know from Mary Douglas (1966) and others, we can think about any social practice in terms of purity and danger. In many societies, females are the designated carriers of boundary distinctions. Their conformity to norms is regarded as the representation of the dignity of the group, while males typically have much greater latitude to engage in deviant behavior. To achieve and maintain female purity, women's behavior is closely monitored and restricted. As Friedland (2002) writes, religious nationalists direct "their attention to the bodies of women—covering, separating and regulating" (p. 396) them, in order "to masculinize the public sphere, to contain the erotic energies of heterosexuality within the family seeking to masculinize collective representations, to make the state male, a virile collective subject, the public status of women's bodies is a critical site and source for religious nationalist political mobilization" (p. 401).

The idea that girls must remain virgins until they marry or their entire family will suffer dishonor is used as a mechanism for women's segregation and subordination all over the world. It is also used as justification for the murder of many young women by male family members claiming to cleanse the girls' supposed dishon-

or from the family.<sup>41</sup> In particular, we see this at play in parts of the Middle East and among some Muslim communities in the diaspora.

When a woman strays from her prescribed roles, seeks autonomy, or is believed to have had sex with a man outside of marriage, killing her is regarded as a reasonable response by her very own relatives, often a father or brother. In Iraq, at last count, since the beginning of the present war, there have been 2,000 honor killings (Tarabay 2006), and United Nations officials estimate 5,000 worldwide (BBC 2003). In the summer of 2006, the *New York Times* reported that in Turkey, a society becoming more religiously conservative, girls regarded as errant because they moved out of the control of their parents or chose a boyfriend, thus casting dishonor on the family, are put in situations in which they are expected and pressured to commit suicide. Suicide spares a family the obligation to murder her and face prosecution (Bilefsky 2006). Elsewhere, such murders are barely noted by the police.

Female circumcision is also intended to preserve women's honor. In many areas of the African continent, girls are subjected to genital cutting as a prelude to marriage and as a technique to keep them from having pleasure during sex, which, it is reasoned, may lead them to an independent choice of mate.

Conferring on women the symbolism of sexual purity as a basis of honor contributes to their vulnerability. In today's genocidal warfare, the mass rape of women by marauding forces is not just due to the sexual availability of conquered women. Rape is used as a mechanism of degradation. If the men involved in the Bosnian and Darfur massacres regarded rape as an atrocity and a *dishonor* to their cause, it could not have been used so successfully as a tool of war. Further, we know that the Bosnian and Sudanese rape victims, like women who have been raped in Pakistan, India, and other

places, are regarded as defiled and are shunned, as are the babies born of such rapes.

CLOTHING AS A SYMBOLIC TOOL FOR DIFFERENTIATION. The chador and veil are tools men use to symbolize and maintain women's honor. Although men, with some exceptions,<sup>42</sup> wear Western dress in much of the world, women's clothing is used to symbolize their cultures' confrontations with modernity, in addition to clothing's symbolic roles. Presumably worn to assure modesty and to protect women's honor, the clothing prescribed, even cultural relativists must admit, serves to restrict women's mobility. Hot and uncomfortable, women cannot perform tasks that require speed and mobility, and it prevents women from using motorbikes and bicycles, the basic means of transportation in poor societies. Distinctive clothing is not restricted to the Third World. Fundamentalist groups in Europe and the United States also mandate clothing restrictions for women.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, clothing is used to differentiate women and men in all societies. In the past, Western women's clothing was also restrictive (e.g., long skirts and corsets) and today, as women have moved toward greater equality, women and men are permitted to wear similar garb (such as jeans and t-shirts). Of course, fashion prescribes more sexually evocative (thus distinctive) clothing for women than it does for men.

TIME AND SPACE. How can we speak of the otherness and subordination of women without noting the power of the variables of time and

<sup>41</sup> A United Nations (2002) report found that there were legislative provisions "allowing for partial or complete defense" in the case of an honor killing in: Argentina, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Egypt, Guatemala, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Peru, Syria, Turkey, Venezuela, and the Palestinian National Authority (of course law does not equal practice). For example, in Pakistan and Jordan honor killings are outlawed but they occur nevertheless.

<sup>42</sup> In demonstrations in societies led by religious leaders, men typically wear Western style shirts and trousers although their leaders typically choose clerics' robes and turbans. Leaders of countries outside the "Western" orbit often choose distinctive dress—robes, beards, open neck shirts, and other costumes for ceremonial occasions or to make political statements.

<sup>43</sup> Hella Winston (personal communication, September 30, 2006) told me that in the orthodox Jewish community of New Square in New York State, a recent edict by the Rabbi reminded women they were to wear modest dress, specifying that "sleeves must be to the end of the bone, and [to] not wear narrow clothing or short clothing." They were not to ride bikes or speak loudly.

space in the analysis? In every society the norms governing the use of time and space are gendered (Epstein and Kalleberg 2004). People internalize feelings about the proper use of time and space as a result of the normative structure. Worldwide, the boundaries of time and space are constructed to offer men freedom and to restrict women's choices. In most of the world, women rise earlier than do men and start food preparation; they eat at times men don't. Further, sex segregation of work in and outside the home means a couple's primary contact may be in the bedroom. If women intrude on men's space they may violate a taboo and be punished for it. Similarly, men who enter into women's spaces do so only at designated times and places. The taboo elements undermine the possibility of easy interaction, the opportunity to forge friendships, to connect, and to create similar competencies. In the Western world, working different shifts is common (Presser 2003), which also results in segregation of men and women.

There are rules in every society, some by law and others by custom, that specify when and where women may go, and whether they can make these journeys alone or must appear with a male relative. Some segregation is to protect men from women's temptations (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Satmar sect in Monsey, NY) and some to protect women from men's sexual advances (e.g., Mexico, Tokyo, Mumbai). But the consequence is that men overwhelmingly are allotted more space and territorialize public space.

A common variable in the time prescription for women is surveillance; women are constrained to operate within what I am calling *role zones*. In these, their time is accounted for and prescribed. They have less *free* time. In our own Western society, women note that the first thing to go when they attempt to work and have children is "free time." Free time is typically enjoyed by the powerful, and it gives them the opportunity to engage in the politics of social life. Most people who work at a subsistence level, refugees, and those who labor in jobs not protected by the authority of the dominant group, don't have free time either. Slave owners own the time of their slaves.

## A THEORY OF FEMALE SUBORDINATION

All of this leads me to ask a basic sociological question. Why does the subordination of women

and girls persist no matter how societies change in other ways? How does half the world's population manage to hold and retain power over the other half? And what are we to make of the women who comply?

The answers lie in many of the practices I have described and they remain persuasive with a global perspective. I propose an even more basic explanation for the persistence of inequality, and often a reversion to inequality, when equality seems to be possible or near attainment. In *Deceptive Distinctions* (1988) I proposed the theory that the division of labor in society assigns women the most important survival tasks—reproduction and gathering and preparation of food. All over the world, women do much of the reproductive work, ensuring the continuity of society. They do this both in physical terms and in symbolic terms. Physically, they do so through childbirth and child care. They do much of the daily work any social group needs for survival. For example, half of the world's food, and up to 80 percent in developing countries, is produced by women (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations n.d.; Women's World Summit Foundation 2006). They also prepare the food at home, work in the supermarkets, behind the counters, and on the conveyor belts that package it. In their homes and in schools, they produce most preschool and primary school education. They take care of the elderly and infirm. They socialize their children in the social skills that make interpersonal communication possible. They are the support staffs for men. This is a good deal—no, a great deal—for the men.

Controlling women's labor and behavior is a mechanism for male governance and territoriality. Men's authority is held jealously. Men legitimate their behavior through ideological and theological constructs that justify their domination. Further, social institutions reinforce this.<sup>44</sup>

I shall review the mechanisms:

We know about the use and threat of force (Goode 1972).<sup>45</sup> We know as well about the

<sup>44</sup> Where religious laws govern such areas of civic life as family relations, inheritance, and punishment for crimes, for example, they invariably institutionalize women's subordinate status.

<sup>45</sup> As one of many possible examples: when hundreds of women gathered in downtown Tehran on July

role of law and justice systems that do not accord women the same rights to protection, property, wealth, or even education enjoyed by men. We know that men control and own guns and the means of transport, and they often lock women out of membership and leadership of trade unions, political parties, religious institutions, and other powerful organizations. We know too that huge numbers of men feel justified in threatening and punishing females who deviate from male-mandated rules in public and private spaces. That's the strong-arm stuff.

But everywhere, in the West as well as in the rest of the world, women's segregation and subjugation is also done *culturally* and through *cognitive* mechanisms that reinforce existing divisions of rights and labor and award men authority over women. Internalized cultural schemas reinforce men's views that their behavior is legitimate and persuade women that their lot is just. The media highlight the idea that women and men think differently and naturally gravitate to their social roles.<sup>46</sup> This is more than just "pluralistic ignorance" (Merton [1948] 1963). Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) reminds us that dominated groups often contribute to their own subordination because of perceptions shaped by the conditions of their existence—the dominant system made of binary oppositions. Using Eviatar Zerubavel's (1997) term, "mindscapes" set the stage for household authorities and heads of clans, tribes, and communities to separate and segregate women in the belief that the practice is inevitable and right. Such mindscapes also persuade the females in their midst to accept the

legitimacy and inevitability of their subjection, and even to defend it, as we have seen lately in some academic discourses.

The mindscapes that legitimate women's segregation are the cognitive translations of ideologies that range the spectrum from radical fundamentalism to difference feminism; all are grounded in cultural-religious or pseudoscientific views that women have different emotions, brains, aptitudes, ways of thinking, conversing, and imagining. Such mindsets are legitimated every day in conventional understandings expressed from the media, pulpits, boardrooms, and in departments of universities. Psychologists call them schemas (Brewer and Nakamura 1984)—culturally set definitions that people internalize. Gender operates as a cultural "super-schema" (Roos and Gatta 2006) that shapes interaction and cues stereotypes (Ridgeway 1997). Schemas that define femaleness and maleness are basic to all societies. Schemas also define insiders and outsiders and provide definitions of justice and equality.

In popular speech, philosophical musings, cultural expressions, and the banter of everyday conversation, people tend to accept the notion of difference. They accept its inevitability and are persuaded of the legitimacy of segregation, actual or symbolic. Thus, acceptance of difference perspectives—the idea that women often have little to offer to the group, may result in rules that forbid women from speaking in the company of men (in a society governed by the Taliban) or may result in senior academics' selective deafness to the contributions of a female colleague in a university committee room.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion I want to reiterate certain observations:

Intrinsic qualities are attributed to women that have little or nothing to do with their actual characteristics or behavior. Because those attributions are linked to assigned roles their legitimation is an ongoing project. Changing these ideas would create possibilities for changing the status quo and threaten the social institutions in which men have the greatest stake and in which some women believe they benefit.

Is women's situation different from that of men who, by fortune, color of skin, or accident of birth also suffer from exploitation by the powerful? I am claiming *yes*, because they carry

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31, 2006 to protest institutionalized sex discrimination in Iran (in areas such as divorce, child custody, employment rights, age of adulthood, and court proceedings where a woman's testimony is viewed as half of a man's), 100 male and female police beat them. Reports also noted a tightening of the dress code and segregation on buses and in some public areas such as parks, sidewalks, and elevators. Another demonstration on March 8, 2006 was dispersed as police dumped garbage on the heads of participants (Stevens 2006).

<sup>46</sup> The recent book by Louann Brizendine (2006), which asserts that the female and male brains are completely different, offering such breezy accounts as "woman is weather, constantly changing and hard to predict" and "man is mountain," has been on the top 10 on the Amazon.com book list and led to her prominent placement on ABC's 20/20 and morning talk shows. Thanks to Troy Duster for passing this on.



not only the hardships—sometimes relative hardships—but the ideological and cognitive overlay that defines their subordination as legitimate and normal. Sex and gender are the organizing markers in all societies. In no country, political group, or community are men defined as lesser human beings than their *female* counterparts. But almost everywhere women are so defined.

Why is this acceptable? And why does it persist?

So many resources are directed to legitimating females' lower place in society. So few men inside the power structure are interested in inviting them in. And so many women and girls accept the Orwellian notion that restriction is freedom, that suffering is pleasure, that silence is power.<sup>47</sup>

Of course this is not a static condition, nor, I hope, an inevitable one. Women in the Western world, and in various sectors of the rest of the world, have certainly moved upward in the continuum toward equality. Thirty-five years ago I noted how women in the legal profession in the United States were excluded from the informal networks that made inclusion and mobility possible. Now, noticeable numbers have ventured over the barriers. Similarly, there has been a large increase in the numbers of women who have entered the sciences,<sup>48</sup> business, medicine, and veterinary medicine (Cox and Alm 2005). This has changed relatively swiftly. Women didn't develop larger brains—nor did their reasoning jump from left brain to right brain or the reverse. Nor did they leave Venus for Mars. Rather, they learned that they could not be barred from higher education and they could get appropriate jobs when they graduated. The problem is no longer one of qualifications or entry but of promotion and inclusion into the informal networks leading to the top. But the obstacles are great.

<sup>47</sup> For example, a recent poll cited in the *New York Times* (June 8, 2006) indicates that a majority of women in Muslim countries do not regard themselves as unequal (Andrews 2006). Of course, this attitude is widespread throughout the world, including Western societies.

<sup>48</sup> Comparing percentages of women attaining doctorates in the sciences from 1970–71 to 2001–2002 the increases were: Engineering .2–17.3; Physics 2.9–15.5; Computer Science 2.3–22.8; Mathematics 7.6–29.

In his review of cognitive sociological dynamics, DiMaggio (1997) reminds us of Merton's notion of "pluralistic ignorance," which is at work when people act with reference to shared collective opinions that are empirically incorrect. There would not be a firm basis for the subordinate condition of females were there not a widespread belief, rooted in folk culture, in their essential difference from males in ability and emotion. This has been proven time and time again in research in the "real" world of work and family institutions (e.g., Epstein et al. 1995) and laboratory observations (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1966; Frodi et al. 1977; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999).

We know full well that there are stories and master social narratives accepted by untold millions of people that have no basis in what social scientists would regard as evidence. The best examples are the basic texts of the world's great religions. But there are also societywide beliefs of other kinds. Belief systems are powerful. And beliefs that are unprovable or proven untrue often capture the greatest number of believers. Sometimes, they are simply the best stories.

We in the social sciences have opened the gates to a better understanding of the processes by which subordinated groups suffer because the use of *categories* such as race and ethnicity rank human beings so as to subordinate, exclude, and exploit them (Tilly 1998). However, relatively few extend this insight to the category of gender or sex. The sexual divide so defines social life, and so many people in the world have a stake in upholding it, that it is the most resistant of all categories to change. Today, Hall and Lamont (forthcoming; Lamont 2005) are proposing that the most productive societies are those with porous boundaries between categories of people. Perhaps there is an important incentive in a wider understanding of this idea. Small groups of men may prosper by stifling women's potential, but prosperous nations benefit from women's full participation and productivity in societies. Societies might achieve still more if the gates were truly open.

Sociologists historically have been committed to social change to achieve greater equality in the world, in both public and private lives. But in this address I challenge our profession to take this responsibility in our scholarship and our professional lives; to observe, to reveal, and to strike down the conceptual and cultural walls that justify inequality on the basis of sex in all of society's institutions—to transgress

this ever-present boundary—for the sake of knowledge and justice.

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