THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Alice Schlegel
During the first half of the twentieth century, Margaret Mead and a few other anthropologists addressed the question of women’s status in various cultures. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, that gender studies became a well-established topic of research. A central issue at that time was the development of a theoretical framework. A number of researchers, including many of the feminist scholars of this period, assumed that male dominance was universal. The “fact” of universal female subordination, illustrated by a few selected ethnographic or historical cases, was taken for granted and the problem was to find its cause.

One obvious place to look was biology. Sociologist Randall Collins claimed that men dominate women because they can physically coerce them. Only slightly more sophisticated was a biological proposition put forward by anthropologist Lionel Tiger. In his view, men dominate women because they are genetically predisposed to bond more than women, due to evolutionary selection for cooperative hunting. There is no evidence that supports either theory.

If male muscles or bonding propensities do not make much sense as explanations for male dominance, what about female reproductive activities? Do bearing and nursing children keep women subordinate? Drawing on earlier cross-cultural research on the division of labor by sex, Judith Brown pointed out that reproductive constraints can keep women from the social activities that bring power and prestige. Claude Meillassoux’s Marxist approach to reproduction is that where reproduction is vital for creating one’s labor force and social networks, men control the reproductive capacities and activities of women through control over marriage and authority over women in general. This theory fails to answer the question of how men gain control.

Two widely cited papers blamed the devaluation of women for female subordination. Psychologist Nancy Chodorow saw it as the result of men’s rejection of their own femininity, which was established through early infantile identification with the mother. (This assumes that gender identity precedes the individuation process of the infant from the mother, for which there is no proof.) Sherry Ortner blamed the devaluation of women on a universal identification of women as closer to nature and men as closer to culture, along with a universally higher evaluation of culture. (Neither of these assumptions has been demonstrated to be, in fact, universal.) Even if Chodorow’s and Ortner’s arguments were true, it does not follow that devaluation can be translated into power. Where devaluation of women and the feminine
principle does exist, it would seem to be an effect of female sub-
ordination rather than a cause.

Comparative Studies of Female Status

I did an early systematic cross-cultural study of female status in
the late 1960s on domestic status in matrilineal societies.9
Matrilineal societies are those in which children at birth become
members of the descent group of the mother. In matrilineal soci-
eties, men depend on sisters rather than wives for producing the
next generation of descent-group members. I found that within
matrilineal societies, households could be husband-dominant (as
they are in patrilineal societies where children at birth become
members of the descent group of the father), brother-dominant
even in cases where husband and wife lived together away from
the woman’s brother, or neither-dominant, where neither hus-
band nor brother held authority over the woman and women had
a high level of autonomy.

Tests of these household authority patterns with fifty-four
variables resulted in a number of statistically significant findings,
such as the absence of a cultural expectation of co-wife jealousy
in brother- or neither-dominant societies, but an expectation of
such jealousy in husband-dominant societies. Another finding
was that the direction of the incest taboo varies according to the
domestic authority pattern: In the husband-dominant societies,
father-daughter incest is regarded as worse, whereas in brother-
dominant societies brother-sister incest is worse. A negative find-
ing was that there is no association between domestic authority
and presence or severity of menstrual taboos, suggesting caution
in using such taboos as an indicator of low female status.

In 1978, Martin Whyte published the first holoheistic study
on the general status of women.10 This was in the nature of an
exploratory study, searching for the dimensions of female status
and testing a number of existing hypotheses about its origins. He
coded a sample of ninety-three preindustrial societies for forty-
six independent variables, or cultural features, and fifty-two
dependent variables, or features that have been considered to be
indicators of high or low status. He then constructed nine scales
of dependent variables that clustered together, each scale containing from three to five dependent variables.

Relationships among these scales were generally very weak. Whyte correctly concluded from this that he was measuring several disparate domains of female status. However, I do not agree with his conclusion that there is no such phenomenon as general female status, and that one cannot speak of women’s status as being higher or lower in one society than another. Some domains may be more central than others; or one could construct a continuum of societies scoring low on several domains to those scoring high on several. The question needs further analysis.

Through correlational analyses, Whyte found that women have less domestic authority and more sexual restrictions in societies with plow agriculture (the complex societies of Eurasia) than in other societies; women in matrilineal societies or in those practicing matrilocal residence (where the couple live with the wife’s parents) have more control over property and somewhat more domestic authority than in other societies; in politically complex societies (chiefdoms and states), women generally have less domestic authority and less ritualized solidarity.

Three years after the appearance of Whyte’s book, Peggy Sanday published her cross-cultural study on the origins of sexual inequality.\(^{11}\) She posited a causal relationship among environment, behavior, and symbolism, opposing large-animal-oriented societies (hunters and herders) to plant-oriented ones (cultivators). Although her statistical tests did not support the posited causal chains, she did find that planting societies are less likely to have masculine origin symbols (e.g., creator deities or culture heroes) whereas big-game-hunting societies are more likely to have them. The variable most strongly associated with masculine deities, however, is low proximity of fathers to infants, which Sanday interpreted as a mediating factor between the technological environment and the mental set that produces and maintains symbolic systems. She also found that women’s status declines with increasing social complexity.

Sanday constructed scales of women’s economic and political power and male dominance. Some of the variables she selected are puzzling or seem tangential. For example, a measure of strong male dominance is incidence of rape (inferred from reports of rape), which seems to be more a measure of male violence than of male social power. While some of the measures and the statistical tests are not compelling, the study is rich in ethnographic data,
and it attempts the important task of integrating symbolism and ideology with the material and social bases of gender status.

Karen Sacks took a traditional Marxist approach to the status of women, claiming that it varies along with women’s control over the means of production. To demonstrate this, she selected a sample of six African societies, ranging from Mbuti, where no one is in control, through those with varying degrees of control by both sexes, to Buganda, a state with virtually total male control. She showed that female control declines within this sample as the mode of production becomes more complex and kin-based ownership of productive property shifts toward individual or family-owned property. An advantage this study has over Whyte’s and Sanday’s is that she specified a reason for decline in women’s status as societies become more complex.

Sacks’s theory was tested by Lewellyn Hendrix and Zakir Hossain on a world-wide sample of societies. While they did find a significant association between female control over production and both women’s domestic authority and female kin-group or family leadership, there is no association between the general mode of production and female control over property. Thus, it cannot be said that either female control over property or female status is a direct consequence of the mode of production. (One could argue that female control over production is a consequence, not a cause, of female power in the home or kin group, attained by other means.)

Although none of these studies has demonstrated a cause for high or low female status, they all indicate that women’s status in the public sphere tends in general to decline with a rise in social complexity; that is, sexual equality is more likely to exist in the less complex than in the more complex societies, although there are exceptions at both ends of the complexity scale. It is likely that the rise of bureaucracies—civil, religious, military—has placed women at a disadvantage, as these bureaucracies create or increase the distance between domestic and public spheres. At the same time, as Carol Ember has shown, in the most complex societies, typically the agrarian states of Eurasia, women become more involved in processing tasks done in the home and less in productive tasks done outside the home, thus restricting the scope of their activities. In complex societies (i.e., the traditional states) it is an unusual elite woman who has a powerful economic or political role, one whose social status overrides her sexual status and whose domestic responsibilities are taken over by ser-
vants or slaves. Even in such cases, she may be subordinate to men of her own social class.

**What Is Female Status?**

In the discussion so far I have used terms such as *prestige, authority, reward,* and *social power.* All of these are components of gender status, although I consider power and authority to be at the core of status similarity or difference.

Reward refers to the material goods that accrue to the individual because of his or her labor or position in society. In many places, men gain greater reward than women, because men have greater access to investment capital, large-scale trading opportunities, or high-paying jobs. In simpler societies, there might be no economic differential between the sexes. When there is no private property (privately owned land, domestic animals, cash, or other forms of property), there is little opportunity for one sex to receive greater reward than the other, since goods are shared within the family and kin network. As societies become more complex, the possibility for sex differential in ownership of goods becomes possible (but is not inevitable).

Prestige can be measured by the amount of deference accorded to a person or category of persons. It is not unusual in male-dominant societies for individual women, like queens or women of great learning or talent, to be acclaimed. Their prestige does not reflect on ordinary women. The same holds true for mythical female beings. Many, probably most, religions include goddesses or other female supernatural figures that are worshiped by both women and men. Male social dominance is perfectly compatible with mother goddesses.

Male dominance and female subordination or autonomy refer to relations of *power.* If men control the persons or activities of (adult) women to a greater degree than women control the persons and activities of (adult) men, then men are dominant. This control can occur through social relations in several spheres, such as economic, political, or religious institutions. In the most highly male-dominant societies, men control the majority of important institutions, and their power over women is regarded as legitimate (i.e., men have *authority* over women). Ancient Greece and contemporary Saudi Arabia are examples of general male author-
ity. In both cases, women have had little autonomy except in the confines of their homes, where they have been secluded. The women’s quarters can be places of much relaxation and personal expression for the women who live there; but outside this confined domain, women participate little in the workings of society.

In other cases, men have no authority over women but may attempt to control them by exerting power in various ways. In some hunting-and-gathering societies in which the physical expression of aggression is tolerated, a man may attack a woman for what he perceives as infringements on his rights. (Women may attack men too, but more often than not it is the women, not the men, who retreat or are subdued.) Among the Mundurucú and some other Indian tribes of the Amazon, men of the village attack and gang-rape the rare woman who disobeys the rules and looks upon men’s sacred trumpets. Through threat of collective violence, men maintain a dominant position that they could not have by other means.

In sexually egalitarian societies, neither sex controls the other (although there may be forms of inequality in these societies along dimensions other than gender, like rank or class). Sexually egalitarian societies are likely to have some domains under the authority of men, some under the authority of women, and some in which authority is shared.

The forms that male dominance and sexual equality take are illustrated by cases drawn from the ethnographic literature. They will be described as they were at the time the ethnographer—the anthropologist or other observer—studied them.

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Pervasive Patriarchy: Oman in the Early 1980s

Oman is a small state on the Arabian Peninsula. Christine Eickelman accompanied her anthropologist husband during his research there and wrote about the lives of her neighbors and friends.¹⁵

There is considerable variation in social status among the Omani: Men and women can belong to the dominant political group, to the somewhat subordinate client tribes, or to a group made up of the descendants of African slaves. In spite of variations of social status among women, women generally are confined to the home and the company of other women as powerless
as they. Men move in the company of other men when they are not at home, and they make all the important decisions in the community and in the household (although in the latter case they may be influenced by the wise counsel of their wives and mothers).

Even within the home, relations between women and men may be somewhat strained. Eickelman described the reaction of women—members of the family and herself as guest—when the head of the household entered unexpectedly: The relaxed, informal atmosphere changed as women sat up, straightened their clothing, and stopped talking. She noted that young men act just as shy and ill-at-ease in the company of elderly female relatives and in-laws.

Patriarchy’s Weak Hold:
The Mundurucú in the 1950s

We move from Oman, a complex traditional state, to a tribal group in the Amazon jungle of Brazil. In contrast to Oman, where male dominance takes the form of legitimate authority supported by law and custom, male dominance among the Mundurucú has a weaker hold. Men have no *de jure* authority over women. The *de facto* dominance they enjoy is the result of institutions that constrain women’s activities. While men believe that they are superior to women, women do not accept this evaluation. Yolanda and Robert Murphy explored women’s and men’s views as they participated in daily life in two villages.¹⁶

Although the Mundurucú plant small gardens of manioc, yams, and other fruits and vegetables, the cultural focus of village life is on hunting and warfare, two activities linked in Mundurucú thought. Raiding parties formerly went long distances to attack enemy villages, killing most of the inhabitants except children brought back to be reared as Mundurucú. Whatever material benefit the Mundurucú gained from these raids, the stated purpose was the taking of enemy heads, which pleased the spirits of game animals. Religion still revolves around hunting themes.

Men account for female inferiority by the myth of the sacred trumpets. According to this myth, women once had control of these musical instruments, whose spiritual power kept men under women’s rule until the men stole the trumpets. Now men own
them, and if women even see them they must be severely punished. This myth is widespread in tropical South America and is similar to myths of sacred flutes common in New Guinea.

To account for the subordination of women that this myth expresses, we have to look at the territories of the sexes and how they affect social relationships and social power. Dwelling houses are set in a circle around a large central open space, where ceremonies and other public life takes place. In these houses live women, girls, and boys. At puberty, boys move into the men’s house and remain there throughout their adult lives, coming to the homes of their wives only as visitors. It is in the men’s house that men plan their collective hunts and raids, discuss local politics, and organize ceremonies. This tight male bonding is given ritual and symbolic expression through collective male ownership of the sacred trumpets. If patriarchy has a weaker hold on Mundurucú than on Omani women, it is because Mundurucú women are relatively self-sufficient. They do most of the gardening and are in charge of the preparation and distribution of food. Even though meat is preferred to fish, fish are eaten and women know how to catch them. Men do not control women through control over economic goods or activities.

If women are indeed self-sufficient, why is there any male dominance at all? In my view, this has to do with the strong ties that unite village men contrasted with the greater division of women into small groups of kin and friends. These bonds among men appear to result from the former conditions of endemic warfare that made it advantageous for the men to live together and be constantly ready to defend the village. In other words, the men’s house functions in part as a barracks. (This is also the case in many parts of Highlands New Guinea.)

Men’s houses exist in many places, and their presence indicates that men of all families and neighborhoods come together. (The village tavern or tea house or coffee house can serve a somewhat similar function in traditional European, Asian, or Middle Eastern communities.) Often there are no comparable public meeting grounds for women. It is in places like these that a public-private distinction can become the grounds for male collective action and social bonding denied to women. This seems to be the case in Mundurucú villages that follow a traditional way of life. In the modern villages, where men work as rubber tappers, the social structure has changed. The men’s house no longer exists, and husbands live with wives in nuclear-family households. Women say
that they prefer this. Are they, however, trading one form of male dominance, founded on male collectivity in the men’s house, for another based on economic dependence?

We will now turn to two sexually egalitarian societies to see the features that characterize them.

**Sexual Equality through Shared Roles: Bontoc in the 1970s**

Albert Bacdayan, himself a Bontoc Igorot, did his ethnographic research in several villages in the Bontoc region of the highlands of Luzon, in the Philippines. In common with many peoples of Southeast Asia, particularly the highlands tribal groups, Bontoc women are acknowledged to have a high status.

The Bontoc subsist on rice and other vegetables that they grow in terraced fields, supplemented by a little meat from the pigs and chickens they raise. Husbands and wives live in nuclear-family households, and they cooperate as a pair in most activities. Unlike the Mundurucú and the Omani, where women and men lead quite separate lives, almost all Bontoc activities are either performed by both sexes or are shared, with a high degree of task interchangeability. These activities include agricultural tasks, fishing, and domestic chores. The exceptions are the rituals, where there is a balance in importance between female and male ritual roles. Women take as active a role in village affairs as men do—speaking out at public meetings, campaigning for candidates they favor, and running for office—and relations between women and men in public are relaxed and spontaneous. Mixed-sex discussion groups are not uncommon, in public as well as in the home.

Nevertheless, there are hints that relations between the sexes were not always quite so egalitarian. Only a few generations ago, before pacification under United States rule, the Bontoc, like many Philippine highland tribal peoples, were headhunters. What today are village meeting houses were formerly men’s houses, off limits to women. It is possible that men made more of the community decisions in earlier times, when those decisions involved warfare and were literally matters of life and death.

However, the precolonial Bontoc are unlikely to have been as vigorous in their denial of female equality as are the Mundurucú, in spite of some similarities between the cultures. Both are located
in tropical forests and practice agriculture along with some hunting. Both used to be headhunters, with men gathering in men’s houses from which women were excluded. We do not know why the Mundurucú differ from the Bontoc in making such claims to male superiority; gender status is never the result of one or two cultural features. But the time is gone when these two peoples can be observed as living headhunters and their cultures studied for comparison.

Separate but Equal: The Hopi in the Late Nineteenth Century

Another kind of sexual equality is illustrated by the Hopi of northern Arizona as they were just before and during the period of first massive contact with the non-Indian world, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In my field work and through historical documents, I learned that women and men had quite separate and clearly defined roles, but the institutions that each sex controlled were in balance with one another.

Households were headed by women and included their daughters and the husbands and unmarried children of all these women. A man farmed the land that his wife’s clan allocated to her household, and the harvest belonged to her. Farming produced almost all of the goods that were used for food, in ceremonial exchanges, and for exchange with neighboring tribes; in other words, through their control of the land and the goods it produced, women controlled the most important aspects of the economy. While the wife was the acknowledged authority in the house, her power was mitigated by her need for her husband’s labor.

A Hopi’s single most important social identification was with his or her matrilineal clan, consisting of “brothers” and “sisters” and the children of the women. Clan leaders were a brother and sister pair, who had to agree on clan policy. The male leader represented the clan to the village and looked out for its interests, while the female leader’s special charge was clan physical and spiritual well-being. She also had the final voice in the allocation of clan land among the clan women’s households. The cooperation of this pair was essential for the proper conduct of clan-associated ceremonies.
The village had two major political institutions: the chief and his council, consisting of the male leaders of the most important clans, and the kiva groups, informal societies of men who used the kivas, or ceremonial buildings, as men’s houses. Village issues were discussed in the kivas, and decisions could be based on the consensus drawn in these discussions.

There are at least two reasons why the kiva groups did not unite the men and enhance their power at the expense of disunited women. One is that every village had several kivas and associated kiva groups in friendly competition with one another. There was, therefore, no monolithic male cohort. The second reason is that men were very conscious of being representative of the women of their household and clan. Since men depended on wives or sisters for their food and shelter, they were careful not to antagonize them.

Public religious ceremonies in the annual ceremonial cycle were mainly of two kinds—those under the direction of the kiva groups and those under the direction of ceremonial societies. Most of the ceremonial societies were under the authority of priests, and men took the principal roles in their ceremonies, although women had important ritual roles as well. Three societies were specifically for women under the direction of priestesses.

Female authority in domestic and economic affairs balanced male political authority in village politics and most ritual affairs. Female power was mitigated by women’s dependence on male labor, and male power was constrained by men’s economic dependence on women. In the clan, female and male shared authority equally as cooperative sisters and brothers.

**WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?**

These four cases illustrate some of the different forms that women’s status can take. We have seen that male dominance can be located in several institutions. These are primarily of two types.

First, there are those institutions that give men greater access to necessary or valued resources. In Oman, women are almost totally dependent on men for all necessities. Among the Mundurucú, male dominance does not have an economic basis
and is not so pervasive as it is among the Omani. Among the Bontoc, the sexes own and share equally and each depends strongly on the other. Hopi women controlled the primary economic resources, but this control was tempered by male control of the formal political process.

Second, there are those institutions that bring men together into a common interest group. It is the old truth of “united we stand, divided we fall.” As Oman is a patrilineal and patrilocal society, men are united in the male-centered lineage and household. The basis for male unity among the Mundurucú is common membership and residence in the men’s house. The Bontoc have no male-centered kin groups, and the newly married couple establishes its own residence apart from both families. The Hopi had female-centered households, male-centered political associations, and gender-balanced clans.

We have also seen that sexual equality is of two types. The first is equality through similarity, exemplified by the Bontoc. There is no basis for the elevation or subordination of one gender or the other if they take more or less equal roles in most social institutions. It is particularly important that they be equally represented in the central institutions of a society, those that are the engines for social maintenance and change. These are generally of an economic, political, and religious nature.

However, in the second type, women and men may hold authority in different institutions so long as these are in balance. In the case of the Hopi, we have seen this balance between domestic-economic and political-religious institutions. In other cases, men may be in charge of hunting and warfare and gain prestige and social power in that way, while women play a major role in religious activities. This is a widespread cultural pattern among tribal peoples of Southeast Asia, many of whom associate death (hunting and war) with masculinity, and life (childbearing and agriculture) with femininity. In some of these cultures, priestesses or female shamans are in charge of the major rituals, those concerned with the fertility of plants and the well-being of the people.

Combining the case studies with the cross-cultural studies, what have we learned about the status of women through comparative research?

A major finding is that there is no universal subordination of women. Theories of universal male dominance crumble when faced with the empirical evidence from other cultures.
Gender status has several components. In this article, I have emphasized power and authority as the key components, but they are not the only ones.

Female control or lack of control over economic resources is one important factor in explaining female power or powerlessness. At the least, male dominance is likely to be ameliorated when women do not depend economically on men.

The organization of same-sex groups can promote the social power of that sex, but these solidarity groups alone are unlikely to do so unless aided by other factors.

Women are less likely to be equal to men in complex societies than in the simpler ones, as the cross-cultural studies have found, although there is no simple relationship between gender status and social complexity.

Most important, there is no necessary and sufficient cause of male dominance or sexual equality; that is, there is no single feature that causes women’s status to be high or low. Rather, there are a variety of features, working together in different combinations, that can be identified across cultures as contributing to gender status. This theoretical position was developed in my publications on women’s status, more recently, Chafetz has spelled out many of these features.

**Recent Research Issues**

In the past decade or so, anthropologists have been looking less at gender status and more at specific topics germane to women, like menstruation, female farming, female sexuality, and women’s changing lives under economic development. In part, this is because the old question of universal subordination of women, which was a philosophical and political position as much as it was a topic for empirical research, has been largely answered in the negative.

Another reason for the redirection of research on women has been that over the last ten or fifteen years, many anthropologists have turned away from broad comparative studies to detailed investigations of single cultures. This has added greatly to our understanding of the contexts of women’s lives and to the specific conditions that enhance or diminish their status within their societies, and it allows us to combine ethnographic with historical
research in understanding the processes that result in the maintenance or change of gender status. In addition, single-case studies have highlighted the variability of women’s status within cultures, according to age, social status, or wealth.

However, ignoring the general in favor of the specific means that the big questions of cause and effect are left unanswered; an understanding of a specific culture or a small cluster of cultures does not translate into a broader understanding of underlying causes.

In light of the newer research, it is clear that we will have to revise the questions we asked two decades ago about women’s status. We looked at customs as measures of status. However, similar customs may have different meanings and consequences in different societies. For comparative research, questions could be rephrased to measure prestige and power directly, keeping in mind the roles played by either sex or both sexes in the central institutions of the society. This requires careful reading of each ethnography and is extremely time-consuming. The comparative researcher will probably have to work with smaller samples, perhaps limited to a particular region or to a single type of society.

Research on the status of women is of more than academic interest. In women’s claims for rights and privileges equal to men, the lessons from other societies can provide guideposts to action in the changing societies of the modern world.

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**Notes**


SUGGESTED READINGS

The works cited in this chapter and in endnote citations 2 and 21 offer a broad range of theoretical discussions and single-culture case studies on women’s status. In addition, there are several collections of papers that are valuable sources in themselves and for guiding further reading. Some of these are listed below:

Dahlberg, Frances, ed. *Woman the Gatherer*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. A collection of articles clarifying many of the assertions that have been made about women and their status in hunting and gathering societies.


