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# The Women's Movement in the United States: Confronting Racism and Sexism

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> At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.
>
> —Che Guevara

## Preface: A Personal Note

This chapter presents some verbal snapshots of the U.S. women's movement in the context of gender and race relations. This has been central to my work and life since 1972—when I first went to work at the National Welfare Rights Organization and then to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights; and today it is in full flower in the work of the Center for Women Policy Studies.

In all of these years, I have shared with many other feminists the mission to speak out about racism-plus-sexism as having a unique quality of oppression for women of color. We have talked about the importance of "doing our homework" about other sisters' origins, cultures, and histories. We have encouraged white feminists to be outspoken against racism and not to leave that task solely to women of color. We have insisted on our responsibility to root out the vestiges of racism in ourselves, in our organizations, and in our feminist theory and policy priorities. And we have talked to women of color as well about multiethnic visions of feminism and the importance of doing the hard work to break down racial, ethnic, and cultural barriers both to sisterhood and to the institutional change that will foreshadow an egalitarian future.

## Setting the Stage: Defining Our Central Premises

In a very significant corner of the women's movement, we have struggled for many years to build a feminism that confronts both sexism and racism, that is truly a multiracial and egalitarian partnership. For white women, this means understanding their skin privilege in the context of gender oppression—and then rejecting it outspokenly. Together, white women and women of color can bridge the great divide of racial dominance that has been our shared but silent legacy throughout our histories in the United States.

Seven central premises shape this chapter; they also should guide our continuing conversations and strategies to confront racism and sexism simultaneously.

The first premise characterizes both our diversity and connectedness in a single image: we who believe in freedom are in the same boat. Some of us—by virtue of our race, class, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, immigration status, or language—are in first-class cabins, and some of us are in the cargo hold. We are not the captain. The boat is stratified by race, class, and gender; it is often brutal and it is governed by patriarchal assumptions. If we remain isolated in our separate cabins and cargo holds, we cannot transform this society, this boat. We need to open our doors wide to each other.

But to do so, we must recognize that there is always a gender dimension to race relations; this is premise number two. Applying a gender lens to all of our work helps us see race relations more clearly and understand the inextricable links between racism and sexism, white supremacy and male supremacy, as they play out in increasingly complex and destructive ways.

Third, we who believe in freedom must place at the center of our analysis and activism an understanding of the combined impact of racism-plus-sexism on women of color—who have bravely faced these dual systems of dominance that still shape our society. An understanding of this particular reality enriches our understanding of both racism and sexism and thus of the realities faced by both men of color and white women. As African-American feminist Anna Julia Cooper said in a speech to an audience of women in 1892:

> We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritism, whether of sex, race, country or condition. . . . The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that . . . not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won—not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. Woman's wrongs are thus indissolubly linked with all undefended woe, and the acquirement of her "rights" will mean the final triumph of all right over might, the supremacy of the moral forces of reason, and justice, and love in the government of the nations of earth. (Cited in hooks 1981)



Since the days of Anna Julia Cooper and her colleagues, the women's movement in the United States has been in struggle against both racism and sexism.[2] As a fourth premise, it is essential that we understand this truth about the women's movement—that it is more than what some have called "the white women's movement" or "mainstream women's organizations." Feminism in the United States is wonderfully diverse and embedded in communities throughout the country. It is a kaleidoscope of many faces and many voices; that most have not been heard or seen by the "mainstream" does not deny their existence or their strength.

The women's movement *is* these many and diverse scholars, activists, and organizations—many of which are led by women of color who carry on the brave tradition of African-American feminists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and countless other foremothers. And the women's movement is also their white feminist sisters who share this mission and struggle and who have said to both white women and men of color that ending one oppression is not enough.

So, when we talk about the women's movement in the 1990s, "inclusiveness" is an inappropriate term and strategy because it implies that the "real" movement is a white and middle-class one; to persist in using the term "inclusiveness" is to persist in the errors of the past by making invisible the feminist organizing and thinking of feminists of color (Wolfe and Tucker 1995).

As Beverly Guy-Sheftall notes, "The history of American feminism has been primarily a narrative about the heroic deeds of white women" (Guy-Sheftall 1995: p. xiii). The act of reclaiming the submerged history of African-American feminism should also ensure that the leadership of women-of-color feminists today is not submerged by the assumption that they must be "included" in other groups.

The women's movement is unique in its persistent engagement in discourse—often appropriately angry—about racism and classism in our movement. Indeed, this remains a central issue for the women's movement as we struggle with the ways in which racism and classism intersect with sexism to oppress all women. For all our failures, the women's movement is a model of the struggle to address these interrelated oppressions based in assumptions of dominance, grounded in fear and hatred of differentness. More than any other progressive movement, the women's movement has struggled with these issues in every realm.

We have not always been successful by any means, but we have engaged in this transformational debate since the nineteenth century. We have made enormous progress in knitting a seamless web of analysis and activism that confronts biases of sex, race, class, and sexual orientation. Sadly, these struggles have been and remain virtually invisible to most people through the media.

And by "we," I do mean feminists, because feminism demands both personal *and* institutional change—by women and men of all backgrounds and by the institutions that govern our lives. But many women are not feminists, many white women remain tied to their white skin privilege, and many otherwise progressive and egalitarian men remain tied to patriarchal assumptions.

The fifth premise points to the future: we have different histories in the United States, but our futures are entwined. As Chicana scholar Aida Hurtado reminds us: "white men use different forms of enforcing oppression of white women and of women of color. As a consequence, these groups of women have different political responses and skills, and at times these differences cause the two groups to clash" (Hurtado 1989: p. 843).

And while African-American women have historically been enslaved and brutalized by white men, white women have, as Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, "been offered a share of white male power but only if they agree to be subordinate" (Collins 1990: p. 189). Collins speaks of slavery days with both rage and generosity. She suggests that perhaps white women would have saved black women from some of the horrors of slavery if they had had the power to do so, or perhaps white women were simply grateful they had escaped the brutal realities of slavery by virtue of their race.

Without a doubt, this conversation about the persistence of that legacy remains an essential one for the women's movement. Otherwise, white women will not examine its impact on them and will not seek to end skin privilege with the necessary passion, but rather will seek to gain



equality with those white men who rule our world. And then, the unexamined life of white skin privilege will continue to infect our movement.

But this is changing, in large measure because the movement is so wonderfully diverse and diffuse, encompassing women's groups organized everywhere. This is the strength of the women's movement. In fact, since the late 1970s, the unreported "news" of the women's movement has been the building of women-of-color organizations with avowedly feminist agendas and feminist discourse and the flourishing of black feminist theory and multiethnic women's studies.

Today, what some have called "mainstream" and others have called "white" women's organizations acknowledge that talking about "women" and "people of color" as separate categories fails to capture reality as it renders women of color invisible. While these organizations continue their worthy struggle for self-transformation, most do not yet reflect the diversity in their boards and senior staffs that their public pronouncements on issues would anticipate.

However, in this post-Beijing era, women worldwide speak in one voice: women's rights are human rights. The continuing development of antiracist feminist ideology and organizing by African-American, Latina, Asian-American, white, and Native American feminists is a promise that the women's movement in the United States will win its struggle for racial and ethnic solidarity and build a common agenda for our shared struggle against both sexist and racist social, political, economic, and personal structures.

## Origins of Multiethnic Feminism

The nineteenth-century women's movement emerged into an era of industrial development and the restructuring of work and family lives, the growth of social reform movements and intellectual ferment that emphasized individual freedom and—quite literally—the "rights of man" (Hole and Levine 1971; Wolfe and Tucker 1995). But the first half of the nineteenth century also was a time in the United States when Native Americans were being forcibly driven from their ancestral lands by Anglo "settlers" living out an ideology of Manifest Destiny to conquer the continent for European Americans. It was a time when the descendants of Africans who had been kidnapped from their ancestral lands still were legally enslaved as chattel throughout the South, forbidden by law and custom to be educated, to marry, and to maintain their own families (Wolfe and Tucker 1995). These were the brutal realities

that shaped the lives of African-American women and Native American women and that most of their white sisters could not imagine or comprehend—or experience as central concerns in their own lives.

And so, while the movement for the abolition of slavery, launched in the 1830s, was the birthplace of the women's rights movement for both white and African-American women, they followed parallel but often segregated paths. Though undervalued by their white sisters, as Paula Giddings reminds us, "all Black women abolitionists (and most of the leading Black male abolitionists) were feminists" (Giddings 1984: p. 55).

But, like their white male abolitionist counterparts, virtually no white abolitionist/feminist women—save Sarah and Angelina Grimke—understood the potential power of a coalition between white and black women. Thus, though the early white feminists recognized the impact of sexist oppression on women's lives (see the 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments [Women's Rights Convention 1969]), it was left to the African-American feminists to bring it all together (see hooks 1981; Collins 1990; Guy-Sheftall 1995).

That the early white feminists could not and did not transcend race and class is disappointing—even infuriating—to us as we look back, but it is hardly surprising given the race relations and patriarchal assumptions of their time. So too, black women's suspicion of white women's motives, and black men's belief—expressed even by early feminist Frederick Douglass—that suffrage for black men must precede suffrage for women, black and white, is hardly surprising. But one hundred years later, such thinking is inexcusable and counterproductive.

Sojourner Truth spoke for many African-American feminists of the day when she expressed the fear that if black men won the vote and not black women, they would dominate black women as white men dominated white women. In 1867, during the debate over whether women should step aside in favor of black male suffrage, she said:

> There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about colored women; and if colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going [the struggle for women's suffrage] while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again. (Guy-Sheftall 1995: p. 37)

Indeed, African-American feminists throughout the nineteenth century



argued that the struggle must be simultaneously focused on the liberation of blacks—both men and women—and white women.

But most progressive white men, feminist white women, and black men struggling for race equality could not hear this truth. And very few black women were welcomed as leaders in either the earlier interracial abolitionist societies or in the emerging feminist movement. These painful issues of race and class bias persist in liberation movements to our own day.

When suffrage became the women's movement's top priority after the Civil War—when their struggle to win the franchise and equal protection of the law for women failed—feminism suffered. Facing ever more powerful and vicious opposition during the next half century, white suffragists became more willing to accommodate racist and conservative views, to gain "respectability" for woman suffrage among the white men who had the power to grant or withhold it. These single-minded white suffragists, then, often expressed racist and nativist views—suggesting that white men would more safely give the vote to their own sisters and wives than to immigrant and dark-skinned men.

Tragically, these and other white suffragists' tactics—including the strategy of expediency to avoid alienating southern white members of the national suffrage association—further divided women by race. And later, the huge suffrage march of 1913 was segregated. Black women's groups—including Mary Church Terrell and the Delta Sigma Theta sorority women of Howard University and Ida Wells-Barnett and the Alpha Suffrage Club—were told they must "bring up the rear" (Giddings 1984).

But African-American women organized their own campaign for suffrage to ensure their own future equality, and by the 1900s, black suffrage clubs were active in every part of the country (Giddings 1984). When woman's suffrage was finally won on August 26, 1920,[3] when the 19th Amendment joined the Constitution, the earlier vision of feminism as a movement to end women's subjugation had faded and dwindled, not to be revived in full force until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Separately, therefore, white and African-American women built strong organizations that survived to support the revived women's movement decades later[4] but also perpetuated and solidified the bitterness and distrust of the latter years of the suffrage struggle. This was the shared but silent legacy of white and African-American women at the dawn of the new era of activism for social change in the 1960s and 1970s.

## The Third Way—Building a New Feminism

Indeed, the race and class divisions of U.S. society infected the flourishing women's movement during the 1970s. Thus, while women of color were among the founders and leaders of feminist organizations, most activists and members were white. Like their foremothers working for suffrage, women of color experienced racism—though often unconscious and unintended—from their white sisters. And white feminists often assumed that the similarities of gender would overcome the differences of race and class, if only women of color could be "recruited" into their organizations and their ideology—that "inclusiveness" notion again.

When white feminists thought they were being antiracist by attempting to be "color blind" and ignore racial/ethnic and class differences, women of color understood the insult of this invisibility. But some white feminists also understood that expecting women to deny their differences and submerge them into a discredited "melting pot" model of an Anglo-dominant society was ultimately destructive of a unified feminist vision and movement. When white feminists glossed over issues of race and class, women of color—and many white feminists for whom these issues were key—turned away from what they called "white women's organizations" and defined their own feminist vision and built their own organizations. Thus, the public image of the women's movement portrayed in the media—reflected in the leadership and membership of many national organizations—was the image of a white women's movement, which further alienated women-of-color feminists.

Yet many women-of-color and white feminists began early on to build a multicultural feminist movement. Confronting the demand from men of color and from white women that they must choose whether racism or sexism is more oppressive, some feminists of color and white feminist theorists began to develop the "third way," considering racism and sexism as the twin and inseparable evils of caste and women of color as the experts both on their impact and on creation of theories of oppression and strategies for change.

Surprisingly, some of this work was done in a federal government agency, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, which established a Women's Rights Program in 1973 that focused entirely on defining the intersection of racism and sexism and its impact on women of color as the hallmark of both civil rights and women's rights work. The spring 1974 issue of the *Civil Rights Digest*, entitled *Sexism and Racism: Feminist Perspectives*, was a landmark that has not been replicated.



But the struggle to bring the two movements together began much earlier, led by young women activists in radical social-change movements. For example, beginning in the late 1960s, some African-American and white women activists in both the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society came to see that in the absence of feminist content, the sexual revolution did not free women, black power did not free women from male chauvinism within the movement, and the New Left's radical analysis of American society that opposed racism at home, imperialism abroad, the Vietnam War, and capitalism did not address the sex caste system that subjugated women and perpetuated their subordinate status in society, which was reflected even in these progressive social movements.

Many feminists feel that this remains true of progressive male-dominated organizations today. Indeed, it is likely that their failure to understand the far right's agenda well enough to confront it in the early 1980s had something to do with their refusal to acknowledge that the assault on feminism was the right's central focus. How could women be at the center rather than on the margins?

Women-of-color feminist groups achieved greater visibility following their successful mobilization at the U.S. International Women's Year Conference in 1977 to insist on a more forceful statement in the National Plan of Action about women of color and the combined issues of racism and sexism.

To a large extent, the conference was an "explosive moment" for the U.S. women's movement (Wolfe and Tucker 1995). It helped launch new organizations, such as the Black Women's Agenda, and brought much of the feminist agenda into the mainstream of federal policy and popular discourse. Indeed, the fact that the conference adopted a twenty-five-point National Plan of Action that addressed the full range of women's issues and specifically spoke of race bias in the context of women's struggles helped shape new coalitions and strategies that helped preserve the movement during the backlash years to come (Wolfe and Tucker 1995). And many women came away from the conference newly aware of the need to build a national, multicultural feminist movement (Bunch 1987).

## Facing Backlash

The women's movement's success during the 1970s in building women's rights law and policy at the federal level[5]—largely to add "sex" to the prohibitions of race discrimination and create federally

funded programs to attack sex bias and discrimination—also brought issues of combined race and sex bias to the fore despite the loss of the constitutional guarantee of the Equal Rights Amendment.

However, feminist initiatives that would reach more deeply into the social and economic bases of women's lower status and confront the combined impact of racism and sexism on women more directly—addressing women's poverty, for instance—have been far less successful.

Hence, our sixth premise points to future struggles by first acknowledging that our success inevitably engendered an antifeminist and racist backlash that linked "respectable" conservative groups with old-time hate groups and newer militia and other hate groups. And since the Reagan administration, the far right's agenda has increasingly shaped federal policy—with its overt hostility to women's rights, to affirmative action, to gay and lesbian rights, and to welfare rights and programs to alleviate poverty.

This is connected to what I have been calling, since the early 1980s, the "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" backlash, which—portrayed throughout the mass media (see Faludi 1991) and now in the voices of more sophisticated antifeminist women's groups such as the Independent Women's Forum—suggests that the women's movement is both dangerous *and* dead, that in this "post-feminist" and "post–civil rights" era we have achieved equality for those women and men of color who are capable of having it, that civil rights and feminist leaders are over the hill and out of touch, that feminism has caused women's problems and made women victims, that affirmative action is preferential treatment of the unqualified, and that welfare programs keep African Americans in poverty that is tantamount to slavery.

The second phase of the "You've Come a Long Way Baby" backlash tries to speak to upper-income working women who are pushing through the glass ceiling and thus threatening the status quo that keeps white men at the very top. This backlash thus suggests that women's career success is meaningless and dangerous both to themselves and their families; it seeks to restore the cult of domesticity, popular in the Victorian era and the 1950s (see Faludi 1991), suggesting that white, upper-income women are dropping out of the work force, having finally come to their senses and realized that true joy and fulfillment is to be had only in the kitchen and the nursery.

But the underlying theme of this subtle backlash, and of many progressive workplace programs, is that working women must solve the problems of "balancing work and family" themselves, thus submerging



feminist demands for the real transformation of workplace cultures to accommodate our traditional, feminist family values and to consider the needs of the vast majority of working women who do not have the option to opt out.

## Facing Our Dilemma

In the 1990s, the progressive agenda still is hampered by our either/or thinking, which shapes our work and thought in too many ways. We still speak of "women" and "people of color"—assuming that "all the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave" (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982).

It remains a powerful dilemma that in the progressive community, with a few exceptions, organizations remain focused on race or gender, rarely both. It is left to organizations led by women of color and their allies to make these links and demand that their colleagues in both the women's movement and the civil rights movement respond to the self-defined needs and strategies of women of color.

Hence the dilemma of what my sister-colleague Jennifer Tucker calls "sexist multicultural education." Hence the dilemma of our recent struggles to save affirmative action because it "helps" white women more than "minorities"—read "men of color" but rarely "women of color."

Hence, the willingness of many liberal proponents of welfare reform to ignore its assault on poor women in the guise of helping their "innocent" children—thus effectively punishing poor women, particularly African-American and Latina women, for their poverty and devaluing their motherhood. Indeed, the recent discourse on poverty is a classic "blame the victim" strategy that suggests that welfare is bankrupting the nation, that poor women are the villains rather than the victims of economic dislocations and discrimination, and that punitive welfare reform proposals to force women from welfare to working poor status—but still in poverty—will help the nation's economic recovery.

Hence the dilemma of the reproductive-rights agenda. After *Roe v. Wade*, women of color, active supporters of the right to choose abortion,[6] built strategies for expanding the definition of reproductive rights to address issues of forced sterilization of low-income women of color and lack of access to reproductive health care, including prenatal care and "choice" regarding contraception and pregnancy as well, and to link women's reproductive rights to an expanded agenda for social

and economic rights focused on low-income women and women of color.

Yet some white feminists persisted in speaking of reproductive rights solely to mean abortion rights, thus denigrating the larger agenda of women of color (Davis 1991). The UN conferences in Cairo and Beijing, however, have made the reproductive rights and health agenda formulated by women of color the hallmark of their principles.

Hence the dilemma that both academic and independent women-focused think tanks and research centers conduct policy-relevant research on issues affecting women—but are rarely led by women of color in partnership with white women; nor is it the top priority of their agendas to focus explicitly on confronting racism and sexism simultaneously. And hence the similar dilemma that virtually none of the major progressive think tanks or research institutes that study urban affairs, civil rights, or poverty focus explicitly on the inextricable link between race and sex bias, with women of color at the *center* of their analyses, their agendas, or their leadership.

Women's organizing at the local and state levels points toward the forms of feminism that continue to flourish. Many women's groups in communities of color lead the way, combining advocacy for systemic change with provision of services to meet women's emergency needs and to respond to crises in women's lives that exemplify women's oppression—rape, woman abuse and domestic violence, poverty and welfare, AIDS, access to health care, denials of reproductive rights, sexual harassment and workplace discrimination, for example (Wolfe and Tucker 1995).

## Transformation of Consciousness

Perhaps the most powerful success of feminism has been in its transformation of public consciousness and rewriting of the public discourse on women's equality and the changing roles of women and men in the workplace, the family, and in public life. This national consciousness raising has changed our world and brought half a revolution to fruition.

The aspirations and experiences of countless women—and men—have been transformed; girls and their parents and teachers do not scoff quite so often at the notion of women in the Senate, in sports, and in the space program. And women of color are visible in all of these.

Public opinion polls consistently reveal that most adults support women's rights. By 1989, 85 percent of African-American women and



64 percent of white women expressed support of "a strong women's movement to push for changes that benefit women" (*New York Times* 1989).

The death of feminism has been reported in the media virtually since the birth of the women's movement, perhaps as wishful thinking. But today, the movement is stronger and more diverse; a powerful mass movement of women is growing throughout the country, led in large measure by low-income women, by women of color, and by younger women who are shaping our "feminist futures" (see Findlen 1995).

## Feminist Futures

For the women's movement in the United States, the Beijing Platform for Action[7] does for the twenty-first century what the Seneca Falls Declaration did for the nineteenth and the Houston International Women's Year conference did for the late twentieth.

In the post-Beijing era, the women's movement in the United States more than ever before sees itself as part of global women's movements and is moving to make its centerpiece the confrontation with all forms of oppression based on a system of dominance—sex, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, national origin, language, marital status, disability, and age. We are building our kaleidoscopic vision of women's many perspectives and experiences—women of color and white women, low-income women and middle/upper-income women, immigrant women of many generations, younger and older women, women with disabilities, straight, lesbian, and bisexual women.

Indeed, the participants in the Center for Women Policy Studies' Think Tank on the Future of the Women's Movement in 1993 were unanimous in understanding that solutions to the problems that women will confront—as both their poverty and their vulnerability to male violence continue to increase—require structural and societal changes that only a mass multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural feminist movement of women can bring. Finally, as feminists define issues and build strategies, we will confront the politics of difference and respond to the various challenges of language that our ethnocentricity and monolingualism impose upon non-English-speaking and immigrant women in the United States.

As we learn new ways to value our diversity, we must also create new images. For many years, I have used the image of the kaleidoscope because, unlike the traditional images of mosaics and tapestries and

quilts—which suggest something fixed, static, and inflexible—the kaleidoscope is a collection of exquisite and unique pieces that are in constant movement. Each functions as an important, equal part of the larger whole, always moving around a central point, always touching, and changing place—and no one can exist or function without the others; change is the nature of the kaleidoscope. And the kaleidoscope that is the women's movement is enlarging, as more and more women enter to address their shared personal struggles to overcome institutionalized sex, race, and class bias and discrimination in their own lives and communities (Wolfe and Tucker 1995).

In many ways, the Beijing Platform guides our forward movement to the twenty-first century. Despite our progress in changing law and policy during the past twenty-five years, multiethnic feminist visions do not yet shape society nor do all women partake of its benefits equally. While the "glass ceiling" is a real barrier for many working women who are climbing ladders into "the white male club" at the top, for example, the vast majority of working women in the United States are trapped on the "sticky floor" at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Yet when others count our successes as a movement, they point to the increased numbers of women who have entered formerly male-dominated professions, who have climbed the corporate ladder, who have become college professors and presidents, who have become visible in the media, who have become successful business owners, and who have been elected to public office. In short, despite feminist ideology to the contrary, we find our success measured by the number of women who make it close to the top in a rigidly hierarchical structure.

While issues of violence, economic justice, and opportunity have long been hallmarks of the feminist agenda, in the future the movement must measure its success by how well it changes the lives of women who have been relegated to the bottom, whether by race or poverty or language or disability or sexual orientation—or by a combination of these factors—our sisters who are the most oppressed, despised, and disadvantaged (Wolfe and Tucker 1995).

As we honor women at the top, we also hold them accountable to women who are less privileged; we expect them to make common cause with the women who answer their phones, clean their homes and offices, make their clothes, and serve their lunch. We expect women elected officials to use their positions to transform the public debate on every aspect of domestic and foreign policy to move the needs of women and girls of all ethnic and class backgrounds, both straight and gay, "from margin to center."



Just as the early feminists defined women's needs in the context of specific forms of discrimination, so in the post-Beijing era, the powerful message that "women's rights are human rights" provides the context and the theory to shape both women's movements and human rights and race-relations movements worldwide. Finally, therefore, the women's movement in the United States will continue to expand its ability to think and act globally for women, if we are to confront the worst offenses of sexism and racism, classism and heterosexism—including AIDS, the lack of reproductive freedom, and the persistence of violence against women. The U.S. women's movement must address these crises in our own country even as we make common cause with sister organizations and movements globally.

All of our governments and cultures devalue women, accept our second-class status, allow the violation of our human rights, and seek to control our lives. These are the patriarchal values that women's movements must confront. It is the challenge of our feminist future.

Thus, our final premise is a call to action. As women and men committed to this vision in our own countries and communities, we have more to do together. And for this, we must create safe spaces to continue coming together to share our truths in an atmosphere of reconciliation and solidarity. We must transcend ourselves to build this egalitarian future. Perhaps we should be guided by Che Guevara's words: "The true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love" (Guevara 2000: p. 158). And by Ella Baker's: "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes" (Baker/SNCC Conference 2000).

## Notes

1. Also see Wolfe and Tucker 1995.
2. See the monumental and exquisite book, *Words of Fire*, in which Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1995) has restored to a new generation much of our previously lost African-American feminist thought—from the 1830s to the present day. Activism in the early 1990s includes the 1994 conference of African-American feminists held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the 1991 declaration of African American Women in Defense of Ourselves, and the agenda of the African American Women and the Law conference and its resulting National Network.
3. Women in Puerto Rico did not gain the right to vote until 1932; Isabel Andreu de Aguilar, who wrote the first memorandum to the Puerto Rican legislature demanding women's suffrage, was one of many leaders in this struggle (Miranda 1986).
4. Women's organizations also existed among all of the Asian immigrant

groups; Latina and Native American women organized within their communities as well, but they had very little interaction with Anglo-American women.

5. These statutes enacted during the 1970s included:
   - Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded education programs;
   - the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974, prohibiting sex discrimination in the granting of consumer credit;
   - the Women's Educational Equity Act of 1974, providing federal funds for the creation of teacher training, curriculum reform, and other programs to eliminate sex bias in education, from preschool through graduate and professional school;
   - the 1972 amendment to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that expanded its coverage to employees in educational institutions;
   - the 1978 amendments to the Fair Housing Act, to prohibit sex discrimination in mortgage lending;
   - the Rape Prevention and Control Act of 1975, the first to recognize rape as a federal policy issue and to establish a program of federally funded research on rape;
   - the Comprehensive Health Manpower Training Act and the Nurse Training Act, which prohibited sex discrimination in nursing and medical schools and other federally assisted health training programs;
   - the 1972 expansion of the mandate of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, to address sex as well as race bias and discrimination in its research, legal analyses, public hearings, and reports;
   - the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, which overturned a Supreme Court ruling that discrimination against "pregnant persons" did not constitute sex discrimination as it applied equally to all pregnant persons, regardless of sex.

6. Organizations such as MANA (Mexican American Women's National Association), for example, had adopted a prochoice position early in its history.

7. In the United States, virtually every local, state, and national women's organization has been conducting some sort of "bringing Beijing home" activity since the UN Conference in 1995. The Center for Women Policy Studies and the Women's Environment and Development Organization, for example, created a U.S.-relevant version of the platform—the Contract with Women of the USA—as an organizing tool for women's groups and for women state legislators nationwide.

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# 9

# The Social Construction of Racial Privilege in the United States: An Asset Perspective

*Melvin L. Oliver*

DISCOURSE ABOUT THE causes of racial inequality in the United States is highly fractured and disjointed. Many people believe that there are no longer any encumbrances related to race that constrain and limit the achievement of economic and social status for racial minorities in contemporary U.S. society (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985). Others contend that people of color face innumerable obstacles that white people never have to think about or face in their pursuit of the "good life" (McIntosh 2001). Can both of these perspectives be true? This chapter attempts to go beyond these highly polarized viewpoints and to create a more nuanced view of how we can understand the continuation of racial privilege in the absence of systematic rules of racial inequality.

I want to develop the notion that even with the scaffolding of racial discrimination dismantled, the past has trapped us in a legacy of racial inequality and privilege that is a powerful constraint or limit on our sense of possibilities for economic and social equality. At different levels and in different contexts, white racial privilege economically or socially continues to be reproduced. Using the United States and black/white racial inequality as a case study, I want to propose a way to look at how that racial privilege has been socially constructed and, in so doing, provide a framework for moving past these inequalities.

## Moving Beyond the Polarities of Race and Class

The desperate economic and social situation of many African Americans is without question. As William Julius Wilson has convincingly shown in his works, "the most disadvantaged segments of the

# 5

# "Night to His Day"
## The Social Construction of Gender

Judith Lorber

Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water. Gender is so much the routine ground of everyday activities that questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions is like thinking about whether the sun will come up.[1] Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987).

And everyone "does gender" without thinking about it. Today, on the subway, I saw a well-dressed man with a year-old child in a stroller. Yesterday, on a bus, I saw a man with a tiny baby in a carrier on his chest. Seeing men taking care of small children in public is increasingly common—at least in New York City. But both men were quite obviously stared at—and smiled at, approvingly. Everyone was doing gender—the men who were changing the role of fathers and the other passengers, who were applauding them silently. But there was more gendering going on that probably fewer people noticed. The baby was wearing a white crocheted cap and white clothes. You couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. The child in the stroller was wearing a dark blue T-shirt and dark print pants. As they started to leave the train, the father put a Yankee baseball cap on the child's head. Ah, a boy, I thought. Then I noticed the gleam of tiny earrings in the child's ears, and as they got off, I saw the little flowered sneakers and lace-trimmed socks. Not a boy after all. Gender done.

Gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced. Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them—unless they are missing or ambiguous. Then we are uncomfortable until we have successfully placed the other person in a gender status; otherwise, we feel socially dislocated. . . .

From "'Night to His Day': The Social Construction of Gender," in *Paradoxes of Gender*, pp. 13–36.






For the individual, gender construction starts with assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth.[2] Then babies are dressed or adorned in a way that displays the category because parents don't want to be constantly asked whether their baby is a girl or a boy. A sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the use of other gender markers. Once a child's gender is evident, others treat those in one gender differently from those in the other, and the children respond to the different treatment by feeling different and behaving differently. As soon as they can talk, they start to refer to themselves as members of their gender. Sex doesn't come into play again until puberty, but by that time, sexual feelings and desires and practices have been shaped by gendered norms and expectations. Adolescent boys and girls approach and avoid each other in an elaborately scripted and gendered mating dance. Parenting is gendered, with different expectations for mothers and for fathers, and people of different genders work at different kinds of jobs. The work adults do as mothers and fathers and as low-level workers and high-level bosses, shapes women's and men's life experiences, and these experiences produce different feelings, consciousness, relationships, skills—ways of being that we call feminine or masculine.[3] All of these processes constitute the social construction of gender.

Gendered roles change—today fathers are taking care of little children, girls and boys are wearing unisex clothing and getting the same education, women and men are working at the same jobs. Although many traditional social groups are quite strict about maintaining gender differences, in other social groups they seem to be blurring. Then why the one-year-old's earrings? Why is it still so important to mark a child as a girl or a boy, to make sure she is not taken for a boy or he for a girl? What would happen if they were? They would, quite literally, have changed places in their social world.

To explain why gendering is done from birth, constantly and by everyone, we have to look not only at the way individuals experience gender but at gender as a social institution. As a social institution, gender is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives. Human society depends on a predictable division of labor, a designated allocation of scarce goods, assigned responsibility for children and others who cannot care for themselves, common values and their systematic transmission to new members, legitimate leadership, music, art, stories, games, and other symbolic productions. One way of choosing people for the different tasks of society is on the basis of their talents, motivations, and competence—their demonstrated achievements. The other way is on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity—ascribed membership in a category of people. Although societies vary in the extent to which they use one or the other of these ways of allocating people to work and to carry out other responsibilities, every society uses gender and age grades. Every society classifies people as "girl and boy children," "girls and boys ready to be married," and "fully adult women and men," constructs similarities among them and differences between them, and assigns them to different roles and responsibilities. Personality characteristics, feelings, motivations, and ambitions flow from these different life experiences so that the members of these different groups become

different kinds of people. The process of gendering and its outcome are legitimated by religion, law, science, and the society's entire set of values. . . .

Western society's values legitimate gendering by claiming that it all comes from physiology—female and male procreative differences. But gender and sex are not equivalent, and gender as a social construction does not flow automatically from genitalia and reproductive organs, the main physiological differences of females and males. In the construction of ascribed social statuses, physiological differences such as sex, stage of development, color of skin, and size are crude markers. They are not the source of the social statuses of gender, age grade, and race. Social statuses are carefully constructed through prescribed processes of teaching, learning, emulation, and enforcement. Whatever genes, hormones, and biological evolution contribute to human social institutions is materially as well as qualitatively transformed by social practices. Every social institution has a material base, but culture and social practices transform that base into something with qualitatively different patterns and constraints. The economy is much more than producing food and goods and distributing them to eaters and users; family and kinship are not the equivalent of having sex and procreating; morals and religions cannot be equated with the fears and ecstasies of the brain; language goes far beyond the sounds produced by tongue and larynx. No one eats "money" or "credit"; the concepts of "god" and "angels" are the subjects of theological disquisitions; not only words but objects, such as their flag, "speak" to the citizens of a country.

Similarly, gender cannot be equated with biological and physiological differences between human females and males. The building blocks of gender are *socially constructed statuses*. Western societies have only two genders, "man" and "woman." Some societies have three genders—men, women, and *berdaches* or *hijras* or *xaniths*. Berdaches, hijras, and xaniths are biological males who behave, dress, work, and are treated in most respects as social women; they are therefore not men, nor are they female women; they are, in our language, "male women."[4] There are African and American Indian societies that have a gender status called *manly hearted women*—biological females who work, marry, and parent as men; their social status is "female men" (Amadiume 1987; Blackwood 1984). They do not have to behave or dress as men to have the social responsibilities and prerogatives of husbands and fathers; what makes them men is enough wealth to buy a wife.

Modern Western societies' *transsexuals* and *transvestites* are the nearest equivalent of these crossover genders, but they are not institutionalized as third genders (Bolin 1987). Transsexuals are biological males and females who have sex-change operations to alter their genitalia. They do so in order to bring their physical anatomy in congruence with the way they want to live and with their own sense of gender identity. They do not become a third gender; they change genders. Transvestites are males who live as women and females who live as men but do not intend to have sex-change surgery. Their dress, appearance, and mannerisms fall within the range of what is expected from members of the opposite gender, so that they "pass." They also change genders, sometimes temporarily, some for most of their lives. Transvestite women have fought in wars as men soldiers as recently



as the nineteenth century; some married women, and others went back to being women and married men once the war was over.[5] Some were discovered when their wounds were treated; others not until they died. In order to work as a jazz musician, a man's occupation, Billy Tipton, a woman, lived most of her life as a man. She died recently at seventy-four, leaving a wife and three adopted sons for whom she was husband and father, and musicians with whom she had played and traveled, for whom she was "one of the boys" (*New York Times* 1989).[6] There have been many other such occurrences of women passing as men to do more prestigious or lucrative men's work (Matthaei 1982, 192–93).[7]

Genders, therefore, are not attached to a biological substratum. Gender boundaries are breachable, and individual and socially organized shifts from one gender to another call attention to "cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances" (Garber 1992, 16). These odd or deviant or third genders show us what we ordinarily take for granted—that people have to learn to be women and men. . . .

## For Individuals, Gender Means Sameness

Although the possible combinations of genitalia, body shapes, clothing, mannerisms, sexuality, and roles could produce infinite varieties in human beings, the social institution of gender depends on the production and maintenance of a limited number of gender statuses and of making the members of these statuses similar to each other. Individuals are born sexed but not gendered, and they have to be taught to be masculine or feminine.[8] As Simone de Beauvoir said: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman . . . ; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine" (1953, 267).

Children learn to walk, talk, and gesture the way their social group says girls and boys should. Ray Birdwhistell, in his analysis of body motion as human communication, calls these learned gender displays *tertiary* sex characteristics and argues that they are needed to distinguish genders because humans are a weakly dimorphic species—their only sex markers are genitalia (1970, 39–46). Clothing, paradoxically, often hides the sex but displays the gender.

In early childhood, humans develop gendered personality structures and sexual orientations through their interactions with parents of the same and opposite gender. As adolescents, they conduct their sexual behavior according to gendered scripts. Schools, parents, peers, and the mass media guide young people into gendered work and family roles. As adults, they take on a gendered social status in their society's stratification system. Gender is thus both ascribed and achieved (West and Zimmerman 1987). . . .

Gender norms are inscribed in the way people move, gesture, and even eat. In one African society, men were supposed to eat with their "whole mouth, wholeheartedly, and not, like women, just with the lips, that is halfheartedly, with reservation and restraint" (Bourdieu [1980] 1990, 70). Men and women in this society learned to walk in ways that proclaimed their different positions in the society:

> The manly man . . . stands up straight into the face of the person he approaches, or wishes to welcome. Ever on the alert, because ever threatened, he misses nothing of what happens around him. . . . Conversely, a well brought-up woman . . . is expected to walk with a slight stoop, avoiding every misplaced movement of her body, her head or her arms, looking down, keeping her eyes on the spot where she will next put her foot, especially if she happens to have to walk past the men's assembly. (70)

. . . For human beings there is no essential femaleness or maleness, femininity or masculinity, womanhood or manhood, but once gender is ascribed, the social order constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered norms and expectations. Individuals may vary on many of the components of gender and may shift genders temporarily or permanently, but they must fit into the limited number of gender statuses their society recognizes. In the process, they re-create their society's version of women and men: "If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements. . . . If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)" (West and Zimmerman 1987, 146).

The gendered practices of everyday life reproduce a society's view of how women and men should act (Bourdieu [1980] 1990). Gendered social arrangements are justified by religion and cultural productions and backed by law, but the most powerful means of sustaining the moral hegemony of the dominant gender ideology is that the process is made invisible; any possible alternatives are virtually unthinkable (Foucault 1972; Gramsci 1971).[9]

## For Society, Gender Means Difference

The pervasiveness of gender as a way of structuring social life demands that gender statuses be clearly differentiated. Varied talents, sexual preferences, identities, personalities, interests, and ways of interacting fragment the individual's bodily and social experiences. Nonetheless, these are organized in Western cultures into two and only two socially and legally recognized gender statuses, "man" and "woman."[10] In the social construction of gender, it does not matter what men and women actually do; it does not even matter if they do exactly the same thing. The social institution of gender insists only that what they do is *perceived* as different.

If men and women are doing the same tasks, they are usually spatially segregated to maintain gender separation, and often the tasks are given different job titles as well, such as executive secretary and administrative assistant (Reskin 1988). If the differences between women and men begin to blur, society's "sameness taboo" goes into action (Rubin 1975, 178). At a rock and roll dance at West Point in 1976, the year women were admitted to the prestigious military academy for the first time, the school's administrators "were reportedly perturbed by the sight of mirror-image couples dancing in short hair and dress gray trousers," and a rule was



established that women cadets could dance at these events only if they wore skirts (Barkalow and Raab 1990, 53).[11] Women recruits in the U.S. Marine Corps are required to wear makeup—at a minimum, lipstick and eye shadow—and they have to take classes in makeup, hair care, poise, and etiquette. This feminization is part of a deliberate policy of making them clearly distinguishable from men Marines. Christine Williams quotes a twenty-five-year-old woman drill instructor as saying: "A lot of the recruits who come here don't wear makeup; they're tomboyish or athletic. A lot of them have the preconceived idea that going into the military means they can still be a tomboy. They don't realize that you are a *Woman* Marine" (1989, 76–77).[12]

If gender differences were genetic, physiological, or hormonal, gender bending and gender ambiguity would occur only in hermaphrodites, who are born with chromosomes and genitalia that are not clearly female or male. Since gender differences are socially constructed, all men and all women can enact the behavior of the other, because they know the other's social script: " 'Man' and 'woman' are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendental meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions" (Scott 1988, 49). . . .

For one transsexual man-to-woman, the experience of living as a woman changed his/her whole personality. As James, Morris had been a soldier, foreign correspondent, and mountain climber; as Jan, Morris is a successful travel writer. But socially, James was superior to Jan, and so Jan developed the "learned helplessness" that is supposed to characterize women in Western society:

> We are told that the social gap between the sexes is narrowing, but I can only report that having, in the second half of the twentieth century, experienced life in both roles, there seems to me no aspect of existence, no moment of the day, no contact, no arrangement, no response, which is not different for men and for women. The very tone of voice in which I was now addressed, the very posture of the person next in the queue, the very feel in the air when I entered a room or sat at a restaurant table, constantly emphasized my change of status.
>
> And if other's responses shifted, so did my own. The more I was treated as woman, the more woman I became. I adapted willy-nilly. If I was assumed to be incompetent at reversing cars, or opening bottles, oddly incompetent I found myself becoming. If a case was thought too heavy for me, inexplicably I found it so myself. . . . Women treated me with a frankness which, while it was one of the happiest discoveries of my metamorphosis, did imply membership of a camp, a faction, or at least a school of thought; so I found myself gravitating always towards the female, whether in sharing a railway compartment or supporting a political cause. Men treated me more and more as junior, . . . and so, addressed every day of my life as an inferior, involuntarily, month by month I accepted the condition. I discovered that even now men prefer women to be less informed, less able, less talkative, and certainly less self-centered than they are themselves; so I generally obliged them. (1975, 165–66)[13]

## Gender as Process, Stratification, and Structure

As a social institution, gender is a process of creating distinguishable social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities. As part of a stratification system that ranks these statuses unequally, gender is a major building block in the social structures built on these unequal statuses.

As a *process*, gender creates the social differences that define "woman" and "man." In social interaction throughout their lives, individuals learn what is expected, see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order: "The very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once" (Butler 1990, 145). Members of a social group neither make up gender as they go along nor exactly replicate in rote fashion what was done before. In almost every encounter, human beings produce gender, behaving in the ways they learned were appropriate for their status, or resisting or rebelling against these norms. Resistance and rebellion have altered gender norms, but so far they have rarely eroded the statuses.

Gendered patterns of interaction acquire additional layers of gendered sexuality, parenting, and work behaviors in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Gendered norms and expectations are enforced through informal sanctions of gender-inappropriate behavior by peers and by formal punishment or threat of punishment by those in authority should behavior deviate too far from socially imposed standards for women and men. . . .

As part of a *stratification* system, gender ranks men above women of the same race and class. Women and men could be different but equal. In practice, the process of creating difference depends to a great extent on differential evaluation. As Nancy Jay (1981) says: "That which is defined, separated out, isolated from all else is A and pure. Not-A is necessarily impure, a random catchall, to which nothing is external except A and the principle of order that separates it from Not-A" (45). From the individual's point of view, whichever gender is A, the other is Not-A; gender boundaries tell the individual who is like him or her, and all the rest are unlike. From society's point of view, however, one gender is usually the touchstone, the normal, the dominant, and the other is different, deviant, and subordinate. In Western society, "man" is A, "wo-man" is Not-A. (Consider what a society would be like where woman was A and man Not-A.)

The further dichotomization by race and class constructs the gradations of a heterogeneous society's stratification scheme. Thus, in the United States, white is A, African American is Not-A; middle class is A, working class is Not-A, and "African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these dichotomies converge" (Collins 1990, 70). The dominant categories are the hegemonic ideals, taken so for granted as the way things should be that white is not ordinarily thought of as a race, middle class as a class, or men as a gender. The characteristics of these categories define the Other as that which lacks the valuable qualities the dominants exhibit.



In a gender-stratified society, what men do is usually valued more highly than what women do because men do it, even when their activities are very similar or the same. In different regions of southern India, for example, harvesting rice is men's work, shared work, or women's work: "Wherever a task is done by women it is considered easy, and where it is done by [men] it is considered difficult" (Mencher 1988, 104). A gathering and hunting society's survival usually depends on the nuts, grubs, and small animals brought in by the women's foraging trips, but when the men's hunt is successful, it is the occasion for a celebration. Conversely, because they are the superior group, white men do not have to do the "dirty work," such as housework; the most inferior group does it, usually poor women of color (Palmer 1989). . . .

Societies vary in the extent of the inequality in social status of their women and men members, but where there is inequality, the status "woman" (and its attendant behavior and role allocations) is usually held in lesser esteem than the status "man." Since gender is also intertwined with a society's other constructed statuses of differential evaluation—race, religion, occupation, class, country of origin, and so on—men and women members of the favored groups command more power, more prestige, and more property than the members of the disfavored groups. Within many social groups, however, men are advantaged over women. The more economic resources, such as education and job opportunities, are available to a group, the more they tend to be monopolized by men. In poorer groups that have few resources (such as working-class African Americans in the United States), women and men are more nearly equal, and the women may even outstrip the men in education and occupational status (Almquist 1987).

As a *structure*, gender divides work in the home and in economic production, legitimates those in authority, and organizes sexuality and emotional life (Connell 1987, 91–142). As primary parents, women significantly influence children's psychological development and emotional attachments, in the process reproducing gender. Emergent sexuality is shaped by heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and sadomasochistic patterns that are gendered—different for girls and boys, and for women and men—so that sexual statuses reflect gender statuses.

When gender is a major component of structured inequality, the devalued genders have less power, prestige, and economic rewards than the valued genders. In countries that discourage gender discrimination, many major roles are still gendered; women still do most of the domestic labor and child rearing, even while doing full-time paid work; women and men are segregated on the job and each does work considered "appropriate"; women's work is usually paid less than men's work. Men dominate the positions of authority and leadership in government, the military, and the law; cultural productions, religions, and sports reflect men's interests.

In societies that create the greatest gender difference, such as Saudi Arabia, women are kept out of sight behind walls or veils, have no civil rights, and often

create a cultural and emotional world of their own (Bernard 1981). But even in societies with less rigid gender boundaries, women and men spend much of their time with people of their own gender because of the way work and family are organized. This spatial separation of women and men reinforces gendered differentness, identity, and ways of thinking and behaving (Coser 1986).

Gender inequality—the devaluation of "women" and the social domination of "men"—has social functions and a social history. It is not the result of sex, procreation, physiology, anatomy, hormones, or genetic predispositions. It is produced and maintained by identifiable social processes and built into the general social structure and individual identities deliberately and purposefully. The social order as we know it in Western societies is organized around racial ethnic, class, and gender inequality. I contend, therefore, that the continuing purpose of gender as a modern social institution is to construct women as a group to be the subordinates of men as a group. The life of everyone placed in the status "woman" is "night to his day—that has forever been the fantasy. Black to his white. Shut out of his system's space, she is the repressed that ensures the system's functioning" (Cixous and Clément [1975] 1986, 67).

## NOTES

1. Gender is, in Erving Goffman's words, an aspect of *Felicity's Condition*: "any arrangement which leads us to judge an individual's . . . acts not to be a manifestation of strangeness. Behind Felicity's Condition is our sense of what it is to be sane" (1983, 27). Also see Bem 1993; Frye 1983, 17–40; Goffman 1977.

2. In cases of ambiguity in countries with modern medicine, surgery is usually performed to make the genitalia more clearly male or female.

3. See Butler 1990 for an analysis of how doing gender *is* gender identity.

4. On the hijras of India, see Nanda 1990; on the xaniths of Oman, Wikan 1982, 168–86; on the American Indian berdaches, W. L. Williams 1986. Other societies that have similar institutionalized third-gender men are the Koniag of Alaska, the Tanala of Madagascar, the Mesakin of Nuba, and the Chukchee of Siberia (Wikan 1982, 170).

5. Durova 1989; Freeman and Bond 1992; Wheelwright 1989.

6. Gender segregation of work in popular music still has not changed very much, according to Groce and Cooper 1990, despite considerable androgyny in some very popular figures. See Garber 1992 on the androgyny. She discusses Tipton on pp. 67–70.

7. In the nineteenth century, not only did these women get men's wages, but they also "had male privileges and could do all manner of things other women could not: open a bank account, write checks, own property, go anywhere unaccompanied, vote in elections" (Faderman 1991, 44).

8. For an account of how a potential man-to-woman transsexual learned to be feminine, see Garfinkel 1967, 116–85, 285–88. For a gloss on this account that points out how, throughout his encounters with Agnes, Garfinkel failed to see how he himself was constructing his own masculinity, see Rogers 1992.

9. The concepts of moral hegemony, the effects of everyday activities (praxis) on thought and personality, and the necessity of consciousness of these processes before political change can occur are all based on Marx's analysis of class relations.



10. Other societies recognize more than two categories, but usually no more than three or four (Jacobs and Roberts 1989).

11. Carol Barkalow's book has a photograph of eleven first-year West Pointers in a math class, who are dressed in regulation pants, shirts, and sweaters, with short haircuts. The caption challenges the reader to locate the only woman in the room.

12. The taboo on males and females looking alike reflects the U.S. military's homophobia (Bérubé 1989). If you can't tell those with a penis from those with a vagina, how are you going to determine whether their sexual interest is heterosexual or homosexual unless you watch them having sexual relations?

13. See Bolin 1988, 149–50, for transsexual men-to-women's discovery of the dangers of rape and sexual harassment. Devor's "gender blenders" went in the opposite direction. Because they found that it was an advantage to be taken for men, they did not deliberately cross-dress, but they did not feminize themselves either (1989, 126–40).

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6

# The Social Construction of Sexuality

Ruth Hubbard

There is no "natural" human sexuality. This is not to say that our sexual feelings are "unnatural" but that whatever feelings and activities our society interprets as sexual are channeled from birth into socially acceptable forms of expression.

Western thinking about sexuality is based on the Christian equation of sexuality with sin, which must be redeemed through making babies. To fulfill the Christian mandate, sexuality must be intended for procreation, and thus all forms of sexual expression and enjoyment other than heterosexuality are invalidated. Actually, for most Christians nowadays just plain heterosexuality will do, irrespective of whether it is intended to generate offspring.

These ideas about sexuality set up a major contradiction in what we tell children about sex and procreation. We teach them that sex and sexuality are about becoming mommies and daddies and warn them not to explore sex by themselves or with playmates of either sex until they are old enough to have babies. Then, when they reach adolescence and the entire culture pressures them into