

THIRD EDITION

A WORLD FULL OF WOMEN



MARTHA C. WARD

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Third Edition

Martha C. Ward
University of New Orleans



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Dedication

A World Full of Women is dedicated with respect, love, and gratitude, to:

Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy

Marlowe, Moselle, Tommie Louise, and Nellie

Heidi, Meg, Emalene, Elizabeth


Ann

Orissa, Kay, Katy, Corinne, Gayle, Alvina, Tommie, Doris, Toni

Jennifer

Coralie and Grace

Introduction

elcome to a world full of women. This book has two goals: to explore and validate woman-centered experiences, and to illuminate the common grounds of being female on Planet Earth.

You will find many voices for or about women. These include examples from ethnography, autobiography, biography, journalism, research, or other sources that explore the varieties of female experience. You will meet anthropologists and other scholars who do fieldwork and critical research. We will highlight women's lives, including some secret parts, and underscore strategies, negotiations, and maneuvering rather than static social structures. This book does not exclude men; it simply puts women in the foreground.

The foundations of the book are firmly woman-centered and gently humanistic. I hope to speak to people who are not anthropologists or whose fascination with the field has only started. I treat women as bicultural creatures who live in at least two different worlds. As a result, women may be strategists or actors in our own lives on a stage we did not invent. Sometimes we cooperate with each other in resistance, and sometimes we participate in systems of domination.

Many theories and positions come into play. I have long-standing friendships with Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Margaret Mead, many theorists, some post-modernists, and a few modernists, as well as structuralists, functionalists, materialists, and those who think best in symbols and myths. As with other friends, I have spent many hours in their company and appreciate the insights they give me about the world. However, I have no intention of eloping or setting up house-keeping with any of them. You will, of course, find their fingerprints throughout the book. There are many theoretical debates in anthropology about gender, gender ideologies or feminism, and many ways to look at women and our lives around the world. Please feel free to add your own interpretations, friendships, experiences, and intellectual commitments, and to use the books and articles cited to follow your own direction.

Much of the book is **ethnographic**. Ethnography literally means "a portrait of a people," that is, research on groups of people, generally ordinary people in cultures different or distant from one's own. The discipline of anthropology started as a small science, a group of researchers who assumed responsibility for studying small-scale, preliterate, or preindustrial societies. In those days, everyone called such groups "primitive." Their lives were thought to be less complicated than people who lived in "civilizations." This social science coincided with the rise of colonial empires throughout the world and what everyone perceived as an enormous rate of social and cultural change. The subject matter of anthropology seemed to be disappearing rapidly. Anthropologists tended, therefore, to take an

odd view of time and space; we spoke of before contact with the West and after contact with the West.

Anthropology grew out of the European and specifically the Victorian world-view, in which women were “naturally” subordinate, inferior, and taken for granted. It had a clear masculine bias. With a few dramatic exceptions, much of the research tended to ignore, misinterpret, or trivialize the lives of women: When people believed that “women’s place was in the home,” they could not see much else. So women were invisible. And the best strategies of survival probably did not involve drawing themselves to anyone’s attention. So much of women’s lives in our own and in other cultures has been hidden.

Many traditional anthropologists only saw women in the role they were believed to be playing right here at home: supporting and nurturing men, dutifully following orders, working at home raising children, gossiping, preparing food, and so forth. They did not even see women in other roles: women whose deepest emotional relationships were with each other; middle-aged women who came into their power so easily that no one noticed they were in charge; married women who supported husbands and children but who could not claim the tributes of that labor; women who cooked or cured but were never addressed as chef or doctor; women who both mothered and fathered, and who, denied formal access, found radical, resistive, and restorative private routes to sensuality, spirituality, artistry, or professionalism.

Old Words and New Realities

The names for various cultures and social divisions in the world are a problem. We can no longer comfortably refer to the First World (Europe, the United States, and other Western democracies), the Second World (Communist-bloc countries), and the Third World (countries mostly in the southern hemisphere who invented this term for themselves to avoid the labels of “developing” or “underdeveloped”). At the same time, we speak of the Fourth World, or the growing consciousness of tribal peoples who may share more with each other than with the dominant political systems. Concepts like “the West” or the “Free World” may exclude “the Other,” people who are somehow different, exotic, pagan, female, or poor.

Caught up of necessity in our habits, our languages, and our outlooks, we sometimes cannot see beyond our own cultural patterns. So I want to reach out to your sense of being a citizen of the planet, connected or tied to women regardless of our cultural differences. At the same time, I want to honor those cultural differences.

A number of terms or words are used for women’s condition in the world: *sexism*, *patriarchy*, *sex* or *gender stratification*, *sexual asymmetry*, *male dominance*, *female subordination*, *gender segregation*, *paternalism* or *paternalistic dominance*, and *women’s oppression*. The meanings are clear. They indicate a form of social inequality based on gender; we know these conditions vary in intensity from place to place and time to time in complex ways. I am not using these terms

in any technical or cleverly theoretical sense. I'm not even going to argue that these phenomena really exist. They just do.

We also have a set of terms to describe our goals and hopes for changing these conditions. We speak of feminism, feminist consciousness, women's rights, women's movements, women's emancipation, consciousness-raising, and women's liberation. A great many books and articles, some of which I included in the bibliography, throw light on these concepts. However we use these terms, we are speaking out about awareness, our sense of working together, and our shared commitment to alternative visions of the future.

These themes will cross and crisscross in many complex ways. I have found it impossible to find words, labels, or terms that will please everyone in every context. The glossary includes terms used in the text, with some interpretations.

Where I'm Coming From

In the international women's movement, women tell each other that "the personal is political." We have learned from each other that our stories count for more than our feelings, our opinions, or our observance of the rules. We know that no writer or researcher can claim complete objectivity or can be honest if we separate ourselves from what we say. This is no longer the age of disembodied experts who speak authoritatively from high places. So you should know something about the person who is speaking with you on these pages.

I have taught anthropology at the University of New Orleans (UNO) since 1969. I wrote up and taught the first official women's studies course in the state of Louisiana. At that time, such a seditious act was possible only because I was "chairman" of my department. In the mid-1980s, a group of faculty women at UNO started a Women's Studies Minor Program and a Women's Center; their dedication and collegiality inspired this book.

I grew up in a wonderful, loving family in a fundamentalist Christian community in small-town Oklahoma. Fleeing that quiet life at the first opportunity, I escaped into the institution of marriage, the study of anthropology, and the city of New Orleans. In the early 1970s, my husband and I spent almost two years doing research in medical ethnography in Pacific Micronesia, on a tropical island named Pohnpei. I fulfilled my dream of doing fieldwork in a faraway place. It was simultaneously scary, boring, sweaty, confusing, exhilarating, and addictive. And I got pregnant.

Becoming a mother changed me. My life in the early 1970s became a series of what *Ms.* magazine calls "clicks," that moment when something shifts forever inside us. A vice-chancellor at UNO said, "Women don't look feminine when they carry briefcases." Click. My university health insurance refused to pay for my daughter's birth because they claimed that I neither had nor was a faculty wife. The hospital refused to admit me because my husband was a graduate student and their blanks could not be stretched to include me as head of household. Click. I could not get credit in my own name, and under the head and master laws in

Louisiana could not own property under any name or vote in my “maiden” name. Click. My husband said, “I like the dessert my sister served us. Get the recipe for it.” My brothers said, “While you’re up, get me the mayonnaise.” Click. I realized I would protect my daughter with my life; that meant I had to take care of myself first. Click. A well-loved relative revealed the sexual abuse her father had hoped to conceal. CLICK. A pregnant friend was beaten by her husband and the baby died. CLICK. Friends, relatives, and students were raped, stalked, beaten, and battered. CLICK. CLICK.

Yes, of course, I am a feminist. I am also happily divorced, a proud mother, a loving daughter, a good sister, a passionate anthropologist, a voter, a homeowner, and I can claim many wonderful people as friends. And I teach anthropology.

No, the discipline of anthropology is not perfect. We don’t have all the answers and we are just learning to ask some of the eternal questions. I am, however, indebted to the life-changing research on a world full of women done by my colleagues in anthropology and other disciplines. For myself, I claim only the legacy of a woman to grow older and tell her collected stories.

Some Books That Changed Our Lives

Early in the decade of the 1970s, a number of books came out that heralded an explosion of knowledge, debate, and revelations for and about women. Since then, we have seen an exponential growth in visibility and understanding about women’s lives. That generation of research centered on three basic questions: (1) How is gender built, assembled, forged, or constructed in a myriad of cultural settings? (2) When and where and how, if ever, did women have status and power? (3) What do the voices of women sound like when we emerge from our silences?

Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere’s collection of articles, *Women, Culture and Society*, (1974), is probably the classic statement for the generation of how we can view women in human society. It set out the theoretical range and many of the definitions for women’s studies and for anthropology. Rayna Reiter’s 1975 book, *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, is a still-valuable collection of articles. It remains one of the most-cited and most influential series of statements about women in anthropology we ever had.

A list of related, relevant, and readable books is similarly included at the end of each chapter.

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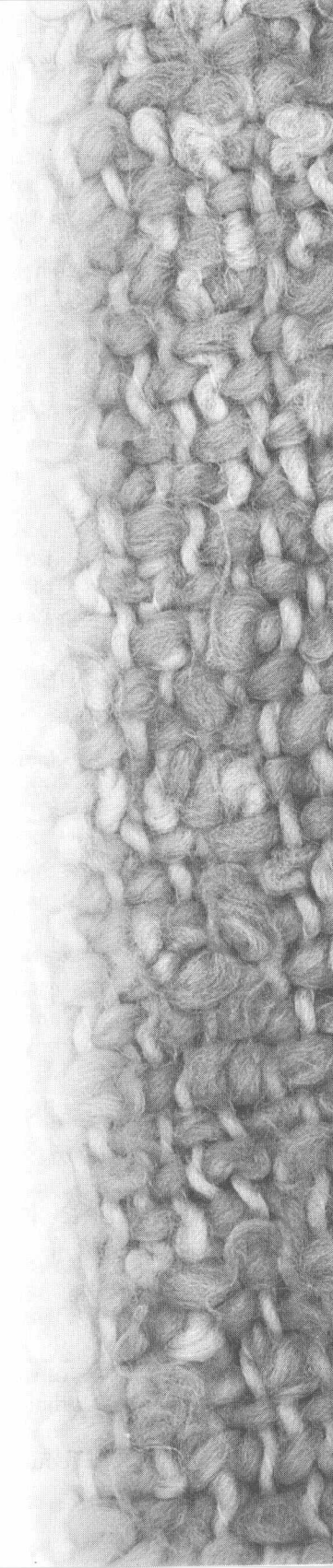
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Chapter One

"What's for Dinner
Honey?"

Work and
Gender



In the tiny coastal village of Grey Rock Harbour in Newfoundland, where residents earn their living in the precarious, cold, hard work of ocean fishing, one woman asks another, "How are you today?" Her neighbor replies, "My nerves is some bad." Another woman stirs her boiled caribou stew and concentrates on her husband fishing from a small boat in rough seas. "It grates on my nerves, I worries some awful when he's out and the weather turns." A friend compliments her. "After the life you've led, my dear, you can't expect much more from your nerves."

Some Newfoundlanders say that men don't have nerves, that men can't feel much. Others say they have heard about men who had nerves. But chiefly, as everyone knows, women have nerves. One woman summarizes: "I worries about the worst happening. That's what nerves is."

Ethnographer Dona Lee Davis conducted this research on nerves in icy Newfoundland. She notes, "It is the women, who carry the burden of worry, who deserve nerves. Her lot in life is harder than the male's. Nerves belong in the emotional, affective realm, the domain of women" (Davis 1989:74). This work is part of the work of being married, of husbanding resources, of being a housewife. Worry is one of the ways women work. In Newfoundland, under the harsh conditions of earning a living there, wives, sisters, and mothers have become **women the worriers**.

Chapter 1 centers on work and gender in ways that everyone has experienced. It introduces some ideas, theories, and controversies that swirl around the problems of defining work, valuing work, or rewarding work. When we talk about women and men, work and survival, what matters most: biology or culture? Should we point up some differences between men and women or deny that any exist? Is there such a thing as just being "natural," some irreducible minimum, some universal or essential floor under us? Or are patterns of work and gender the products, the constructions, of the cultures we live in? Perhaps, you say, all this is completely up to individuals.

To illustrate these key questions, we begin with women and men talking to each other. Ordinary conversations can show us something about the working and interpretation of differences. Then we proceed to the many types of work and how tricky it is to see the work women do. Last we turn to the major ways in which human beings earn their living on the planet and why that is crucial to understanding women's lives.

Work: The First Fact of Life

Women, like men, work for a living. In every human society that anthropologists ever studied, people divide the work they have to do between women and men. This is called the **sexual division of labor**, the assignment of the survival tasks of the society according to gender. Men get some of the jobs and women get some of the jobs. A few jobs may be done by both sexes. Generally, people feel strongly that their way of dividing up work is the best way or the "natural" way. Generally, some other group does it differently. That this division of work may be neither equal nor equally rewarding is quite beside the point.

Some jobs are “women’s work” and others are defined as “men’s work.” The catch is that these tasks are not the same from group to group. For example, in cultures along the Sepik River in New Guinea, people eat flour made from sago palms. Someone must cut, haul, and process the trunk of the palm tree for the soggy flour it reluctantly yields. In some groups along the dramatic river, only men do this work. There people say, “Of course, it is naturally men’s work.” Downriver or upriver, women gather to strain the flour out as people in that group remark, “Naturally this is women’s work.” Then, just as they think they have it sorted out forever, something changes—the environment, the world economy, or historical forces beyond their control. Their division of labor by gender changes as well, predictably and irrevocably.

This book begins with work and gender for two reasons. First, scholars who disagree with each other on everything else are, in the main, agreed that human beings divide up the work of survival and put meaning in their lives by assigning tasks based on gender and age. Anthropologists, notoriously independent thinkers, still think that the sexual division of labor is true across time and space. Conservative male sociobiologists and radical Marxist feminists all admit that the sexual division of labor is fundamental to being human. Work divided by gender is somehow a true statement about the human condition. This will be the last time for such easy agreement in this book. Such people do not, however, agree on *why* the sexual division of labor is true. Some say God, religion, nature, science, or mothers make us live this way. And no one concurs on *how* to translate this agreement over the sexual division of labor into decent and life-affirming social policies. In fact, there is no widespread agreement that human beings even need such policies.

But the second and even more important reason to start this book by discussing work and gender is the pain, denial, defensiveness, and heated arguments that currently surround this topic. Who takes out the trash, feeds the children, brings home the bacon, fries it up, remembers to buy and wrap presents are not abstractions. They are the topics of tense political discussions about “family values” and marital arguments about who does the household’s work. One of the most difficult ideas women’s studies faculty have had is getting our students and ourselves beyond the culture-bound notion that some women work and some don’t. Some of us think that women have perfectly obvious choices between “staying at home” or “going out to work” or that our personal worth or mothering abilities are tied irrevocably to these categories. Some people think that work is defined as nuclear suburban families do it or that work equals collecting a paycheck and that work done without a paycheck or title is not really work.

So work is at the heart of the theoretical arguments swirling around gender relations. The goal of this chapter is to make women and women’s work visible in ways you may not have considered. Here we’re taking a rather domestic and familiar viewpoint. In sharp contrast, the last chapter talks about women and work from the point of view of international development and economics. These are very different ways to bracket the lives of women.