

TOO MANY WOMEN?

The Sex Ratio Question


Marcia Guttentag
Paul F. Secord

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For information address:



SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Newbury Park, California 91320

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Guttentag, Marcia.
Too many women?

1. Sex customs—History. 2. Sex ratio—Social aspects—History. 3. Women—Social conditions.
4. Sex role—History. I. Secord, Paul F. II. Title.
HQ12.G88 1982 305.3 82-19192
ISBN 0-8039-1918-2
ISBN 0-8039-1919-0 (pbk.)

92 93 94 10 9 8 7 6 5

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SAGE PUBLICATIONS

The International Professional Publishers

Newbury Park London New Delhi

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Marcia Guttentag.

—P.F.S.

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PREFACE

This book was Marcia Guttentag's "letter to the world," to use a phrase from her favorite poet, Emily Dickinson. She believed that the idea which led her to write these pages was the most creative and powerful one she had in her lifetime. When talking about this project or working on it, Marcia was aglow with the joy of discovery and creation. Although it is a tragedy that her career was cut short at the height of her powers and that she did not live to complete more than one-half of the book, much less to see it in print, I am happy to have completed it for her. No memorial could be more fitting.

This book is generated from a simple but powerful idea: that the number of opposite-sex partners potentially available to men or women has profound effects on sexual behaviors and sexual mores, on patterns of marriage and divorce, childrearing conditions and practices, family stability, and certain structural aspects of society itself. Although the importance of male-female ratios among animals and humans was recognized by Charles Darwin, no one has fully developed the idea by making a comprehensive survey of the evidence for it and pointing out its profound implications. This book attempts to do just that.

That this task has not been undertaken previously should not be surprising; only the most intrepid scholar would attempt it. Marcia's boldness in meeting the challenge is clear from a look at what is required. She reviewed anthropological studies of primitive societies, ranged all the way back in history to the ancient Greeks and Romans, examined the early and late Middle Ages, and studied the lives of Orthodox Jews and of blacks in contemporary America. Dealing adequately with the evidence and its interpretation required no less than the use of history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and reproductive biology.

From the magnitude of the task, it should be apparent that this book is only a first attempt at developing a sex ratio thesis and weighing the evidence for it. No single historical period or line of argument combined with

evidence could be treated in great detail in a work of this kind. Our hope is that the book will stimulate other scholars to pursue the many ramifications of the thesis with further studies.

Marcia worked on the book in intermittent stretches during the last three years of her life. At the time of her death, toward the end of 1977, she had drafted Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 8, dealing with the topics just referred to. Only a few notes, scattered statistics, and other miscellaneous materials existed for portions of the remainder. Fortunately, I had heard her discuss the book repeatedly and at length with friends and colleagues, and she had discussed it endlessly with me. As a result, I was able to carry out her general plan for completing the book. It was the least I could do for the extraordinary woman to whom I was married for the last five years of her life.

In addition to rewriting and extending the drafts that Marcia left behind, I have written Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 9, and have replaced her first chapter with an entirely new one that takes advantage of the overall perspective provided by the finished book. Chapter 5 deals with colonial and early America. Chapter 6 develops a theoretical interpretation showing how sex ratios are linked to relationships between men and women and to the roles that they assume. Chapter 7 takes us through the modern period in the United States, and Chapter 9 concludes the book with implications for the future identity of women.

Before citing our profound indebtedness to legions of scholars, colleagues, and students, let me report an anecdote in Marcia's own words, explaining how the central idea of this book occurred to her. She had been striving to understand some recent mental health statistics on young women indicating that rates of depression, suicide attempts, and other mental health indicators had risen sharply during recent years, and she reported the following:

I was absorbed in these issues, and struggling to find out what might account for this radical change, when my family and I attended a performance of *The Magic Flute*. It was the first time I had heard the opera in English. The lyrics were astounding. They gave me a sense of cultural shock. Throughout much of the opera each of the male leads, Papageno and Tamino, sings of his determination to find a wife, and his longing to make a commitment to a woman for life. Both sing of the many obstacles they are willing to overcome in order to claim their beloved. The intensity of their desire is demonstrated by their willingness to undergo severe trials in order to enter Sarastro's brotherhood and claim their respective loves.

Women were depicted in Mozart's opera in a manner not too different from the way they were idealized in the popular songs of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The songs of those decades emphasized romantic love, exclusive commitment for life, marriage, and monogamy. Even if taken as a parody on romantic love (see Jacques Chailley, *The Magic Flute*), Mozart's lyrics are in striking contrast with attitudes toward women in the U.S. today. I asked my 16-year-old daughter whether she had noticed anything odd. She said that the lyrics were strange because the men sang about wanting to make a life-long commitment to one woman—a wife.

To test our impression of dramatic change, we went home and listened to records of current popular music. All the songs were about brief liaisons and

casual relationships between men and women; the theme was "Love 'em and leave 'em." There was no sign of a male's intention to make a long-term sexual commitment, and marriage was never mentioned. Why? Why the difference between Mozart's lyrics two centuries ago and our lyrics today? Could this profound shift in attitudes and behavior toward women be related to the sharp rises in statistical indicators reflecting stress and unhappiness among young women? Was there some way in which it all fitted together, and if so, how?

One striking possibility came to mind. Are there too many unattached women? Is there actually a shortage of men? If there is, could this possibly explain *all* of these changes? What kinds of evidence would test such a hypothesis? These speculations led me on an exciting intellectual journey from the present into the past, during which I pored over census statistics, sex ratios, and numerous historical materials going all the way back to the ancient Greeks. This book is a report on that fascinating trip.

Our debt to scholars, students, and friends is enormous. A wide-ranging, interdisciplinary project like this would have been impossible without their help. Almost every time that we talked about our ideas concerning the social effects of population shortages or surpluses of women or men, someone would come up with relevant material from their own area of expertise. We are especially indebted to David and Patricia Herlihy. Not only were they warmly encouraging as Co-Masters of Harvard's Mather House, but David's work on the medieval family made our manuscript on that period possible. And Pat Herlihy brought to our attention an article in Yiddish detailing nine censuses of Jews and other ethnic groups in nineteenth-century Russia, which led us to include an important section on sex ratios at birth among Orthodox Jews.

Ernst Badian's review of Sarah Pomeroy's *Women in Classical Antiquity* led us to discuss sex ratios with him, and he brought to our attention the differences between classical Athens and Sparta. Moreover, he encouraged Jay Hayward to measure sex ratios among fourth-century B.C. Athenians. Stanford Lyman alerted us to the remarkable sex ratios found among the Chinese-Americans in the 19th century, and Robert Fogel led us to some valuable demographic data on blacks in the plantation era, provided by Richard Stekel. Mildred Dickeman sent us her unpublished papers on female infanticide.

Various scholars generously read parts of the manuscript. David and Pat Herlihy gave us valuable assistance with the chapter on the medieval period. Peter Manicas made many constructive comments on the material on Athens and Sparta. Tom Beidelman read a draft of a chapter on preliterate societies and convinced us that the demographic data available on such peoples were too unreliable for our purposes; that material is not included. Paul Glick and Noreen Goldman independently read the chapters on white and black Americans, and provided many critical and helpful comments. Robert Fogel's comments on the chapter on black Americans were most valuable. Robert Wells read the chapter on colonial and early America and made a number of helpful suggestions. Ernst Badian commented on the material on classical Greece. Constructive criticism of several parts of the manuscript was generously provided by Paul Weiss and James Weinrich.

Finally, countless colleagues and friends discussed the sex-ratio question with us informally, stimulating our thinking and providing valuable leads.

We owe much to Noreen Goldman, who obtained reams of data from the U.S. Census Bureau and other statistical sources, as well as assisted us in sorting through it and debating with us over how to interpret it. She also did much of the statistical processing of the data, calculating sex ratios and other indices. Ken Ghee, Linda Spatig, Bill Wilson, and Gila Arnoni provided further assistance in processing the data. Robert Schwarz, Genece Hudson, and Bruce Macchiaverna assisted with library research. In addition, Marcia obtained assistance from many Mather House students whose names were known mostly to her, but whose anonymous assistance is gratefully acknowledged. Ann Hoffman and Kit Wheatley were two of these students; they did an exceptionally large amount of library research for this project. Cynthia Longfellow researched the literature on reproductive biology up to about 1975, and Mark Weinstein to 1980. Janet West typed much of the final manuscript, bearing up cheerfully with revision after revision, and Gwen Hodgkins helped with the final stages.

I offer my apologies to the many others who helped but who remain unnamed because knowledge of their assistance was lost with Marcia's untimely death. And, of course, none of those named here are responsible for any errors that might be found in the manuscript; these remain my responsibility alone.

—Paul F. Secord
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Introduction: The Sex Ratio Question

A common belief is that in all populations, the number of male and female babies born is almost exactly equal, with only slightly more boys than girls. And under most circumstances, we take it for granted that the number of men and women in a population is very nearly equal. But suppose for the moment that there were some populations with more of one gender than the other. What would the social consequences be?

We might first notice that much depends upon the *ages* of the two sexes, especially at the years where they are in disproportionate numbers. If the imbalance were mainly in the number of young boys relative to the number of young girls, we would not expect any serious social consequences, at least not while they were still children. But if there were more elderly women than elderly men, we could anticipate that in a traditional society where men earn more than women and many women work only as housewives, a large number of these women would be without a husband and consequently would lack adequate means of support.

Even more serious consequences would be expected if there were a disproportionate number of women (or men) at the ages when people most commonly marry and have children. Suppose that there were more young adult women than men. Under those circumstances, many of the women would not be able to find a man to marry and would have difficulty finding casual partners. How would this affect the birth rate in a population? How would this make women feel? What kinds of actions might they take? Would their attitudes and behaviors toward men change? Would they begin to relate differently toward other women? Would women get together in protest? Would they want to become less dependent on men?

And what about the men? With an unusual number of women available, what would they do? Would their attitudes and behaviors toward women

change? In what way? Would they be more promiscuous? What about men who were already married? Would a surplus of single women have any effects on their marriages? Would the presence of available single women influence a husband's attitude toward his wife? Would it be easier for him to have an affair? Would the temptations be greater? Under what circumstances, if at all? Would the persistence of this imbalanced sex ratio ultimately bring about profound changes in the relationship between men and women and in the nature of the family?

Before we look for possible answers to such questions, let's consider the reverse case, where there is a considerable excess of men at the ages when people most commonly marry and have children. Because of their scarcity, would women be more highly valued by men? Would men extend themselves to find a partner of their own? Would they do more courting or wooing under such circumstances? If the shortage of young adult women persisted, would this lead to a heightening of romantic images? Would there be more appreciation of and commitment to a wife? Would men be especially concerned about competition with other men? Would women be sheltered and protected under these conditions? Would this lead them to demand that the woman they marry be a virgin? Would they be especially concerned about their daughters' chastity?

How would women feel under these circumstances? Would they feel more valued? Would their role as wife and mother seem more important? Would they have more trust in men? Would they welcome protection, or would they resent such moves and see them as restrictions on their independence? Would they be less interested in having a career of their own in the workplace? It seems possible that the implications for relationships between men and women and for the nature of the family would be considerable if there were either a persistent shortage of young adult women or of young adult men.

Before speculating any further, let's examine some actual sex ratios. Have they ever been disproportionate enough to create social consequences such as these? The sex ratio is well known to demographers, although it usually receives less attention from them than birth or death rates. Quite simply, the sex ratio is typically reported for a given population in terms of the number of men per 100 women. So, if the ratio were 110, there would be 110 men for every 100 women in the population. Or, if it were 90, then there would be only 90 men for every 100 women. Of course, sex ratios can be computed for subgroups of a population, such as for newborns, young adults, single persons, or other categories. We will see later that a specific cohort of women in a population—of a certain age, for example—is for our purposes best matched with that age cohort of men whom they would most commonly marry, in order to arrive at a sex ratio pertaining to marital opportunities. But for the moment, let's examine some sex ratios for total populations without regard to age.

Figure 1.1 provides a historical view of sex ratios in the United States. It provides ratios for the total U.S. population, both married and unmarried, for the 185-year period from 1790 to 1975. A mere glance reveals a striking fact. The last few decades have been unique in our history: Only then has