

Women in American Society

Virginia Sapiro



WOMEN IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

AN INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN'S STUDIES

Virginia Sapiro

University of Wisconsin—Madison



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To my family:
William and Florence Sapiro, Graham K. Wilson,
and Adam Ross Wilson, who has just begun.

PREFACE

Women in American Society is a woman-centered introduction to the study of gender. This book emerges from my discontent—and that of my students—with the texts available for use in the introductory women's studies course I have taught for several years. This book offers an interdisciplinary analysis of women's situation in the United States, based on current research in the social sciences. It assumes no prior college-level background in either women's studies or the social sciences. The text is designed to be used as the main text in courses such as Introduction to Women's Studies and Women in the United States.

Women in American Society surveys a wide range of topics and themes that are important to an understanding of women's status, roles, and experiences today, including most topics usually treated in women's studies courses. The text emphasizes both theoretical and empirical research. Although I focus primarily on contemporary society, I have devoted considerable effort to showing the reader how an understanding of historical developments places the current situation in context and enlightens us about the nature and processes of social change, both in general and in America in particular.

This book reflects the state of the field of women's studies, but it is also a unique contribution to that field. The newness of the field means that conventional wisdom, agreed-upon methodologies, and existing models do not exist to the same degree as they do in other fields. Even so, women's studies has built up a core of shared views and commonly cited works. This book, however, does not take even these for granted; many of the observations and works commonly cited in women's studies writing are already out of date. For this reason I have relied heavily on the most recent journal articles and monographs in the various disciplines touched by this book. In some cases this means that "old friends" in the literature do not get the treatment to which they have grown accustomed, but this is inevitable as our knowledge grows. In other cases I discuss works that are not generally known outside the women's studies community.

Those who are very familiar with general women's studies writings may also find that the topical organization used here departs in certain respects

from the expected. Many of these differences are based on carefully thought-out considerations of theory and pedagogy — as well as the demands of working in a specifically *interdisciplinary* fashion, a problem I shall discuss shortly. For example, there is no chapter devoted solely to the problems of violence against women: this crucial aspect of women's lives is taken up in subsections of relevant chapters, including those that focus on health, the law, and relations between women and men. Likewise, there is no special chapter devoted to the unique situation of black women, older women, lesbians, or any other subgroup of women who usually receive such segregated treatment. Instead, I have worked on the assumption that all women are not in the same situation and that understanding the significance of these differences must be a part of each theme we undertake. In one of the two concluding chapters of this book I specifically address the question of difference and division among women and draw in large part on the relevant discussions that have been woven throughout the book. I have also attempted to organize these topics so that some instructors can reorganize them on a syllabus in a more traditional way.

Finally, with regard to organization, I both begin and end with theory, but I end (rather than begin) with a full-fledged discussion of feminism, feminist movements, and feminist theory per se. A book such as this one must begin by helping the reader to understand what feminist analysis is and how it differs from other kinds of study; my experience of teaching introductory students in women's studies courses, however, has taught me that discussing the history of and need for feminism as a social movement before describing and analyzing the situation of women is putting the cart before the horse. Again, questions of feminism are inseparably woven throughout the pages of this book, and extensive treatment of the topic is reserved for the finale.

The interdisciplinary nature of women's studies makes teaching and learning a great challenge. Too, there is a difference between *interdisciplinary* and *multidisciplinary* writing. In the latter case, a book might have chapters on "the history of . . . ," "the psychology of . . . ," "the politics of . . . ," and "the law on" In this book, the approaches, methods, and findings of different disciplines are interwoven to examine common themes and problems. The topics covered in the book are limited to the social sciences and law, for the most part, but even within that boundary the range of difference in assumptions, focus, language, method, and interpretation is enormous. Different fields use the same terminology to discuss different ideas, and they also use different terminology to discuss the *same* ideas. It is by no means easy to achieve integration in a rigorous way; interdisciplinary research is not just a grab bag or pastiche of bits from various disciplines.

The rewards of integration are great, however. Some disciplines are often accused of focusing on individuals to the neglect of social structure; others receive the opposite criticism. Some approaches consider human thought and behavior without explicitly recognizing the power of public law and policy or

the relationship between the two; others investigate the latter without paying much attention to their real relationships to how people think and act. An integrated, interdisciplinary approach can be considered to allow a more realistic understanding of human life.

The students in my various women's studies classes at the University of Wisconsin—Madison have been important in the writing of this book. They are my audience in writing; I have looked at their faces while writing much as I do when I lecture. When I lecture, I do not see an abstraction called a "student," but rather, many different individuals in their "concrete situations," as some theorists like to say. My students come from many backgrounds and have many different interests. They range from adolescents to people over seventy years old. Many, of course, are full-time students, but some are working people from the community taking a single course because they are interested or because it relates to their work. Some come in as radical feminists; some are as skeptical and anxious as a student in this kind of course can be. Some are new to academic study; some are relatively advanced scholars in other fields who are investigating women's studies for the first time. This book has been written for all these people. I assume that my readers are at least as diverse as the students I have already met.

Many people have helped me write this book. At the top of my list are my students who, as the saying goes, are too numerous to mention. Also included in this category are the many scholars in the field with whom I have talked and whose work I have read over the years. I have benefited from contact with my colleagues in Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, and particularly those who read portions of the manuscript and made helpful comments: Susan Friedman, Judy Leavitt, and Gerda Lerner. Although Claire Fulenwider became too busy to be a coauthor, she was the original co-conceiver. Peer reviewers chosen by Frank Graham, my editor at Mayfield, provided many helpful suggestions. These are Shirley Harkess, University of Kansas; Geraldine Manning, Suffolk University; Sue Mansfield, Claremont McKenna College; Marilyn Myerson, University of South Florida; Yolanda Moses, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Jane Prather, California State University, Northridge; and Ann Stromberg, Pitzer College.

Over the long haul my greatest debts are to Graham Wilson and Adam Wilson—the former because, as always, he was wonderful in all the ways one could want, and the latter because his impending arrival kept me moving.

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WOMEN'S STUDIES: AN INTRODUCTION

Suppose you opened a general philosophy textbook that began with the question: "What is Man?" What would you expect the rest of the discussion to be about? Most likely you would find an exploration of how man differs from other animal species, or perhaps how he differs from angels, gods, and other celestial beings. You would probably find that Aristotle argued that man is by nature a political animal, or that others think of man as basically aggressive and competitive and in need of regulation by social and political organizations. You would probably read that he is different from other species in that he has an independent will or conscience, makes tools, uses language, is rational and calculating, or kills for reasons other than self-defense and sustenance.

Suppose, now, that you opened a general philosophy textbook that began with the question, "What is Woman?" What would you expect the rest of this discussion to be about? You would probably anticipate being treated not to a discussion of women and animals or gods, but to an analysis of the similarities and differences between women and men. You might learn that although our ideas about women have changed, women still represent, in many respects, the polar opposite of or complement to men. Such a discussion might point out that since the time of Aristotle, philosophers have argued that women exist in and represent not the political world of competition, aggression, and leadership, but the private world of nurturance, altruism, and loyalty. You might read that women *do not* have a strong, independent conscience, but a rather rigid sense of morals, and that women's thought and communication is not rational and verbal, but intuitive, emotional, and physical.

Why would most people's expectations of these two books be so different? One answer is that *man* is often considered a generic term, but *woman* is not; in other words, *man* can be used to refer to either one particular sex or to human beings as a species. But isn't this confusing? How do we know when *man*

means males and females and when it means only males? Perhaps we can judge by the context. Unfortunately, the immediate context rarely does much to help solve the ambiguity. Think again about the characteristics usually discussed as part of the nature of man (human). Would most people argue that they are equally the characteristics of man (male) and woman? Very often, writers will write about man or men as though they expect us to assume that they mean human beings, male and female (and most readers might accept this implication), even though a careful reading would show that what is really being discussed is men (male). We might read, for example, about man's move westward and his life along the way, including his experiences in battle and the way he treated his wife and children. Notice how difficult it is to be clear when we use the words *man* and *men* to refer to both men and women as well as only men, especially when we are interested in understanding the relationships among man (human), man (male), and woman. (If that sentence did not illustrate the problem, nothing will.) To avoid such ambiguity in this book, from now on *man* and *men* will be used only to refer to males.

Aside from the confusion and ambiguity, which by itself would be reason enough to reserve the words *man* and *woman* to refer, respectively, to males and females, there is another important issue involved, one that will serve as a theme throughout this book. How did it happen that one word came to refer, apparently equally, to either the whole of humanity or one specific half of it? Why does *man* represent, in meaning, both males and females, while *woman* refers very narrowly to females?

The answer, as suggested by numerous feminist theorists over the course of recent centuries, is that the use of the word *man* to represent human society as a whole reflects our tendency to view men as the central actors or characters in human society and to understand what we view as male characteristics, manliness, or masculinity as the central characteristics of human beings.

The word used to describe this situation is *androcentric*, which literally means "centered on men." This word was used as long ago as 1911 by sociologist and feminist theorist Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1911) in her book *The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture*. Androcentric has a meaning that is parallel to three words that are more widely used and understood: egocentric, ethnocentric, and anthropocentric. *Egocentric* refers to the tendency of individuals to see themselves as the center of the world, as though everything revolves around them. *Ethnocentric* refers to the tendency of people to accept only their own culture as normal and to think of others only as deviations from their own — better — way of life. *Anthropocentric* refers, in a sense, to the egotism of humanity as a whole, to the tendency to view the human species as the most significant entity in the universe. *Androcentric*, then, refers to the tendency to think of men as the norm against which women are compared and to the view that men are the main actors in — the center of — the social world.

An analogy using the ideas of characters and actors will help to illustrate the