
*W*OMEN
AND
*S*Ocial *C*LASS

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WOMEN *and* SOCIAL CLASS

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TAVISTOCK PUBLICATIONS
London and New York

First published in 1987 by
Tavistock Publications Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Published in the USA by
Tavistock Publications
in association with Methuen, Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York NY 10001

© 1987 Pamela Abbott and Roger Sapsford

Printed and bound in
Great Britain by Biddles Ltd,
Guildford and Kings Lynn

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Abbott, Pamela
Women and social class.
1. Social classes 2. Women – Social conditions
I. Title II. Sapsford, R.J.
305.5 HT609

ISBN 0-422-61000-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Abbott, Pamela.
Women and social class.

Bibliography: p.
Includes indexes.
1. Women – Social conditions. 2. Social classes.
3. Feminism. I. Sapsford, Roger. II. Title.
HQ1154.A226 1987 305.4'2 87-10211

ISBN 0-422-61000-3 (pbk.)

Preface

In one sense this is intended not as a 'feminist book' but as a contribution to the mainstream of sociological debate. We cover the topics that one would expect to find in any book on social class: social mobility and the degree to which we live in an 'open' society; determinants or correlates of subjective social class; views on what characteristics are important in assigning class labels; and social imagery, the 'world view' people have of their social environment. The main points are made in part by reference to summaries of the research literature that one would expect to find in such a book. The main difference is that the new data we have to offer are data on women.

In another sense, however, our endeavour is a distinctly feminist one. This is a book about *women* and social class. It starts from the position that it is necessary to incorporate women in social class analysis for both theoretical and empirical reasons. A theory that cannot explain the subordinate position of women is inadequate, and empirical research based on male-only samples cannot adequately reflect the full range of class stratification, social mobility and class awareness, consciousness and action. However, this endeavour has not been without its problems, not least because of the inadequacies of existing theories and concepts. Thus, as Johnstone and Rattanis (1981) have pointed out in reviewing the Oxford Mobility Study,

'It is . . . not at all surprising that there is no recognition here that the 'invisible woman' in the sociology of class is not *simply* the product of women's social subordination to men, but is inscribed in the very structure of discourse for which the occupational order and the market are the central conceptual means for theorising the economy and its relation to class.'

(p. 206)

While we feel that we have demonstrated in this book the need to incorporate women in class analysis, we recognize that how this is to be done is an issue that still requires considerable development of theory and research. We do not claim even to have begun to demonstrate ways in which the incorporation of women could satisfactorily be brought about.

This book, then, is a contribution to the debate on women and class and is one that looks at the issues from the standpoint of women. In this sense it can be seen as a feminist contribution to the debate. We hold the view that feminist sociology must be about ways of incorporating women into sociology – not just about research on women. As we have demonstrated, trying to incorporate women makes us aware of the inaccuracies, about men as well as women, of the conclusions which have been drawn from male-only samples and of the theory about social class which has been based on them.

We are indebted to the DE304 and DE801 Course Teams at the Open University, who gave us permission to use the survey data on which this book is based. We should also like to thank the Open University students on these courses who collected the data and the people who gave their time as respondents. Finally, we acknowledge the help we have received from the computing centres at the Open University, Cambridge University, and Plymouth Polytechnic.

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1 Women and social class: An overview

In the last twenty or so years feminists have challenged the nature of conventional sociology, arguing that at best the conventionally used categories of analysis are 'sex-blind' and consequently fail to reveal gender differences and inequalities, and at worst they are plainly sexist and divert attention from important gender-related aspects of social life. An ever-growing feminist sociology has appeared during the same period – that is, sociological work that incorporates women as people in their own right rather than, if at all, as some sort of deviation from the male norm. There is controversy within this new tradition as to whether what is needed is research on women, by women, or rather the construction of a new 'mainstream' in sociology by the development of sociological theory, categorization and analytical tools to take account of women and incorporate them in their own right within the 'problematics' of the discipline. The latter approach would mean not just including women in research samples, but the development of adequate theories and theoretical categories so that gender differences can be researched and explained and cannot be overlooked.

It is evident from the debates which have arisen and from inspection of sociological work undertaken in the past that women have been ignored systematically in many of the key areas of sociological interest; they have been seen as marginal or peripheral to them and therefore excluded. This is nowhere more true than in the area of social stratification and social class theory. Most of the main stratification studies undertaken in Britain or the United States have excluded women from their samples; major theoretical lines of social class analysis have

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either not considered gender inequalities at all or have argued that women are marginal to class analysis.

The core of the conventional view is that stratification theory is concerned with explaining *class* inequalities – inequalities that arise out of the occupational or economic structure of society. As women, it is argued, are marginal to the occupational structure and as their paid employment is conditioned by their familial responsibilities, their social class position is most realistically determined by the occupation of the ‘bread-winner’, the (male) head of household. In other words, the conventional view asserts that social class inheres not in individuals but in households. The household is the unit of analysis, and the class position of that unit is determined by the occupation of its head. Indeed, the instructions given to interviewers (see Oakley and Oakley 1979) tend to be such that if an adult male is present in a household it is almost certain that his occupation will determine the coding of the class position of that household. This means in practice that some people (mainly adult males) have a class position determined by their own occupation, while other people (mainly, but not exclusively, married women) have their class position determined by the occupation of someone with whom they live.

It is not just that women are ignored in stratification theory – that women’s subordinate position is not seen as part of what the theory needs to explain – or that women are excluded from major surveys; more important still is that many women (the majority) are said to have only a derived class position, determined by the occupational experience of a man with whom they live. This is not just a technical convenience of survey coding; it is a theoretical statement that women’s experiences, loyalties, and social action are not their own in the sense that men’s are. Along with the equally sexist proposition that women are necessarily dependent on men and that gender inequalities are therefore necessarily and a priori less important than male class differences, this curious assumption underlies much conventional stratification theory. The effect is that such theoretical positions undermine their own arguments by failing to provide a comprehensive account of social experience and by failing to provide adequate empirical grounding. They fail in the former by excluding over half the population from their analysis, and in

the latter by effectively miscoding that part of the population when they do include it.

The major feminist objections to conventional class theory were first voiced systematically by Acker (1973), who listed five shortcomings in the conventional approach. These were:

- (i) the assumption that the family is the rational unit of analysis, with complete class equivalence within it;
- (ii) that the social position of the family is determined by the occupation of the head of household;
- (iii) that the male is necessarily the head of household, if such a position has to be distinguished;
- (iv) that none the less women somehow determine their own class position when they do not happen to be living with an adult male; and
- (v) that the inequalities between men and women are inherent and inevitable.

These points of objection have been taken up and expanded by feminists in both the United States and Great Britain. Not only has a theoretical debate developed, but also empirical research to demonstrate how necessary it is to incorporate women into stratification and class theory. As Dex (1985) has pointed out, it is not particular theories of stratification which are being attacked, but *all* the major theories – the American structural-functional tradition and the British neo-Weberian and neo-Marxist traditions alike. The basic arguments against all of these are the same and boil down to the theories' inadequacies in terms of both explaining gender inequalities and incorporating women adequately into the explanation even of class inequalities. Indeed, it could be argued that the failure of sociology to incorporate women into class analysis is bound up with its more general failure to change and develop its concepts as society changes. Giddens (1973) has suggested that the failure of social class analysis to develop in response to social change has resulted in a crisis for social theory, which is confused, ambiguous, and lacking in analytical precision. Yet Giddens himself has none the less remained within the malestream tradition as a class theorist, failing to recognize that changes in women's employment histories and a widespread questioning of the inevitability of the separation of public and private

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spheres (particularly when they are segregated on gender lines) may require radical rethinking of social stratification theory. One might almost believe, as Dex (1985) suggests, that male sociologists *want* women to remain marginal or invisible.

Two broad 'fronts' may be distinguished within the feminist challenge to class theory, both of which are summarized briefly below: the attempt to revise class theory to make sense of women's class relationships, and the wider attempt to recast stratification theory as a whole so that gender differences and inequalities are properly recognized within it. While sympathizing strongly with the latter endeavour, in this book we have concentrated chiefly on the former. We present data from the Open University's People in Society Survey, a source previously untapped except in two recent papers (Abbott and Sapsford 1986; Abbott 1987), together with a critical survey of the available work on women, men, and class relations, to make a preliminary exploration of women's class images and subjective class position and to illustrate how such an analysis of women's social class could add to our ability to theorize class relations adequately.

Women as a class

The first side of the feminist challenge deals with the question of what stratification theory should be able to explain – its range of convenience. The conventional view is that stratification theory is about class divisions determined by occupation, and that these are an intelligible area of study in their own right. Feminists have argued that stratification theory should be equally (or more) concerned with gender inequalities. (The position could be taken further, to assert that an adequate theoretical position would be able to deal with *all* major sources of inequality – class, gender, race, age, etc. It is argued that a theory which is not able to cope with the articulation of the major sources of social inequality cannot adequately explain inequalities based on only one source, because all sources combine to define social position.

The *radical feminist* position has mainly been developed by the French writer Christine Delphy (see for example, 1977, 1981, 1984). Delphy argues that while sociologists have regarded

occupational class inequalities as primary, their own research demonstrates that sexual inequality is primary and more fundamental than occupational inequality. Thus women's oppression cannot be seen as secondary to, and therefore less important than, class oppression. Delphy argues that women (or at least, wives) form a class who are exploited by men (husbands).

'While the wage-labourer sells his labour-power, the married woman gives hers away: exclusivity and non-payment are intimately connected. To supply unpaid labour within the framework of a universal and personal relationship (marriage) constructs primarily a relationship of slavery.'

(Delphy 1977: 15)

and

'the logical consequence of the non-value of a woman's labour is the hunt for a good marriage. But even though a marriage with a man from a capitalist class can raise a woman's standard of living, it does not make her a member of that class. She herself does not own the means of production. Therefore, her standard of living does not depend on her class relationship to the proletariat, but on her serf relations of production with her husband.'

(p.19)

Because women are opposed as a class to men, are exploited by men and therefore have shared interests in opposition to men, and patriarchal structures are fundamental to our form of social organization, it follows that the main axis of differentiation in our society must be gender.

Walby (1986) is another who argues that housewives and husbands form two separate classes. She argues that housework is a distinctive form of work even though the housewife does not receive payment. Domestic work is productive: the housewife produces the labour power of her husband, herself, and her children. The distinctiveness of domestic labour lies in the relations of production under which it is performed. Wives exchange their labour for their maintenance, and therefore wives as a class are exploited by their husbands, in a patriarchal mode of production. (See also Eichler 1980, for another variant of this kind of account.) Walby and Delphy argue, then, that while housewives may differ in their standard of living because

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their husbands are in different occupational classes, yet they are also to be seen as all members of the same class because of what they share – exploitation by another class (husbands) in a patriarchal mode of production. Stratification theory, they argue, must explain these inequalities – the dominance of men over women – if it is to be seen as adequate. Indeed, given the fundamental importance of gender-based inequalities, this must be its main task.

In Delphy's more recent analysis, co-authored with Diana Leonard (Delphy and Leonard 1986), these arguments have been further developed. They argue not only that 'class or stratification analysis, which forefronts a particular form of inequality, cannot therefore be regarded as adequate representation of society as a whole, or even of social inequalities' (p. 72), but go on to demonstrate that the exclusion of women from class analysis also leads to the

'misrepresentation of class life-changes, life-styles, patterns of association and socio-political orientation, which they [class theorists] certainly do care about. It also results in gross misrepresentation of the mechanisms (notably the hereditary transmission of status) which account for the perpetuation of, and changes within, classes and between classes over time.'
(p. 73)

Thus they argue that the inclusion of women as a class enables us to understand how fathers' occupational advantage is inherited by some of their offspring (mainly sons) when other children (notably daughters) are excluded. It also enables us to recognize the different and antagonistic categories and statuses which exist within classes as conventionally defined.

Walby, while stressing the importance of patriarchy as a mode of production, also recognizes that many women will have an occupational class in their own right: women in paid employment have a class location determined by their market position. This point also seems to be recognized implicitly in Delphy's work. Thus in this line of theory some women (housewives in paid employment) have *two* class positions – one determined by their role as housewives and one by their occupation. (By implication this holds for men in employment as well: if women as a class are exploited by husbands as a class, then some men

have a class position defined by their marital status as well as an occupational class.) However, radical feminists generally go beyond immediate personal circumstances to the structural position of the gender as a whole and argue that all women, not just married women, are oppressed by men and that patriarchal relations are dominant (see, for example, Millett 1971). One might argue, for example, that the occupational status (market position) of all women is conditioned by the fact that some women marry and that women as a whole are restricted in their career opportunities, for instance, by attitudes among selectors who are conditioned by an expectation of marriage. Evidence of gross overall patriarchal relations might also come from the extent of labour market segregation by gender – the overall concentration of women or men in different occupations and in different hierarchical positions. MacEwan Scott (1986), as a result of a cross-national study, argues that the market which produces such sexual segregation is not itself sex-neutral but shaped by political and ideological pressures. In all societies women are regarded as forming a special category of labour even when there are no longer differences in supply: ‘the “gender-embeddedness” of the division of labour is thus an outcome of the wider structure of gender inequality and of the institutional linkages which shape the division of labour’. Thus even when we consider women’s class positions as determined by the labour market we have to take account of patriarchally conditioned inequalities between men and women.

The malestream response to this position has varied. On the one hand, it has been argued that class is the major form of inequality and that women are themselves more divided by class inequalities than the sexes are by gender inequalities; the conclusion is that class is a coherent and important area of study in its own right and that class theory does not need to concern itself with questions of gender (Parkin 1972; Lockwood 1986). Alternatively, it may be argued that gender inequalities can be explained adequately by existing theory. Parkin (1979), for instance, has argued that Weberian theories of social stratification, and specifically the concepts of market position and social closure, give an adequate account of gender inequalities (see also Murphy 1984). Mainstream Marxist writers, similarly, have suggested that Marxist theories give an adequate account

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of the position of women (e.g. Poulantzas 1975; Wright 1985). Marxists argue that the radical feminist position fails to take account of the specific nature of class inequalities in capitalist society. They argue that in the capitalist mode of production it is the bourgeoisie who exploit the proletariat, and that the subordinate position of women can be wholly explained by their position within the bourgeois nuclear family under the capitalist mode of production. Attempts have indeed been made to develop the theory so that gender inequalities can receive more adequate explanation. None the less, the main Marxist concern remains the explanation of how all workers are exploited in a capitalist society – men, women, black, white – and specific explanations for women's subordination have to be incorporated within that more general frame of analysis.

The main development within mainstream Marxist theory to take account of gender relates very much to women's position within the bourgeois nuclear family. It is based on Engels' argument that women's oppression can be seen to begin with the emergence of private property and hence with capitalist class relations, so that the struggle for a classless society logically subsumes the struggle for women's emancipation. Thus the separation of public and private spheres with the development of industrial capitalism meant that women came increasingly to be economically dependent on men and to serve the needs of capitalism by having and caring for children, thus producing the next generation of workers and reproducing the labour power of their husbands (Zaretsky 1976). Women were therefore increasingly excluded from the labour market and did not produce surplus value; failing to be classifiable as producer or exploiter of surplus value, they thereby failed to have a class position of their own. They did, however, come to form part of the industrial reserve army – a group of potential workers who could easily be called into the labour market at times of economic need and just as easily be pushed out again when no longer required. Thus they provided a buffer against the cyclical nature of capitalist economic development. The main thrust of the Marxist argument, then, is very much that the subordinate position of women can be explained by the means and relationships of production under capitalism.

However, *Marxist feminists* have challenged this conventional

Marxist view, arguing that it is inadequate for the same reasons that the malestream sociological view is inadequate and that we need to incorporate explanations of women's ongoing location in the family as the performers of domestic duties in our theoretical explanations in order to understand fully women's position in the labour market – in other words, that theory must adequately explain the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. *Socialist feminists* such as Heidi Hartmann (1976) have gone further, arguing that the categories within which Marxists operate are themselves sex-blind, and that patriarchal relationships preceded capitalism and will probably succeed it also. In order to understand the subordination of women in the capitalist mode of production, they argue, it is necessary to *articulate* patriarchal with Marxist explanations – to show how the two kinds of explanation interlock to produce processes not directly predictable within either alone: 'capitalist development creates the places for a hierarchy of workers but traditional Marxist categories cannot tell us who will fill which places. Gender and racial hierarchies determine who fills the empty places' (p. 18). Thus radical feminists have argued that sexual oppression is primary, and economic exploitation secondary, and conventional Marxists have argued the reverse. Marxist feminists and socialist feminists have argued that gender and class inequalities have a mutual influence and cannot be analysed in isolation from each other, although Marxist feminists tend on the whole to give primacy to class.

A further interesting line of thought has been advanced by some Marxist feminists, who suggest that dualism – the separation of patriarchal oppression and class exploitation, and thus the need to articulate them in explanations – is itself a historically conditioned phenomenon, consequent on the separation of production from the rest of life, and specific to capitalist society in its present form. 'In treating patriarchy and capitalism as distinct systems we are reading back into history and into other kinds of societies a state of affairs peculiar to our own' (Smith 1983: 2). Smith argues that the domination of men over women in the direct and personal way found under capitalism is specific to that mode of production. She argues that capitalism created two specific kinds of individual – owners of the means of production and individuals owning labour power

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that they are forced to sell in order to subsist. Capitalism is accompanied by the development of philosophies stressing equality within a democratic system, but by taking the standpoint of the proletariat it is possible to see that private property is a barrier to equality and democracy. If we go beyond this and take the standpoint of women we can see a further barrier to equality: the inequality that exists in the family between men and women. An analysis of the relation of women's domestic labour to labour power sold as a commodity demonstrates that the individual worker is 'produced' through his wife's domestic labour, and Smith argues that this is as true in the middle class as the proletarian family. She concludes that the separation of consumption from production in the capitalist mode of production means that the exploitation of women by men is integral to that mode.

Susan Himmelweit (1983) echoes many of these arguments and argues that the problem is not assigning priority of explanation to patriarchy or capitalism as a form of oppression, or favouring one struggle over the other, or even finding some way of integrating them within the body of theory, but recognizing that the problem is a historical and political one and that the solution will also be a political one – the transformation of society by reintegrating production into life itself. This, she suggests, involves more than transforming the means of production or a change from production for profit to production for use; rather, it involves recognizing that production takes no ultimate priority over the rest of life, that the needs of the family and of personal life are also real needs, and conversely that labour and economic problems are not absent from family life. In immediate practical terms this would mean the provision of shorter and flexible working hours for child-carers, of nurseries, of 'wages for housework', or some such means of assuring the financial independence of carers, etc. In the longer term it would mean breaking down the separation by gender of what we currently see as two separate spheres of life, the equal participation (in principle and according to personal needs and desires) of both genders in both parts of life, and thus inevitably the removal of stigma and penalty from one of them.

As can be seen, the debate concerning the incorporation of women into stratification theory is a complex one at this level, and different 'schools' take different lines on how it should be

achieved. What all the feminist lines so far discussed have in common, however, is the view that stratification theory must be able to account for gender disparities as well as (or even instead of) class inequalities. The malestream response, shared by what we have labelled 'conventional' Marxists, is either that stratification theory already does this quite adequately or that it is not called upon to do so, being concerned with *class* inequalities and having no need to go beyond the bounds of class in order to forge coherent explanations.

Women in class theory

The second principal challenge brought by feminists against conventional class analysis – the one to which this book is intended as a contribution – concerns the necessity for it to take account of women's class position as well as men's, not only because they are over half the population, but also because by excluding women we in fact come to an inadequate understanding of the class position even of men. We agree with Walby (1986) that feminist stratification theory should 'not confine itself merely to elaborating more accurate rankings of life-style and prestige, which include women as well as men'. None the less, we see the elaboration and rectification of conventional class theory to include women as a relevant activity for sociologists influenced by feminist arguments and research. We would assert the need to incorporate women into class analysis, to close the gap in our knowledge and understanding that exists because their role in the class system and their relation to status hierarchies have been ignored. Thus as Morgan and Taylorson argue:

'Whether we adopt some version of a Marxist or a Weberian analysis, in practice our concern is with occupational groupings – their different relations to the mode of production, their different rankings in term of income, power and prestige, and so on. Since most women have for most of their lives worked and held occupational identities and since most women at some time contribute to the husband's income, women should clearly occupy a place in studies of class and stratification in their own right.'

(1983: 8)

and, as Allen (1982) points out,