

Sapiro, Chapter 2 **Societal-Level Approaches to Understanding Women's Lives**

This chapter is in two parts: first, it provides a brief overview of the facts of cross-national variation: "how the other part of the world lives." The second part of the chapter offers the theories - six influential ideologies or theories about the construction of gender. **Hint:** Because this chapter is long and provides lots of information, take careful reading notes so that you can remember its main points.

This week's writing assignment asks you to explain what factors of women's lives you think affect them the most. **Question: is there any major category that you think Sapiro leaves out in her discussion of the factors that influence women's status? Media? Technology access?**

1. Chapter provides an overview of cross-cultural variation in how women's lives affected by gender

- a. Comparison will help us understand status of women in individual countries
 - i. US women v. world women
 - ii. women v. men in all countries
 - iii. factors to consider:
 - (1) education,
 - (2) marriage and reproduction,
 - (3) women's work, and
 - (4) women and the state.

2. Literacy and education (the chart uses "x" marks to inscribe women's illiteracy)

- a. Studies show repeatedly that formal education - defined by literacy - no matter what the culture, determines status. Education provides
 - i. personal resources and credentials that help in the labor market
 - ii. knowledge and skills for coping
 - iii. status and social mobility
 - iv. influences childbearing age/constrains fertility

Question: why does Sapiro define education as literacy?

- b. Education is an important indicator of status of women - how educated are they compared to their male peers?
 - i. In US, education correlates with income; women generally high (some college necessary to earn living wage)
 - ii. Table shows how women in other countries fare: the divisions are advanced/new industrial; developing; former Soviet or Soviet bloc (corresponds with first, third, and second world, respectively).
- c. Reading the chart of illiteracy/literacy:
 - i. PAST SCHOOLING: the poorer the country, the more likely it is that its citizens are illiterate. The average age of literate people includes generations that were educated when the status of women was even lower than it is now.
 - (1) First and second world countries have similar levels of literacy for men and women; developing countries' literacy rate is very poor.

- ii. PRESENT BASIC SCHOOLING: enrollment in secondary school suggests that there is a more egalitarian standard (v. illiteracy) now among the younger generations in these countries.
- iii. PRESENT ADVANCED SCHOOLING: postsecondary - varies among countries and development levels; Asian and African countries still lagging behind
- iv. PRESENT HIGH-LEVEL SCHOOLING: proportion of university faculty - abysmal at most nations, with a few surprise variations in places like Brasil and Philippines. AHere, the variation across countries, and especially across richer and poorer counties, flattens out. **Question: why does the variation flatten out here, in the A top category?**

3. Marriage and Reproduction

- a. Marriage and reproduction are important status indicators because
 - i. most women across the world marry and have child(ren);
 - ii. marriage is a big part of women's lives;
 - iii. affects division of labor, especially domestic labor and childrearing.
 - iv. However, it's notoriously difficult to generalize about marriage based on statistics. **Question: what generalizations can you make?**
- b. Average age at marriage is important *because it affects all other factors*, such as work, access to resources, domestic roles. Factors that influence age at marriage:
 - i. urban environment
 - ii. education
 - iii. However, in the case of YOUNG marriages (15-19) - variation among nations suggest that many factors influence this; there's no pattern; consider factors such as cohabitation, religious customs, arranged/companionate marriage traditions.
- c. Women who do not marry are another group worth studying. However, the same problems as above exist: the stats don't reflect serial monogamy, or cohabitation. **Question: where does Sapiro address lesbianism in these figures?**
- d. Childbearing rates/frequency and contraception vary across cultures.
 - i. Generally, in industrialized countries, fewer children are born, and birthrates declining over the last twenty years; in Africa and developing nations, high fertility and increasing birthrate. **Question: how do we account for these differences? Are they biological or cultural?**
 - ii. Contraception use is affected by cultural customs; more common in industrialized countries than in poorer countries (influencing factors: religious stigma; patriarchal interference; legality; access to health-care technology and drugs).

4. Work and economic life - "a woman's work is never done"

- a. first we have to define "employment" and "work," and women's labor traditionally has not been called "work" - why not?

- b. Vast difference in levels of employment and types of work done around the world, though housework/child-rearing and domestic labor are almost always *women's work*
 - c. Fuel-gathering considered women's work in many countries (consequences: time away, air pollution, manual labor)
 - d. Collecting water is women's work (consequences: much time-consuming work)
 - e. Undocumented service labor in all countries is often not called "work" but is done by women nonetheless.
- 5. Women and the state - long way to go in most countries**
- a. Women's suffrage movements are largely a 20thC phenomenon (begun in 19th, achieved in 20th), and women still do not vote in many countries.
 - b. Election of women to office and major political leadership positions: women are only a tiny fraction of elected representatives, especially at the higher levels. In many countries women are legally barred from serving in political roles.
 - c. Laws/legislation re women's issues (that is, laws about reproduction and sexuality) is rudimentary even in most industrial nations.
 - i. maternity laws and leave policies; daycare provision
 - ii. contraceptive and abortion laws
 - iii. laws against violence against women (rape, marital rape, sexual harassment, military rape, honor killings, bride killings).
- 6. Explanations of male dominance/women's subordination. Sapiro says she evaluates the validity of each explanation according to:**
- a. its assumptions and evidence
 - b. how well it explains women's position historically
 - c. its historical context
 - d. its political implications
 - e. Sapiro does not address: its author/s; persistence of binary thinking used to deride what is female
- 7. Religious/theological explanations.**
- a. creation stories blame women
 - b. static view, often interpreted both flexibly and literally
 - c. used as justification for inequality of women in church structures
- 8. Biological explanations of male dominance (pp. 48-56)**
- a. based on activity/passivity, strength/weakness paradigm
 - b. what was biologically female was derided, and women's biological strengths (such as endurance) and toughness (labor) ignored
 - c. areas of study: fetal development; hormones; brain lateralization
 - d. difference between sex (biological) and gender (sociocultural) has been expanded by recent scientists; very difficult to uncover
 - e. sociobiology often confuses human evolution with human history - we are not directly comparable with animals.
- 9. Social change explanations. Enlightenment/modernization (pp. 56-59)**
- a. Critique begins with Mary Wollstonecraft: the oppression of women by men is like the oppression of subjects by monarchs.

- b. Liberal social-change theorists tend to embrace an idea of linear progress, assuming a gradual upward improvement reflecting that society "learns from its mistakes"
- c. Male theorists echo MW - decline of monarchy calls patriarchy into question. To understand how this works, one must look at the political history of the western world in the last 200 years, when democratic revolutions have gradually eroded the power of monarchs and increased the power of individuals.
- d. Liberal social-change arguments assume that legal rights extended to men should eventually be sought and attained by women, such as property ownership, the right to vote, and the right to divorce and maintain custody of children.

10. Structural/functionalist and evolutionary theories (pp. 60-65)

- a. Darwin, as reflected through Herbert Spencer, argues beginning in 1859 for "survival of the fittest." (Not to be confused with "survival of the meanest," this emphasizes the importance of adaptation, not of dominance, to animal survival.)
- b. Sociologists and cultural theorists extend this argument to claim that humans must, like animals, create the highest-possibly functioning organizations - thus division of labor that subordinates women must be highly functional and therefore valuable and even natural. Women are naturally "fitted" for subordinate roles.
- c. Structural theorists of women's subordination were effectively critiqued by two women.
 - i. Antoinette Brown Blackwell argued that the sexes are not unequal, but complementary, and that the devaluation of women's labor and position were cultural.
 - ii. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, economic theorist and fiction-writer, said that in industrializing economies, the division of labor formed to handle farming cultures was no longer necessary and men were harming the future of humankind by suppressing women and relegating them to subordinate roles.
- d. Contemporary sociobiologists argue that male dominance has been enforced through genetic evolution, and that by studying patriarchal animal hierarchies one can justify patriarchal human social relationships.
 - i. Critiques of sociobiological theory focus on the difference between human evolution (biological change) and human history (social change.) They note that sociobiologists love to select their data.
- e. In the 1950s, sociologist Talcott Parsons again uses a functionalist argument to label those who don't conform as "dysfunctional." The functionalist argument assumes that, as Dr. Pangloss says in *Candide*, "All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds." It ignores the views of those who don't consider roles and hierarchies high-functioning.

11. Economic/materialist theories (pp. 65-69)

- a. Karl Marx, the father of revisionist economic theory, argues beginning in 1847 that human history is the history of class struggle; the basis of class is economics; because humans are conscious, they can change their class. (His political and economic theories are essentially an outgrowth of liberalism.)
- b. Marx does not consider the subordinated position of women until 1884, in *Origins of The Family, Private Property, and the State*. Then his argument is more about property ownership as the basis of capitalism than it is about women. The gap between male and female status, according to Marx, mirrors the gap between capitalists and workers, because the dominant ones control the surplus. The oppression of women originates in the class system.
- c. In spite of Marx's critique of women's subordination, little has changed. The division of labor, esp. homemaking/childrearing/emotional labor, remains problematic. Women's work is still not called "labor" and unpaid and invisible; women's professions still categorically underpaid (and, at the time of this writing. Individual solutions don't solve the society-wide problem.

12. "Sex War: The Struggle for Dominance" (pp. 69-74).

- a. The struggle for dominance argument assumes that males biologically and historically have struggled for control and dominance over women. They are filled with antagonism and a desire to subdue Others. Some arguments maintain that women are motivated by the same kinds of antagonism toward men.
- b. Certainly there is much conflict between men and women. However, physical violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women. Peggy Reeves Sanday found that men, in response to external stressors such as war, hunger, and migration, have established systematic ways of keeping women excluded, afraid, and powerless, but that the degree of this varies by culture.
- c. The struggle for dominance argument is logically one of the most flawed of the societal-level explanations of women's subordination.
 - i. First, the antagonism towards Others is the natural order of things argument falls apart if you use it to explain and justify racial oppression.
 - ii. Second, if men and women are antagonistic, why do many of them get along well without antagonism, and why do many choose to spend their lives together?
 - iii. Third, the argument uses male antagonism to explain/rationalize the existence of male violence. (This is a circular argument - its premise and conclusion are the same: Men are violent because men are violent.) "Writers from a wide spectrum of viewpoints suggest that even if no one knows how male dominance began, it has to be systematically maintained through struggle and violence."

- d. Freud originated a very influential argument that attempts to explain why women and men were at war with one another. The antagonism in his system, however, comes from women and is directed towards men. His theory of human development argues that women, in response to the greater privileges they perceive men to enjoy, develop penis envy, an irrational hatred of men.
- e. Finally, some anti-feminist arguments portray women as cunning manipulators who must recognize men's natural weakness and stupidity and exploit those factors for personal gain. These theories certainly express contempt for both genders.