

TENTH EDITION

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THINKING ABOUT  
*Women*

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SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SEX AND GENDER



MARGARET L. ANDERSEN

# **Thinking about Women**

Sociological Perspectives  
on Sex and Gender

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Tenth Edition

# Thinking about Women

Sociological Perspectives  
on Sex and Gender

**Margaret L. Andersen**

*University of Delaware*

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# DEDICATION

For Aubrey Emma Hanerfeld (2012– )

*With hopes that you will grow up in a world where women are treated with fairness, justice, and full human rights*

# BRIEF CONTENTS

## **PART I INTRODUCTION**

- 1 Studying Women: Why Gender Matters 2**

## **PART II GENDER, CULTURE, AND SEX**

- 2 The Social Construction of Gender 20**
- 3 Gender, Culture, and the Media 54**
- 4 Sexuality and Intimate Relationships 81**

## **PART III GENDER AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS**

- 5 Gender, Work, and the Economy 112**
- 6 Gender and Families 160**
- 7 Women, Health, and Reproduction 199**
- 8 Women and Religion 236**
- 9 Gender, Crime, and Deviance 265**
- 10 Gender, Education, and Science 293**
- 11 Women, Power, and Politics 322**

## **PART IV GENDER AND SOCIAL CHANGE: FRAMEWORKS OF FEMINISM**

- 12 Women and Social Reform: Liberal Feminism 356**
- 13 Contemporary Frameworks in Feminist Theory 381**

# CONTENTS

Preface xvi

About the Author xxiv

## **PART I INTRODUCTION**

### **1 Studying Women: Why Gender Matters 1**

#### **A Focus on Women: Taking Women Seriously 2**

Studying Women: Women's Studies and Feminist Scholarship 4

Feminism: What's in a Label? 6

#### **Connecting the Personal and the Political: A Sociological Perspective 10**

#### **What About Men? 13**

#### **Gender Matters...and So Do Race, Class, and Sexuality 14**

#### **A Framework for Thinking about Women 17**

#### **Chapter Summary and Themes 17**

#### **Key Terms 19**

#### **Critical Thinking Activities 19**

#### **Online Resources 19**

#### **Multimedia Resources 19**

## **PART II GENDER, CULTURE, AND SEX**

### **2 The Social Construction of Gender 20**

#### **Biology, Culture, and Society 22**

Sex and Gender: What's the Difference? 22

Creating Sex: The Biological Process 23

Assigning Sex Identities 23

Biological Determinism 25

What Difference Does Difference Make: Nature? Nurture? 26

The Difference Culture Makes 27

The Institutional Basis of Gender 30

#### **Socialization and Gender Identity: An Ongoing Process 31**

Sanctions and Expectations 32

Race and Gender Identity 36

Socialization across the Life Course 37



**Theoretical Perspectives on the Formation of Gender 45**

- Identification Theory 45
- Social Learning Theory 46
- Cognitive-Developmental Theory 47
- Symbolic Interaction and “Doing Gender” 48
- Comparing Theoretical Perspectives 49

**Is Socialization Enough? 50**

**Chapter Summary and Themes 51**

**Key Terms 52**

**Critical Thinking Activities 52**

**Online Resources 53**

**Multimedia Resources 53**

**3 Gender, Culture, and the Media 54**

**Gender and Language 58**

**Popular Culture and the Media 61**

- Analyzing the Media 61
- The Body Culture 62
- Portrayals of Aging 63
- Presenting Women’s Sports 64
- Gender, Children, and the Media 65
- Diverse, but Controlling, Images 65
- Violence, Sexualization, and the Media 68
- Theorizing the Media’s Influence 70

**The Sociology of Knowledge 75**

- Karl Marx: Power, Profit, and the Production of Ideas 75
- Karl Mannheim: Knowledge and Ideology 77

**Chapter Summary and Themes 78**

**Key Terms 79**

**Critical Thinking Activities 79**

**Online Resources 79**

**Multimedia Resources 80**

**4 Sexuality and Intimate Relationships 81**

**The Social Construction of Sexuality 82**

**The History of Sexuality in the United States 83**

**Contemporary Sexual Attitudes and Behavior 86**

- Women and Men: Still a Double Standard? 86

- The “Hooking Up” Culture 88
- Equal Rights for All? Changing Public Opinion about Lesbians and Gays 89

### **Sexual Development over the Life Cycle 90**

- Menstruation 91
- Menopause 92

### **Race, Sexuality, and Power 93**

- Race and Sexual Politics 93
- Sex Work and Sex Trafficking 95

### **Love and Intimate Relationships 96**

- Interracial Relationships 100
- Friendship 101

### **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Experiences 103**

### **Chapter Summary and Themes 109**

### **Key Terms 110**

### **Critical Thinking Activities 110**

### **Online Resources 111**

### **Multimedia Resources 111**

## **PART III GENDER AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS**

### **5 Gender, Work, and the Economy 112**

#### **Women’s Work: History Matters 113**

- The Family-Based Economy 114
- The Family-Wage Economy 115
- The Family-Consumer Economy 117

#### **What Counts as Work? The Lingering Role of Ideology 118**

- The Cult of True Womanhood 118
- The Emergence of Modern Housework 119
- What Is Work? 120

#### **Race, Class, and Gender Stratification 121**

- The Significance of Class 121
- Race Matters 123
- Economic Restructuring and the Economic Downturn 124

#### **Gender in the Workplace 127**

- Who Is in the Work Force? 128
- Who Works Where? Gender Segregation 128
- Why the Pay Gap? 138
- Hitting the Glass Ceiling 141
- Gender and Immigration 143
- The Climate in the Workplace 144

**Poverty and the Declining Safety Net 146**

- Poverty: A Woman's Issue 146
- Welfare: Is It Working? 148
- Retirement and Social Security 151

**Who Cares? The Intersection of Family and Work 151**

- Housework: Changing with the Times 152
- The Second Shift...and, Now, a Third: Care Work 153

**Policies for Gender Equity 155**

**Chapter Summary and Themes 157**

**Key Terms 158**

**Critical Thinking Activities 158**

**Online Resources 158**

**Multimedia Resources 159**

**6 Gender and Families 160**

**Historical Perspectives on Modern Families 162**

- Origins of the Western Family 162
- Idealized Womanhood 163
- Shaping Public and Private Spheres 163

**Feminist Perspectives on Families 165**

- The Social Construction of Families 166
- Diversity in Families: The Intersection of Class, Race, and Gender 167
- Linking Social Structure and Human Action 171
- The Family Ideal 171

**A Portrait of Contemporary Families 172**

- Marriage 173
- Divorce 175
- Cohabitation 176
- Gay and Lesbian Families 177
- Motherhood 179
- Fatherhood 181
- Balancing Family and Work 183

**Families in Trouble 186**

- Partner Violence 186
- Marital Rape 189
- Incest and Sexual Abuse 190
- Teen Pregnancy 190

**Families and Social Policy 192**

- Child Care 192
- Family-Friendly Policies at Work 194

**Chapter Summary and Themes 196****Key Terms 197****Critical Thinking Activities 197****Online Resources 198****Multimedia Resources 198****7 Women, Health, and Reproduction 199****The Social Structure of Health 200**

Gender, Work, and Health 201

Race, Class, and Health 204

**Gender, Health, and Social Problems 206**Gender and the Body: Weight, Food,  
and Body Image 206

Substance Abuse: Alcohol, Drugs, and Smoking 209

Women and AIDS 214

Disability 215

**The Politics of Reproduction 216**

Birth Control 217

Abortion 219

Racism and Reproduction 221

The Politics of Birth: Pregnancy and Childbirth 223

New Reproductive Technologies 229

**Gender and the Health-Care System 230**

Women as Health-Care Workers 230

Health Insurance 232

The Women's Health Movement 233

**Chapter Summary and Themes 233****Key Terms 234****Critical Thinking Activities 234****Online Resources 235****Multimedia Resources 235****8 Women and Religion 236****Religion: A Social Force in People's Lives 237**

The Influence of Religion 238

Religion as Social Control: The Case of Witches 239

**Religion and the Rise of Feminism  
in the United States 241**

**Women, Gender, and Religious Faith 243**

- Images of Women in Religion 243
- Religious Texts as Interpretive Documents 244
- Gender and Religious Beliefs 246

**Women's Status in Religious Institutions 248**

- Religion and the Gender Division of Labor 249
- Women as Clergy 250

**Religion and Social Justice 253**

- Race, Religion, and Civil Rights 253
- Religion and Antifeminism 255
- Feminism and the Religious Right  
in the United States 256
- The Abortion Debate: A Conflict of Worldviews 257
- Faith, Feminism, and Spirituality 259

**Chapter Summary and Themes 263**

**Key Terms 264**

**Critical Thinking Activities 264**

**Multimedia Resources 264**

**9 Gender, Crime, and Deviance 265**

**Understanding Deviance and Crime 266**

- Early Studies of Crime and Deviance 268
- Defining Deviance 269
- Labeling and Social Deviance 270
- Deviance, Power, and Social Conflict 270
- Feminist Perspectives on Deviance 271

**Women as Victims of Crime 273**

- Rape 275
- Causes of Rape 279

**Women as Criminals 283**

- Women's Crime: How Much? 283
- Causes of Women's Crime 284

**Women in the Criminal Justice System 286**

- Gender and the Courts 286
- Women in Prison 288

**Chapter Summary and Themes 290**

**Key Terms 291**

**Critical Thinking Activities 291**

**Online Resources 292**

**Multimedia Resources 292**

**10 Gender, Education, and Science 293****The History of Education: Patterns of Exclusion 295****Gender and Educational Success 297**

Gender and Schooling 298

Academic Achievement: Is There a Gender Gap? 303

Gender and the Curriculum 304

Class and Race Inequality 307

**The Gender Gap in Higher Education 308**

Sexual Harassment 310

The Special Insights of “Outsiders” 310

**Gender, Science, and Society 312**

The Status of Women in Science 312

Science, Feminism, and the Social Construction of Knowledge 314

Ways of Knowing 317

Feminist Standpoint Theory 318

**Chapter Summary and Themes 320****Key Terms 321****Critical Thinking Activities 321****Online Resources 321****Multimedia Resources 321****11 Women, Power, and Politics 322****Defining Power 324****Women and the State 325****Women and the Law 327****Women in Government 329**

The Gender Gap 334

Do Women Make a Difference? 335

**Women and the Military 337**

Lesbians and Gays in the Military 339

Feminism and Militarism 339

**Rethinking the Political 340****The Women’s Movement 342**

American Feminism in the Nineteenth Century 343

The Emergence of the Contemporary Women’s Movement 346

Feminism and Civil Rights 348

The Second Wave of Feminism 349

Feminism for the Twenty-First Century:

A Third Wave 351

**Chapter Summary and Themes 353**

**Key Terms 354**

**Critical Thinking Activities 354**

**Online Resources 354**

**Multimedia Resources 355**

## **PART IV GENDER AND SOCIAL CHANGE: FRAMEWORKS OF FEMINISM**

### **12 Women and Social Reform: Liberal Feminism 356**

**Frameworks of Feminist Theory 358**

**The Liberal basis of Modern Feminism 361**

**Liberalism as a Mode of Social Thought 361**

The Origins of Liberal Thought: An Age of Enlightenment? 361

The Continuing Influence of Liberal Thought 364

**Early Liberal Feminists 366**

Mary Wollstonecraft 366

Harriet Martineau 368

John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill 371

**The Critique of Liberal Feminism 376**

**Chapter Summary and Themes 379**

**Key Terms 379**

**Critical Thinking Activities 380**

**Online Resources 380**

**Multimedia Resources 380**

### **13 Contemporary Frameworks in Feminist Theory 381**

**Diverse Frameworks of Feminist Thought 382**

**Socialist Feminism: The Importance of Class and Capitalism 384**

Karl Marx and Historical Materialism 384

Class and Capitalism 386

Ideology and Consciousness 389

The Woman Question 390

The Feminist Critique of Marx 391

Family and Economy in Capitalist Society: Juliet Mitchell 391

The Question of Separate Spheres 392

<b>Radical Feminism: The Power of Patriarchy</b>	<b>394</b>
The Sex/Gender System	395
Sexuality and the State	396
Intersections of Capitalism and Patriarchy	396
Comparing Liberal, Socialist, and Radical Feminism	397
<b>Multiracial Feminism: An Intersectional Analysis</b>	<b>399</b>
<b>Postmodernist Feminism</b>	<b>403</b>
<b>Queer Theory and Sexualities</b>	<b>407</b>
<b>Continuing Questions for Feminist Theory</b>	<b>409</b>
<b>Chapter Summary and Themes</b>	<b>411</b>
<b>Key Terms</b>	<b>412</b>
<b>Critical Thinking Activities</b>	<b>412</b>
<b>Online Resources</b>	<b>412</b>
<b>Multimedia Resources</b>	<b>413</b>
Glossary	414
Bibliography	420
Author Index	462
Subject Index	472



# PREFACE

With each new edition of *Thinking about Women*, there is an opportunity to reflect on changes in the status of women and men in society. News headlines and popular books proclaim various changes—that “The End of Men” is near or that women need to “Lean In” to find success in hitherto men’s worlds. Various commentators worry that now boys, not girls, are falling behind in school. Some of these claims are misleading; others hold a kernel of truth. A clear-headed assessment of how women’s and men’s lives have changed requires a more vigorous assessment. That is one of the purposes of this book.

Especially for the most likely readers—younger women and men enrolled in college—the reality of gender in society may be clouded by the fact that women are now a majority of college students, outnumbering men on most college campuses. The current generation of readers can also see firsthand many of the changes in gender that have unfolded in people’s lives. Families are now more diverse than ever; women are found in some of the highest and most prestigious places in society. Perhaps even within the time frame of this edition it is possible that the United States could have its first woman President.

From a time not that long ago when women could not hold jobs as teachers if they were pregnant; when women were excluded from most of the most prestigious colleges in the country; when women could not have their own credit cards; when single women were barred from legal access to birth control—times have changed indeed. Yet, rates of violence against women—on campus, on the streets, and in the home—remain frighteningly high. Sexualized stereotypes of women (and, increasingly, men) are common in the popular media. Baby girls are still typically dressed in pink, baby boys in blue. Despite a half century of laws providing equal pay for equal work, the wage gap between women and men persists.

How do we explain these truths? Some of the answers will be found in the chapters of this tenth edition. Like the earlier editions of *Thinking about Women*, this new edition introduces readers to how gender operates in society. Studying how gender inequalities are found in women’s lives will unveil how gender shapes men’s lives, too. The presence of gender in society is ubiquitous—seen virtually everywhere, including the influence on women’s and men’s self-concepts as well as their relationships, attitudes, beliefs and values, life opportunities, and other social behaviors. The long life of *Thinking about Women* (first published in 1983) indicates the strong interest in this subject, as well as the vitality of feminist scholarship over this period of time. It is an honor—and, frankly, a lot of fun—to continue revising this book to reflect the new ideas and new discoveries that emerge from research and theory about gender and women’s lives.

Each new edition of *Thinking about Women* provides an opportunity to think about how new generations of students might be thinking about gender. Most students in my classes have come of age at a time when it appears to them that women have it made, that barriers to women’s achievements are a thing of the past—a past about which they actually know very little. This provides an opportunity not only to try to

connect to different generations but also to observe and analyze the changes that have taken place—and those that have not—in both women’s and men’s lives.

For young students reading this book, feminism may seem a thing of the past. The new visibility of women in prominent positions in society, the opening of new fields of work and study to women, changes in women’s and men’s roles in the family, and, in general, more liberal attitudes among much of the public on matters relating to gender make it seem that feminism is no longer needed. Indeed, much progress has been made in transforming women’s lives. But, as you will learn in this book, women and men continue to be unequal in many ways, and despite the progress that has been made, gender and the differences it makes still permeate women’s and men’s lives.

In this book, you will see how gender is socially constructed—that is, formed through early learning patterns that are continuously reinforced throughout all social institutions. You will also see how gender intersects with other social factors, especially race and class, but also sexual orientation, age, religion, and nationality, among others. A large part of the book focuses on gender in major social institutions, including the economy and work, families, health care, religion, criminal justice, education, and government. The book also reviews the development of feminist thought and its relationship to the women’s movement over time.

Although the title of the book suggests that the text is only about women, that is not the case. Gender influences everyone in society. The new scholarship on gender first emerged from taking women’s lives seriously. Thus, much, but not all, of the focus of *Thinking about Women* is on women, but not to the exclusion of men. Men’s lives are influenced by gender, too, but in different ways than women’s lives. How gender organizes relations between and among women and men is an important part of this book.

Furthermore, understanding gender means not treating women as a single category—as if all women’s experiences are the same. Gender is also tangled with systems of race, class, and sexual inequality. From the early years when the feminist movement was largely centered on the lives and experiences of White women, feminist scholars now anchor their work in recognizing the interrelationship among gender, race, and class—and increasingly, sexuality.

*Thinking about Women* develops from the empirical research and feminist theory that has taught us how much gender matters in society. It presents the most current scholarship on gender, but in a style that is accessible to those who have never thought much about it before, as well as to those who have been introduced to studying women in other undergraduate courses or life activities. *Thinking about Women* is grounded in a sociological perspective, although it can be used in interdisciplinary courses.

## Organization of the Book

*Thinking about Women* is organized in four parts. Part I, **Introduction**, acquaints students to the study of gender as it is rooted in feminist analysis. It presents the sociological framework that underlies this book and shows how research on women and women’s studies has developed from the feminist movement. Part I also includes discussion of men’s studies and its connection to feminist scholarship.

Part II, **Gender, Culture, and Sex**, focuses on the social construction of gender and the representation of gender in culture, particularly in the media. Chapter 2, “The Social Construction of Gender,” reviews the influence of gender socialization and the role of gender in shaping women’s and men’s identities. Chapter 3, “Gender, Culture, and the Media,” analyzes the increasing significance of the media and popular culture on the social construction of gender. Chapter 4, “Sexuality and Intimate Relationships,” examines the relationship between gender and sexuality as social constructions. This chapter shows how gender and sexuality reinforce each other.

Part III, **Gender and Social Institutions**, examines the institutional structures of work, family, health, religion, criminal justice, education, and politics. Chapter 5, “Gender, Work, and the Economy,” details research on women’s work and economic status. The chapter includes a discussion of poverty and welfare reform, as well as the ongoing struggle of balancing work and family—a theme also picked up in Chapter 6. Chapter 6, “Gender and Families,” focuses on the historic evolution of contemporary family forms and emphasizes the diversity of women’s experiences in families. It also includes discussion of various problems for families, including family violence, teen pregnancy, and child care. Chapter 7, “Women, Health, and Reproduction,” looks at the consequences of gender inequality for women’s health compared to men’s and also includes an extensive discussion of reproductive politics. Chapter 8, “Women and Religion,” conceptualizes religion as both a source of women’s oppression and, ironically, a source of women’s liberation. Chapter 9, “Gender, Crime, and Deviance,” studies crime and women—both as victims and perpetrators. It also examines women’s victimization by violence and discusses how men’s violence is related to gender roles. Chapter 10, “Gender, Education, and Science,” looks at schooling, but it also shows how the construction of scientific knowledge is influenced by the exclusion of women from positions of scientific leadership. Chapter 11, “Women, Power, and Politics,” provides a transition to the last part of the book on social change, and looks at the engagement of women in political institutions. This chapter also includes an overview of the women’s movement and other forms of women’s political activism.

The final part of the book, Part IV, **Gender and Social Change: Frameworks of Feminism**, introduces students to feminist theory and its link to the women’s movement historically and today. Chapter 12, “Women and Social Reform: Liberal Feminism,” reviews the evolution of liberal feminism, showing students how the term *liberal*—though widely stigmatized in conservative discourse—is a specific feminist philosophy with important implications for social change. By detailing the historical evolution of liberal feminism, students can examine their own assumptions about the dominant strategy of “equal rights” that has characterized much feminist transformation of society. Chapter 13, “Contemporary Frameworks in Feminist Theory,” reviews more radical perspectives and updates the discussion of theory to include multiracial feminism, postmodernism, and queer theory. Throughout, the presentation of theory emphasizes the need to examine one’s underlying assumptions—theoretical or common sense—and to understand the different strategies needed to improve women’s lives.

## New to the Tenth Edition

Each new edition of *Thinking about Women* benefits greatly from the comments of faculty and students who have read earlier versions of the book. But this edition also reflects the transformation of teaching that is occurring with the increasing presence of Internet technology.

This edition maintains the features from the ninth edition, including: a **box in every chapter: *History Speaks: Yesterday's Feminists Talk about Today***. This feature provides a brief biographical sketch of a historic feminist and briefly discusses some of her key ideas. The point is to introduce today's students to some of the classic feminist thinkers whom they might not otherwise know, and also to show the relevance of their work when thinking about today's world. Thus, the questions in these *History Speaks* boxes will invite students to reflect on what this person might think about a contemporary issue that stems from the chapter content. For example, students are introduced to Margaret Sanger in Chapter 7 on women and reproduction and are then asked to think about what she might be saying about a topic such as abstinence-only sex education. Or, in Chapter 4, students are introduced to Audre Lorde and asked to reflect on what she would be saying today about same-sex marriage. This feature not only provides some introduction to historic feminists but it also includes a critical thinking exercise that encourages students to relate historic feminist ideas to contemporary social issues.

The *Thinking Further* feature, appearing in some boxes and/or graphs, asks students a critical-thinking question that helps them interpret what they see in the box or figure and encourages them to ask new questions and think about additional insights that stem from the material presented. This feature appears throughout the text.

As in earlier editions, the tenth edition has a pleasing visual format with new photos and graphic features throughout that makes the text more visually appealing to today's generation of visual learners. This edition also maintains the box features on media, research, and men that were included in earlier editions, including *Focus on Research*, *Media Matters*, and the retitled *A Closer Look at Men*. Thus, each chapter (except Chapter 1) has four boxes on the following themes:

- **History Speaks: Yesterday's Feminists Talk about Today**  
*Example* (Chapter 5): A biographical sketch of Emma Goldman is presented and a question is posed about her likely analysis of today's high poverty rate among women and the role of the federal government in providing social support programs.
- **Focus on Research**  
*Example* (Chapter 6): A discussion of "opting out" frames an interesting question: Are well-educated, middle-class women dropping out of the labor market to raise children? The media claim this is a strong trend, but is it? This box feature examines new sociological research on this topic.
- **Media Matters**

*Example* (Chapter 11): This box features new research on media coverage of First Ladies and poses a critical-thinking question about media coverage of Michelle Obama as the first African American First Lady.

- **A Closer Look at Men**

*Example* (Chapter 4): The theme of this box is about the peer socialization of young boys in which homophobic insults reinforce social norms of masculinity.

Throughout this new edition, current research has been incorporated and examples have been updated to appeal to contemporary students. Also, figures and empirical data reflect the most current information.

This text is available in two formats—digital and print. To learn more about our programs, pricing options, and customization, visit [www.pearsonhighered.com](http://www.pearsonhighered.com).

## Pedagogical Features

In addition to the boxed features, students and instructors will find useful pedagogical elements that enable learning and discussion. The *Chapter Summary and Themes* account concludes every chapter. These are intended to highlight the major points of each chapter, thus enhancing student learning.

Each chapter also includes *Discussion Questions/Projects for Thought*. This feature can be used for in-class projects or research assignments and papers.

All *Key Terms* at the end of each chapter are also defined in a glossary at the end of the book. *Chapter outlines* open each chapter so that students will know what key ideas to look for. *Graphics*, developed by the author, are found throughout the book to help students learn to interpret data; these have been updated with the most recent data available.

## Chapter-by-Chapter Changes

In addition to the updating and incorporation of new research, here are some of the *highlights* of individual chapters.

**Chapter 1: Studying Women: Why Gender Matters** The introductory chapter was reorganized for the tenth edition so that chapter heads would flow better from topic to topic. Also, there is more included in this first chapter on sexuality and sexual orientation in the spirit of inclusiveness that has always guided this book. New data from the Pew Research Organization on perceptions of gender discrimination is also included.

**Chapter 2: The Social Construction of Gender** New historical research on how the colors pink and blue became associated with girls and boys is included. There is also new material in this chapter on gender and video games, as well as gender and sports.

**Chapter 3: Gender, Culture, and the Media** Research on gender and social media has been given more attention than in previous editions and there is

also new research included on gender and speech, illustrated by a recent research study of gender and speech on the game show *Jeopardy!* There is also more and newer material on gender and the sexualization of women and girls in the media.

**Chapter 4: Sexuality and Intimate Relationships** Since the ninth edition, there has been an outpouring of research on “hooking up” and college sex; that new research is now shown here. This chapter also includes new scholarship on how stereotypes can be subverted. There is a discussion of the important Supreme Court decision outlawing the Defense of Marriage Act as unconstitutional.

**Chapter 5: Gender, Work and the Economy** The recent recession and ongoing economic downturn have had particular and differing effects on women and men. This chapter includes discussion of this phenomenon. There is more research included on various topics, including care work, gender segregation and promotions, retirement, the “third shift” for women, household work, and the impact of welfare reform. The chapter heads were reorganized to include a discussion of Social Security in the section covering the social safety net. New data on gender and work are included throughout.

**Chapter 6: Gender and Families** This chapter was reorganized under new major headings. There is much more included on contemporary family changes and new research on several important topics, including women as breadwinners, fathers, interracial marriage, and work/family balance. Data on families are updated throughout to reflect the most recent available.

**Chapter 7: Women, Health, and Reproduction** A discussion of gender and the Affordable Care Act has been added to this chapter.

**Chapter 8: Women and Religion** This revised chapter includes new scholarship on Islamic gender ideology, as well as new material on evangelical religion and gender ideology.

**Chapter 9: Gender, Crime, and Deviance** This chapter now includes a discussion of rape shield laws and a closer look at rape myths, including the issue of consent when alcohol is involved. Included is the new FBI definition of rape, amended in 2011—a change that includes all sexes, any kind of penetration, and a clause about the inability to consent. A discussion showing the link between masculine gender norms and school shootings is included. There is new material on the effect of gender and the media on death penalty sentencing, among other new material. Data on crime have been updated throughout.

**Chapter 10: Gender, Education, and Science** This revised chapter includes new research on gender and the educational achievement gap. The controversy over whether both genders are losing out at school is discussed. More material has been included on the status of women in STEM (science, technology, and engineering) fields.

**Chapter 11: Women, Power, and Politics** Additional information is included in this chapter on women and the military, including women as veterans and new material on sexual assault in the military. The section on politics includes updated material on women in politics, including as voters and as elected officials. Updated information is given on conservative women, and a new box ponders when there will be a woman president in the United States.

**Chapter 12: Women and Social Reform: Liberal Feminism** Students are introduced to a discussion of neoliberalism and libertarianism, as they affect frameworks of feminist thinking. There is also updated material on gender and the law.

**Chapter 13: Contemporary Frameworks of Feminist Theory** The chapter includes an expanded discussion of the so-called postfeminist generation.

## Instructor Resources

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*Margaret L. Andersen*

*Elkton, Maryland*



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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# CHAPTER 1

## Studying Women Why Gender Matters

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

*After reading this chapter, you will be able to:*

- Be able to cite some of the current data on the status of women.
- Connect personal troubles and public issues from a sociological perspective.
- Analyze how gender shapes everyone's experience, even men's.
- Discuss why gender matters as well as how it intersects with race, class, and sexuality.
- Develop a framework for thinking about women.

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

#### **A Focus on Women: Taking Women Seriously 2**

Studying Women: Women's Studies and Feminist Scholarship 4

Feminism: What's in a Label? 6

#### **Connecting the Personal and the Political: A Sociological Perspective 10**

#### **What About Men? 13**

#### **Gender Matters... And So Do Race, Class, And Sexuality 14**

#### **A Framework for Thinking about Women 17**

Have you ever asked yourself:

- Why do so many women spend so much time and money on beauty and diet products—even when some of these products are detrimental to their health?
- Why is violence so much more likely to be committed by men—either against other men or against women and girls?
- Why are there not more women in fields such as science and math, even though, when girls are young, they do at least as well, if not better, in these subjects at school?
- Why do women’s sports not routinely draw the same crowds or media attention as men’s sports regularly do?
- What would happen if every woman in the United States stopped working for just one week?

You could ask yourself many questions like these—and you will find that such questions guide much of the content of this book. If you find them intriguing—or you want to know the answers—then you already have the kernel of imagination that can sprout the study of gender in society.

**Gender** refers to the cultural expectations and societal arrangements by which men and women have different experiences in society. As you will learn throughout this book, gender relations are complex, variable, and deeply entrenched in society. Gender shapes all facets of our experiences—what we think, how we interact with others, what opportunities we have, even how we walk and talk! There is no simple or single way to think about gender, but how gender affects women and men in society is a fascinating subject—and one that is essential to making social changes that will improve people’s lives.

## **A Focus on Women: Taking Women Seriously**

Women seem to have it made. Formal barriers to discrimination have been removed. Women have moved into many of the top professional positions, are now the majority of college graduates, and are more visible in positions of power than at any other time in the nation’s history. The position of women in U.S. society has changed dramatically. The majority of women are employed, and they now number close to half of those in the workplace.

Attitudes have changed, too. When asked if they want to work outside the home or stay at home, *both women and men* are more likely than in the past to say they would prefer to work outside the home rather than stay at home. But here’s another interesting change: A substantial number of men (29 percent) say they would actually prefer to stay at home (Saad 2007b). Among women, choosing only one preference—home or work—is unusual because balancing the two is more common. Studies of college women indeed find that most want to include careers, marriage, and motherhood in their futures (Gerson 2010).

These changes have led many to conclude that women now have progressed and that no further change is needed. Consider the following facts, however:

- Today, women who work full time earn, on average, 77 percent of what men working full time earn (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2013).

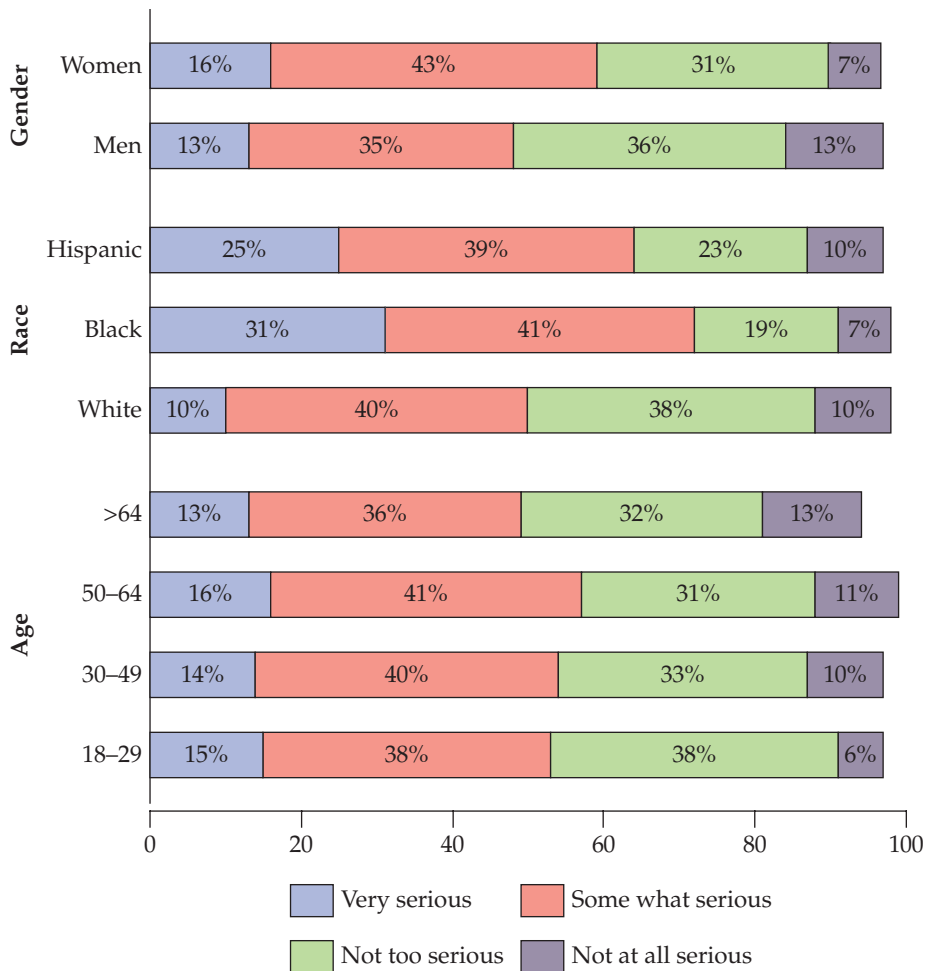
- Despite three decades of policy change to address gender inequality at work, women and minorities are still substantially blocked from senior management positions in most U.S. companies. Women hold only 4 percent of the CEO positions in the Fortune 500 companies (U.S. Department of Labor 2012; Catalyst 2013).
- Thirty-four percent of all families headed by women are poor; the rates are higher for African American women, Latinas, and Native American women, and the rate has been increasing (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith et al. 2013).
- Each year, one-quarter million women are raped or sexually assaulted, at least as reported to the police; over one-third (38 percent in 2011) of these *reported* violent acts are committed by someone the victim knew—friends, acquaintances, or intimate partners (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2013).
- Despite the fact that they are the most likely to be employed, women of color are concentrated in the least-paid, lowest-status jobs in the labor market (U.S. Department of Labor 2012).

These facts indicate that although women have indeed come a long way, there is still a long way to go. Little wonder that there is a substantial gender gap in women's and men's perceptions of society's treatment of women: Women are more likely than men to perceive discrimination against women as a serious problem (see Figure 1.1).

Look around, and you will see many signs of the status of women in society. In the grocery store, for example, women employees are clustered in those departments (deli and bakery) that are least likely to lead to promotion; men employees, on the other hand, predominate in departments such as produce and groceries, where the majority of store managers begin (Padavic and Reskin 2002). In schools, women constitute a large majority of elementary school teachers, but through the higher grades and into college, women become a smaller proportion of the faculty. Despite the recent movement of more women into political office, the vast majority of those who make and enforce laws are men, particularly among those holding the most influential positions.

Differences between women and men can also be observed in interpersonal interaction. Watch the behavior of men and women around you—how they act with each other and with those of the same sex. In public places, men touch women more often than women touch men. Men also touch women in more places on the body than women touch men. Despite stereotypes to the contrary, men also talk more than women and interrupt women more than women interrupt men or men interrupt each other. Women are more likely than men to smile when interacting with others (especially when with men), even when they are not necessarily happy. Men, in general, are less restricted in their demeanor than women and use more personal space. Although these patterns do not hold for all men and all women, nor necessarily for people from various cultural backgrounds, in general they reflect the different ways that women and men have learned to interact (Mast and Hall 2004; Wood 2009; de Lemus, Spears, and Moya 2012).

Many current social problems also call attention to the status of women in society. Violence against women—in the form of rape, sexual harassment, incest, and wife beating—is common. Changes in U.S. families mean that more families are headed by women. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with such



**FIGURE 1.1** Perceptions of Society’s Treatment of Women

Source: Pew Research Center. 2008. *Men or Women? Who’s the Better Political Leader? A Paradox in Public Attitudes*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. [www.pewsocialtrends.org](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org)

**Question asked:** How serious a problem do you think discrimination against women is in this country—a very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, not too serious, or not at all serious?

arrangements, women’s low wages mean that female-headed households have an increased chance of being poor. As a consequence, the rate of poverty among children in such households has increased dramatically in recent years.

### Studying Women: Women’s Studies and Feminist Scholarship

Thinking about women helps us understand why these things occur. For many years, very few people thought seriously about women. Patterns affecting the lives of women were taken for granted as natural or to be expected. Few people questioned the status of women in society, presuming instead that studying women was

trivial, something done only by a radical fringe or by frivolous thinkers. Even now, studying women is often ridiculed or treated with contempt. But, by bringing attention to the study of gender, studying women has opened new ways to think about and study men.

**Women's studies** emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s to correct the exclusion of women in most academic fields. Today, it is now a thriving field of study. Studying women—and now, men—as gendered subjects has often required challenging some of the basic assumptions in existing knowledge—both in popular conceptions and in academic studies. Scholars have found that thinking about women changes how we think about human history and society, and revises how social institutions are understood. Thinking about women also reveals deep patterns of gender relations in contemporary society. Gender relations are part of the social world that surrounds us. Much of the time, these patterns go unnoticed, but they influence us nonetheless, even though we often do not see or understand them. Gender influences who we are, what we think, and what opportunities are available to us. Women's studies illuminates these patterns and thus can be very transformative in your thinking; it helps you see the realities of women's experience.

Since the resurgence of feminism in the 1960s, women's studies has produced a dramatic outpouring of studies and theories about women in society. These studies have questioned the assumptions and biases of existing work in almost every field, including science, the humanities, and the social sciences. Scholars working in different fields have discovered that much of what stood for knowledge in their disciplines was either overtly sexist or ignored women altogether. Feminist reconstructions of academic scholarship have now touched every discipline and have resulted in major changes in the assumptions, theoretical frameworks, and research data in different fields in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences.

Examples from many disciplines show that when women's experiences are taken seriously, new methods and perspectives are established. For example, in history, feminist scholars have criticized the “women worthies” approach for recognizing only women who meet the male standards for eminence in history. Although it is important to recognize the contributions of prominent women in history, such women stand out because they are exceptional. In their transformations of historical scholarship, feminist historians have shown how even the periods used to define time frameworks in history are based on men's achievements and men's activities (Lerner 1976). The Renaissance, for example, is typically depicted as a progressive age that encouraged humanism and creativity; yet, for women, the Renaissance was a time of increased domestication of bourgeois wives and intensified persecution of witches—most of whom were single peasant women. To see the Renaissance from a woman-centered perspective is to see that this was a period marked by increased restriction of the power of women (Kelly-Gadol 1976), not just the era of creativity and humanism that has been the dominant characterization of the time.



National Museum of American History/Smithsonian Institution

During World War II this now-classic poster was used to recruit women into the labor force.

Similarly, in psychology, women’s studies scholars have revised how scholars think about moral development. Carol Gilligan’s (1982) classic work showed how theories of moral development took men’s experiences as the norm and then measured the women’s experiences against that. In fact, as Gilligan has shown, women’s moral development follows a different plan from that of men: Women are more contextual in their judgments than are men. In other words, women base moral judgments on their assessments of conflicting responsibilities in a given situation, whereas men are more likely to make moral decisions based on their judgments of competing rights and abstract principles. Gilligan’s point is to show not only that men and women have different conceptions of morality but also that men’s experiences were taken by psychologists to be a universal standard by which both men and women are evaluated. Deriving women’s experiences from the particular experiences of some men only makes women appear incomplete, inadequate, or invisible (McIntosh 1983).

Since its inception in the late 1960s/early 1970s, women’s studies has developed a more inclusive view of women. “Woman” is no longer considered a unitary category. That is, women’s studies recognizes the diversity of women’s experiences, because of social factors such as race, sexual orientation, nationality, age, social class, and so forth. So, on the one hand, women are a definable social category, identifiable and understood simply in terms of their social status *as women*; on the other hand, women are also differentiated because of their location in *multiple social statuses*. Understanding how these different experiences *intersect* within a given group’s experiences and among women is one of the most important contributions of women’s studies and it has spawned, as we will see, the growth of fields such as Black feminist studies (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991; Andersen and Collins 2013), as well as Latina studies, sexuality studies, and an increasing concern with global and cross-national studies of women.

One objective of women’s studies scholarship is to see all groups in relationship to one another and to include multiple human groups in the concepts, theories, and content of human knowledge. Including women and people of color in our studies reveals hidden assumptions in what we learn from more exclusionary studies. Inclusive thinking—that in which women’s and men’s experiences are seen in relationship to the other and in which multiple human groups are included in the concepts, theories, and content of human knowledge—is a new way of thinking in academic studies. Revealing the assumptions embedded in ideas or knowledge helps us envision the process by which knowledge can become genuinely inclusive and take gender, race, and class together as part of the complexity of human experience.

The purpose of this book is to show how thinking about women explains patterns of gender relations in society. A single book cannot discuss all of the research and theory that has been developed to understand gender in society, but it can show how thoroughly gender permeates the structure of society and women’s and men’s lives within it.

## **Feminism: What’s in a Label?**

Women’s studies is rooted in the feminist movement. Indeed, feminism and women’s studies emerged together as women sought to understand their experiences and put them in a framework that would guide social change. Feminism is based



on a philosophy of change—namely, that we can build a more just society for women if we consciously understand and seek to transform the social behaviors and institutions that are the basis for women’s experiences. Consequently, developing women’s studies as an academic field is part of the process of transforming women’s place in society—a fundamental premise of the feminist movement.

So, what is feminism? **Feminism** is not easy to define because it includes a variety of political perspectives and ideas. As you will discover, there is no single feminist perspective, and feminist theories and programs for social change sometimes differ quite substantially from one another. Moreover, feminism among young women has evolved compared to that of their feminist foremothers, as we will explore later in this chapter in the feature called “History Speaks.”

First, feminism begins with the premise that women’s and men’s positions in society are the result of social, not natural or biological, factors. Although different varieties of feminist thought have developed, feminists generally see social institutions and social attitudes as the basis for women’s position in society. Second, because there are structured inequities between women and men, feminists believe in transforming society on behalf of women. Feminism is a way



APWide World Photos

In 1968, one of the first feminist demonstrations was a protest against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Widely covered by the media, it called the public’s attention to how women were routinely defined in a demeaning way as sexual objects.



## HOT TOPICS

## Gender in the Public Eye

When Georgetown law student Sandra Fluke spoke out publicly, arguing that birth control should be available to students at religious institutions under the national health care policies, conservative radio commentator Rush Limbaugh called her a “slut” and a prostitute. He went on to say that birth control was expensive because she

was having so much sex. Limbaugh added that he would “buy all of the women at Georgetown University as much aspirin to put between their knees as they want” (Fard 2012). His comments caused a national furor. Ask yourself: Without the influence of the women’s movement, would such comments have caused such a stir?

of both thinking and acting; in fact, the union of action and thought is central to feminist programs for social change. Third, feminists believe that women’s experiences, concerns, and ideas are as valuable as those of men and should be treated with equal seriousness and respect. This does not mean that women have to be like men, but that women’s interests should be central in movements for social change.

Public opinion polls indicate that the majority of women in the United States support feminist issues such as equal pay for equal work; improved child care policies; reduced violence against women; and greater opportunities for women regardless of their race, class, or sexual orientation.

Why, then, are so many people reluctant to call themselves “feminists?” The word *feminism* conjures up different images to different people. Sometimes not calling oneself a feminist reflects actual disagreement with feminist policies and perspectives, as will be seen in the discussion of antifeminist movements in Chapter 11. Often, people are reluctant to call themselves feminists because of misunderstandings about what it means. Feminism is often equated with being a lesbian, which, in turn, is equated with man-hating; thus, for many, rejection of feminism is linked to fears and stereotypes about lesbians. Others feel it is risky to become a feminist, fearing that friends and lovers might reject or tease them. These reactions show how threatened people can be by a movement that advocates change in women’s lives. Some have come to think that feminism is no longer necessary, assuming that discrimination has been eliminated by recent reforms and that women and men now stand on relatively equal terms. We will examine these assumptions, but the point is that many hesitate to call themselves feminists, even when they agree with the ideas of feminism.

Why is being a feminist so stigmatized? For some, feminism conjures up images of aggressive fanatics, as if to be feminist means one cannot be gentle and kind, be reasonable, or have good relationships with men. This is simply not true, as any careful look at the diverse women and men who are feminists would show. Others will say, “I’m not a feminist; I’m a humanist,” reflecting their belief in the betterment of life for all persons—men and women alike—but such a view does not preclude being a feminist. In fact, if one really is in favor of the betterment of all human beings, then it is logical to call oneself humanist, antiracist, *and* feminist.

The fact that the label *feminist* carries a stigma to some reflects the deep and continuing devaluation of women throughout U.S. society. Popular stereotypes of feminists as angry, radical, man-hating, “feminazis” encourage this kind of thinking. Some feminists are, indeed, angry—angry about the injustices women face in the workplace, angry about violence against women, angry about persecution of gays and lesbians, and angry about the persistent denigration of women in popular culture. Many feminists are also radical thinkers, particularly if we take *radical* to mean looking at the roots of women’s status in society. Feminism includes a wide range of feeling, thought, and ways of being, none of which are so narrow and ugly as the popular stereotype of feminists suggests.

Many feminists are men, although men may find calling themselves feminists especially difficult. Adopting a pro-woman attitude puts men and women at odds with the dominant culture. Men may think that by calling themselves feminists, they will be thought of as gay, itself a stigmatized identity in the dominant culture. As you will see in Chapter 4 on sexuality, this labeling, rooted in the homophobic attitudes of our culture, is a form of social control. It is society’s way of trying to force men and women into narrowly proscribed gender roles. Men who call themselves feminists—some of whom are gay, others of whom are not—are men who support women’s rights, who do not believe men are superior to women, and who are willing to work for liberating social changes for women and men. This shows another point learned from feminism—that men are subjected to cultural expectations about masculinity that affect their emotions, identities, and social roles.

The fact is that feminism is threatening to those who want to protect the status quo. Advocating for women’s rights can be downright dangerous, as you may recall the case of Malala Yousafzai who was shot in the head in 2012 by Pakistani militants who called her out of a school van and shot her for her advocacy of educating women and girls. Although critically wounded and hospitalized for three months, Ms. Yousafzai subsequently founded the Women in the World Foundation to support the rights of girls and women worldwide (see [www.womenintheworld.org](http://www.womenintheworld.org)).

The danger that comes to those who advocate for women’s rights was also vividly shown in a global context when, in 1994, Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh was threatened with death by Muslim extremists in her home country. Nasrin is a novelist and poet who, in her writing, challenged fundamentalist Islamic decrees on the role of women. When religious leaders called for her death, the Bangladesh government sought to arrest her. Islamic radicals renewed their death threat and offered a \$5,000 reward to anyone who killed her. She has since been living in exile.

These cases are extreme, but one need not witness such extremes, nor leave the United States, to see how threatening feminism is for many. Conservative women’s groups have targeted women’s studies programs, accusing them of being like-minded, distributing misinformation, and brainwashing women. The fact is that becoming a feminist does change the way you think because it gives you a critical awareness of relationships and social systems that you might have previously not questioned. Also, feminist programs for change would dismantle the privileges that many (though not all) men get simply by virtue of being men.