

Gender: Women's Roles and Status

(some thoughts)

Among Indigenous peoples, e.g., in gatherer/hunter societies, "**women**" (as a corporate entity) and their roles and positions are typically defined in terms of:

1. Metaphorically linked to "earth" -- expressed naturally and spiritually as "nurturer" and "regulator," as exemplified in Changing Woman among the Navaho, Sedna among the Inuit, or White Buffalo Calf Woman among the Lakota.
2. By extension, focus on "domestic" roles -- which are challenging, creative, nurturing, and politically and economically powerful. "Domestic" doesn't mean "private," but a very public role.
3. A role separate from men, with clear and often rigid demarcation.
4. Nevertheless, female and male roles are complementary and equal in power and privilege.
5. With option of interchangeability with men's role, e.g., "women warriors."

With stratification of society into classes and the **domestication** of plants and animals, some 10,000 years ago, a gradual **asymmetrical** relationship develops between men and women. **Women** become **subordinated** to men for the **first time in human history**. See story of [Jericho](#).

- **Stratification** refers to differential access to resources, power and privilege – some benefit while others do not – **a new social order**

- **Domestication** refers to deliberate manipulation and control of a once wild plant or animal, for the benefit humans – **a new ecological world view**

Among the social science theories that explain the change in the status of women are:

1. With an agricultural orientation, women denied **access to means of production**; no longer major economic contributor.

Examples in various [Marxian economic and Praxis-based theories](#).

Men assume control over modes of food production and trade (where it had been an essential role in both)

2. Given that males are traditionally anchored in the "public realm," they are associated with cultural involvements revolving around economics, politics and religion, i.e., all expression of power over nature, that help create artificial symbolic and technological mediations that increase the control of humans over nature. In contrast women are anchored traditionally in the "domestic realm," focused on "natural" involvements, such as giving birth and nurturing young, as well as providing food and health. With domestication, a **new ideology further emphasized the need for control over "nature"** i.e., – wild nature in fact a threat to cultivated fields and livestock – barriers established between – **separation** – and towers erected to watch and control over – **subjugation**. With domestication, the earth is now envisioned as "wild" and a "threat" to what is domesticated, as well as something to be "controlled" and a "natural resource" to **benefit** mankind.

Example in theories of: [Sherry Ortner](#), cultural anthropologist from UCLA.

As "women" express "natural" processes, that which is "natural" in women – women's biological roles as child-bearers and nurturers – are, by extension, subjugated by men.

This domination is further amplified to the extent that women were formally linked to and associated with the earth itself.. In its most extreme expression, those values are, in turn, **transferred** to women -- a "resource" to be controlled, as "property" for what they can "produce," i.e., children, and certainly kept "separate" from and subordinated to men.

Domestication certainly would have unfolded differently had the image of a "nurturing" and "motherly" earth persisted. No one would want to exploit their "mother"!

3. In the newly developed, competitive and hostile world of class/social stratification, and less need for group solidarity and the marking of life-cycle status changes, there is an associated **reduced need for "rites of passage"** for both men and women. Such rites of passage have traditionally directly helped **instill and reinforce psychological self-identity and self-esteem** - defining who you are and how you are to relate to others.

Example in theories of [Nancy Chodorow](#). (sociologist and clinical psychologist from the University of California, Berkeley)

-- Nevertheless, women's self-identity and self-esteem continues to be fostered by her "life-cycle natural maturation" process, including close ties with her mother and reiteration of self-identity via menses, childbearing and infant nurturing. Relatively high self-esteem.

-- As either ritual or natural rites of passage are not available to men, a generalized and relatively low male "self-esteem" for men results. Self-identity is not clearly psychologically demarcated and established. This low self-esteem becomes translated and manifested into attempts by men at compensation through overt acts of aggression toward and subjugation of women. Subordinate women to compensate for own low self-esteem.

To the extent these theories are valid, it is ironic that that which gives a woman a strong sense of self-identity has become the basis for her own subordination, whether from males attempting to extend control over nature and thus what is natural in her or from a comparative lack of self-identity by men!