Women's Status: A Century of Enormous Change

By Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

When the twentieth century opened, equality between the sexes seemed little but a dream; at the century's close, it is, in many essential respects, a reality. Men still cannot bear babies, and women have yet to make the starting roster of a professional football team, but, for practical purposes, women enjoy full legal and political equality with men. This transformation ranks as one of the great revolutions in human history, and, arguably, as the most cataclysmic change in what has been, by any standard, a tumultuous century. The very magnitude of the changes and the rapidity with which they have occurred compound the difficulty of understanding them.

Most Americans have come to view equality between women and men as a matter of elementary justice—even as a moral norm—and to view vestiges of inequality between them as injustices. Yet throughout history, the norm has been gender inequality, and the justice and morality of that inequality have been inscribed in religion, custom, and law. Most societies have found the core justification for gender inequality in the physiological differences between women and men, above all in women's ability to bear children, which has seemed to offer a self-evident justification for treating women differently than men, notably with respect to sexual mores. In practice, the acknowledgment of sexual difference has frequently led to gender inequality, which has often resulted in men's abuse, oppression, and exploitation of women. This gender inequality, however, normally coexisted with myriad other forms of inequality, notably class stratification, slavery, and ethnic or racial domination. Under these conditions, the inequality between women and men was not always as great as the inequality among women of different social groups, and if women were oppressed, they were often not significantly more oppressed than their male kin.

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By the dawn of the twentieth century, most forms of legal inequality had disappeared in the United States, with the notable exceptions of racial segregation and gender inequality. In 1900, white American women lacked many of the rights that their male kin could claim as their birthright: They could not vote in federal elections; they could not serve in armed combat; they were denied access to many educational institutions and occupations; in most churches they could not serve as clergy; and, if married, their rights to hold property in their own name were restricted. As early as the 1840s, a small group of women had begun to protest gender inequality, but they had not won a broad following. By 1900, however, a growing number of women were protesting their secondary status and organizing to secure woman suffrage.

In 1920, the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment affirmed women's right to vote and to hold political office. But suffrage itself did not immediately transform women's position relative to men's. During the 1930s, for example, married women were barred from teaching in the public schools on the assumption that such jobs should be reserved for men who had families to support. In this instance, as in countless others, deeply ingrained assumptions about the sexual division of labor continued to govern public attitudes towards men and women's appropriate roles in society and the family. And women's pronounced tendency to vote the same way as their husbands reinforced the view that a woman primarily identified with her family rather than as an individual. During the 1920s, members of the Woman's Party, introduced and pressed for the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, but their campaign failed.

The Feminist Movement Reignited

During the 1960s, what has been called "second wave feminism" burst upon the American scene, mobilizing a growing number of women to join various campaigns to promote greater equality between women and men in all aspects of life. By the end of the 1980s, American women were enjoying vastly expanded opportunities to participate fully in the worlds of work and politics as well as greater freedom and independence within families. Many feminists continued to deplore the failure of a new campaign to pass the ERA, but that failure to legislate complete equality between women and men did not compromise the many gains women had made.

Women's gains during these two decades touched—and often revolutionized—virtually every aspect of American life. In quick succession women secured the right to legal abortion, no fault divorce, credit in their own names, equal pay for equal work, and membership in a variety of institutions, from private clubs to colleges, from which they had been barred. At the time and since, the feminist movement has seen the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision as the practical and symbolic cornerstone of women's new freedom. *Roe* legalized abortion throughout a pregnancy and, thereby, according to feminists, freed women from the potentially disastrous consequences of an unintended pregnancy. As the capstone in a general expansion of artificial contraception, notably the birth control pill, *Roe* confirmed the triumph of the sexual revolution. In theory, the sexual revolution "liberated" women to pursue sexual encounters with the same freedom as men. In practice, it also exposed them to new dangers. Proponents of women's sexual liberation argue that freedom from the risk of pregnancy permits women to function as fully autonomous beings, independent of male control. In this view, legal abortion provides the guarantee that women can escape their physiological inequality with men.

During the 1980s and 1990s, women's "right" to abortion was subjected to a series of qualifications, including erosion of public subsidy and parental consent (or the equivalent) for minors, and, at the end of the 1990s, it seems possible that partial-birth abortions will be banned. Feminists have greeted these qualifications with outrage and dismay, but the general public seems cautiously to be rethinking the desirability of some abortion procedures. A recent poll by the Princeton Research Associates found 70% of women now favor some restriction on abortion and 40% believe it should be available only in cases of rape, incest, or to save the woman's life.

Another poll suggests that young people are beginning to rethink the feminist commitment to sexual equality. Only 40% of college students now agree that "if two people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex even if they have known each other for a very short time." This is down from a high point in 1987 of 52%. And their support for keeping abortion legal is also dropping: In 1990, 65% of college freshman believed that abortion should be legal, and now only 51% believe that it should.[1] In the same spirit, a recent Gallup poll for *CNN/USA Today* finds a strong commitment to monogamous marriage among both women and men. In 1997, 92% viewed marriage as "very important," and 84% acknowledged having "old fashioned values about family and marriage."[2] Also according to Gallup, a large majority (80%) of Americans believe that children do better if their mothers work part time or remain at home before the children start school.[3]

Leveling the Workplace Playing Field

These and related views on divorce, the discipline of children, and parents' participation in children's schools suggest a marked retreat from the radical views of previous generations and even a return to "traditional values." The most arresting aspect of the findings may nonetheless be their coexistence with a firm commitment to gender equality in the workplace. During the 1960s and 1970s, the struggle for greater sexual equality paralleled an equally intense struggle for gender equality in pay and opportunity. The early feminist slogan, "fifty-nine cents on the dollar," accurately captured the disparity in women and men's earnings. That disparity reflected both unequal pay scales and women's exclusion from some of the most lucrative occupations. Slowly, during the late 1970s and at an accelerating clip during the 1980s, women closed the gap. Today, most occupations are open to women who choose to enter them. Further, entry level women earn virtually the same as men for the same work and occasionally a bit more. Feminists continue to protest gender disparities in earnings, but the disparities do not occur when women and men do the same work, at the same level, for the same amount of time. The disparities above all reflect women's propensity to give more time to family than men, including leaves for pregnancy or early childcare.

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Looking back over the century, we may confidently assert that throughout most of our economy, gender equality in work and pay is the rule not the exception. Where exceptions occur, they are generally seen as anomalous and subject to legal remedy. The most striking aspect of this equality is the rapidity with which it has occurred and the ease with which the American public has accepted it. It would be difficult to find a group of working people in all of history that has improved its position as dramatically or in as short a period of time as American women have during the past two or three decades. It would also be difficult to find a significant number of Americans who do not believe that women should earn as much as men for the same work. Where pockets of resentment exist, they primarily reflect a growing discomfort with affirmative action programs that have sometimes appeared to promote women's opportunities at the expense of men's. And since women now account for more than half of all college students in the country, it is reasonable to expect that the pool of qualified women will grow more rapidly than the pool of qualified men.

Women's professional, occupational, and economic success must count as one of this century's primary gains in gender equality, but this development has not benefited all women equally. New opportunities have served upscale women extremely well, permitting them to enter and succeed at the most lucrative professions. But the same economy that has welcomed them presents a very different aspect to less affluent women. During the very years of women's most dramatic strides toward economic equality with men, the economy has become a predominantly service economy, which provides excellent jobs for a minority, and low-skilled, low-paying jobs for the majority.[4] During the same years, the skyrocketing of out-of-wedlock births has exposed poor women to economic catastrophe. In a world in which even the affluent frequently believe a family needs two incomes, poor women with one income and one or more children have little hope of both providing and caring for their children.

Forging A True Domestic Partnership

Within a remarkably brief span of time, a majority of

Americans have come not merely to accept but to favor gender equality at work and greater respect for women as individuals within families. Even as Americans continue to believe that young children would benefit from their mother's presence at home, they have come to believe that married women have as much right as their husbands to work, even when they have young children. This growing acceptance of women's need for a profession or occupation has resulted in men's increased participation in the life of families, especially children. Fathers now care for children while mothers work, coach a daughter's soccer team, and contribute to basic household tasks. Few Americans believe that men do as much domestic and childcare labor as women, but most expect them to do significantly more than their fathers would have tolerated. In this spirit, both women and men are more likely than previous generations to expect marriage to be a genuine partnership in which both husband and wife contribute to wage earning and to domestic work.

These new attitudes and others like them count as an impressive advance in gender equality. What remains interesting—and still awaits clear political expression—is the extent to which an impressive number of people appear to view gender equality as, in some way, compatible with sexual difference. In this perspective, it is plausible to view the most radical attempts to erase all signs of sexual difference as a misstep or false direction in the question for a livable gender equality. The growing reservations about abortion on demand and other aspects of the sexual revolution fall into this category. In a not entirely coherent way, Americans seem to be groping for a vision in which women have as much opportunity as men to develop their talents and reap the rewards of their labor and still remain women. It would further appear that much of this new caution stems from people's growing concern about the needs of children and the value of strong families.

The widespread acceptance of gender equality has, in recent years, progressed hand in glove with a growing emphasis upon self-reliance and a growing mistrust of governmental programs dedicated to the redistribution of income and the supplanting of individual and family autonomy. Some have taken the sharp reaction against affirmative action that has surfaced in Texas, California, Washington State, and elsewhere during the past few years as evidence of conservatism and diminishing concern for the unfortunate, which it may in part be. Yet these same years appear, if anything, to have spawned a heartening increase in volunteerism and efforts to help others and strengthen communities. Under these conditions, it is tempting to read the reaction against affirmative action as, above all, a rejection of social engineering—a kind of collective recognition that nature will have its say.

Similarly, Americans seem to be having second thoughts about some of the extreme feminist campaigns to defend women against male sexuality. Recent decades have seen a dramatic and heartening advance in public recognition of rape as a crime and of the sexual abuse of women as unacceptable. But it might be misguided to view these gains in public awareness as gains in gender equality. For if they testify to a growing sensitivity to women's right to personal dignity and physical safety, they also register a recognition that, with respect to sexuality, women do differ from men. If anything, we are witnessing a growing reaction against the proliferation of rules about sexual harassment and acquaintance rape. Some argue that women should be prepared to live with the risks of sexual freedom, even when the results are distressing. Others argue that women should learn to cultivate modesty and reject excessive sexual freedom. Both sets of responses, however, converge in a tacit recognition that sexual difference cannot be equalized or leveled by the intervention of public authorities. Both, in other words, propose that women learn to take responsibility for themselves as independent female beings.

The progress toward gender equality in the United States during the past three decades ranks as one of the great world-historical revolutions, and it is abundantly clear that few, if any, of us grasp its full implications.[5] What many of us, nonetheless, intuitively understand is that the clock cannot be turned back, and, increasingly, few of us wish to. At the century's close, we have learned that women can do most things as well—sometimes better—than men; that women are entitled to reap the same rewards from their efforts as men; and that stifling women's talents imposes high costs upon our society as a whole. In this respect, the gains that have permitted women to function as independent, responsible adults, rather than permanent children, are not merely a matter of justice, but a benefit to us all. On the basis of these gains, the agenda for the coming decades will be to provide the opportunities for women to benefit from those gains as women rather than as imitation men. That agenda requires our finding a balance between gender equality and sexual difference, and to do that, we must rethink the false starts that seemed to promise women freedom from their ability to bear children and to discount their sexual vulnerability.

Endnotes:

[1] Survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California.

[2] "Thinking About Values," *The Public Perspective,* Vol. 9, No. 2, 1998, p. 17.

[3] "Thinking About Values," p. 20.

[4] Louis Ferleger and William Lazonik,

[5] This argument and others expressed here are more fully developed and documented in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *"Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life" : How the Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch With Women's Real Concerns* (New York: Nan Talese/Doubleday, 1996).

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