

# SOCIAL CLASS AND STRATIFICATION

CLASSIC STATEMENTS  
AND THEORETICAL DEBATES

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## Women and Social Stratification: A Case of Intellectual Sexism

*Joan Acker*

In the last ten years, empirical studies and speculative discussions on the disadvantaged status of women have increased rapidly. Although social inequality is the subject matter of social stratification studies, little of this work on the position of women has been done by sociologists in the field of social stratification.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, sex has rarely been analyzed as a factor in stratification processes and structures,<sup>2</sup> although it is probably one of the most obvious criteria of social differentiation and one of the most obvious bases of economic, political, and social inequalities. Very few sociologists have even recognized that we have, with the exception of the study of the family, constructed a sociology that tends to deal with only the male half of humanity.

The inclusion of the female half of humanity and of sex as a central dimension in the study of society would lead to a more accurate picture of social structure and to a better understanding of process. However, serious consideration of sex as a central social factor will require reconceptualization in many areas of sociology. Problems of concept and method which arise in the field of social stratification when women are assumed to be significant participants in society are the subject of this paper. I discuss, first, the assumptions in stratification literature about the social position of women; second, some problems of reconceptualization; and, third, some contributions to the understanding of society which may result from studying women in the stratification system.

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### ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WOMEN AND STRATIFICATION

In stratification literature, six assumptions are made, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, about the social position of women. These are most clearly stated by the functionalists but are present also in the work of nonfunctionalists and Marxists.<sup>3</sup> These assumptions are:

1. The family is the unit in the stratification system.
2. The social position of the family is determined by the status of the male head of the household.
3. Females live in families; therefore, their status is determined by that of the males to whom they are attached.
4. The female's status is equal to that of her man, at least in terms of her position in the class structure, because the family is a unit of equivalent evaluation (Watson and Barth 1964).
5. Women determine their own social status only when they are not attached to a man.
6. Women are unequal to men in many ways, and are differentially evaluated on the basis of sex, but this is irrelevant to the structure of stratification systems.

The first assumption, that the family is the unit in stratification, is basic to the other five. Together, these assumptions neatly dispense with the necessity for considering the position of women in studies of social stratification or considering the salience of sex as a dimension of stratification.<sup>4</sup> To put it another way, the fate of the female in the class system is determined by the fate of the male. Therefore, it is necessary to study only males.

How adequate are these assumptions? There are, I believe, deficiencies of both logic and validity which I will discuss briefly.

1. *The family is the unit in the stratification system.*—The choice of the family as the unit may be based on the belief that all persons live in families. This is obviously not true, since 11 percent of the population over age eighteen is categorized as unattached individuals in 1970 data.<sup>5</sup> This assumption also rests on the validity of the other five assumptions, which I examine in the following paragraphs.

2. *The social position of the family is determined by the status of the male head of the household.*—This is a researchable question which has been little researched. Instead, empirical researchers often imply an answer to this question in their choice of indicators of class or status position. Thus, if family income is chosen as an indicator, there is an implication that total family resources determine

standing. If class placement is measured by occupation alone or an index including occupation, the occupation of the male head of household is invariably used, implying that his position does decide that of the family.<sup>6</sup>

There is one situation in which the second assumption is clearly invalid. The position of the family cannot be determined by the male head if there is no male head of the household. This is the case in a substantial proportion of American families. On the basis of the 1960 census, Watson and Barth (1964) estimated that approximately two-fifths of the households in the United States do not have a male head, in the sense implied by the traditional model of the small nuclear family. They found that two-fifths of the households were either "females or female headed households or husband-wife families in which the husband is retired or otherwise not in the labor force, is unemployed, or is working only part time."

3. *Females live in families; therefore, their status is determined by that of the males to whom they are attached.*—This assumption may be challenged on the grounds that all females do not live in families. Further, the assumption that a woman's status is determined by that of the man to whom she is attached implies that women have no status resources of their own. In a society in which women, as well as men, have resources of education, occupation, and income, it is obviously not true that women have no basis for determining their own status. If women do have such resources, why do we assume that they are inoperative if the woman is married? It is inconsistent to rank an unmarried woman on the basis of her education and occupation and then maintain that these factors are of no importance to her social status or class placement after she gets married the next day.<sup>7</sup> However, such an abrupt alteration of the criteria of class placement at the time of a shift in marital status is necessary if we are to accept the assumption that only women without men determine their own social status.

4. *The female's status is equal to that of her man.*—Once we question the assumption that the woman's status is determined by the man, we must also question the assumption that the status of the female is equal to that of her male. Of course, wife and husband may be equal, but equivalent evaluation can no longer be assumed.

Even if all females had no independent, status-creating resources, the equality of their status with that of their husbands would still be in question. Equality can be assessed on numerous dimensions. Prestige in the community, style of life, privileges, opportunities, association with social groups, income, education, occupation, and power might all be considered in evaluating the equality of husband and wife in the class structure. Occupation, equated by the functionalists with a full-time, functionally important social role, is often used as the indicator of position for men. However, the full-time occupation of many women, that of housewife-mother, is never considered as a ranking cri-

terion in stratification studies. Are we to conclude that this role is either not functionally important or not a full-time activity, or are we to conclude that only those activities which are directly rewarded financially can bestow status upon the individual or the family? Perhaps this is another question which could be explored through empirical research. There is some research evidence to suggest that housewives whose husbands work in a given occupation have less prestige than women who themselves are employed in the same occupation (Haavio-Mannila 1969). However, the evidence to support or refute the assumption of equal status in regard to the class structure is unfortunately sparse.

5. *Women determine their own social status only when they are not attached to a man.*—This assumption can be interpreted as a way of coping with the inconvenient fact that some women are not married or living in the household of a male relative.

6. *Women are at a disadvantage in hierarchies of wealth, power, and prestige, but this fact is irrelevant to the study of stratification systems.*—This assumption is implicit in the stratification literature. I draw this conclusion from, on the one hand, the scant attention to the situation of women in the stratification literature, and, on the other hand, the existence of ample evidence that women are excluded from the higher positions of power, that they earn less than men, and that they are present in very small proportions in the more prestigious occupations.

But, perhaps, the position of women is irrelevant to the structure of the larger system. I don't think so. For example, female-headed households account for almost 40 percent of those below the poverty line (Ferriss 1970). This statistic suggests that the economic and social disadvantages of being female may have an impact on class differentials in family structure. When stratification theorists talk about some classes, they are talking about women to a large extent. It is possible that some of the differences they discuss are sex rather than class differences. These differences may, for example, have an effect upon mobility patterns and the permeability of class boundaries, thus affecting the larger system in complex ways.

In sum, it is not adequate or useful to assume that females have no relevant role in stratification processes independent of their family roles and their ties to particular men. If this conclusion is reasonable, a reconsideration of sex status and stratification is indicated.

As a first step in such a reconsideration, I make the following assumptions:

1. Sex is an enduring ascribed characteristic which (a) has an effect upon the evaluation of persons and positions, and (b) is the basis of the persisting sexual division of labor and of sex-based inequalities.

2. The sex dichotomy cuts across all classes and strata. (This is also true of ethnicity and race.)

## MODELS OF STRATIFICATION AND SEX

A number of conceptual issues arise when sex is considered a relevant stratification variable. One of these issues is, Can inequalities based on sex be integrated into a conceptual model of stratification systems? The traditional view of classes as aggregates occupying similar positions in relationship to the means of production or similar positions in one or more hierarchies of wealth, power, or prestige has made it difficult to deal with inequalities which cut across class lines. It has been easier to assume, as Watson and Barth point out, that the family is a unit, that all members of the family are equally evaluated, and that, therefore, it is not important to investigate the status of women.

Some current developments in the study of social stratification may make it easier to give serious consideration to sex inequalities. For example, there is a trend toward expanding the study of stratification to include a wide variety of structured social inequalities (Heller 1969). Similarly, there is a trend away from exclusive concern with the classic definitions of class and toward a concern with the individual as a unit. Although this trend began a number of years ago, it now seems to have establishment blessing even in the person of Parsons. A recent review article notes, "He [Parsons] also poses some serious objection to the relevance of classic definitions of class in the analysis of modern societies, arguing . . . that the unit of class stratification can no longer be usefully taken to be the family but a man's complex of ascribed and achieved collectivity memberships, including his organization memberships" (Laumann 1970).

Using the individual rather than the family as a unit, it may become possible to integrate sex into models of stratification systems in at least two ways: (1) as a dimension in stratification which cuts across class lines and produces two interrelated hierarchies of positions or persons, or (2) as a basis of evaluation which affects the placement of individuals in particular hierarchies.

An alternative solution to the problem of integrating sex-based inequalities into conceptual models of stratification systems would not require abandoning classic definitions of class. Females can be viewed as constituting caste-like groupings within social classes.<sup>8</sup> Female castes, using this approach, may have certain common interests and life patterns. In addition, they may share certain disabilities and inequities. At the same time, female castes are embedded in the class structure and each is affected by the class which envelops it. Class differences in ideology, life chances, and lifestyle may obscure the identical nature of many structural factors affecting female castes.



### STATUS AND CLASS: CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL PROBLEMS

An additional conceptual problem can be stated as follows: If women are to be seen as persons rather than as appendages to males, how do we define their social status, particularly if they are not working for pay and cannot be categorized on the basis of their own occupation and income? Can value be assigned to productive work which is not paid labor? This is a broader problem which also arises in trying to define the status of retired persons, of young people who are still students, of volunteers, and of the unemployed. It may eventually become a problem even in determining the status of adult men who are in the workforce. If long-range predictions about the declining centrality of work and the increasing importance of nonwork activities in cybernated societies become reality, the relevance of paid occupation for class placement may decline, and other, unpaid activities may become more important as a source of social identity.

In the interim, one solution to the problem of defining women's social status is to view "housewife" as an occupation and to give it some sort of ranking in the hierarchy of occupations. Although the rankings of occupational status in current use, such as the North-Hatt Scale, do not include "housewife" as a category, new scales could be developed. I assume that this occupation would have a rather low ranking. This raises the interesting question of whether, and under what conditions, marriage constitutes downward social mobility and/or reduced mobility opportunities for women. At the same time, the value of "housewife" may vary with the socioeconomic stratum within which the position occurs. For example, the position of upper-class housewife may be much more highly valued in the overall structure than the position of lower-class housewife. It may be that the valuation of this position rises as its functions become more symbolic and less utilitarian.<sup>10</sup> Or, to put it another way, the value may rise as functions become centered more around consumption and less around productive activities. Within classes, however, the evaluation of housewife relative to other occupations open to females may vary in other ways.

Another partial solution to the problem of defining the status of women is to explore more thoroughly the notions of conferred status and deference entitlement (Shils 1968). Shils points out that "relative proximity to persons in powerful roles is [another] deference entitlement." Applied to the family, this means that the social position of the most powerful person in the family is, to an extent, reflected onto the other members of the family. Dependent women are among the most obvious recipients of this type of deference entitlement. This concept should not be confused with that of equivalent evaluation of all

family members, based on the evaluation of the male head. There is no necessary implication that only the male family head determines status or class placement of family members. Some men may achieve entitlement to deference through their close relationship with a prestigious wife or mother. In addition, conferred status does not imply equivalent status. The status which is gained through close association with another person is probably a different order of deference entitlement from that which is gained more directly through characteristics or achievements of the individual herself. The recipient of conferred status in most cases probably does not have deference entitlements equivalent to those of the person whose proximity confers deference. With fewer status resources available, the recipient usually cannot reciprocate, and consequently as long as status is conferred must remain unequal to the person with greater resources.<sup>11</sup> This relationship between the bestower of status and the recipient is, in all probability, reflected in differential social evaluations.

To summarize, the position of the nonemployed wife may be determined by a combination of the ranking of housewife, conferred status, and premarriage deference entitlements belonging to the woman herself.

### TOWARD A MORE ACCURATE VIEW OF AMERICAN SOCIETY

The incorporation into sociology of the insight that sex does affect standing in the social structure would contribute to a more accurate picture of our society. Questions about social mobility and about power structures which are suggested when sex is taken as a salient variable illustrate this point.

Generalizations about social mobility patterns and trends on a societal level are based primarily on studies of white males (Blau and Duncan 1967). Since this group does not comprise even one-half of the population, the validity of the generalizations might be questioned. Of course, the choice of males as the proper subjects in the study of mobility is related to the assumption that female mobility is tied to male mobility. This derives from the assumptions discussed above and also pervades the literature. For example, Lopata (1971, 14) states, "The occupational ranking of the husbands of the women interviewed is generally higher than that of their fathers; thus the women had experienced upward mobility."

If the assumptions of female dependence were dropped, different patterns might emerge. For example, it would be interesting to look at intergenerational occupational mobility patterns of females, using the mother's status as the point of origin and using "housewife" as an occupational category. The findings from studies of this type might then be usefully combined with studies

of mobility patterns and trends among white males to produce a much more complex and complete view of American mobility processes.

The few studies of intragenerational female mobility which have been made (Rubin 1968, 1969; Scott 1969; Elder 1969) focus on mobility through the contracting of a marriage. It would be just as reasonable to study mobility as the consequence of the dissolution of a marriage. Is there, for example, a greater probability of downward mobility for the woman who is divorced, deserted, or widowed than for the woman whose marriage is not disrupted? Some historical studies on this problem might also help to dissolve the notion that, even though the ideal nuclear family is not universal today, it was almost universal at some mythical time in our past. Although widespread divorce is a fairly recent phenomenon in the United States, dissolution of the nuclear family through death and desertion has probably always been with us. The deserving widow working hard in the boardinghouse to put her boys through school is a well-known mythical figure. It may be that the female-headed household was more prevalent in our past than we generally think. It may also be that, in some cases, this type of downward mobility for the woman contributed to the mobility strivings in her children.

A more complex and complete understanding of the structure of power and power relationships might also result from the recognition of the relevance of sex. For example, there may be a relationship between the position of women and the type of power system. This might be examined at the level of the local community as well as the level of the nation-state. In addition, cross-national comparisons of the position of women in societies which are undergoing rapid changes in class structure and the distribution of power might contribute to our understanding of larger social systems.

### CONCLUSION

I have briefly indicated a number of conceptual and empirical questions which arise if we consider sex-based inequalities as salient to the structure of stratification systems. As the traditional nuclear family becomes less and less the dominant form in our country, the contribution which sex makes to the class and caste structure and to the social status of the individual will become more visible. In addition, as women become more powerful through greater participation in the labor force and through political organization as women, their position in the total social structure will become a more legitimate problem for the sociologist.

### NOTES

Revision of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Southwestern Sociological Association (1971), Dallas, Texas.

1. Sociologists in other areas have made a number of recent contributions which are relevant to problems of stratification. For example, Epstein (1970) discusses the salience of sex status in the professional careers of women in the higher professions. Oppenheimer (1968) examines the basis for the sex labeling of jobs in the American workforce. Wilensky (1968) explores the relationships between the position of women, economic growth, and democratic ideology. Etzioni (1969) investigates the relationship between sex status and occupation in the semiprofessions. Some earlier, but isolated, analyses were Hacker (1951) and Myrdal (1944, appendix 5) both of whom discuss women as a minority group; Hughes (1949), who places nontraditional, career women in the role of "marginal men"; Ellis (1962), who studied correlates of mobility among career women; and Caplow (1954), who devotes a chapter to women in the world of work. There have been other sociological discussions of the position of women (Komarovskiy 1950, 1953; Bernard 1966, 1968), but these analyses have not been integrated into the studies of social stratification.

2. Lenski (1966) is one of the few who recognized this problem in the field of stratification. In *Power and Privilege* he states, "Another much neglected aspect of the distributive systems of modern societies is the class system based on sex." He also observes that "In analyses of advanced industrial societies, it is impossible to ignore or treat as obvious the role of sex in the distributive process." Even Lenski, however, does little analysis. He concludes his brief discussion of the position of women (mentioned on 13 pages out of a total of 446 pages in the book) with the comforting thought that, "for the vast majority of women, the battle for equality has been won." There may be some contradiction between the statements that the battle for sex equality has been won and that sex is still an important factor in the distributive process. However, this book was published pre-women's lib, in 1966, when such inconsistencies, although frequent, were relatively invisible. This contradiction reflects the difficulties of stratification theory in dealing with the status of women.

3. See, for example, two recent studies of class structure in Poland and Czechoslovakia (Machonin 1970; Wesolowski and Slomczynski 1968) which explicitly make the assumptions outlined here.

4. Lenski (1966) makes the same point: "This neglect [of women] has been due in large measure to the tendency of sociologists to treat families, rather than individuals, as the basic unit in systems of stratification" (402).

5. Calculated from tables 6, 8, and 44, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1971* (U.S., Bureau of the Census 1971, 36).

6. Hofstetter (1970) explores this problem. She concludes that class self-placement by college student respondents may be determined by the combined resources of father and mother, rather than by those of father alone.

7. Many of these points have also been made by Watson and Barth in a penetrating critique of some assumptions in stratification theory and research published in 1964.

8. Both Myrdal (1944, appendix 5) and Hacker (1951) drew the parallel between

women and blacks, suggesting that women occupy a caste position similar to that of blacks. As noted above, their work, among that of others, has remained peripheral to the mainstream study of stratification in all theoretical perspectives.

9. Exercises along this line can be found in ladies' magazines and in women's lib literature. However, they have not been seriously pursued, as far as I know, by sociologists.

10. Thorstein Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* ([1899] 1993), of course, makes the same point.

11. This idea derives most directly from Blau (1964).

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