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# Gender Relations in Native North America

NANCY BONVILLAIN

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Analyses of gender roles in societies throughout the world have raised questions about the causes of equality or inequality in status and inter-gender relations. Much of the recent research contradicts the often-stated claim that some degree of male dominance exists in all societies.<sup>1</sup> The notion of reputed universal male dominance has been challenged on several fronts. First, most anthropologists have been male and have dealt with male informants in their fieldwork, and ethnographic material has been framed by the gender perspective of observer and participant.<sup>2</sup> Second, historical accounts of earlier cultures are likewise tainted by the attitudes of explorers, missionaries and government officials, all of whom were men. It is well to be reminded of Lafitau's admonition in 1724 that "... authors who have written on the customs of the [Native] Americans" concerning the rights and status of women "... have formed their conceptions, in this as in everything else, on European ideas and practices."<sup>3</sup> Finally, by the time colonial agents, and later anthropologists, interacted with indigenous peoples, traditional gender relations were already distorted by rapid sociocultural and political changes resulting from colonial processes.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, even the earliest post-contact data are not truly representative of aboriginal society.

This paper will examine gender differences in five Native American societies: the Naskapi, Navajo, Eskimo, Iroquois and Plains peoples. We will see the extent to which ecological and

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social conditions have molded gender roles in Amerindian cultures and the extent to which they have been re-shaped by post-colonial historical forces. We begin with a discussion of societal features bearing on gender relations and then proceed to the analysis of each of the five societies, which were chosen to demonstrate the impact of various factors in different ecological contexts.

### FEATURES OF GENDER RELATIONS

Gender is a social construct. It emerges from sex differences between females and males but, rather than reflecting biology, gender reflects and defines the social identities of women and men. Notions of gender provide culturally determined roles which become models for behavior, both legitimizing and reproducing women and men as social beings within the context of that particular culture. Concepts of gender, therefore, are ideological and as such explain and reinforce cultural evaluations of appropriate male and female activity and identity. These ideas have their operational reflection in the assignment of roles in society, potentially providing differential assessments of women's and men's social contributions. As products of culture, gender concepts are not everywhere identical and do not lead automatically to the same roles and valuations. Differences are found in the kinds of work, familial responsibilities and political and ritual participation deemed appropriate for men and women. Taken together, patterns of gender behavior and their ideological justifications form, in Sanday's words,<sup>5</sup> "sex-role plans" which provide models for individuals' conduct and conformity.

Underlying and structuring gender relations is the sexual division of labor which assigns roles to individuals on the basis of their biological sex and thereby transforms them from female and male beings into women and men.<sup>6</sup> This transformation has implications not only for the work that men and women do but also for the quality of the relationships established between them. Through the division of labor in both its material and ideological aspects, men and women are categorized as socially distinct. Relations between them may be egalitarian or stratified in terms of access to status and prestige, participation in "central institutions"<sup>7</sup> and the ability to control one's own or another's actions.

In sexually egalitarian societies, “. . . neither sex controls the other,” both women and men have “equal control in all spheres or [their] spheres of control are different but balanced.”<sup>8</sup> Interpersonal relations in these societies are characterized by the principle of autonomy, which is the “. . . decision-making power over [one’s] own life and activities.”<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, gender stratification “refers to the unequal and persistent distribution of resources such as income, political power or prestige on the basis of gender.”<sup>10</sup>

Unequal access to resources, power and prestige results in systematic hierarchical relations. Resources supply rewards, such as payment for work done, produce received in distributive networks or allocation of food intake within households. Social prestige is reflected in attitudes and behaviors of deference accorded to a person by others. Prestige is further reflected in individual power, which entails the “. . . ability to exert control . . . in domestic, political, economic or religious spheres”<sup>11</sup> or more generally the “. . . ability to act effectively on persons or things, to take or secure favorable decisions.”<sup>12</sup> Power may function covertly to allow socially dominated persons some degree of influence or it may function as authority, which is the publicly recognized right to “. . . make a particular decision and to command obedience.”<sup>13</sup>

Sex role plans express differences in men’s and women’s autonomy, prestige, power and authority. These crucial socio-political relations will be reviewed in the five Native American societies to be examined. Furthermore, we will consider gender role allocation as it is influenced by ecological, social and historical factors. Subsistence activities take shape within ecological contexts but also vary with dimensions of social complexity. Therefore, the distinction between foraging and horticultural societies is important, since these primary subsistence modes have implications for gender contributions and assessments. Individuals’ roles within kinship groups are another expression of gender values. Post-marital residence patterns and descent rules help to establish individuals’ rights and authority and conversely to undermine the rights of others. Behavior within households, including familial roles, decision-making and conflict resolution, serves as a critical method of reproducing gender identity in each generation. Families (i.e., households) are not idealized, abstract constructs. They are lived through differently by each member, with gender and age as primary determinants of experience.<sup>14</sup>

Arenas of community-wide activities provide an additional context for the display of gender roles. Rights to participate in public discussion and decision-making reflect values associated with male and female influence and authority. Variables of social complexity must be considered, as well, since the formalism involved in public "political" life in large, stratified societies differs substantially from the informal manifestation of authority characteristic of small, egalitarian societies.

Finally, symbols of gender are expressed in religious belief and practice. Gender differences can be stressed or minimized through patterns of ritual participation and through segregated or forbidden behavior. Myths of origin and the qualities of supernatural beings also reflect cultural attitudes toward human females and males. Religious symbols are especially powerful modes of reinforcing gender concepts, since they are virtually unquestioned—coming, by definition, from divine sources.

All Amerindian peoples endured a common legacy of direct and indirect European colonization. These societies experienced differences in the time and circumstances of contact, but colonial policies everywhere affected subsistence, sociopolitical organizations and belief systems. Gender relations were concomitantly disrupted, both through directed attacks upon existing sex role plans and through change in other intra-cultural patterns. Therefore, the impact of historical processes on activities and valuations of men and women is a further component of gender relations.

### MONTAGNAIS-NASKAPI

The Montagnais-Naskapi of eastern Labrador have been described by Leacock<sup>15</sup> as an essentially egalitarian people, lacking a gender-based hierarchy or any principle of entrenched status differentiation. Seventeenth-century missionary accounts of Naskapi gender roles are contradictory, as are early descriptions of cultural norms in most Amerindian societies. On the one hand, native women are depicted as engaged in endless drudgery, laboring constantly in strenuous outdoor tasks, child-rearing and food preparation.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, women are reported to have had "great power" in family and community affairs.<sup>17</sup> Jesuits working among the Naskapi noted with disapproval the right of native women to make decisions regarding household

activities and group movements. Women also had freedom in sexual matters, evidently engaging in pre-marital or extra-marital affairs.<sup>18</sup>

These conflicting views of Naskapi life need to be placed in the cultural context of a small, egalitarian, foraging society. Subsistence tasks were assigned by gender. Men hunted, fished and made their equipment; women prepared food, made clothing and tents and cared for children. However, the household's activities were communal. Movement to new locations for better access to hunting and trapping areas involved discussion among all members. Although cultural ideals differentiated the subsistence roles of women and men, in actual practice, women often accompanied their fathers or husbands in hunting and men readily tended to children's needs.<sup>19</sup>

Naskapi norms of personal autonomy were manifested in the ease of relations between spouses, a result of clearly defined roles: ". . . the women know what they are to do, and the men also; and one never meddles in the work of the other."<sup>20</sup> Women and men jointly made decisions affecting their households, which were the basic units of economic production and consumption. Leacock's work among the Naskapi of this century documents the continued autonomous yet interdependent relations between wives and husbands and the fluidity with which each performs necessary tasks.<sup>21</sup>

Egalitarian gender relations among the Montagnais-Naskapi are reflective of the lack of ascribed status differentiation in band societies. In a discussion of band-level sociopolitical organization, Leacock warns against interpreting social relations from a hierarchical, class-based perspective: "what is hard to grasp about the structure of the egalitarian band is that leadership as we conceive it is not merely 'weak' or 'incipient,' as is commonly stated, but irrelevant."<sup>22</sup> Due to the importance of a combination of individual initiative and group interdependence, "decision-making in this context calls for concepts other than ours of leader and led, dominant and deferent, no matter how loosely these are seen to apply."<sup>23</sup> In Montagnais-Naskapi society, individuals all had rights to be heard without the implications of differential power over others.

Analysis of data from the Montagnais-Naskapi corroborates Sanday's suggestions concerning sex role plans in egalitarian societies. She proposes that fluid gender relations reflect sexual

integration and balanced, interdependent roles emphasizing consensus and cooperation. These behaviors contrast with gender role rigidity, which is a necessary feature of stratification and male dominance.<sup>24</sup>

Within the network of familial roles, Sanday correlates egalitarian gender relations with child-rearing practices involving fathers in their children's care.<sup>25</sup> Early missionary accounts of Montagnais-Naskapi life reflect such involvement, and Leacock's observations of modern Naskapi society document the persistence of this practice.<sup>26</sup>

Another feature of Montagnais-Naskapi culture which influenced gender relations was the preference for post-marital matrilineal residence.<sup>27</sup> Married men joined hunting and trapping groups composed of their fathers-in-law and some brothers-in-law. These locality rules were not always followed, as is typical of the informality and practicality of native social life where decisions were based on resource availability and personal affiliations. However, matrilineal residence, which continued as a preference into the twentieth century,<sup>28</sup> impacts on gender relations since it provides a woman with a stable kin group of parents and siblings who ensure that her rights are respected. Jesuit reports of the power of native women to determine household affairs may well have reflected the secure position of women in a matrilineal family.

In Montagnais-Naskapi society, men took a prominent role in religious life, acting as shaman and curers. But women were not barred from these roles and the respect associated with them.<sup>29</sup> Male orientation in religious belief and practice, however, was evidenced by the preponderance of rituals concerned with hunting, men's principal occupation. For example, important rites involved the determination, through divination, of successful hunting routes.<sup>30</sup>

Aboriginal Montagnais-Naskapi culture developed a stable, balanced ecological adjustment, relying on small game hunting, fishing, trapping and the gathering of wild resources. External threats of warfare and internal violence were extremely rare. All of these factors helped maintain egalitarian gender relations stressing individual autonomy and household interdependence.

European colonization changed native society and undermined traditional values in many areas of life, particularly subsistence activities and family organization. These changes had a direct im-

pact on gender roles and assessments of the contributions and rights of women and men. Early goals of the French missionaries included establishing stability in Montagnais-Naskapi marriages and promoting nuclear rather than extended family households. The European ideological bias favored a husband's social, legal and moral dominance over his wife and children. Nuclear family residence severed the support which a woman formerly received from her co-resident kin. As the colonial period continued, male economic activities focused increasingly on trapping beaver to amass the furs needed to obtain desired European goods. The trade economy emphasized male contributions and lessened the social valuation of female labor. Although modern Montagnais-Naskapi ideals still stress individual autonomy, the altered economic structure has shifted the household base from interdependent relations to women's dependence on their husbands. Leadership roles within the community have become more formalized through dealings with European and Canadian officials, and these positions have been held exclusively by men.

### NAVAJO

The Navajo have experienced several cultural transformations since their migration to the semi-desert regions of the American Southwest some time after 1000 A.D. However, the term "traditional" usually is applied to their way of life following the 1868 release from four years of mass imprisonment at Fort Sumner, New Mexico. The economic base established then consisted of a mixed reliance on sheep-herding and horticulture, with peripheral earnings from craft production and wage work.

Navajo gender relations are egalitarian and autonomous. The division of labor differentiates the roles of women and men to some extent, but actual activities are often joint endeavors of household members. Men and women own individual sheep which are pooled as the household's herd and tended by young members of the family. Land for farming is allocated through matrilineal clans and is worked by both men and women, although men spend more time in this occupation. Women do the major share of household work, including food preparation and child care. Fathers, however, are attentive to their children and provide them with a great deal of emotional support.



The Navajo "sex role plan," then, is highly integrated. Economic contributions of women and men are equally central to household functioning and equally valued. The social system supporting these patterns is based on matrilineal clans and matrilocal post-marital residence. Settlements typically are composed of separate dwellings for each nuclear family, related to each other through matrilineal ties. The "outfit," as it has been called,<sup>31</sup> centers on an elder woman and her husband and includes their daughters, sons-in-law and unmarried sons. Strength of ties to the household varies for members depending on sex and age. The elder couple and their daughters have the strongest bonds, as they form the stable core of residence. Unmarried sons realize that upon marriage they will probably move from their family of origin to that of their wife. However, sons know that they can always return to their mother's home, since the emotional bond between a mother and all of her children is intense. Sons-in-law are initially loosely integrated into their wives' household. They are valued for the labor they contribute, but their behavior tends to be circumspect and they often return for visits to their natal family. Divorce is frequent, especially in the early years of marriage, contributing to the lack of solidarity between a son-in-law and his wife's kin.

Until recently, community cohesion beyond the local settlement was almost entirely absent. Networks were based on kinship, determined by familial bonds (primarily ties to one's mother's relatives and secondarily to one's father's relatives). Leadership, then, was oriented to the family and shared jointly by wife and husband. One's mother's brother featured prominently in certain kin roles, giving advice concerning his sister's children, participating in arranging their marriages and performing various ceremonial functions.

Men served as the major link to the world outside the local group. This pattern may reflect an earlier warrior role in raiding and community defense which was transformed after the Fort Sumner imprisonment into a position as family and local spokesman. Women, however, participated in discussion and decision-making, not only within their households but also in public contexts.

Navajo society developed in an ecological setting which necessitated small, scattered homesteads focused on self-sufficient and inner-oriented networks. Gender equality in labor, prestige and

social valuation was consistent with mutual interdependence and fluidity in roles. Intra-familial violence was minimal. Women were protected by the presence of their kin within the settlement. But men also were valued members of the local group.

Navajo ideology stresses women's fertility and the mother-child bond. These themes are expressed in daily life and in the symbolism of ritual and myth.<sup>32</sup> The essential kinship tie is that of mother and child who are ". . . bound together by the most intense, the most diffuse and the most enduring solidarity to be found in Navajo culture."<sup>33</sup> Mothers are sources of life and sustenance. Even in the child's adult years, mothers provide a place of residence and support for daughters remaining at home and for sons returning to visit or to stay if their own marriages do not succeed.

In Navajo terminology, the word for "mother" is extended to refer to many important cultural symbols. One of these is "Changing Woman," a central mythological figure, who came to the Navajo, it is said, when people had lost the ability to reproduce. The first female puberty rite was held for her, celebrating her fertility and enabling her to mate with the Sun. She gave birth to twin sons and later to the original Navajo clans.<sup>34</sup> "Changing Woman" represents not only human fertility but the sustenance provided by the Earth, another of her names. When she grows old, she is transformed into a young woman again, symbolizing the continual rejuvenation of the earth.

Additionally, the term for "mother" is used in reference to the earth, corn and sheep, the three major elements of Navajo subsistence. Corn is associated generally with mothers and more specifically with female fertility. Corn pollen is ". . . probably the single most sacred item in the Navajo universe."<sup>35</sup> As the fertile aspect of corn, it was fed to "Changing Woman" to stimulate her reproductive ability and is used in many rituals, including the ceremonial meal shared by the couple in marriage rites.

Human fertility is further symbolized by menstrual blood and more widely by the colors of red (blood) and yellow (corn pollen). Contact with menstrual blood is avoided because of its power and danger. However, sexual intercourse during menstruation is not feared but rather is thought to insure conception.<sup>36</sup>

The basic sex role integration and interdependence characteristic of Navajo life is reflected and reinforced by myths of origin and order in the universe. These myths depict an early world in

which women and men lived apart, resulting in the inability to reproduce or to cultivate the land. This situation was resolved by assigning each sex its proper role: women as sustainers of life and men as political and religious leaders.<sup>37</sup> Balance in gender relations is expressed symbolically in the female/male pairing of ritual elements, including west/east, red/blue, earth/sun, and blood/water.<sup>38</sup>

Although pastoralism is often associated with male authority and dominance in other parts of the world,<sup>39</sup> among the Navajo it has not led to unequal gender relations for several reasons. First, both men and women own sheep and are responsible for their herding and care. Secondly, matrilineal clan structure and especially matrilineal residence patterns provide security for women, protect their rights and legitimize their authority. Finally, the centrality of motherhood and its symbolic extensions permeate Navajo ideology and behavior. The separate but equal contribution of males and females is a recurrent theme in mythology and ritual, expressing the real social value accorded to both.

Traditional Navajo culture has undergone major changes in this century, particularly since the 1930s, highlighted by federal programs aimed at reducing the number of sheep to halt deterioration of the land from over-grazing. By this period, Navajo people relied on their sheep, not only for food but for supplies of wool to sell to traders in order to purchase groceries, clothing and equipment.<sup>40</sup> Sheep reduction policies therefore undermined the rather fragile self-sufficiency enjoyed by most Navajo households. This situation has had direct and indirect ramifications for gender roles and relations. The decline in sheep herds affected income levels by limiting the amount of wool available for sale. Wage work increased dramatically, but since most jobs were in fields dominated by men, particularly construction, railroad work and mining, men contributed more than women to the economic stability of their families. Jobs for women in service occupations were temporary and paid lower wages, further decreasing comparative female productivity.<sup>41</sup> Women's important work in the manufacture of rugs for sale declined as well, partly because of shortages of wool for weaving and partly due to market shifts to cheaper, imitative sources.<sup>42</sup>

These economic changes entailing reliance on individual wage earnings have led to an emphasis on neolocal nuclear family residence patterns. The breakup of matrilineal units has resulted in

the isolation of women within small households, exacerbated by their husbands' absence from home. Work which previously had been shared between spouses today falls exclusively to women.<sup>43</sup>

The traditional notion of individual ownership and control of one's own resources often is extended to include wages earned on jobs. But since these wages are obtained primarily by men, women are vulnerable to financial insecurity and lack of support. In a study of a changing Navajo community, Hamamsy observes that ". . . the poorest women are generally the middle-aged and old women who have no male providers. Under traditional conditions these women would be well off; they might be managers of large extended family units, or at least respected female relatives with secure positions within the family group."<sup>44</sup>

Male authority has increased with the shift to nuclear family organization and the concomitant role of the husband/father as provider. In situations of conflict between spouses, husbands are in a strategically advantageous position either in asserting their wishes or in coping with the consequences of divorce.

Although these socioeconomic changes have altered gender relations in many households, the valued symbols of motherhood continue to be potent forces in Navajo worldview.<sup>45</sup> Women, especially elders, are publicly respected and have prominent positions in their local communities. As an example, recent confrontations and resistance in the Joint Use Area against government attempts to relocate Navajo families in the so-called Navajo-Hopi land dispute amply demonstrate the active assertion by elder women of rights to their native homelands.

## ESKIMO

In Eskimo culture, gender roles were sharply differentiated, particularly in subsistence activities. Hunting of sea mammals or caribou among coastal or inland groups, respectively, was men's primary occupation. Since hunting provided nearly all of the Eskimo's food, households were directly dependent on male labor for their survival. However, women's productive contribution was considerable. In addition to distributing the catch and preparing meals, women were responsible for processing raw materials from the animals into necessary utilitarian goods. They made all of the clothing, boots, boat covers and containers used

by the family.<sup>46</sup> This labor provided products essential for the survival of the husband/hunter and therefore contributed to sustaining the group. Women who were especially skilled in these manufactures were sought after as wives, just as successful hunters were preferred as husbands.<sup>47</sup>

The survival of the nuclear household depended on the work of both husband and wife. Authority within the family was exercised by whomever had knowledge in the matter at hand; that is, men's opinions were respected in areas of their expertise while women's advice was followed in their spheres.<sup>48</sup> Although most child care was done by mothers, fathers also were directly involved with children, tending to their physical needs and entertaining them. Children, in fact, were highly prized and parents spent a great deal of time caring for them. However, in stark contradiction to the ideological value placed on children of both sexes was the occurrence of female infanticide among some Eskimo groups. Although female infanticide happened only in times of severe food shortages and can be explained as an ecological adjustment to the need to eliminate dependents who could be a drain on household resources, this practice must have had an emotional impact on women. It certainly carried a message of the differential valuation of female and male lives.

Harris<sup>49</sup> posits that female infanticide is associated with male dominance and the social denigration of women. Among the Eskimo, such an association was somewhat weaker than elsewhere because of economic and social contexts. Harris' theory was developed from data of Amazonian peoples, among whom men monopolized subsistence activities, controlled all resources and kin groups and engaged in frequent warfare. In those cultures, women performed very few productive tasks. Eskimo women, on the contrary, made considerable economic contributions to the survival of all. They also had rights within households and participated in public life. Additionally, warfare was rare and therefore male warrior ideologies which demean women never developed.

Although warfare was infrequent, violence directed at someone within one's own or a nearby community did occur. Jealousy between men vying for the attention of a particular woman was evidently the most common motivation for attacks. Within local groups, male competition took the symbolic form of public "song

duels," each man composing songs of ridicule and insult toward his rival. Audience reaction and laughter determined the winner, although the woman whose favor was sought often followed her own sentiment. Antagonism between men sometimes lingered on and erupted into physical violence as well. Marital jealousies contributed to domestic violence; husbands feared their wives' interest in other men might lead to their ultimate desertion. Men thus beat their wives in retaliation for imagined or actual adultery. Women, too, were afraid of abandonment by their spouses but had less recourse to physical threats and punishments. The fact that both wife and husband were dependent on each other actually may have increased the insecurity they experienced, since both worried about their ability to survive alone. Marital bonds, therefore, were often fairly brittle.

Eskimo mythology and religious practices stressed male participants and rituals. Most shaman, who were respected and often feared, were men, although many elderly women were skilled healers.<sup>50</sup> Male practitioners employed supernatural means to diagnose and cure illness, while females used herbal treatments.<sup>51</sup> Male behavior in this cultural realm, then, was more spectacular, incurred greater risk, and required spiritual power, just as their subsistence activities involved danger and physical strength. Daily rituals were directed at safeguarding the hunter, ensuring successful expeditions and protecting against the harmful contamination of contact with menstruating women. Both women and men carried amulets and observed numerous taboos which framed many of their actions. This male orientation in ritual was counterbalanced by the importance of female deities, among whom Sedna was the most powerful. Sedna is considered responsible for the creation and yearly supply of sea animals upon whom the people's survival depends.<sup>52</sup> She therefore is a symbol of nurturance and regeneration.

Changes in modern Eskimo life, although considerable, have not significantly altered traditional gender relations. The economic base of hunting has disappeared in most Arctic regions, replaced by a reliance on trapping fox and seals for fur markets and by wage work. Trapping has been adopted as a male occupation, whereas both women and men obtain gender-specific jobs in permanent towns which have sprung up throughout the North. Men work in construction and mining, while women are

employed in service occupations and as school aides. Craftwork, including sculpture, painting and basketry, is prized, earning female and male artisans a relatively good income.<sup>53</sup>

Subsistence changes have not markedly favored the contributions of either sex. However, the marriage bond itself has weakened with the economic independence of both spouses. Women, especially, are delaying marriage, if not avoiding it entirely.<sup>54</sup> The reasons for their reluctance are not clear but must at least be a response to their ability to survive without a male provider, unlike traditional times. In the current context, women are able to support themselves through wage work and with the public assistance provided in Canada and Alaska to mothers with young children. These women avoid the control and violence of which their female ancestors traditionally were often the victims.

Population density in Arctic towns is much greater than in the traditional lifestyle of widely dispersed, nonpermanent camps. Village leadership therefore has newly emerged to resolve local conflicts, as well as to represent the community to the larger federal system, whether in the United States or Canada. Councils are attended by women and men, all of whom have rights to speak and be heeded. Both women and men hold administrative offices, although men are more often in the top leadership positions.<sup>55</sup>

## IROQUOIS

Among the Iroquois, sedentary horticulturalists of the Northeast, sex role plans separated the economic, social and political activities of men and women but accorded prestige and authority to both. Egalitarian gender relations came not from similarity in behavior, but from balance, integration, and principles of personal autonomy. Age and ability conferred differential status on individuals, but all people could aspire to and achieve public recognition.

Subsistence activities were allocated by sex. Women planted and farmed, distributed the produce, managed the household, prepared meals, made clothing and housewares, and cared for the children. Men cleared fields for planting, hunted, fished, made their equipment, and traded with other groups for desired goods.<sup>56</sup> It was not labor itself but rather the control of resources

and distribution of produce which supported women's high social prestige and authority.<sup>57</sup> Matrilineages allocated land for farming and the leading clan/lineage matrons supervised its use.<sup>58</sup> Women controlled the distribution of the products of their own labor and, significantly, the products of men's labor as well. They prepared and distributed meals in the household and at public council meetings and rituals. They also supplied traders and warriors with food for their expeditions.<sup>59</sup> Surplus food, especially corn and dried beans, was stored in the houses and used, not only for direct consumption, but also as a commodity in intertribal trade.<sup>60</sup> Women's labor, then, supported male trading and warfare, just as men's activities brought in foreign goods and defended the community.

Women were the real and symbolic sustainers of life, giving life through birth and survival through daily sustenance. Female fertility was represented in the matrilineal clan organization and the preference for girl children.<sup>61</sup> Women's value was further recognized in the practice of ritual payments necessary if a murder had been committed, requiring twice as many presents to the victim's kin in cases of a woman's death as in cases of a man's murder.<sup>62</sup>

Women's social solidarity was assured by matrilocally-based residence in large, multi-family "longhouses" which, along with all of their material contents, were owned by the matrilineage and controlled by resident matrons. Women had rights in the house by descent and remained with their kin throughout their lives. Men moved into their wife's household upon marriage, but their integration into it was somewhat incomplete. They spent a good deal of time away from local communities in hunting, trading or warfare expeditions. Furthermore, when divorce occurred, evidently with some frequency, men left their wife's home to return to their mother or sister. In addition to its concrete functions, the longhouse was extended metaphorically to symbolize the solidarity of the Iroquois Nations and the united confederacy. The League took the image of a longhouse, stretching from east to west, encompassing all of these matrilineally-related peoples.

Iroquois political life was formalized through council structures on the local, tribal and confederacy levels. Male chiefs were chosen by lineage matrons and presented the interests and opinions of both men and women in their deliberations. Consultations on the local level ensured that all people could participate in forming the group's consensus. Matrons occasionally desig-



nated a male speaker to voice their positions on specific issues at the confederacy meetings.<sup>63</sup> Although these councils were usually attended only by men, women could be present and speak if they felt it urgent to do so.<sup>64</sup>

Symbolism of female fertility and power was expressed in Iroquoian mythology and ritual practice. Original creation occurred through actions of a female figure, Aataensic, who subsequently gave birth to twin sons and is honored as the caretaker of human souls.<sup>65</sup> The three sisters, givers of corn, beans and squash, are referred to as "our mothers" and revered for their life-supporting products. Further, the Iroquois ceremonial system is based on calendric festivals which celebrate the planting and harvesting of major crops, i.e., women's work.<sup>66</sup> And, finally, the origin myth of the Iroquois confederacy includes contributions of male and female characters. For example, when Deganawidah, the league's founder, set out to unite the nations, he told his plans first to a woman who, by her approval and encouragement, earned the right for women to name the chiefs.<sup>67</sup> The myth, then, expresses actions and knowledge inherent in both sexes.

Women and men held official positions in religious life, each sex providing half of the "keepers of the Faith" who planned and managed public ceremonies. Women, as clan representatives, were responsible for cleaning and reburying the bones of dead kin in the "Feast of the Dead," held every decade and symbolizing in the most sacred Iroquoian rite the eternal unity of the clan.

Balance in Iroquois gender relations was achieved through the separation of male and female activities and the recognition of substantial contributions of both. Principles of individual autonomy, solidarity among kin, and female and male control over strategic resources ensured that women and men were respected for their own achievements.

Historical forces since European contact have had an impact on gender relations by altering socioeconomic integration and ideology. Two major periods of change can be differentiated. The first was marked by increased reliance on external trade and a rise in intertribal warfare. These changes strengthened the importance of both men's and women's contributions and solidified their interdependence. Men traded with other Amerindians for furs which they then bartered at colonial markets for the manufactured goods upon which the Iroquois had quickly become dependent.<sup>68</sup> This trade network required women's labor as well, since

it was they who provided the corn desired by other native peoples and given in exchange for furs.

As intertribal competition and warfare intensified, men's military skills increased in social value. However, the prestige awarded to warriors was not used to monopolize power in the villages. In fact, external warfare and trading kept men away from their homes for longer periods of time, enabling resident women to maintain and perhaps augment their local authority.

The second post-contact period began with the establishment of reservations in the late eighteenth century. Iroquois subsistence activities were reassigned with concomitant restrictions on women's functions. The end of warfare and trade eliminated men's productive activities. At that time, Canadian and American colonial powers convinced Iroquois men to take up agricultural work, teaching them innovative techniques. This displaced women from their traditional work and relegated them to domestic labor. Both men and women resisted these changes, but in time the new roles were adopted.<sup>69</sup> Female political participation was undermined by the refusal of colonial agents to negotiate with women and by their pressure on men to ignore women's advice. Women were finally disenfranchised by the elimination of matron-appointed leaders and the installation of a system of elected representatives with only male suffrage.<sup>70</sup>

The emergence of the revivalistic Handsome Lake religion in the early nineteenth century included a social program first promulgated by French missionaries but later advocated by Handsome Lake.<sup>71</sup> Gender roles in the family were altered by emphasizing nuclear residence patterns and the authority of husband/father as head of household. The breakup of matrilineal units, the decline in clan powers and the dismantling of the political system contributed to the erosion of female solidarity in both material and ideological form.

## PLAINS CULTURES

Amerindian peoples of the Plains began to develop their distinctive cultures by the eighteenth century as a result of direct and indirect European contact. The term "traditional" as it applies to Plains society therefore refers to a lifestyle which had been considerably altered by the effects of migration from other areas in

the east and west and by the influx of European goods, especially horses. Plains cultures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries evolved from different local forms but developed similar configurations as their adaptive strategies converged. These historical processes transformed Plains economy, with repercussions in political and social life which, taken together, had an impact on gender roles and relations.

Although variations existed, male dominance characterized gender relations in most traditional Plains societies. The historical antecedents of gender stratification are unclear. Some of these peoples previously had been sedentary horticulturalists (Cheyenne, Dakota, Crow) with subsistence based on women's food production and men's hunting. Others (Comanche, Kiowa, Blackfoot) had been nomadic foragers combining the work of men and women in obtaining wild foods. Both of these subsistence patterns, in the context of small, egalitarian societies, argue against the existence of systematic gender-based hierarchies. But with changes in the economic base, Plains cultures developed concepts of social ranking, political leadership and warrior ideologies which enhanced men's status and restricted women's rights.

The acquisition of horses beginning in the early eighteenth century led to increased reliance on hunting large animals, especially buffalo, as sources of food and raw materials used for clothing, tents, equipment and trade. Individual wealth came to be measured in the number of horses a person owned, as they provided the means by which to acquire material goods. Male competition over wealth motivated raiding to obtain more horses and hence even greater amounts of property and associated social status.<sup>72</sup> This cycle led to confrontation with other groups which had the same goals. Raiding and warfare skills therefore became ideals of masculinity and the focus of male behavior.

Women's work included processing animal hides into clothing and tents, making utensils, preparing meals and caring for children. Women were trained to be industrious and mild-mannered. Those who were especially gifted in hand-work, notably in sewing and embroidery, were well respected, gaining public recognition and value as wives.<sup>73</sup> However, it is difficult to determine whether these women gained personal prestige from their achievements or whether they enhanced the status of their husbands. As Schlegel cautions: "It is not enough to know that

women are valued, rather we must ask whether they are valued in their own right, and therefore are in a position to receive prestige, or whether they are valued as objects in the social, political or economic affairs of men."<sup>74</sup> Although there were counterbalancing tendencies in Plains cultures, the evidence certainly points to the deterioration of women's status as a result of a shift in economic relations.

By the early nineteenth century, Plains Indians increasingly became dependent on European and American products, desiring household goods, weapons and ammunition. Although men did the hunting and trading, women's labor also was necessary, since women tanned the buffalo, moose and deer hides and rendered them marketable.<sup>75</sup> As women's value in commodity production increased, polygyny (most often sororal) also became significant.<sup>76</sup> Polygyny was not so much a feature of social structure as it was of economic organization. Due to the advent of horses and guns in hunting, and the presence of huge herds of buffalo, men were able to kill large numbers of animals. However, the hides were worthless unless prepared by women for markets. Therefore, men with several wives were able to monopolize more female labor and in the end procure greater wealth.<sup>77</sup> As a further accommodation to the growing trade economy, the age at marriage declined for females to their early teens and increased for males to their thirties.<sup>78</sup> Girls' productivity could be obtained at a young age, particularly in an ideological context stressing female obedience and industriousness. On the other hand, it took a man many years to amass the horses needed for bride-wealth and to prove himself a worthy hunter and warrior.<sup>79</sup>

Male authority within the household solidified for several reasons. First, the social ranking of the family was determined primarily by the status (i.e., wealth, bravery) of the husband/father.<sup>80</sup> Men rose in this system of stratification by their own military deeds or accumulation of wealth. The latter depended on their ability to channel women's labor. Women's rank was inherited from their fathers and modified by their husbands. They contributed to household status by their work, their character and their behavior. Lazy, stupid or promiscuous women brought shame on their fathers and husbands. Women, therefore, were carefully controlled. Pre-marital chastity and marital fidelity for females were strictly enforced.<sup>81</sup> Violence against women in the

form of beatings and rape was not uncommon and functioned as punishment and as a threat to elicit compliant behavior. Finally, since seniority itself conferred status in Plains society, the husband's advanced age relative to his wife contributed to his authority.

In the context of frequent raiding and warfare, Plains cultures developed systems of leadership based on village councils composed of male elders. Civil and military chiefs influenced and coordinated community activities although they did not have powers of coercion. Since group survival depended increasingly on male actions in hunting and warfare, women's public roles were of less significance. However, some women did contradict the norms by participating with their male relatives in hunting and raiding expeditions.<sup>82</sup> Accounts of the lives of individuals substantiate the autonomy, independence and prestige exhibited by some Plains women even within the context of a male-oriented culture.<sup>83</sup>

Plains religion emphasized male achievements in rituals celebrating warfare, hunting and male adulthood. Most ritualists were men, although older women, especially after menopause, could become skilled healers and gain community recognition. Certain major ceremonies, including the Sun Dance and medicine bundle rites, required female as well as male participants.<sup>84</sup> In several Plains societies, specific beliefs recognized important contributions of female beings. For example, all Oglala sacred rituals, including the vision quest, Sun Dance, girl's puberty rite, sweat lodge, and mourning ceremonies, were given to the people by White Buffalo Calf Woman.<sup>85</sup> Among the Blackfoot, symbolic equivalence of men's and women's achievements was expressed in children's ear-piercing rituals when ". . . an old woman in imitation of a warrior counting coup, calls out just before piercing an ear, 'I have made a tipi, worked a robe, etc. with these hands.'"<sup>86</sup>

Although male powers and personalities were central to Plains ideology, metaphors of the earth as mother and of the generative abilities of women were also characteristic of Plains world view.<sup>87</sup> These beliefs and practices mitigated the strength of male-orientation by providing an ideological balance expressing women's and men's value. Yet transformation of the material basis of Plains culture critically undermined egalitarian gender relations.

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## CONCLUSION

A review of gender relations in these five Amerindian societies uncovers processes affecting behavior and ideology. Subsistence, social organization, political structure and religion are all arenas for the development and display of sex role plans.

Societies based on foraging economies tend toward egalitarian sociopolitical relations. Principles of autonomy for all individuals apply to women's and men's functioning within their households and local communities. However, variations in the assignment of work modify interrelationships between the sexes. The fact that males and females have different economic roles leads not only to the formation of separate gender identities but also to the necessity of establishing a bond (i.e., marriage) between a man and a woman in order for each to secure goods and services provided by the other.<sup>89</sup> Economic interdependence, then, is a feature of all Amerindian cultures, but contributions of each gender are variously weighted in diverse ecological and historical contexts. As we have seen, among the Naskapi, subsistence tasks were performed without adherence to rigid gender-specific rules. In contrast, Eskimo norms segregated the economic contribution of the sexes. Male monopoly on hunting is adaptive in Arctic environments where success depends on exposure to harsh weather, risk of accidental injury or death and physical strength to haul in the kill. Although some women are as strong as or stronger than some men, allocation of large animal hunting activities to men has two advantages, both linked to women's reproductive roles. First, since the reproduction of populations depends more on the number of women than on the number of men, men's injuries or deaths are less costly to the continuation of the community.<sup>90</sup> Secondly, since women are either pregnant, nursing or tending young children during many of their adult years and therefore are unavailable for work requiring prolonged physical stress or extended absence from households, it is inefficient for a society to train them intensively for skills they rarely use. Separation of tasks, then, was adaptive among the Eskimo and resulted in gender interdependence. In Plains foraging cultures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, men similarly monopolized the hunting of large animals and women processed raw materials for household consumption and commodity production. This economic base, in the context of male competition

and appropriation of wealth, turned women into laborers for a market to which they had no direct access. Finally, women, valued for their work, themselves became commodities in exchanges between their fathers and husbands.

Horticulture and pastoralism permit variations in the allocation of work, creating different gender relationships. In economies stressing complex technology and/or the accumulation of private property, men usually own or control resources and means of production. Simpler farming techniques and communal control of resources may allow for female participation, not merely as laborers but as decision-makers.<sup>91</sup> This latter pattern prevailed among North Amerindian horticulturalists, including the Iroquois and Navajo. Egalitarian gender relationships existed in both these societies, although they stemmed from divergent bases. Work role separation among the Iroquois and work role integration among the Navajo similarly stressed the important contributions of women and men. Iroquoian women controlled production, distribution and consumption while Iroquoian men obtained intertribal and later European trade goods essential to the home economy. In contrast, Navajo subsistence in farming and herding was based on shared work among all family members. Individually-owned property and clan-controlled resources were pooled and available equally to both sexes.

Pastoralism among the Navajo was of a different character from pastoralism among Plains peoples. Navajo men and women owned sheep independently and combined their animals into a family herd, which was a measure of household wealth, with status accruing to both women and men. In Plains cultures, horses were owned and tended primarily by men. Although women had some rights to property, men's wealth and status were the focus of competition and display.

Among the five Amerindian cultures, matrilineal residence patterns were the norm for the Iroquois, Navajo and Naskapi. These patterns provided women with kin group support and protection in the event of conflict between spouses. Gender relations were egalitarian and, most significantly, male violence against women was extremely rare and socially condemned. Matrilineal residence combined with matrilineal descent among the Iroquois and Navajo, deepening bonds and dependencies for household residents.

In both Eskimo and Plains cultures, on the other hand, residence rules tended to favor patrilocal affiliation. Since subsistence was based on male hunting, settlements organized around men were adaptive, providing stable groups of male kin who cooperated in hunting, and among Plains peoples, in trade and warfare. Patrilocal residence had consequences for women by isolating them from their own kin. And, again significantly, male violence toward women was common in Eskimo and Plains cultures. Furthermore, in Plains societies, a double standard for sexual behavior permitted male exploits and restricted female activity.

Political organizations developed among the Iroquois and Plains peoples, but differences in underlying gender relations influenced male and female participation. Iroquoian councils were dominated by men, although discussion and decision-making on the local level involved both women and men. In Plains societies, only men attended the councils, where seniority as well as sex were necessary attributes. Wealth and stratification were important features of the political hierarchy.

In both Iroquois and Plains societies, warfare was frequent, and shaped men's activities and identities. However, in this sphere, too, ecological and societal conditions influenced the ways in which warfare affected gender relations. Most Iroquois warfare took place at long distances away from home communities, involving ambushes of Amerindian traders on their way to European-controlled posts. Native villages were not attacked directly until quite late in the historical period. Women's authority at home was not undermined even in the historical context of intensification of intertribal conflicts and concomitant glorification of warrior abilities. In fact, women's control of production and distribution may have increased due to male absence from households. Iroquois women also participated in decisions about war and peace by providing or withholding food for military expeditions and by urging their male relatives to bring back captives to avenge previous losses.

Among Plains peoples, warfare was motivated by the desire to obtain horses and often took the form of surprise raids against enemy villages, killing residents as well as warriors. Since local settlements were vulnerable to attack, warriors' presence was needed to provide defense against intruders. Men had complete control of all aspects of warfare and developed a complex of



ideology and behavior exalting their exploits. Women, with a few unusual exceptions, did not participate in this system except as observers and occasionally as victims.

Social and religious ideology provides explanation, justification and reinforcement for sex role plans originating from ecological, socioeconomic and historical conditions. In the cosmologies of all Native American peoples, female and male beings are endowed with powers and have specific roles in the natural and supernatural worlds. The importance of female fertility is a component of all these belief systems, receiving special emphasis among the Iroquois and Navajo. For both peoples, mythological concepts reflect and support societal roles for women and strong emotional bonds between mothers and children. Even in the Eskimo, Naskapi and Plains cultures, although rituals stress male activities, female participants and deities figure prominently.

Egalitarian gender relations prevailed fully in three of the five Amerindian cultures analyzed. Among the Iroquois and Navajo, gender equality was an essential aspect of social life, reflected in the balance of roles and valuations accorded to women and men. For the Naskapi, notions of personal independence similarly safeguarded the rights of all individuals. These societies share several important features. First, they all developed stable adaptations to environmental conditions which were neither extreme nor stressful. Secondly, principles of autonomy emphasized harmonious interpersonal behavior. And finally, social organization included patterns of matrilineal residence which protected women's rights.

Relations between Eskimo men and women were partially egalitarian. Although individual autonomy and interdependence characterized the society, certain norms, particularly ritual taboos restricting women's activities and male violence against women, signalled some degree of male dominance. Adaptive strategies in harsh and dangerous settings stressed the direct productivity of men for group survival. Women's labor also was essential, but women were more immediately dependent on men than men were on them. Ecological conditions, then, provided a rationale favoring male authority.

Among Plains cultures, marked male dominance developed as a result of geographical and socioeconomic dislocations after European contact. Competition over wealth and ensuing intertribal warfare accentuated the roles of men in organizing household

work and defending villages against external attack. Male dominance, which entails the ". . . exclusion of women from political and economic decision-making [and] male aggression against women,"<sup>92</sup> took hold in this transformed context. Men's authority increased as their activities in trade and defense became more important for community survival.

The advantages to men in such systems are obvious. Women's acquiescence, on the other hand, is problematic. Godelier suggests that ". . . for relations of domination and exploitation to be formed and reproduced in a lasting fashion, they must be presented as an exchange of services."<sup>93</sup> Ideological support ensures that ". . . dominated individuals and groups consent to their own domination [because] the latter must appear as a service rendered them by the dominant, whose power henceforth seems so legitimate that the dominated feel it to be their duty to serve those who are serving them."<sup>94</sup> This concept is applicable to Plains cultures and to the Eskimo. Women's obedience to male authority can be seen as a response to those, i.e., men, who provide basic subsistence and, in the case of the Plains, armed defense against enemies. Even in the Plains, though, male dominance was tempered by a lingering ethic of personal autonomy and by ideologies which included positive female images.

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