

COMMON BONDS?

ON THE INTERSECTION OF CLASS, RACE AND GENDER IN THE LIVES OF U.S. WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews historical and sociological literature exploring the interaction of class, race and gender in the lives of U.S. women. It addresses current debates on diversity and 'women's condition', emphasizing the ways in which patriarchy fuses with class and race inequality, creating divergent experiences of oppression.

KEYWORDS: *women; class and race; class; race and gender.*

I. INTRODUCTION

As the community of women involved as scholars and/or activists in “second-wave” feminism broadens, consistently opening up new areas for research on women and reevaluating the needs and priorities of the women’s movement of the late twentieth century, the discussion on diversity among women has become particularly urgent. Black feminists, who have from the start emphasized the specific socioeconomic situation of women of color, have been successful in drawing attention to the “white, upper middle class bias” of much of the earlier scholarship on women (HOOKS, 1981; COLE, 1986; RICH, 1986) while numerous recent studies have shown that for poor and working class women in the United States, life “after feminism” may be harder than ever (PEARCE, 1978 and 1983; SIDEL, 1987).

It is widely recognized that fundamental changes — economic, social and political — affecting women’s status have taken place over the course of the twentieth century. However, many of the studies focusing on the nature of these changes have erred in, first, failing to examine the varying “points of departure” for women as the century rolled off to a start, and, second, failing to consider that basic structural and historical tendencies could affect different groups of women *according* to their differences.

Klein (1984) provides us with a fine summary of the confluence of forces that worked together to undermine women’s traditional role and led to “the learning of a new [feminist] consciousness”: the incorporation of women into the paid labor force (as many of women’s traditional functions came to be performed outside the home and the development of the service economy gradually increased the demand for female labor), the “decline of mother-hood” as the sole consuming responsibility of many women’s lives and identities, and changing marital patterns that rendered untenable age-old assumptions about marital stability and made women’s economic dependence on men more dubious and risky than ever. However, Klein’s analysis is also representative of the conventional (white) feminist approach, insofar as she subsumes diversity in a monolithic category of “women”. As Hooks (1981) points out, “there is no one so-called status women share as a collective group” and “[...] the social status of white women in America has never been like that of black women [...]” (HOOKS, 1981: 136).

Cole (1986) asks to what extent “the heavy weight of patriarchy level[s] all differences among women” (COLE, 1986: 01), wisely cautioning that among the things that all women must confront are the numerous assumptions, myths and stereotypes about “the way women are”. In order to analyze commonalties and

differences among women, she discusses what she considers the most fundamental aspects of American women's social existence — work, family, sexuality and reproduction, religion and politics — and then proceeds to analyze the experiences of women of different class, racial and ethnic groups within each. I will follow her lead here, focusing specifically on the first three. However, I will first make a brief theoretical digression, for the purpose of conceptual clarification and as a prerequisite for the discussion of women and social class.

II. WOMEN, MEN AND SOCIAL CLASS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Feminist theory has presented many important challenges to classical (pre-feminist) social and economic theory, stirring up debates around some of the basic conceptual tools and theoretical perspectives that, although widely accepted, are unable to adequately account for — and sometimes entirely disregard — the experiences of women. In “Developing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy”, Eisenstein (1979) issues a challenge to sociological class analysis, stating that the very categories of the former must be reworked, since, at present, “class categories are primarily male-defined, and a woman is assigned to a class on the basis of her husband's relation to the means of production; woman is not viewed as an autonomous being” (EISENSTEIN, 1979: 31). Well into the following decade, Abbott and Sapsford (1987) find that this problem has still not been satisfactorily grappled with: “It is not just that women are ignored in stratification theory [...] or that women are excluded from major surveys; more important still is that many women [the majority] are said to have only a derived class position, determined by the occupational experience of a man with whom they live [...]. Along with the equally sexist proposition that women are necessarily dependent on men and that gender inequalities are therefore necessarily and a priori less important than male class differences, this curious assumption underlies much conventional stratification theory” (ABBOTT and SAPSFORD, 1987: 02). Abbott and Sapsford believe that this approach leads to the exclusion “of over half the population” and to the “miscoding” women's class position when they are included in empirical research.

Sociological class analysis, as it is commonly practiced, regards class as an attribute of *families* rather than of individuals, and, in doing so, has usually assumed a male “head of household”, that is, that a man serves as a household's representative on the labor market. Yet in light of women's ever-increasing labor market participation and the increase of marital instability and female-headed families that has accompanied it, such an approach could very well lead to the distortion of reality.

Heath and Britten (1984) examine data on families and argue for a reconceptualization of class in which “cross-class families” would be considered, for their relevance in studies focusing on class and gender as intertwining elements of modern industrial society's stratification system.

A rebuttal is provided by Goldthorpe (1984) and Erikson (1984), who raise some important questions regarding the revision of class analysis to incorporate women's work, and whether intra-familial differences in occupational category are significant enough to warrant such changes. Erikson suggests that work like Heath and Britten's make too much of “work position”, a category which rather simply reflects the occupation of an *individual*, and tends to conflate the former with “market situation”, or class position, which is a characteristic of families or households¹. While certainly not precluding the possibility of differential distribution of consumption and spending among family members, the family “is typically the unit of consumption that shares a dwelling, that brings up children and sends them to schools and universities” (ERIKSON, 1984: 501). Thus, Erikson argues,

¹ Erikson writes “from my perspective, the nuclear family is the basic element of the class structure of modern industrial societies, because of the dependence of family members upon each other and the largely shared conditions within the family. Class society also embraces everybody: all of us have a class position, regardless of whether we participate in the labour force or not. I therefore suggest we use the term *work position* for the work related concept and the concept *class position* for the market related concept” (ERIKSON, 1984: 502).

both men and women's *work positions* could be components of class position, but insofar as their work positions diverge, it is necessary to locate the *dominant position* (based on occupational status rather than gender) — the position that functions as primary determinant of a family's life chances. His approach enables us to maintain a notion of class position that is not overly sensitive to such things as job changes and movement in and out of the labor force when these do not cause fundamental changes in the life chances of a family (especially important in view of the lesser stability of married women's labor force participation).

Goldthorpe also maintains that class analysis can "accept 'differences' attributable to the employment of married women [...] without [...] being required to depart from the 'conventional view' that the class position of a family is a unitary one which derives from its 'head' — in the sense of the family member who has the fullest commitment to labour-market participation" (GOLDTHORPE, 1984: 492). He points out that proponents of "joint classification" of families have often overemphasized differences between routine clerical jobs (mainly female) and manual wage-earning work (primarily male) which are actually quite comparable "in that they occupy essentially subordinate positions within the organization of production, with negligible or at best strictly delimited autonomy and responsibility" (GOLDTHORPE, 1984: 492). Thus, if empirical work of this sort is corrected for a more accurate assessment of class position, the "high degree of class endogamy" in modern (British) society to which Heath and Britten admit (HEATH and BRITTEN, 1984: 487) becomes even greater, bearing out Goldthorpe's contention that "the wives of stable working-class men are themselves overwhelmingly working-class (in virtue of their own employment)" (GOLDTHORPE, 1984: 492).

The continued role of marriage and family in the transmission of class position and, thus, in the reproduction of class relations is also supported by Barbara Ehrenreich's (1989) insightful, though less sociologically rigorous discussion of the professional managerial

"middle class" in contemporary American society. She argues, first, that since the turn of the century, the middle class has worked to carve out its own "occupational niche" in the professions, thus creating a "class fortress" closed to the poor, the working class and the uncredentialed rich². Yet, earlier in the century, a chasm existed *within* the class, between its "achievers" and its "menial laborers", its husbands and wives; and, in this context, marriage itself was often one of the few routes of social mobility open to working class women, who could "marry up" and become middle class wives. Today, however, and to a great extent as a perhaps paradoxical result of the feminist challenge to the traditionally male professions, the middle class has closed ranks even more tightly: middle class professional men more frequently marry middle class professional "career women". As Ehrenreich puts it, "seen as economic partners as well as helpmates, women are more likely to be equals within their marriages. They are also less likely than in the past to be displaced by any of the far more numerous women — secretaries, flight attendants, cocktail waitresses — who lack professional credentials and impressive resumes" (EHRENREICH, 1989: 220).

Certainly, there is much more research to be done in this area and the debate on the implications of women's market work for class analysis is far from concluded. Nonetheless, I think it is possible, for my purposes here, to proceed with an analysis of class and race variation in women's situation using a notion of class position in which the latter is seen as an attribute of families, composed in many cases of men and women who perform market work (and in most

² "Through professionalization, the middle class gained purchase in an increasingly uncertain world. Henceforth it would be shielded, at least slightly, from the upheavals of the market economy. It's 'capital' would be knowledge or, more precisely, expertise. Its security would lie in the monopolization of that expertise through the device of professionalization. Its hallmark would be higher education and, with it, the exclusive license to practice, consult or teach, in exchange for that more mundane form of capital, money" (EHRENREICH, 1989: 80).

of these cases, types of work with a similar place in the social division of labor). It is also crucial to see social class as a process of social relations in the making; in our society, today, middle, working and upper class women, as members of middle, working and upper class families, have distinct possibilities in the realms of culture, politics and the labor market, and enter into different kinds of relationships with one another as well. I contend that of particular significance is the difference between women of the professional-managerial class or strata and women of poor, working and lower middle class backgrounds, since the former are precisely those who have most “come into their own” as a result of recent processes of social change.

III. WOMEN AND WORK

As I've stated above, the view most commonly advanced in feminist literature on women and work maps out a general twentieth century trend of increasing labor force participation within the context of the historic public-private sphere split (and women's primary association with the latter). Yet the public-private sphere dichotomy, which numerous feminist scholars have identified as one of the fundamental mechanisms underlying women's subordinate status in industrial society (ZARETSKY, 1986; ROSALDO, 1974), is not unilaterally applicable. For many women, “relegation to the domestic sphere” was never a reality; the isolated but protected lives of upper and middle class women may well have been their most immediate source of alienation and powerlessness, yet for many white working class women and most women of color, struggling to help sustain their families, domesticity seemed a privilege they themselves had been denied. With this in mind, it is necessary to reconsider the mechanisms and institutions of patriarchy, which do not work in the same way for all women.

In pre-industrial America, women participated in work in the fields and the household (the latter including crafts and domestic production, as well as “reproductive labor”). It is with the development of the market economy that the chasm between male and female activities — and the lives of women of different classes —

became more divergent. While the developing separation of market and household spheres meant an increased centrality of household for women of all classes, upper class women had domestic servants — usually poor and working class women — to perform domestic chores for them.

As industrialization proceeded apace, employment opportunities for middle and upper class women also decreased. This is the period of the emergence and diffusion of the “cult of domesticity and true womanhood” through which elite and middle class women were expected to assume an exclusively domestic role, built up around an idealized conception of motherhood as woman's “true vocation”.

For white working class women of this period (late 19th and early 20th century), participation in the workforce was usually a necessity. Young unmarried women worked in factories and most often contributed the greater part of their wages toward their families' sustenance. For many, leaving work upon marriage was a goal, though quite frequently an unattainable one. Sarah Eisenstein's (1983) study of women workers of Jewish and Italian backgrounds from 1905-1920 shows that, in the lives of these women, there existed a certain tension between their economic need to work and the dominant ideology which defined femininity in the image of the middle or upper class woman's domestic role. Most “factory girls” had been influenced by this notion and thus aspired to domesticity, yet as workers did not simply succumb to stigmatization but began to learn new ways of relating to one another and the world. Many became involved in union activity and some even developed an incipient critique of dominant notions of “woman's place”. As workers, they also experienced exclusion from male-dominated labor unions and relegation to lower-paying, sex-segregated jobs. It should also be noted that for white working class wives, improvement in family situation (for example, increased income through husband's or children's employment) might permit withdrawal from the labor force; similarly, family crises (such as spouse's loss of job, illness or death) often pushed a wife from the home back into paid work. Not surprisingly,

when working class wives engaged in wage labor, this was frequently coupled with greater autonomy or egalitarianism in marriage.

Black women, perhaps “more than any other group of women [...] were from the start exempted from the myth of female disability” (GLENN, 1985: 95). During slavery, black women were “exploited on the basis of their gender as breeders and raisers of slaves for plantation owners” yet not for this reason were they exempted from the hard physical toil of the fields (GLENN, 1985: 95). As domestic slaves, it was their labor in the white household that permitted the white slaveowner’s wife to live out her own “true womanhood”³. After emancipation, when Black women attempted to devote themselves to the home (HOOKS, 1981) — seeking to mold their own lives in the direction of the dominant notion of womanhood — they were again denied the opportunity to do so. White planters resented the loss of black women’s labor power, and resisted by such tactics as charging black men whose wives did not work in the fields extra for food and shelter (HOOKS, 1981: 49) and eventually implementing the sharecropping system as a means to encourage family labor.

Domestic service was the second largest occupational category for black women during this period, characterized by long hours and extremely low pay. Often, the domestic worker was required to live in the employer’s home, and thus again denied the right to spend time in her own household and raise her own children. In the South, this type of work was performed exclusively by blacks, as since slave times it had been a racially-typed occupation which poor white women continued to turn down. Manufacturing and white collar jobs continued to be

closed to black women for a long time. In those sectors of Southern industry in which white women had access to manufacturing jobs, black women were allowed entrance only into the dirtiest, least desirable and unmechanized tasks, such as plant sanitation and the scrubbing of machinery. This situation was replicated in the urban north during and after World War II, as black men and white women gained entrance into factory work, yet black women were largely excluded.

Married black women during the years spanning 1870 to 1930 had much higher labor force participation rates than their white counterparts (in 1900, 26% as compared to 3,8%) and, “although their wages were consistently lower than those of white women, their earnings constituted a larger share of total family income, due to the marginal and low wage employment of black men” (GLENN, 1985: 97).

Chicana and Mexican women, who prior to the late 19th century had worked primarily within the household economy, began to seek wage work in greater numbers in the 1880s, motivated by economic depression and the heightened need for cash incomes their households experienced. They entered the labor force as maids, laundresses, cooks, waitresses and dishwashers in commercial establishments as well as in private domestic service. Many Chicana women also entered the agricultural labor force, frequently working side by side with other members of their families as a family labor system became widespread in the American Southwest. Under this system, women toiled long hours in the fields and in packing houses, as well as bearing and raising children and attending to other home responsibilities. The migrant camps were notorious for their miserable living conditions and high infant and child mortality rates, yet this was the fate of perhaps more than 20% of all employed Chicanas two decades into the twentieth century (GLENN, 1985: 94), denied access to more desirable employment due to the racial/ethnic segmentation of the labor market. Urban Chicanas were concentrated in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, in garment factories and food-processing plants (19,3% in 1930) and in service positions such as those described above. When employed in industry, their situation was

³ It may be argued that this was an oppressive role for the elite Southern woman who was idealized yet expected to submit to the authority of her husband and patriarchal southern culture; nonetheless, the “Southern belle’s” higher (protected) status as a woman was also part of a process which devaluated black womanhood (see HOOKS, 1981 for an interesting discussion of the demoralizing impact of the 19th century cult of true womanhood on enslaved Black women).

similar to that of black women, denied access to the better jobs occupied by white women, and working for significantly lower wages. For them, well-protected domesticity was an option precluded by their class and racial/ethnic status, while the latter also locked them into the lower rungs of a highly stratified labor market and made the daily struggle for subsistence the *leitmotif* of their lives.

The contemporary scenario seems more a continuation of than a departure from trends established earlier in the century. Women's labor force participation rates have continued to increase and women's attachment to the labor force has become increasingly permanent. This tendency is linked to the expansion of the service sector, providing greater employment opportunities for women, and to the increasing pressure on wages⁴ requiring more working and middle class wives to contribute wages to family sustenance. The feminist movement has helped to legitimate the notion of the working woman, and marriage is no longer seen as an alternative to wage work or career. Increasing marital instability has also provided women with further incentive to prepare for a role in the labor market. Yet most women continue to work in traditionally female types of employment, highly sex-segregated and low-paying, and the onset of economic decline since the 1970s has hit working women hard. Under unstable market conditions, business strategies have included a place for women, though one of extreme vulnerability: as part-time workers, in jobs lacking in social protections (such as health insurance or unemployment benefits) and in sectors where unionization has been slow, difficult or unattempted (HAGEN and JENSON, 1988).

The labor market restructuring of the 70s and 80s has also increased the class polarization of women workers. Many middle class white women entering the traditionally-male elite

professions have, in spite of the "glass ceiling"⁵ (LORBER, 1994), reaped the benefits of access to high-paying careers. Their situation, however, exists in stark contrast to the majority of women workers, who have remained trapped in the "ghetto" of female occupations, earning lower wages than their male counterparts and particularly subject to job instability and poor benefits. Add to this disadvantage the growing number of women who raise families alone, enduring stress and social stigma, and the sharp cuts in government-aided family support programs during this period, and it is little wonder that the eighties were greeted with the claim that women today lead a "lesser life", feminist influences notwithstanding (HEWLETT, 1986).

The historically-evolved overrepresentation of women of color in the most economically disadvantaged sectors of the working class links today's *feminization of poverty* to the worsening situation of women in minority communities. And while it may be true that affirmative action and other kinds of recent anti-discrimination legislation have enabled some (usually already more privileged) women of color to move into "mainstream" professional jobs, these laudable but limited (and often hard to enforce) measures cannot keep pace with the much greater dimensions of the problem.

Since World War II, domestic service has ceased to be a major occupational category for women. Black women, previously concentrated in this sector, have thus moved massively out of it (three out of every five employed black women were domestics in 1940 as compared to one in 14 in 1980), but became concentrated in other less advantageous, service-type jobs, such as food services and healthcare (which in 1980 occupied 25.4% of black women in the labor force, as compared to 16% of employed white

⁴ A product of the downturn of economic cycles, as well as the increased family dependence on wages as the commodification of virtually all areas of social life have rendered domestic production of goods and services less and less economically significant.

⁵ "The pervasive phenomenon of women going just so far and no further in their occupations and professions is known as the *glass ceiling*. This concept assumes that women have the motivation, ambition and capacity for positions of power and prestige, but invisible barriers" — stemming from attitudinal or organizational bias — "keep them from reaching the top" (LORBER, 1994: 227).

women). Greater numbers of black and hispanic women are concentrated in low-paying operative position such as those of the garment industry. Similarly, although there are more black women in white-collar jobs than ever before, they are still there in lesser proportion than white women (less than half of all employed black women, as compared to over 2/3 of employed white women) and are concentrated in lower level positions. Moreover, black women bear an added burden due to the particular vulnerability of black men: black women's wages make up a greater portion of the black family income than do white women's, yet in general they must contend with lower wages and have a higher rate of unemployment (GLENN, 1985: 100-101). Mexican-American women continue to be underrepresented in professional work, more concentrated in "operative" work (especially in the garment industry, laundries and food-processing plants) than white women (25% Chicana as compared to 11% white in 1979) and still overrepresented in low level service jobs and agriculture. Chinese-American women seem to have gained greater entrance into white-collar and professional jobs, yet closer scrutiny reveals that many Chinese professionals are "actually recent immigrants of gentry origins, rather than working class Chinese-Americans who have moved up" (GLENN, 1985: 98). Family enterprise, once more widespread among Chinese-American families, has become a less viable option in the post-war period, so that more have had to seek wage work and have become dual-earner households. Chinese-American women have historically had and continue to maintain unusually high labor force participation rates.

Within an already sex-stratified labor market, then, we see that further stratification exists; in factories and offices, in hospitals and retail stores; in short, wherever there are women working for wages and salaries, we find women of color performing the least desirable tasks, in the lowest-paying and often menial jobs. From their historic role in performing "reproductive" labor for white families and thus easing the domestic burden of upper class white women, to their contemporary over-representation in commodified reproductive labor (performing

the same type of services in commercial or public establishments for a wage), women of color have been far removed from the protective womanhood idealized by our society, and have quite often endured a heavier burden than their white working class counterparts. Not infrequently in our history, the hardships women of color were forced to endure in procuring sustenance for their families preempted their opportunities and right to spend time with their own children, as was the case with African-American women, first as slaves and later in domestic service to white families. Thus, while the patriarchal ideology of our society cast the identity of some women solely in terms of their relation to the domestic sphere, it can be argued that this was not the case for women of color, whose "definition as laborers in production took precedence over their domestic roles" (GLENN, 1985: 102); not, of course, in their own eyes, but in the eyes of the privileged, for whom they cooked, washed, cleaned, served and otherwise toiled.

IV. WOMEN AND FAMILY

In the previous section, I have already alluded to some significant differences between elite white women, working class white women and working class women of color and their relationship to domesticity. It cannot be overemphasized that precisely what came to be viewed by many white feminists as "the source of women's oppression" — relegation to the domestic sphere and personal identity cast in terms of the role of wife and mother — should actually be seen as pertaining specifically to upper and middle class white women, and, to a lesser degree, white working class women. This point has been made by a number of writers (HOOKS, 1981; DAVIS, 1981; COLE, 1986) with regard to the denial of black women's rights to have a family under slavery⁶ and to the role of racial-ethnic women's economic responsibility for family sustenance (discussed above) which

⁶ Enslaved black people did have families, and struggled to keep them together, although their marriages were not recognized nor was their family life respected by white society. Thus, after manumission, many cohabiting black couples moved quickly to have their union legalized.

effectively precluded domesticity. Thus, it would perhaps not be difficult to conclude that in a sense, while elite white women had to struggle to be recognized *outside* the home, women of color have had to fight for their right to simply *have* one.

The tragic and dramatic nature of the struggle surrounding black women and men's right to maintain, protect and enjoy their families is of such historical significance that one African American sociologist has argued that it eclipses not only the question of separate spheres but the very salience of gender inequality in African American history (LADNER, 1971). The matter, however, is much more complex. While Ladner and Davis (1981) believe that sexual equality prevailed within the slave household, and Ladner goes as far as asserting the more egalitarian character of African-American family life in general (stemming, as it were, from the "absence" of a public/private dichotomy), Hooks argues that all men, regardless of race, use patriarchal power to dominate women; that black male sexism predates slavery and has since been upheld by black male political leaders who have, in heading struggles against racism, consistently advocated patriarchal sex roles for the black community. She also believes that many black women have "colluded with patriarchy" by expecting or demanding that black males assume the role of breadwinner.

Of course, it would hardly be reasonable to expect that black women remain untouched by the dominant patriarchal social imagery which in fact stigmatized them⁷ and it is probably an oversimplification to pose the problem in terms of collusion. Perhaps a more fruitful way to consider the issue is as suggested by Glenn, who points out that while feminist scholars have typically emphasized inequality and gender

conflict within the family, for people of color "conflict over the division of labor is muted by the fact that the institutions outside the family are hostile to it" (GLENN, 1985: 103). Or, as Cole (1986) suggests, families need not be seen as *either* a source of support *or* site of women's oppression; rather, for women of all classes and racial/ethnic groups, life in families is contradictory. After all, for most women, the members of their family who may very well be an obstacle to their growth and self-development are also human beings to whom they are bound by emotional attachment; for working class women and people of color, the solidarity provided by the family in the context of a hostile environment may very well take on added significance. Jane Humphries' (1980) work on the working class family focuses on the role of the family as a unit of survival, stressing the material and moral support it provides to its members, patterns of male dominance notwithstanding. She argues against the point of view that reduces the family to an institution that is "functional for capital" (*bourgeois*) and "reproduces patriarchy", and suggests its contradictory character. She also contends that the preservation of non-market relations within the working class family is, rather than a vestige of an outmoded way of life, an expression of "labor's struggle", a form of solidarity and resistance (HUMPHRIES, 1980: 163).

The class bias of research on women and families has also been criticized by scholars who point out the inadequacy of theories which assume the universality of the nuclear family, actually an ideologically-defined prescription and an ideal much more easily attained by upper and middle class people than by other communities faced with discrimination and economic hardship. Stacks's (1974) now classic study of family life and organization in a poor black community documents the importance not only of "extended family" but also of "fictive kin" relationships as a form of pooling resources and sharing developed by people involved in a desperate struggle to survive. Rapp's (1982) excellent article on family and class in contemporary America outlines the specificities of family life in different social classes. For working class people, the material basis of family life is

⁷ There are obvious parallels here with Sarah Eisenstein's discussion of the consciousness of white working class women at the beginning of the century: how they had internalized the dominant ideology of female domesticity which they then could not measure up to; and how, at the same time, their experiences as workers began to teach them new ways of thinking about themselves.

the hourly wage, and dependency on the latter is “the most salient characteristic of household organization”. For men and women of this class, work is usually not a prestigious and fulfilling career as it can be amongst the middle class, but is often a source of dissatisfaction and frustration. Thus, it is no small wonder that family is often seen as an escape from the tediousness of production, and that working class men as well as women tend to place family above job (FERREE, 1987). This is also inherently contradictory, since “[...] in fact it is what sends people into relations of production, for they need work to support their families” (RAPP, 1982: 174).

A relatively disadvantaged economic position also favors at least some degree of maintenance of larger kinship groups. Amongst the working class, the “ideal autonomy of an independent nuclear family is constantly being contradicted by realities of social need, in which resources must be pooled, borrowed, shared. It is women who bridge the gap between what a household’s resources really are and what a family’s position is supposed to be”, while men usually represent, if only symbolically, the autonomy of their (nuclear) families (RAPP, 1982: 174). Working class women, with or without paid employment, are not only specifically identified with the domestic sphere⁸, but also bear the burden of easing the tensions of alienated work and providing an environment that can serve as a “haven in a heartless world”. Yet while not often confronted with the dilemma faced by upper or middle class women (fulfilling career *vs.* family commitment), current research shows that working class women *do* value paid employment insofar as it provides certain rewards that domesticity does not. Working supplies valued resources, both in terms of wages and extra-domestic experiences that enhance women’s self-esteem and sense of competence. This greater measure of social and economic independence is usually desired and welcomed by women (see FERREE, 1987).

⁸ This is reinforced by the particularly disadvantaged position of working class women in the labor market, that is, the probability that their work is less stable and lower-waged than that of their husbands.

And it is particularly important, in doing further research on working class women, not to conflate dissatisfaction with the kind or the conditions of work with a “preference for a traditional role at home” (RAPP, 1982: 195).

Recently, considerable research has been done on poor Black families, suggesting the frequency (and intracommunity legitimacy of) female-centered households and domestic networks. Rapp, Stack (1974) and Wilson (1987) all support the view that this type of family structure is a product of class position rather than racial or ethnic group characteristics, in which case it might be possible to make some generalizations about household formation among the very poor (a subject, of course, for further empirical investigation). Existing literature permits us to sketch out a picture of ways in which life in poor families diverges from the mainstream “norm”. Among the poor, there are, of course, multiple household types, “based on domestic cycles and the relative ability to draw on resources”; by necessity, they are “extremely flexible and fluctuating groups of people committed to resource pooling, to sharing, to mutual aid, who move in and out from under one another’s roofs” (RAPP, 1982: 176-177). As people living “below socially necessary reproduction costs”, it is the sharing of resources — spreading out the aid and risks of daily life — that makes reproduction possible. This “survival strategy” has both its real benefits (social and material) and high costs, such as “leveling” (by providing for all under such adverse and precarious conditions, none may get ahead). It is also important to note, as many studies have shown, that their material conditions of existence distan-

⁹ The construction of fictive kinship as a means of “legitimizing” and solidifying support networks itself testifies to the pervasiveness of family ideology in our society and specifically, its applicability to poor communities; as Rapp so aptly argues, “Fictive kinship is a prime example of family-as ideology. In this process, reality is inverted. ‘Everybody’ gets a continuous family, even though the strains and mobility associated with poverty may conspire to keep biological families apart. The idiom of kinship brings people together despite centrifugal circumstances” (RAPP, 1982: 178).

ce poor people from the norm than far more than their allegedly “*deviant*” ideas about family life; poor people, just as the non-poor, aspire to stable, “nuclear” family life, yet “are simply more realistic about their life chances” (RAPP, 1982: 179)⁹. Evidence would seem to suggest that among the poor, when neither household nor work relations tend toward stability, the public/private split is also not of particular relevance. For there “can be no privatization when survival may depend on rapid circulation of limited resources” (RAPP, 1982: 179). In this context, women “become the nodal points in family nets which span whatever control very poor people have over domestic and resource-getting arrangements” (RAPP, 1982: 179). Poor women, then, may not be subject to the domestic authority of a male, yet could hardly for this reason be considered “freer” of patriarchal relations. In fact, as Pearce (1983) and Sidel (1987) argue, their poverty is a product of (or at least, exacerbated by) women’s definition as subordinate and secondary workers in our society, and, as Sidel explains, government policy predicated on women’s primary responsibility for the children they bear. Sidel also contends that, while it is true that women of color are overrepresented in this category of the most economically disadvantaged and marginalized, great numbers of American women, including those who are white working and perhaps even middle class, are at risk of falling into poverty, given the economic vulnerability of single women with children, the frequency with which marriages end in divorce, and the glaring lack of a coherent family policy capable of dealing with current economic and social trends. If this is the case, then it is a very tragic way in way in which women today, across classes and racial/ethnic groups, share a (potential) common fate and bondage¹⁰.

V. WOMEN AND SEXUALITY

Before concluding, I would like to address one other fundamental aspect of women’s

experience, in which both a common condition and variation along class and race lines can be found. In fact, it might seem, at a first glance, that given the sexual subordination and objectification of women that is central to the legacy of patriarchy and pervasive in our society, it is here where women’s shared situation of oppression bears least relationship to class and race/ethnicity. However, a closer look reveals some significant differences here as well.

Cole (1986) discusses the subjection of all women to a “patriarchal culture” which treats all women “as sexual objects who either live up to or fall short of the ideal female sexual being” (COLE, 1986: 15). Yet women of more privileged economic backgrounds may have more resources to develop that free them from traditional sexual and cultural patterns. Access to a professional education and identity, for example, are resources that may permit women to compete with men in professional areas where they may be judged more on the basis of “gender neutral” criteria of competence and expertise than by their ability to measure up to traditional standards of femininity. At the same time, in a society built up on racist and “classist” culture and institutions, idealized standards of desirable femininity may exclude women who are not economically privileged, not white and not heterosexual.

In terms also of reproductive rights, which are inextricably linked to the question of women’s sexual subordination in patriarchy, questions of class and race are also relevant. As Cole reminds us, the birth control campaigns of the late 19th and early 20th century had a built-in class and race bias: what Margaret Sanger and others advocated as right for upper class women, they regarded as an obligation for the poor. This unfortunate pattern has been maintained as governments and social agencies have frequently concerned themselves with lowering birth rates and controlling the fertility of poor, working class and non-white women, with little concern or regard for what the women themselves desire, or even acting against their will or without their knowledge, as has been the case with the forced sterilization of black, Puerto Rican and Native American women.

¹⁰ It is doubtful, however, that this vulnerability be equally applicable to those women who possess high-level professional or managerial credentials, and would not pertain to upper-class women who possess large inherited resources of their own.

Adrienne Rich, in her “Ten Years Later” new introduction (1986) to *Of Woman Born* recounts how, during the seventies’ struggles for reproductive choice, “many white feminists could not understand that the facilities for ‘sterilization on demand’, with no waiting period, could and did easily turn into sterilization abuse if a woman was dark-skinned, was a welfare client, lived on a reservation, spoke little or no English [...] [the issue brought home] how experiences among women — the experience of having our reproductive choices made for us by male-dominated institutions (RICH, 1986: xxi). This she writes, in the way of a critique of that work, including her own, which has dealt with women’s right to sexual and procreative choice while making abstraction of the ways in which race and class fuse with patriarchal control.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

A look at the historical intertwining of class, race and gender in U.S. history makes it clear that there is no one “women’s condition”; rather, common bonds and shared forms of oppression mingle with relative privileges and disadvantages. The study of power relations *between* men and women does not preclude nor diminish the need for the study of power relations *among* women. An understanding of how class and race differences *divide* women, creating diverse needs and forms of consciousness, is the key to understanding issues such as women’s varying views of gender inequality or engagement in struggles for political change. At the same time, these differences do not dissolve the reality of historical, gender-based forms of power inequality. In this context, a recognition of differences becomes a precondition for the development of solidarity among women, whenever and wherever they hold a common interest in struggles for gender equality.

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