

Gender

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Abstract

Categorizing children at birth into the binary categories of female or male is common cross-culturally. But there is also substantial variation across cultures, both in the number of gender categories and in the tolerance of switching categories. This module first explores variation in gender concepts, then turns to what we know from cross-cultural research about gender differences in division of labor, political and warrior roles, and the relative status of women and men in society.

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Figure 1: Lukas Avendaño, a muxe contemporary performer from Mexico. In Zapotec cultures a muxe is someone who is assigned one gender at birth, but dresses as or assumes the societal role of the other binary gender, sometimes being referred to as a “third gender. Credit: Mario Patinho, CC BY-SA 4.0.”

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In most Western societies there is great importance placed on assigning a newborn into one of two categories—female or male—based on the newborn’s external biological appearance. From the moment of birth, research has shown that parents begin to have very different ideas and expectations for their newborn girl or boy. They not only believe that they have different personalities but they soon begin to treat them differently. And if, as it occasionally happens, an infant is born with ambiguous genitalia (intersex), there is usually strong pressure to “correct” the anatomy to conform to one clear category. Most children and adults accept the male or female category assigned to them, but some individuals feel that they do not belong to their assigned category (such individuals may refer to themselves as transgender) and they may opt for medical treatment (such as hormones or surgery) to bring about a closer fit between their body and the gender role they feel comfortable with.

Western societies are not alone in categorizing babies into the binary categories of female or male. The two category system is common cross-culturally. But there is also substantial variation across cultures, both in the number of gender categories and in the tolerance of category switching. All of this suggests that biological sex and cultural conceptions are not the same. Nature and nurture are inextricably confounded.

The women's movement of the 1960/70s in the United States played a large part in persuading scholars to take more seriously society's role in shaping not only expectations for males and females, but also how society shapes differences in access to prestige, authority, and power for males and females. Particularly important was the introduction of the concept of "gender" as distinguished from "sex." Gender is socially constructed; sex results from biological differences. Because it is difficult to disentangle the effects of society from biology, we generally use the term gender in our discussion here. After exploring variation in gender concepts, we turn to what we know from cross-cultural research about division of labor in subsistence, political and warrior roles, and the relative status of women and men.

Variation in Gender Concepts

While the two gender (binary) category system appears to be common cross-culturally ([Segal 2004](#)), we do not have a systematic survey to tell us how common it is compared to multiple gender systems. Quite a number of societies have a third gender category in addition to female and male. Two examples are the concept of "two-spirit" (the earlier term *berdache* is considered perjorative) found in many Native American cultures and the Oman *xanith*.

The assignment of a two-spirit designation would often come about when a boy, prior to adolescence, would undertake a vision quest, a rite of passage that involves being alone in the wilderness to seek a guardian spirit. Upon his return from the wilderness, the boy's vision would be interpreted, sometimes indicating a two-spirit status ([Segal 2004](#)). Two-spirits are not seen as men or women; instead they occupy an alternative gender. In the majority of the eastern North American cultures documented by Williams ([1992](#)), a two-spirit person would wear traditional women's clothing and perform traditional women's labor in the community. However, they also had unique roles in childbirth and weddings that were different from women's roles. A two-spirit



Figure 2: We-Wa, a Zuni “two-spirits” person, weaving. Credit: John K. Hillers, license-free.

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person might also get married and take on the role of the wife in a partnership. Although rarer, a two-spirit person could also be born female and take on more masculine dress and roles—for example, among the Ojibwa, a two spirit female engaged in hunting ([Callender et al. 1983, 445](#)).

In Oman, there is a gender triad of female, male and *xanith* ([Wikan 1977](#); [Burton 2015](#)). Xaniths are anatomically male and had roles that were neither like males nor females. For example, males dress in white, xaniths dress in unpatterned pastels, and women dress in brightly colored patterns. Xaniths have medium length hair; women have long hair and men short hair. Unlike women, who are secluded and cannot move about freely, xaniths are secluded only at night but can move about freely as men during the day. Xaniths typically earn a living either as domestic servants or as prostitutes for men. One of the most interesting aspects of the Omani gender construct is that it is the sexual act itself, and not the organs, which constitutes the distinction between a man and a xanith. For the Oman, a man is someone who performs the act of “entering” during sexual intercourse, and whoever receives, is a woman. The fact that a man has sexual relationships with a xanith does not alter his gender identity—he is still a man if he performs the entering ([Burton 2015](#)).

While the most common exception to the male/female dichotomy comes in the form of a third gender, there are societies with more than three genders. The Bugis of Indonesia recognize five different genders. *Oroane* (identify with their assigned gender as men), *makkunrai* (identify with their assigned gender as women), *calabai* (transgender women), *calalai* (transgender men), and *bissu* (half-male and half-female). The final gender category, *bissu*, is perhaps the most contested of the five. *Bissu* may be intersex, being born with ambiguous genitalia, but this is not always the case. *Bissu* are thought of as being externally male, but internally female. They typically serve as shamans and were originally seen as having a special connection to the gods. While the increasing presence of conservative Islam in Indonesia led to the oppression and repression of gender diversity in the 20th century, the *bissu* have been vital to cultural revitalization efforts, and still today play an important role in various ceremonies ([Nanda 2013](#)).

Division of Labor by Gender

In most societies known to anthropology, there is a division of labor by gender. Given all the different societies in the world, we might imagine that there would be an enormous number of different ways of dividing labor by gender. But to the contrary, there are some near-universal cross-cultural patterns regarding subsistence, food processing, other economic activities, and household chores for adults ([Murdock and Provost 1973](#)).

- Men almost always hunt and trap animals, do work that involves hard materials such as lumbering, mining, quarrying, and making objects from bone, horn, and shell. They also almost always make musical instruments.
- Women almost always care for infants.
- Men usually fish, herd large animals, clear land and do soil preparation for planting, butcher animals, make nets and rope, and collect honey.
- Women usually gather wild plants, cook, prepare dairy products, fetch firewood or other fuel, launder clothes, spin yarn, and care for children.
- Activities done by either women or men include collecting shellfish, caring for small animals, milking, planting and weeding crops, preserving fish and meat, preparing leather products, baskets, clothing, and pottery.
- Although many agricultural tasks are performed by men or women, men will tend to increase their participation in agriculture with the introduction of the plow ([Murdock and Provost 1973](#); [Alesina, Giuliano, and Numm 2013](#)).
 - However, women do not appear to decrease their absolute contribution to agriculture with intensification; rather, men increase their contribution relative to women ([Ember 1983](#)).

Why? With the intensification of agriculture, which is usually related to growing cereal crops, total work time (in both subsistence and domestic work) increases. Increased domestic work results from: more time needed to process cereal crops to make them edible (such as grinding flour or boiling dried grains for hours); more water and firewood are needed for cooking; and more infant and childcare (due to higher fertility). Domestic work is more

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compatible with childcare, so it appears that women are “pulled” into spending more time in tasks in and around the home. With increased domestic work, women probably have no more time to spend on agriculture, so men have to do more. It is important to note that women in intensive agricultural societies work on average over 11 hours a day, 7 days a week (Ember 1983).

- When the same task may be performed by either gender (such as weaving or making pottery), men are more likely to do it if it involves trade or monetary transactions (Byrne 1994, 1999; O’Brian 1999).

Why? If men have limited access to land, they will increasingly participate in production of crafts if there is a market for them (Byrne 1994). An additional factor may be the compatibility of commercial production with women’s other tasks and childcare. If pottery or weaving can be done in or around the home in limited time periods, it is compatible with childcare. If labor needs to be continuous, it may be difficult for women to undertake it (Ember and Ember 2019, 207).

- Children’s chores usually match adult gender assignments but when there are exceptions, boys will do women’s work, but girls do not do men’s work (Bradley 1987, 1993).

What explains division of labor?

Four theories often mentioned to explain division of labor patterns are: strength differences, compatibility with childcare, economy-of-effort, and expendability. While all of the theories plausibly explain some of the near-universal patterns, all of the theories have some weaknesses (see discussion in Ember and Ember 2019).

While some of the nearly universal male activities do involve considerable strength such as lumbering, quarrying, and the hunting of large game, all of which are consistent with “strength” theory, other tasks such as trapping small animals, making objects from shell, and making musical instruments do not seem to require that much strength. And women in some societies do hunt, indicating that women are certainly capable of hunting.

The “compatibility with childcare” theory stresses the impact of breastfeeding, which on average is two years in the nonindustrial world. Women need to

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Figure 3: A Nepalese woman carries luggage using a headstrap while carrying a baby. Credit: Bgabel, CC BY 3.0.

be relatively near their infants and toddlers so that they can return home to nurse or they need to take them with them when they go away from home. But some activities, such as hunting, trapping, lumbering, and mining are clearly too dangerous for young children to be nearby. This being said, the “compatibility with childcare” theory cannot readily explain why men work with bone, horn, and shell or make musical instruments since these can be interrupted.

Economy-of-effort theory can fill in the gaps for some of the activities not clearly accounted for by the first two theories. First, it may be advantageous for the gender that performs the primary task to do secondary tasks because they have more knowledge about the materials they need to work with. So, if men cut down trees and prepare logs for building, it may be more efficient for them to make other wooden objects, such as musical instruments since they are familiar with qualities of different woods. Second, it is more efficient to perform tasks located in the same vicinity. If women take care of infants in or around the home, other household tasks in or around the home can more readily be accomplished.

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Society's population is limited by the number of reproductive-aged women, not the number of reproductively-aged men. This is because women usually have only one child at a time, but men can impregnate more than one woman. Indeed, most societies in the [ethnographic record](#) allow or prefer [polygyny](#) as a form of marriage. Therefore, if there are dangerous activities to be undertaken, “expendability” theory suggests it is more adaptive for men, rather than women, to perform them. “Expendability” theory can explain many of the same activities as the strength theory, including hunting, trapping, lumbering, and mining. But like “strength” theory, it does not explain other activities that are not so dangerous.



Figure 4: Kikuyu women carrying heavy loads of wood in Kenya. Work requiring strength is not always relegated to the realm of men. Credit: Sirphilipjunior, CC BY-SA 4.0.

What gender is the “breadwinner”?

When people nowadays talk about the “breadwinner” in the family, they usually mean who brings in more money from paid employment. But there is

an enormous amount of household-related work that is unpaid. This includes childcare, taking care of relatives, preparing food and cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping or going to the market, repairs, and care of nearby grounds. When all work is added up, in most countries today, women average less paid work time than men but work more total hours than men—on average one more hour a day (Parker 2017).

In anthropological samples, usually of nonindustrial societies relying primarily on household food collection and production, the equivalent of “breadwinner” is the person who does most of the primary subsistence work—gathering, hunting, fishing, animal husbandry, and agriculture. Cross-culturally, it is relatively uncommon for women to do more primary subsistence work than men. The exceptions tend to be societies where gathering, usually women’s work, is the predominant activity. If we want to ask whether men or women contribute more to primary subsistence, we are usually contrasting societies where men do most of the primary subsistence with those where women contribute about the same as men. We discussed above how the increase in domestic work may explain why women contribute relatively less than men to agriculture when plowing is involved, but what explains the variation in other societies? Some societies practice *purdah* (female seclusion), which sometimes entails seclusion of women in the household or the covering of the body in the presence of males. Such practices are more common in South Asian and Islamic countries (particularly Arab countries). Indeed, societies with a high proportion of Muslims have lower participation of women in wage labor (Korotayev et al. 2015).

Relative Status of Women and Men

Scholars who have surveyed societies of the recent past and present have not found any societies where women could be described as having clear dominance over men. Even in societies with [matrilineal descent](#) (kin groups that pass descent through women) and [matrilocal residence](#) (where married couples live with or near the wife’s family) women do not have prominence in many areas of life. However, as Martin Whyte (2015, 6, 257) puts it, there is certainly considerable variation in need of explanation. There are societies in which women are generally excluded from political and other important realms of public life and there are others in which men and women are more

equal and male dominance is minimal. So a critical question is why the status of women relative to men is low in some societies and higher or more equal in others.

But what is meant by the term “status”? It is an ambiguous term that can refer to “differential power, prestige, rights, privileges, and importance of women relative to men” (Whyte 2015, 10). Do all these aspects go together? Does the concept of status appear to be a clear dimension of variation? Using a worldwide cross-cultural sample and 52 different variables that might tap some aspect of status, Whyte (2015) decided to see how these variables relate to each other. Whyte (2015, 169) concluded that status was not a unitary construct because these different measures did not predict each other very well. This leaves us with a research dilemma. How can we try to explain variation in status when status is not a clear construct or contain simple measures that tap it? Whyte’s solution, because he still wanted to search for explanations, was to construct a series of smaller measures to tap different aspects of status. We summarize some of his main findings along with those of other cross-cultural researchers.

Societal complexity

- Greater societal complexity in nonindustrial societies (as measured by indicators such as intensive agriculture, political hierarchy, larger towns and cities, and social stratification) predicts that women have *lower* status in a number of domains (Whyte 2015, 154–57, 172).
 - less authority in the home
 - less independent solidarity with other women
 - more unequal sexual restrictions
 - fewer property rights
 - more ritualized fear from men
 - belief that women are inferior (Coltrane 1992)
- Greater societal complexity in nonindustrial societies predicts *more* informal influence (Whyte 2015, 172), but this finding, while seemingly contradictory to the above findings may reflect a lack of real influence (Whyte 2015, 135).

- If we broaden our purview beyond nonindustrial societies, the relationship to societal complexity is probably curvilinear (resembling a “U” shape). Specifically, it appears that as societies transition from simpler to more complex subsistence economies the status of women generally declines, but as we move away from subsistence economies from industrial and post-industrial economies, gender equality increases somewhat.
 - Countries that rely on agriculture seem to have the least favorable attitudes towards gender equality, while industrial societies tend to have moderately favorable views, and post-industrial societies typically have the most favorable attitudes Inglehart et al. (2003).

Why? The suggestion is that in countries with more child mortality, there will be a greater emphasis on fertility of women and therefore jobs outside the home will be discouraged. With declining child mortality, women have more job opportunities and more opportunities for education. This theory might be parallel to the idea that childrearing is incompatible with certain types of labor for women.

Kinship and residence

- Female-centered social organization (matrilineal descent and/or matrilocal residence) has modest effects on women’s status—women in matrilineal societies and/or matrilocal societies have significantly more control over property than **patrilocal** and **patrilineal societies** (Whyte 2015, 133, 171); other domains of status are somewhat higher where social organization is oriented around women, but these relationships are not significant (e.g., more domestic authority, more ritualized female solidarity, more control over sex).

Why doesn’t matrilineality and matrilocality predict higher status for women in more domains? Scholars point out that in most matrilineal societies (often also matrilocal societies) males are decision-makers for their kin group even though descent and property pass through women—thus there is divergence between the line of descent and the line of authority (this is often referred to as the “matrilineal puzzle”—see discussion in Schlegel (1972) p. 1-8). So a brother may have considerable authority over his sister. Alice Schlegel (1972, 135) suggests that in

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Figure 5: A Navajo woman ties carrots that were just harvested from the field in Maricopa County, Arizona. The Navajo are an example of both a matrilineal and matrilineal society. Property and clan membership are both inherited from the female lineage. Credit: US Department of Agriculture, license-free.

matrilineal societies women only tend to have more domestic autonomy when neither their brothers nor their husband has dominance in domestic matters.

- Patrilineal descent and male inheritance predict less female participation in religious rituals (Fink 2004, 54, 60).

What doesn't predict women's status?

Researchers don't usually focus on non-predictors except when they are surprising. In the studies of women's status, there was the general expectation that activities which bolster men's importance, such as males being the major contributor to primary subsistence, or having high dependence on hunting or herding, or more warfare—activities that require strength or aggressiveness—would all predict lower status for women. Polygyny is similarly believed to detract from women's status. However, here is what studies have shown:

- Higher contribution by men to subsistence *does not* generally predict lower status for women across domains (Whyte 2015, 169; see also Sanday 1973)
- Higher dependence on herding large animals shows mixed results, with no clear prediction of lower status for women across domains (Whyte 2015, 126)
- Higher dependence on hunting shows mixed results, but greater balance is associated with more advantages for women (significant for domestic authority, value of life, and ritualized solidarity— Whyte (2015) p. 128)
- More warfare does not generally predict lower status for women across domains; most of the correlations are in the opposite direction and one is significant—more domestic authority for women with more warfare (Whyte 2015, 130)

Politics and Warfare

The ancient Greeks describe a tribe of powerful women warriors they named Amazons. Greek vases from the 6th century BC depicted combat between their male warriors and these female “Amazon” warriors. The Americas had “Amazon” women warriors as well, at least in stories that come to us from



Figure 6: Amazon Mattei at the Capitoline Museums in Rome depicts one of the great female Amazon warriors. Credit: Mary Harrsch, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

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conquistadors, missionaries and explorers. In fact, the Amazon River got its name from the explorer Francisco de Orellana, who named it the “Amazon” after reporting battles with female warriors (Crist, Parsons, and Schultz 2018). Did the Amazons exist or were these just myths? Excavating more than one thousand tombs in the Eurasian steppes associated with a nomadic culture (Scythians) archaeologists have found that about 20-37% of the excavated graves with weapons were female graves, consistent with Greek legends of female warriors coming from this region. Moreover, many of the female burials were elaborate with rich grave goods (Mayor 2014). Of course, we don’t know much about gender relations within the society as a whole based simply on finding evidence of female warriors.

But these exceptions are estimated to amount to less than 1% of all warriors in human history (Goldstein 2004, 10–22). In fact, Goldstein points out that the connection of males with warfare is more of a cross-cultural universal than almost any other gender difference. Nonetheless, we do find that some societies allow women to participate in warfare. What explains why in some societies women take part in warfare?

- Societies with internal warfare and/or some community **exogamy** lack women’s participation in warfare. Or, to put it in reverse—societies with purely external warfare and community **endogamy** are more likely to allow women to participate in warfare.

Why? Adams (1983) suggests that internal warfare and exogamy set up a conflict of loyalties for a woman between the family she has married into and her family of birth. To understand why there is a conflict, it is important to keep in mind that internal warfare (war against neighboring communities sharing the same language) is associated with patrilocal residence (Ember and Ember 1971) and patrilocal societies also tend to marry women who at least sometimes or always come from other communities (community **agamy** or exogamy). This means that in patrilocal societies, not only is the in-marrying wife often from a different community than her husband, but also that the community she has married into might have been or will be engaged in warfare against her natal community. To prevent a woman from trying to protect her natal community by some means, patrilocal societies are likely to forbid a woman from participating in war, handling weapons of war, or even from listening in on war plans. In contrast, with purely external war and

the fact that people usually marry spouses from the same society, purely external warfare would not pose a conflict of loyalty for either women or men. Neither would there be a conflict from marrying endogamously, because spouses come from the same community and would have no split loyalties. In Adam's (1983) sample, every single case where we there are women warriors (Comanche, Crow, Delaware, Fox, Gros Ventre, Maori, Majuro, Navajo, and Orokaiva) there is either exclusive external war or endogamous residency.

Biology may still play an important role in explaining male dominance in warfare because warfare is highly incompatible with infant care, for much of the same reasons we discussed above for dangerous labor activities such as hunting or lumbering. Moreover, warfare would not only be difficult to manage for pregnant women (Adams 1983, 207), but loss of reproductive potential is a huge cost for society. Men are also on average bigger and stronger than women and have slightly higher spatial abilities—traits which may give men additional skills needed by warriors (Adams 1983, 210). However, while these biological differences may explain why the majority of warriors would be male, these differences do not explain the almost complete exclusion of women from warrior roles, especially given that “a minority of women are stronger, more spatially adept, and more competitive than most men” (Goldstein 2004, 128–82).

What explains male and female political participation?

Similar to dominance of men in warfare, it is extremely common for men to dominate the political arena, even in matrilineal societies. This is especially true when it comes to holding formal positions of power. Whyte (1978, 217) found that only men were leaders in about 88 percent of societies. If we look at countries as a whole, as of June 2019, only 11 women were heads of state and 12 were heads of government (“Facts and figures: Leadership and political participation,” n.d.). Additionally, while the number of women in parliaments (or a representative body) have increased in the last two decades, the worldwide average for women in parliament is still only about 24% (the United States is about average). Why is women's participation so low? One possibility is that much of politics involves warfare decisions and since men's participation in warfare is almost universal, this may give men the edge for being considered political leaders (Ember and Ember 2019, 384). Men



Figure 7: The Hungarian parliament in session in Budapest. There is a clear preponderance of males in the parliament. However, this is not limited to Hungary. As of February 2019, the world average for female parliamentarians was 24% (UN Women). Credit: bici, Pixabay license.

also generally have height advantages. Although it may seem far-fetched, studies of leadership in individual societies have shown that taller individuals are more likely to be leaders (Werner 1982; Stogdill 1974; Handwerker and Crosbie 1982). Finally, men are more likely to see more of the outside world in their roles as hunters and warriors; women, especially those with more children, are likely to stay closer to home (Ember and Ember 2019, 212–13; Werner 1984).

- Female political activity and the presence of female leadership will be positively associated with internal conflict and warm/affectionate socialization practices and negatively associated with external conflict, fraternal interest group strength, and intercommunity marriage (Ross 1986).

Why? The relationship between exogamy and a lack of women in war, is similar to that of exogamy and women in politics. In this case, it is not so much due to a question of loyalties, but because the women are coming into the community largely as outsiders, and do not have as

much insider knowledge about the community's members and history among other things (Ember and Ember 2019).

What We Don't Know

- There are as of yet no systematic surveys of the prevalence of different gender systems—two, three, or more categories and why they may vary.
- We have a lot of surmises about requirements for different labor tasks (degree of strength required, compatibility with childcare, etc.), but little evidence to support those surmises. Also, are male activities usually associated with higher status and prestige than female activities? If so, why?
- Do any of the conditions explaining why women might participate in combat help us explain the position of women as political leaders?
- There has been little exploration of intersexuality cross-culturally.
- In the ethnographic record there are relatively few instances of women transforming to men in gender categories. Is this a function of reporting bias or is it a real difference? If so, why might that be?

Exercises Using eHRAF World Cultures

Explore some texts and do some comparisons using the [eHRAF World Cultures](#) database. These exercises can be done individually or as part of classroom assignments. See the [Teaching eHRAF Exercise on Gender](#) for suggestions.

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Glossary

Ethnographic Record what we know from descriptions written by observers, usually anthropologists, who have lived with and worked with people in the present and recent past

Polygyny when two or more women are married to one man at the same time; it is called sororal polygyny when the two women are sisters

Matrilineal descent the rule of descent that affiliates individuals with kin of both sexes related to them through women; at birth an individual affiliates with their mother's kin group.

Matrilocal residence a pattern of marital residence in which couples typically live with or near the wife's parents.

Patrilineal descent the rule of descent that affiliates individuals with kin of both sexes related to them through men; at birth an individual affiliates with their fathers's kin group.

Patrilocal residence a pattern of marital residence in which couples typically live with or near the husband's parents.

Exogamy the rule that specifies marriage to a person from outside one's own group (kin or community).

Endogamy the rule that requires marriage to a person within one's own group (kin, caste, community).

Agamy the absence of a rule which dictates whether or not a certain group is eligible for marriage.

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