

# GENDER AND INDIVIDUALISM IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Conf.univ. dr. Smaranda ȘTEFANOVICI  
Universitatea „Petru Maior”, Târgu-Mureș

## *Abstract*

The paper will focus on the three movement-building responses to gender inequality in American culture, 1920s to today. It will look into the future of feminism and how Americans understand the intersection of race and gender in America. Some of the questions raised will be related to whether the new generation has different gender identity than the past generation and what American women really want.

## MOTTO:

Helman: Before all else, you are a wife and mother  
Nora: That I no longer believe  
I believe that before all else,  
I am a human being, just as much  
As you are – or at least that  
I should try to become one. (Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, 1879)

## **Rationale/ Introduction**

The revival of feminism in recent years has demonstrated that many women still remain profoundly disturbed by the nature of relationships between the sexes. Institutions still perpetuate female inferiority (“the glass ceiling”), societies are still patriarchal, based on male supremacy. Has the status of American women changed since the enactment of the Nineteenth Amendment (1920) that was seen as a major victory on the suffrage fight and a major stride in the struggle for sexual equality? The present study is an effort to answer this question by examining the role of women in America since 1920.

The main assumption is that sexual inequality is rooted within the social structure itself through the allocation by society of segregated roles for each sex. The very existence of activities and responsibilities maintain an imbalance of power between the sexes. Therefore, it is important to concentrate on the women’s movement-building responses to gender inequality but also on the women’s “place” in the American society, in other words, on the “place” and “role” the American society is willing to offer to their women. Does the most democratic country in the world still perceive the polarity of male and female spheres? And if this is the case, are these private and public spheres still segregated when they should be valued equally?

Today, undoubtedly, it seems reasonable to argue that the social world is the creation of both males and females, and that any full understanding of human society and any viable program for social change will have to incorporate the goals, thoughts and activities of the “second sex”. Then why is woman still defined in the twenty-first century “the second sex”, “the Other” (Simone de Beauvoir wrote “The Second Sex” a century ago, i.e. in 1949)? Everywhere, even in societies where women have achieved considerable social recognition and power, as is the case of America, they are still facing male domination, being excluded (or not considered trustworthy) from certain economic or political activities or responsibilities. Why do women, in American society as elsewhere accept a subordinate standing? How, and in what kinds of situations, do women exercise power? How do women help to shape, create, and change the private and public worlds in which they live?

These questions generated within the field of anthropology and sociology raised a concern to understand and change women’s position. Researchers have reached the conclusion that the social factors are more important than biological ones; even in the case of primates, like humans, the expression of dominance is related to the environment in which the investigation is made. Paradoxically, however, this sex imbalance based on biological factors still perpetuates under so different social worlds from the 1920s. Most and probably all contemporary societies, wherever they are on the scale of development, are characterized by some degree of male dominance, and although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life.

### **Culture and Anthropology of Gender**

The paper invites the reader to see America as a plurality of cultures. We maintain, along with most other social scientists, that gender is everywhere largely culturally constructed. Gender, Stone argues, “does not automatically take shape of our male and female biologies; gender is rather something that all of us invent, modify, and reinvent as we go about the business of leading our individual and collective lives.” (“Introduction” 2). The present study limits to what is distinctive about gender in America. Along with our premise that gender is a cultural construction, we also maintain that in the U.S.A., as in many other industrial societies, gender is closely related to ethnicity and class.

Culture, in its broad and flexible sense, refers to the learned behaviors and ideas that characterize particular groups of people, as well as their ways of life and traditions. America has a common political and economic organization shared by a multicultural (multiethnic) society. People belonging to the American society may recognize and approve of some

cultural categories while rejecting others. Gender is one such contested category in America even today.

### **Gender, Patriarchy, and Feminism**

Gender refers to the different ways that men and women are culturally defined and evaluated. 'Gender', as a cultural, dynamic and variable construction, distinguishes from 'Sex', which is universal, static and invariable. It is not our goal to speak here about patriarchal or matriarchal societies. We will use the term 'patriarchy' referring to male dominance in certain social spheres, although women also contribute and exercise power in those social spheres. 'Feminism' will not be associated with man hating; it will be associated here with gender equality. Status (i.e. position with expected behavior) and power referring to gender can exclude or complement each other. As gender roles (i.e. behavior expected of someone who holds a particular status) are relative, power, status, autonomy, and authority are also relative and dynamic.

Most societies have developed an elaborate and segregated network of roles for each sex, with little interaction or exchange between the two. The allocation of different spheres of responsibility to men and women has been a means of maintaining and reinforcing an imbalance of power between the sexes. In practice, if not in principle, "separate has meant unequal" (Chafe viii). If such is the case, it is important to know if the status of American women has altered over time, more exactly in the years since the Nineteenth Suffrage Amendment was adopted in 1920.

To see that, we have to look more closely at the period after 1920 to evaluate the changing shapes of American women's public roles. If change has occurred, then we will find a visible shift in the allocation of roles between men and women. Rosaldo argues that an emphasis on women's maternal role leads to a universal opposition between "domestic" and "public" roles that is necessarily asymmetrical; women, confined to the domestic sphere, do not have access to the sorts of authority, prestige, and cultural value that are the prerogatives of men. She suggests further that, given this imbalance, the exercise of power by women is often seen as illegitimate, and that the avenues by which women gain prestige and a sense of value are shaped and often limited by their association with the domestic world. Ortner comes to the conclusion that women's biology, their social role in child care and reproduction and personality encourages cultures to see them more "natural" and less "cultural" than men, hence her subordinated role in the service of "culture's" ends and her universal enclosure to the status of the "second sex".

Feminism and concern for the rights of women have been a continually but not always particularly strong theme in American history since the founding of the Republic. Historians speak about three identifiable waves of American feminism: the first one, associated with the fever of reform in antebellum America, was symbolized by the Seneca Falls Convention and Declaration of 1848; Connected to liberal women's rights movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> c and early 20<sup>th</sup> c, it was concerned with access and equal opportunities for women, such as the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (women's vote). The second one, emerged in the 1960s with Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* and ended in the 1990s with the radical voices of women's empowerment and differential rights. While the first-wave feminism fought for votes for women, the second-wave feminists believed in women's collective empowerment, producing expressions such as "sisterhood is powerful" or "the personal is political". The third wave feminism from the mid 1990s onward emerged of a new postcolonial world order, challenging the notion of "universal womanhood". Women fought for being recognized as capable, strong and assertive social agents.

All three waves of feminism had in common one goal: to focus people's attention on them, to demolish the cultural ideology according to which women's lives are not interesting and are not worth attention.

Because women were so closely associated with the home, they were consigned to the historical margins as well. Historians generally treated those women who ventured out into paid work or politics as exceptions that proved the rule. These historiographical assumptions actually duplicated a distinctly nineteenth century conceptual framework, as Laura F. Edwards argues, that divided society into two separate spheres: a private, female world, centered on domesticity and affective family ties, and a public, male world of production and politics. The middle-class "cult of domesticity", in which women were idolized for their modesty and domestic talents, reinforced this separation, although there were domestic writers such as Catharine Beecher who supported the idea according to which the two spheres were of equal importance and complementary, because the domestic realm was necessary to sustain the public sphere.

Barbara Welter, the author of "The Cult of Womanhood, 1820-1860" (1966), on the other hand, criticized this domestic literature of the time, arguing that the insistence on women's piety, purity, submissiveness, and domestic isolation constrained them at the very moment when social, economic, and political opportunities of all kinds were expanding for men. Women thus were left behind, they did not make history. They were refused individualism, and forced into a sphere from which, in order to get out, they had to organize themselves within that very restrictive sphere, on the principle according to which "sisterhood

is powerful”. In fact, as Cott suggested (1977), “women’s experience within their separate sphere was a necessary condition of feminism, which rested on the “bonds” of womanhood in the sense of women identifying with each other as a distinct group with common interests that were different from those of men.” (qtd. by Edwards 230).

The ideology of separate spheres reflected American woman’s role in that historical period of economic, social and political changes. In Western societies, mostly the American society, gender expectations took on polarities: for example, if men were strong, women were weak; if men were intellectual, women were emotional; if men were warriors, women were nurturers. These assumptions perpetuated power relationships in which most women were regarded as inferior, in need of male protection and with no civil rights, that is not being regarded as individuals, but as subjects.

In the nineteenth century females were not allowed to education, to public professions, testify in court, hold title to property, establish business, or sign papers as witnesses. In marriage, a wife was obliged to pledge obedience and to give her husband power to deprive her of her liberty” (Chafe 5). Deprived of any civil rights, women’s identity being subsumed into her husband’s identity, early feminists attacked all forms of discrimination beginning with the assertion that “all men and women are created equal”. Sexual inequality is rooted within the social structure itself. Therefore, the principal assumption of “The Declaration of Sentiments” (Seneca Falls, NY, 1848) was that society must go through a complete transformation in thinking about women. Gaining the suffrage was just a big, but superficial, political stride towards this more profound fight for social recognition. Women could never be free, they said, as long as society did not acknowledge men and women’s identity in capacities and responsibilities.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a founder of the women’s rights movement dismissed most zealously the political bondage as woman’s chief discontent. The vote was according to her a partial and superficial step toward her social bondage. To this view, she wrote *Woman’s Bible* (1890) to dismantle the widespread theological assumption that females were the weak and inferior sex.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s treatise on *Women and Economics* (1898) drew on the cause of sexual inequality, which, she believed, could be traced to prehistoric times, when females first became dependent on males for food and shelter. Thereafter, a woman’s survival rested on her ability to seduce and hold a husband. In effect, Chafe says, “sex became a female’s economic way of life; while men worked to live ... women mated to live .... ” (7-8) The sexual division of labor dried, according to the same social critic, women’s minds and limited their horizons while depriving the country of a human resource. Gilman, like Stanton,

believed that gaining the vote was a good and important step towards freedom but much more important was gaining economic independence, which would be achieved only through work. The task of society, Gilman reasoned, was to develop mechanisms which would allow each individual to cultivate his or her own potential, inside or outside home. To that end she suggested the establishment of central kitchens to prepare the community's food, the development of public nurseries for childcare, and the creation of a corps of expert housekeepers to maintain the cleanliness of the home. (Cf. Chafe 9). Accordingly, woman could do what she knew to do in her private sphere but offering her support outside it, in the public sphere.

Although faulty in criticizing the nuclear family, marriage, and the church (institutions to which most people were deeply devoted at the time) society started, even if timidly and reluctantly, at first, to become aware of the fact that woman's place could not be changed without altering the family and forcing a radical revision of a whole set of social relationships.

The twentieth feminists insisted on female individuality rather than on identical rights to engage in worldly activity. Each sex had its own particular sphere, but the two were complementary rather than incompatible, argued Chafe. There were male voices who believed in women as homemakers as well as politically involved as long as political involvement (the vote in this case) protected the family. There were still others who claimed that the vote would disturb the family and destroy the home.

The new middle class experienced growth toward self-consciousness and the ties between suffragists and reformers became closer as extension of the vote to females was becoming more and more thought to be a tool of improving society.

The 1960s witnessed a rebirth of the women's movement. It was the period around WWII when more and more women expanded their "sphere" taking jobs outside home. The *New York Times* reported that a "new breed of middle class women" was emerging and that suburban housewives who had previously stayed at home all day were seeking jobs, going back to school, and engaging in volunteer work. At this time Betty Friedan published her renowned feminist book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) on the issue of the second-wave of feminism occurring in America during the 1960s.

She discusses the effects of the 'feminine mystique' on the housewives. Apart from noticing that most of them suffered from 'the problem that has no name', being limited to the roles of mothers and housewives, gender stereotypes being enforced and nourished by the mass media, she urges that women should not have to live up to any sort of image, real or imagined, but should learn to live their lives in a way that provides them with satisfaction.

Although Friedan did not bring anything new, she was a pioneer in highlighting the causes of feminism and sometimes attacking them manifestly. She belonged to the 1950s young women generation who could no longer see themselves in the role of submissive wives. They wanted more from life and being confined to homes was something highly undesirable. These sentiments were expressed in a desperate tone in her book: “it is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women. For women of ability in America today, I am convinced there is something about the housewife state that is dangerous” (*Feminine Mystique* 305). “We believe [she claimed] that a true partnership between the sexes demands a different concept of marriage, an equitable sharing of the responsibilities of home and children and of the economic burdens of their support.” (NOW 1966)

Friedan is putting her finger on the feminine dissatisfaction due to lack of self-realization. Today, indeed, women are marrying later, not dropping out of school to marry and bear children, restricting the number of children, often postponing childbirth in favor of a career, and the glass ceiling, while not totally shattered, has severe cracks in it.

### **Civil Rights and Liberties in the U.S.A.**

Civil rights ensure equality under the law. America is a common law country, based on civil law and a legal system rather than on legislative statutes like continental European countries. It follows that the US civil rights are usually thought of in terms of the specific rights guaranteed in the Constitution: freedom of religion, of speech, of the press, etc., and the rights to due process of law and to equal protection under the law.

Unlike slavery and race, which, in the words of James Madison, were “the central problem,” women were never mentioned during the debate over the ratification of the US Constitution. Indeed, in the document itself no mention is made of the status of women, even though they were treated differently than men in every state on almost every issue that affected the rights of citizens, including suffrage, property, jury service, and education. The original constitution does not mention women or men, it speaks only about persons, fully and equally.

In August 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment passage, which granted women in the US the right to vote, became part of the Constitution. This marked the end of the first round of rights politics by American women. However, if they voted at all, they voted pretty much as their fathers, brothers, or husbands instructed them to do.

It was only in the 1960s that women began to organize around the issue of their civil rights. For more than four decades after passage of the suffrage, feminist demands were largely ignored. The federal Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963 to authorize equal pay for men

and women for similar jobs and by the early 1970s over forty states had passed equal pay laws. Because of segregation in the job market, however, most men and women were not employed in the same jobs.

First proposed in 1923, an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), intended to prohibit all discrimination based on sex (“Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex”), was introduced into every session of Congress till 1972 when it was passed and sent to the states for ratification. After failing to win ratification in a sufficient number of states, the ERA was abandoned. Today, it is still not part of the USA Constitution. The Equal Rights Amendment was last reintroduced on July 21, 2009. If it gets three more votes (it has been ratified by 35 of the necessary 38 states) it might become the 28<sup>th</sup> Amendment in the American Constitution.

### **Gender, Individualism and Glass Ceiling in the USA**

If, as the feminists claim, one of the principal obstacles to equality is the division of labor between men and women, departing from the home to take a job represents at least a step toward enclosing the gap between male and female spheres, and creating a new and different kind of life for women. As more and more women have taken jobs, responsibilities within the home have been redistributed between husbands and wives, women increasingly expecting and being expected to fill a diversity of roles. And if attitudes change, then behavior patterns change as well.

World War II was the catalyst in setting in motion new ideology regarding gender roles and labor discrimination. Before the war, although some American wives became dedicated camp followers and assumed their traditional domestic responsibilities, including cooking meals and cleaning the camps, women were denied access to political and military decision making, were subjected to exploitative wage disparities when employed as nurses and camp servants, and were victimized by the same cult of domesticity that had existed prior to the war. American troops and governments assumed, for instance, that a woman could not possess the knowledge to formulate a political opinion that differed from her husband’s.

However, which is the situation today? The glass ceiling is a level above which it is difficult for women to move in an organization. It can refer to a management level, salary level or level of responsibility or authority. The presence of the glass ceiling is a much discussed issue with regard to women’s professional success around the world (Ryan and Haslam 2007). Gender and race discrimination lead to the glass ceiling phenomenon. In the USA, the factors that cause the persistent existence of the glass ceiling are also connected to gender and race discrimination, more explicitly to the roots of gender bias, male/female thought patterns, masculine identity of American individualism (Warren 1984) and its relation



to another Western value, equality. We can see thus the seeds of the glass ceiling installed by males who regard certain professional levels sacred and thus unbreakable by women.

In his social scheme, Rousseau excluded women from the public realm. As American males adopted individualism, they defined it as male and excluded women from its freedoms. American individualism historically has excluded women and racial minorities from economic and political life.

In the nineteenth century motherhood was glorified while sexuality was underestimated. In the twentieth century motherhood was no longer at odds with sexual expression, but it came into conflict with female 'personhood', autonomy, or women's expression of individualism (Stone 91). The two spheres (domestic and public) belong to the same role takers, i.e. the 'homemaker' (woman) and the 'breadwinner' (man). American individualism was preached way back by the Founding Fathers of the US Constitution who believed that the government should seek to protect individual rights in the constitution itself.

For Americans, individualism is part of what it means to *be* an American. A cultural icon, it emphasizes individual liberty, belief in the primary importance of the individual, and in the 'virtues of self-reliance' and 'personal independence'. According to Lykes, 'Individualism' embraces opposition to authority, and to any control over the individual, especially when exercised by the political state or 'society'. It is thus, he continues, directly-opposed to **collectivism** which advocates subordination of the individual to the will of the society or community. While individualism refers to a philosophical tradition characteristic of Western societies (Liberalism), collectivism is more characteristic of Eastern societies (Confucianism). Societies described as individualistic emphasize "I" consciousness, autonomy, independence, whereas societies characterized as collectivist, on the other hand, stress "we" consciousness, collective identity, dependence and interdependence. As a result, in cultures characterized as individualistic, such as American culture is, each person is encouraged to be autonomous, self-directing, the Western self being gendered toward a male perspective vs. the Eastern individual who involves the other for self-development.

### **Repression and Empowerment**

From the earliest of times, motherhood has helped to divide men and women since women primarily stay at home while pregnant and nursing. Likewise, men have traditionally taken jobs away from the home. In primitive times, this practice may not have suggested inequality between the sexes. Yet, in our modern times the tradition of women staying at home rearing children while men work outside the home has left many women economically dependent on men to provide the material necessities of life.

Nineteenth century American feminist literature and later twentieth century immigrant literature represent women empowerment, female protagonists who achieved liberty to become themselves by going against the norms of the society, and by defying the people and the society that continue to repress them as free women in the American society. Nineteenth and twentieth century American women have, through the years, evolved from being simple mothers, wives, and daughters to being women of true substance; that is, women who gained autonomy despite the stereotypes and stigmas branded on them by their society.

Although many things have changed for women in the last century, the full equality between the genders has not been achieved. This is because women are still paid less than men for corresponding jobs. Women earn about 30 percent less than men do in corresponding full time jobs (Nelson, 2006). Women are underrepresented in certain professions and in more prestigious positions with power, and they often do the 'second shift' of housework which is undervalued. The gender gap is widespread and exists in all occupational categories (Nelson, 2006). Women still form the major part of part-time and temporary workforce, and women and men are occupationally segregated, with women concentrated in jobs stereotyped as 'women's jobs' (nursing, clerical child care, retail, humanistic sciences teaching, etc.). Similarly, women are poorly presented in science, computer science and engineering occupations, which are often very prestigious and well paid and this job inequality is rooted in the broader social inequality, which separates boys and girls from an early age, and which still sharply defines male and female roles with the family and society at large. Men as individuals give importance to power, competency, efficiency, and achievement, while women are often regarded as more focused on issues of love, communication, beauty, and relationships.

In 1937, 34 percent of the American public (40 percent of the women and 27 percent of the men) said they would vote for a woman for president of the US. In 1987, 82 percent of the American public (83 percent of the women and 81 percent of the men) said they would vote for a woman for president.

Women have also become more involved in the political process. In the first presidential election in which they were eligible to vote, only 26 percent of them exercised their newly won and hard-fought-for right. By 1952, 60 percent of women compared with 64 percent of men voted in the presidential election; from that time forward, the percentage of women voters has matched or slightly exceeded that of men. Today public opinion polls show consistently that a substantial portion of the American public would vote for a qualified female presidential candidate. Roughly, 26 percent of the public is not in favor of a female president; however, most voters (66 percent) saw Hillary Clinton as a strong contender at the 2008 presidential elections.

## Conclusion

The premise we started from in this anthropological and sociological study of gender and American individualism was the conflict between the American ideal (the conjugal family), on the one hand, and the American reality (women mostly defined as domestic), on the other hand. Long time ago, in 1974, Rosaldo argued that “the most egalitarian societies are not those in which male and female are opposed or are even competitors, but those in which men value and participate in the domestic life of the home and women transcend domestic limits by participating in important public events.” (41) After so many years, in 2009, although changes have taken place (on some important matters as personal and family life, work and educational experiences, and contributions and visibility in the political and public spheres) societies still face the same conflict. The conflict can be put an end too, and the feminist movement, as well, only when women will be acknowledged, like men, as social actors seeking power, security, prestige, and a sense of worth and value, which America is on the right track, as Hilary Clinton’s running for presidency proved. It is simply overlapping the two spheres, private, and public, and giving credit to women’s lives as worth considering attention. Domestic life is as interesting as public life. No matter which one woman chooses, it is simply to acknowledge the universal fact of male authority while not denying female importance and individuality.

## Bibliography

1. Chafe, W.H. *The American Woman. Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920 – 1970*. Oxford: OUP, 1974.
2. Edwards, Laura F. “Gender and the Changing Roles of Women” in *A Companion to Nineteenth Century America*. Malden William L. Barney (ed.). Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2001, 223-237.
3. Lykes, M. Brinton & Qin Dongxiao. “Individualism and Collectivism” in *Encyclopedia of Women and Gender. Sex Similarities and Differences in the Impact of Society on Gender* (Vol I-II). San Diego et al: Academic Press, 2001, 625 -631.
4. NOW. “The National Organization for Women’s 1966 Statement of Purpose”. Written by Betty Friedan. <http://www.now.org/history/purpos66.html>
5. Ortner, Sherry B. “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” in *Woman, Culture and Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974, 67-89.

6. Rosaldo, M.Z. & L.Lamphere (eds.). "Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview" in *Woman, Culture and Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974, 17-43.
7. Ryan, M. & Haslam, A. "What Lies Beyond the Glass Ceiling? The Glass Cliff and the Potential Precariousness of Women's Leadership Positions" in *Human Resource Management International Digest*. 14 (3): 3+, 2006, 3-5.
8. Stone, L. & N.P. McKee. *Gender and Culture in America*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2001.
9. Warren, Joyce W. *The American Narcissus: Individualism and Women in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984.