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ABSTRACT

A method for incorporating an examination of sex roles and position of women into an undergraduate course on geography of Africa is discussed. It is a regional geography course with a cultural emphasis. Five percent of the total instruction is devoted to the examination of women. This is justified because geographical concepts such as spatial interaction, environmental perception, and static distributions involve women's issues. Moreover, the role of women differs from one society to another, and the origins and distributions of role concepts are geographical. A brief section explains how house types and settlement morphology reveal cultural aspects about the position of women. The majority of the document compares status and roles of women in African, Arab, and American societies. Preschool sex roles of the three groups are similar, but learning of roles becomes more formalized when schooling begins. By puberty, great contrasts are found. Americans hold the sexual double standard; Arabs enforce female seclusion in order to prevent premarital sex and thereby ensure receipt of a woman's "bride price;" African tribes are less anxious about human sexuality and only few insist on virginity of unmarried women. Marriage patterns of polygyny or monogamy and effects of nuclear or extended families are also discussed. A short bibliography contains 17 references on women in Africa and the Arab world. (AV)

EXPLORING SEX ROLES IN AFRICAN STUDIES

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(Paper presented at the "Discovering Women's Place" session of the annual meeting of the National Council of Geographic Education, San Francisco, November 1976.)

This morning I wish to discuss how I examine sex roles and position of women in courses I teach. I incorporate these issues into all my classes, even such unlikely courses as cartography (choice of data) and weather and climate (naming of hurricanes). But my emphasis here is on my course on geography of Africa. Before examining particulars, I discuss the matter generally.

Geographers, who were quick to vent their outrage against racial discrimination in the late 60's, have been slow to confront the discrimination of women, and thus the profession is failing in its responsibility to instill among students the humanitarian feeling of condemnation of social injustice. Many feminist issues are inherently geographical and were simply overlooked by the male pioneers of the field. Our most honored traditions allow for such an examination. Static distributions, for example: the distribution of women is not simply a constant percentage of humanity generally (Birdsall & Cunville). Spatial interaction: migration patterns of women are not identical with those of men (Schultz), and at a micro level, the spatial behavior of women differs greatly. Environmental perception: women

are generally homebound, and structure their environmental image to reflect this (McKetchnie, Lee). Moreover, the role of women differs from one society to another, and the origins and distributions of role concepts is geographical.

Finally, discussion of feminism greatly appeals to students. This alone would not justify curriculum revision, but coupled with the other points, the pragmatic justification should not be ignored.

Let me now describe my Africa course, which is a standard regional geography with a cultural emphasis. In my discussion of the form of the landscape I examine house types and settlement morphology. The form of the house reveals much about the position of women; yet although house forms have long interested geographers, only recently have they examined the organization of space at a domestic level, as Bonny Loyd points out. There is no justification for this: if spatial interaction is geographical, there is no need to eliminate study at the micro level of the house. This is only a matter of scale. One might conclude that domestic space is ignored in geography because traditionally this has been women's space. If so this is sexism by omission.

In my section on social structure and traditional culture, I examine the status and roles of women in African, Arab, and American societies. Regarding pre-school children the three groups are similar: boys imitate their fathers and girls their mothers. With school age children, the learning of sex roles becomes more formalized. In pre-colonial Africa this was a continuation of the enculturation process in the household. For Arabs, school is institutionalized for boys only.

Girls, in their opinion, need only learn domestic skills for proper maturation. Americans educate both sexes, with the tacit understanding that some subjects, the sciences for example, are more appropriate for boys than girls.

At puberty great contrasts are found. Americans hold the sexual double standard; accepted for boys, discouraged for girls. In Arab society, the attitude is fanatical: traditionally, if a girl were found to have willingly participated in the premarital sexual act, she could legitimately be put to death by her family. Consequently, the institution of seclusion prevails. Women clothe their entire bodies except the eyes and hands. Islamic architecture provides a segregation of rooms and courts into those where women stay and those used by men. Arab males adhere to a folklore that women are essentially weak-willed and must be protected from harm. Studies show, however, that seclusion essentially protects men from temptation, who need such protection the most (Mernissi).

In fairness I point out that the origin of this institution is found in pre-Islamic Arabia when life was especially precarious. At marriage, the parents were compensated for the loss of a daughter with a "bride price." They came to depend on this potential source of income. If her virtue were in question, the daughter, who contributes little income in a nomadic society, would not marry and would continue draining the family's resources. This could result in disaster for the family. Notwithstanding, the institution is now archaic and is dying out, though slowly.

The male-dominated Arab and American societies exhibit great anxiety toward human sexuality. This was not the case in traditional Africa. A survey of African tribes showed that only 21% insisted on virginity of unmarried women (Murdock). Moreover, many tribes traditionally wore little or no clothing, as National Geographic Magazine is fond of pointing out. These attitudes scandalized Christian and Muslim teachers, who saw only degenerate eroticism. They worked hard to instill their particular shame concepts, and in many areas were successful.

Marriage patterns reveal much on the relative position of women. In Africa and the Arab World polygyny is the rule. Polygyny has drawbacks and is the target of feminists wherever the institution prevails. Feelings of inequity and jealousy may be constant undercurrents. For instance, the first wife is often the most powerful female in a household, and awards unpleasant tasks to the younger women. She may be the patriarch's favorite and receive the bulk of his attentions and money. On the other hand, an older married man may take on a young wife and bestow his favors on her and her children. How could the first wife help but resent this.

The household in Africa and the Arab World is larger than in America. The household is the extended family, which is more efficient than ours, since there is specialization of labor and economy of scale. In terms of effort and cost per serving, it is more efficient to cook for twenty than for four. The young mother receives help and advice about child care from the older women.

Americans prefer the nuclear family, but it has its disadvantages, and it is the woman who loses the most. Africans and Arabs have the

help and companionship of other women in the family, but usually the American woman works alone or in the company of children. Mechanical devices make work easier; nonetheless, the life of the housewife is unquestionably stifling.

Clearly the traditional Arab woman is worse off than the African or American. The symbol of womanhood is a shameful one; in fact, the Arabic word for beautiful woman and for chaos is the same. The Arab woman has few rights, is looked down upon by the males of the society, and may even be treated with outright cruelty. For example, a man whose wife will not obey may beat her until she does. Apologists note that she has subtle devices for influencing her husband's behavior. For example, Sudanese Arabs believe in a magical spirit which can capture a body, and will leave only when appeased. The husband may beat his wife severely, but it is to no avail since the spirit is quite beyond her control. Finally he gives in if he wishes peace to return to the family.

There are other examples of devious ways by which Arab women are able to obtain power, but on the whole, life is rough for them. We can think of a scale of female liberation ranging from zero to ten, zero being least liberated, most dominated by male authority, having fewest rights and privileges; and ten representing complete equality between women and men in all aspects of life. I place Arab women at about one on such a scale.

African women are better off. Womanhood is a positive symbol of goodness and prosperity. Moreover, African women participate in the generation of income. They work in the fields, they are found in

small retailing and transportation enterprises, and generally are accepted outside the home. Sexism in Africa is largely a colonial import (Dobert and Shields), and with independence there have been improvements. Nonetheless the status of women in Africa is low. On the scale mentioned above, I place African women at about three.

And American women? In some ways they are disadvantaged compared with the women of extended households, but on the whole they are probably better off. Perhaps this is more a function of our advanced technology than of our humane spirit.

However, we must use an absolute, not a relative scale to view the issues of sexism. Women in this country do not have equality, as any purusal of MS Magazine or the NOW literature will document. American women enjoy higher status than Arabs and Africans; nonetheless, on the zero to ten scale, they rank about 4.5 only.

The time devoted to the examination of women in my Africa course is about five percent of the total instruction, but it is one of the most popular and best retained parts of the course. Much stimulating debate is generated. For example, in one class a male student, a real macho type, was uncomfortable with the trend of the discussion. When I indicated that Arab female purity was preserved with fear of death, he yelled "well, all right!" A female student next to him voiced an obsenity, and he was quiet for the rest of the period. Most men appear defensive, though quiet. The females are attentive, and I am especially gratified when women obviously display an awakening to notions previously suppressed.

In conclusion, I submit that the study of women and feminist issues constitutes a relevant and legitimate field of teaching and research in geography. While the other social sciences eagerly revised their curricula to include these subjects, geography sat back and remained silent. The consciousness of geography is now slowly being raised, and we are finally recognizing the necessity of "discovering women's place."

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