Chapter 2

The Social Construction of Gender

To understand what sociologists mean by the phrase "the social construction of gender," watch people when they are with young children. "Oh, he's such a boy!" someone might say as he watches a 2-year old child run around a room or shoot various kinds of play guns. "She's so sweet," someone might say while watching a little girl play with her toys. You can also see the social construction of gender by listening to children themselves or watching them play with each other. Boys are more likely to brag and insult other boys (often in joking ways) than are girls; when conflicts arise during children's play, girls are more likely than boys to take action to diffuse the conflict (McCloskey and Coleman, 1992; Miller et al., 1986).

To see the social construction of gender in another way, try to buy a gender-neutral present for a child—that is, one not specifically designed with either boys or girls in mind. You may be surprised how hard this is, since the aisles in toy stores are highly stereotyped by concepts of what boys and girls do and like. Even products like diapers, kids' shampoos, and bicycles are gender-stereotyped. Diapers for boys are packaged in blue boxes; girls, in pink. Boys get diapers with blue borders and little animals on them; girls, pink borders with flowers. You can continue your observations by thinking about how we describe children's toys. Girls are said to play with dolls; boys play with "action figures!"

When sociologists refer to the social construction of gender, they are referring to the many different processes by which the expectations associated with being a boy (and later a man) or being a girl (later a woman) are passed on through society. This process pervades society, and it begins the minute a child is born. The exclamation "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" in the delivery room sets a course that from that moment on influences multiple facets of a person's life. Indeed, with the modern technologies now used during pregnancy, the social construction of gender can begin even before one is born. Parents or grandparents may buy expected children gifts that reflect different images, depending on whether the child will be a boy or a girl. They may choose names that embed gendered meanings or talk about the expected child in ways that are based on differ-
ent social stereotypes about how boys and girls behave and what they will become. All of these expectations—communicated through parents, peers, the media, the schools, religious organizations, and numerous other facets of society—create a concept of what it means to be a "woman" or be a "man." They deeply influence who we become, what others think of us, and the opportunities and choices available to us. The idea of the social construction of gender sees society, not biological sex differences, as the basis for gender identity. To understand this fully, we first need to understand some of the basic concepts associated with the social construction of gender and review some information about biological sex differences.

**Distinguishing Sex and Gender**

The terms *sex* and *gender* have particular definitions in sociological work. *Sex* refers to the biological identity of the person and is meant to signify the fact that one is either male or female. One’s biological sex usually establishes a pattern of gendered expectations, although biological sex is not always the same as gender identity; moreover, the fact that someone is born female or male does not mean that she or he will become stereotypically feminine or masculine. Femininity and masculinity are cultural concepts and, as such, have fluctuating meanings, are learned differently by different members of the culture, and are relative to the historical and cultural contexts in which they emerge.

*Gender* refers to the socially learned behaviors and expectations that are associated with the two sexes. Whereas "maleness" and "femaleness" are biological facts, becoming a woman or becoming a man is a cultural process. Like race and class, gender is a social category that establishes, in large measure, our life chances and directs our social relations with others. Sociologists distinguish sex and gender to emphasize that gender is a cultural, not a biological, phenomenon.

Culture is defined as "the set of definitions of reality held in common by people who share a distinctive way of life" (Kluckhohn, 1962:52). Culture is, in essence, a pattern of expectations about what are appropriate behaviors and beliefs for the members of the society; thus, culture provides prescriptions for social behavior. Culture tells us what we ought to do, what we ought to think, who we ought to be, and what we ought to expect of others.

The concept of culture explains a great deal to us about variation in human life-styles and human societies. Cultural norms (the expectations that culture provides) vary tremendously from one society to another and, within any given society, from one historical setting to another and among different groups in the society. Cross-cultural studies reveal an immense diversity in human social relations, because human creativity and cultural adaptations to different circumstances create a rich and complex mosaic of the different possibilities for human life. As a result of the cultural basis for gender, what it means to be a woman or a man varies across cultures. Consider the following example.

In the village of Uder, located in the rugged hills of northern Nigeria, lives a population of people who call themselves Birom. When a boy is born here, his
umbilical cord is cut with an iron knife used to cut acha—the most valued staple grain of the culture. Traditionally, women were forbidden to grow acha; the size of a man’s acha crop is taken as a measure of his strength and virility. When a girl is born, her umbilical cord is cut with a blade of grass or a bamboo knife. The afterbirth of a boy is placed in a clay pot and put high on a branch of a cottonwood tree; the girl’s afterbirth is buried in the soil, usually during a fertility ritual. In the same society, crying in boy infants is regarded as a sign of strength, virility, and lust for life; crying in girls is regarded as indicative of a fretful and complaining personality (Smedley, 1974).

To an outsider, these practices may seem unusual and strange; however, if we as outsiders considered our own cultural practices surrounding birth, they too would seem quite odd. In American culture, baby boys are dressed in blue; girls, in pink. Although the origins of this practice are obscure, most parents comply with the cultural habit. Some will dress their daughters in blue as well as pink, but it is a rare parent who dresses a boy in pink.

In our own culture, we engage in many social practices that differentiate boys from girls. The names we carry throughout our lives are often marked with gender expectations. Girls’ names are supposed to be feminine—soft, pretty, and symbolic of goodness, sweetness, and beauty; boys’ names are supposed to be masculine—short; harder in tone; and symbolic of strength, determination, and intellect. More diminutive endings are found on girls’ than on boys’ names, such as Debbie, Susie, or Barbie, implying the lesser status of women. In fact, research shows that female given names have more sounds and syllables, more frequently vary the position of the stressed syllable, and more often conclude in a vowel or resonant sound than do male given names (Slater and Feinman, 1985).

Fear of crossing traditional gender role boundaries often discourages parents from giving names that might fit both sexes. Names also reveal our cultural fear of homosexuality, especially among boys, as evidenced by the fact that girls’ names are sometimes feminized forms of boys’ names, but the reverse seldom occurs (Richardson, 1981).

Naming is only the beginning of the practices that socialize the young into culturally prescribed gender roles. When parents take a child home from the hospital, they begin a complex, often unintentional, series of practices that slowly but effectively create the gender of their child.

In every known culture, gender is a major category for the organization of cultural and social relations, although specific cultural expectations vary from society to society. One feature of a culture is that its members come to take cultural patterns for granted; thus, culture provides its members with tacit knowledge, and much of what members believe as true or what they perceive as real is learned to the point where it is no longer questioned. Culture provides assumptions that often go unexamined but that, nonetheless, fundamentally guide our behavior and our beliefs.

The cultural basis of gender is apparent especially when we look at different cultural contexts. In most Western cultures, people think of man and woman as dichotomous categories, that is separate and opposite, with no overlap between the two. Looking at gender from different cultural viewpoints challenges this
assumption, however. Many cultures consider there to be three genders, or even more. Consider the Navaho Indians. In traditional Navaho society, the *berdaches* were those who were anatomically normal men but who were defined as a third gender and were considered to be intersexed. Berdaches married other men. The men they married were not themselves considered to be berdaches; they were defined as ordinary men. Nor were the berdaches or the men they married considered to be homosexuals, as they would be judged by contemporary Western culture. Similarly, in some African and American Indian societies, there are those who are biological females living as men, known as *manly hearted women*. They are considered "female men," but they do not have to dress or act like men; they only have to have enough money to buy wives (Lorber, 1994; Nanda, 1990; Amaduime, 1987; Blackwood, 1984).

Another good example for understanding the cultural basis of gender is the *hijras* of India. Hijras are a religious community of men in India who are born as males, but they come to think of themselves as neither men nor women. Like berdaches, they are considered a third gender. Hijras dress as women and may marry other men; typically, they live within a communal subculture. An important thing to note is that hijras are not born so; they choose this way of life. As male adolescents, they have their penises and testicles cut off in an elaborate and prolonged cultural ritual—a rite of passage marking the transition to becoming a hijra.

Hijras occupy a special place within Indian culture and society, a situation stemming from Hindu religion which, different from Western culture, values the ambiguity of in-between sexual categories. Hinduism holds that all persons contain both male and female principles within themselves, and Hindu gods are commonly seen as sexually ambiguous. Hijras are believed to represent the power of man and woman combined, although they are impotent themselves. Hijras perceive sexual desire to result in the loss of spiritual energy; their emasculation is seen as proof that they experience no sexual desire. Their special place within Indian society is evidenced at Indian weddings, where hijras often perform rituals to bless the newly married couple’s fertility. They also commonly perform at celebrations following the birth of a male child—an event much cherished in Indian society and the cause for much celebration (Nanda, 1990).

These examples are good illustrations of the cultural basis of gender. Even within contemporary U.S. society, so-called gender bending shows how the dichotomous thinking that defines men and women as either/or can be transformed. Cross dressers, transvestites, and transsexuals illustrate how fluid gender can be and, if one is willing to challenge social convention, how easily gender can be altered. The cultural expectations associated with gender, however, are strong, as one may witness by people’s reactions to those who deviate from presumed gender roles.

Gender expectations in a culture are sometimes expressed subtly in social interaction, as, for example, in U.S. culture, where men interrupt women more frequently than women interrupt men (Frieze and Ramsey, 1976), where women smile more than do men (Mehrabian, 1971), and where men stare at women more than women stare at men (Frieze et al., 1978). At other times, gender expectations
are not so subtle, as in the cultural practices of Chinese foot binding, Indian suttee, European witch hunts, and the genital mutilation of women documented in some African countries (Blake, 1994; Hosken, 1979; Jacobson, 1974; Stein, 1978; Wong, 1974). Within U.S. culture, extreme physical practices are also evidenced in the sadistic treatment of women in pornography and in the common surgical practices of face lifts and silicone implants.

In different ways and for a variety of reasons, all cultures use gender as a primary category of social relations. The differences we observe between men and women can be attributed largely to these cultural patterns. This in itself is strong evidence for the cultural basis of gender roles. Were differences between women and men determined by biological factors alone, we would not find the vast diversity that exists in gender relations from society to society; moreover, were sex differences universal in content, what it means "to be a man" or "to be a woman" would not vary from one culture to another. Gender expectations are established by society and are variable across time and place; gender is not fixed by one's biological status.
The Institutional Basis of Gender

Understanding the social basis for gender requires putting gender into a sociological context. From a sociological perspective, gender is systematically structured in social institutions, meaning that it is deeply embedded in the social structure of society. Gender is created, not just within family or interpersonal relationships (although these are important sources of gender relations), but also within the structure of all major social institutions, including schools, religion, the economy, and the state (i.e., government and other organized systems of authority, like law, the police, and the military). These institutions shape and mold the experiences of us all.

Sociologists define institutions as established patterns of behavior with a particular and recognized purpose; institutions include specific participants who share expectations and act in specific roles, with rights and duties attached to them. Institutions define reality for us insofar as they exist as objective entities in our experience. They are "experienced as existing over and beyond the individuals who 'happen' to embody them at the moment. In other words, the institutions are experienced as a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:58). Institutions

are not only here-and-now, given, and self-evident, but also arise within particular and historic environments, and in response to certain felt interests and needs; and as these interests are served, and needs are met and continue to be met in certain typical ways, actions are repeated, grow into patterns, and become firmly entrenched in practice and consciousness. It is just at this stage, when practice and habits pass over into highly organized forms, that we begin to speak of "institutions" as opposed to mere custom or habitual activity. (Payer, 1977:30)

Understanding gender in an institutional context means that gender is not just an attribute of individuals; instead, institutions themselves are gendered. To say that an institution is gendered means that the whole institution is patterned on specific gendered relationships. That is, gender is "present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distribution of power in the various sectors of social life" (Acker, 1992:567). The concept of a gendered institution has been
introduced by Joan Acker, a feminist sociologist. Acker uses this concept to explain not just that gender expectations are passed to men and women within institutions, but that the institutions themselves are structured along gendered lines. Gendered institutions are the total pattern of gender relations—stereotypical expectations, interpersonal relationships, and men’s and women's different placements in social, economic, and political hierarchies. This is what interests sociologists, and it is what they mean by the social structure of gender relations in society.

Conceptualizing gender in this way is somewhat different from the related concept of “gender roles.” Sociologists use the concept of social roles to refer to culturally prescribed expectations, duties, and rights that define the relationship between a person in a particular position and the other people with whom she or he interacts. For example, to be a mother is a specific social role with a definable set of expectations, rights, and duties. Persons occupy multiple roles in society; we can think of social roles as linking individuals to social structures. It is through social roles that cultural norms are patterned and learned. Gender roles are the expectations for behavior and attitudes that the culture defines as appropriate for women and men. These roles are learned through the process of socialization, the subject discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

The concept of gender is broader than the concept of gender roles. Gender refers to the complex social, political, economic, and psychological relations between women and men in society. Gender is part of the social structure—in other words, it is institutionalized in society. Gender roles are the patterns through which gender relations are expressed, but our understanding of gender in society cannot be reduced to roles and learned expectations.

The distinction between gender as institutionalized and gender roles is perhaps most clear in thinking about analogous cases—specifically, race and class. Race relations in society are seldom, if ever, thought of in terms of “race roles.” Likewise, class inequality is not discussed in terms of “class roles.” Doing so would make race and class inequality seem like matters of interpersonal interaction. Although race, class, and gender inequalities are experienced within interpersonal interactions, limiting the analysis of race, class, or gender relations to this level of social interaction individualizes more complex systems of inequality; moreover, restricting the analysis of race, class, or gender to social roles hides the power relations that are embedded in race, class, and gender inequality (Lopata and Thorne, 1978).

Understanding the institutional basis of gender also underscores the interrelationships of gender, race, and class, since all three are part of the institutional framework of society. As a social category, gender intersects with class and race; thus, gender is manifested in different ways, depending on one’s location in the race and class system. For example, African American women are more likely than White women to reject gender stereotypes for women, although they are more accepting than White women of stereotypical gender roles for children. Although this seems contradictory, it can be explained by understanding that African American women may reject the dominant culture’s view while also hop-
ing their children can attain some of the privileges of the dominant group (Dugger, 1988).

Institutional analyses of gender emphasize that gender, like race and class, a part of the social experience of us all—not just of women. As Kimmel and Messner (1989) argue, "Men are gendered, too," emphasizing that gender is just as important in the formation of men's experiences as it is in women's. From a sociological perspective, class, race, and gender relations are systemically structured in social institutions, meaning that class, race, and gender relations shape the experiences of all. Sociologists do not see gender simply as a psychological attribute, although that is one dimension of gender relations in society. In addition to the psychological significance of gender, gender relations are part of the institutionalized patterns in society. Understanding gender, as well as class and race, is central to the study of any social institution or situation. Understanding gender in terms of social structure indicates that social change is not just a matter of individual will—that if we changed our minds, gender would disappear. Transformation of gender inequality requires change both in consciousness and in social institutions.

**Socialization and the Formation of Gender Identity**

The fact that gender is a social, not a natural, phenomenon means that it is learned. Although rooted in institutions, gender is passed on through social learning and is enacted through what sociologists call gender roles. Gender roles are the patterns of behavior in which women and men engage, based on the cultural expectations associated with their gender. Gender roles are learned through the process of socialization. It is through the socialization process that individuals acquire an identity based on gender. Gender identity is an individual's specific definition of self, based on that person's understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman. In other words, it is through the socialization process that gender is socially constructed.

**Sanctions and Expectations**

Through gender socialization, different behaviors and attitudes are encouraged and discouraged in men and women. That is, social expectations about what is properly masculine and feminine are communicated to us through the socialization process. Our family, peers, and teachers, as well as the media and religious groups, act as agents of the socialization process. Although probably none of us becomes exactly what the cultural ideal prescribes, our roles in social institutions are conditioned by the gender relations we learn in our social development.

Some persons become more perfectly socialized than others, and sociologists have warned against the idea of seeing humans as totally passive, overly socialized creatures (Wrong, 1961). To some extent, we probably all resist the expectations society has of us. Our uniqueness as individuals stems in part from this
resistance, as well as from variations in the social experiences we have. Studying patterns of gender socialization does not deny individual differences, but it does point to the common experiences shared by girls as they become women and boys as they become men. However much we may believe that we were raised in a gender-neutral environment, research and careful observation show how pervasive and generally effective the process of gender-role socialization is. Although some of us conform more than others, socialization acts as a powerful system of social control.

Peter Berger (1963) describes social control as something like a series of concentric circles. At the center is the individual, who is surrounded by different levels of control, ranging from the subtle—such as learned roles, peer pressure, and ridicule—to the overt—such as violence, physical threat, and imprisonment. According to Berger, it is usually not necessary for powerful agents in the society to resort to extreme sanctions because what we think and believe about ourselves usually keeps us in line. In this sense, socialization acts as a powerful system of social control.

The conflicts we encounter when we try to cross or deny the boundaries between the sexes are good evidence of the strength of gendered expectations in our culture. Although most of us resist the idea that we are controlled, because we like to think we are individuals, the effects of social expectations are easily seen in some simple experiments. Think of what you would have to change about yourself were you to act and appear to be a member of the other sex. Would you do it? One experimenter asked college women to select a man and, for an hour, to act in accordance with the ideals of the women's liberation movement. One-quarter of the students said that this action required no change in their behavior, and another 10 percent received positive support from their peers for rejecting the traditional feminine role. Still, a majority of the women reported anger, conflict, surprise, and resistance from their male friends (Weitzman, 1979). Other researchers have found that women are given more latitude than men to deviate from gender norms (i.e., gender expectations; McCreary, 1994). Men who do so are presumed to be gay, indicating a link between gender socialization and expectations about sexual identity—something discussed further below.

The pressure to adopt gender-appropriate behavior is evidence that the socialization process controls us in several ways. First, it gives us a definition of ourselves. Second, it defines the external world and our place within it. Third, it provides our definition of others and our relationships with them. Fourth, the socialization process encourages and discourages the acquisition of certain skills by gender.

Conformity to traditional roles takes its toll on both men and women, and research shows that those who conform most fully to gender-role expectations experience a range of negative consequences. Higher male mortality rates can be attributed to the stress in masculine roles; among women, those with the most traditionally feminine identities are more likely to be depressed (Tinsley, Sullivan-Guest, and McGuire, 1984). Women who score as very feminine on personality tests also tend to be dissatisfied and anxious and to have lower self-esteem than do less traditionally feminine women (Thornton and Leo, 1992).
indicates that depression is related to traditional gender roles. Housewives, generally speaking, report more depression than do women employed outside the home, although this is mitigated by a number of factors. Employed women with lower incomes and who have young children have higher rates of depression than do women who work only in the home; not surprisingly, this indicates the effect that stress has on mental health. At the same time, housewives whose gender expectations for themselves are in conflict with those of their husbands for them report higher rates of depression than do housewives whose expectations are congruent with their husbands' (Krause, 1982; Cleary and Mechanic, 1983). Figure 2.1 also shows some of the different consequences of gender roles on the stress that women and men experience.

Men and women with more androgynous gender orientations—that is to say, those having a balance of masculine and feminine personality characteristics—show signs of greater mental health and more positive self-images. For example, research among middle-aged professional men shows that those who are the most androgynous perceive themselves to be more healthy than do more traditional men of their age and status (Downey, 1984). Personality tests given to male and female college students also show that those who score high on both masculine and feminine traits (and, therefore, are defined as more androgynous) have higher self-esteem than students who score higher on one gender type or another (Spence, Helmreich, and Stampp, 1975). Finally, research also shows that, in spite of the strains experienced by women with multiple roles, those with multiple roles report more gratification, status security, and enrichment in their lives (Gerson, 1985).

The restrictions of traditional gender roles not only have consequences for our mental health, but they also divide men and women from each other. Tolson (1977) suggests that by shaping persons into masculine and feminine types, we condemn both to a "one-sided existence." Traditional gender roles deny women access to the public world of power, achievement, and independence at the same time that they deny men the nurturant, emotive, and other-oriented world of domestic life. In this sense, traditional gender roles limit the psychological and social possibilities for human beings.

Some argue that the pressures of gender socialization are even more restrictive of boys, at least at the early ages, than of girls. Men's roles are more rigidly defined, as witnessed in the more severe social sanctions brought against boys not to be sissies, compared with girls who are thought of as tomboys. For girls, being a tomboy may be a source of mild ridicule, but it appears to be more acceptable (at least until puberty) than being a sissy is for boys.

Some researchers explain this finding as the result of homophobia, defined as the fear and hatred of homosexuals (Pharr, 1988). Homophobia acts as a system of social control because it encourages boys and men to act more masculine, as a way of indicating that they are not gay. Homophobia further separates the cultural roles of masculinity and femininity by discouraging men from showing so-called feminine traits such as caring, nurturing, emotional expression, and gentleness.
Researchers conclude that "homophobia thus appears to be functional in the dynamics of maintaining the traditional male role. The fear of being-labeled homosexual serves to keep men within the confines of what the culture defines as sex-appropriate behavior, and it interferes with the development of intimacy between men" (Morin and Garfinkle, 1978:41). Men who endorse the norms of traditional male roles are also more homophobic, as are men who hold strong beliefs in the moral value of sports—as if athletic prowess is the mark of a "real" man. (Thompson, Grisanti, and Pleck, 1985; Harry, 1995).
In sum, gender socialization is a powerful process involving our individualism, as well as the multiple forms that gender roles can take. Gender expectations confront us everywhere and shape our identities and relationships with others, perhaps even at times when we might wish they did not.
Socialization across the Life Course

Socialization begins at birth, and it continues throughout adulthood, even though gender roles are established very early. When we encounter new social experiences, we are socialized to adopt new roles through the expectations others have of us. Socialization patterns can be observed in many individual and group experiences and in the context of all of the institutions of society. This section examines the processes and consequences of gender socialization as it occurs throughout the life course.

Infancy

Beginning in infancy, boys and girls are treated differently. Research on infant socialization shows, in fact, how quickly gender expectations become part of our experience. One innovative study asked first-time parents to describe their babies only twenty-four hours after birth. Although physical examination revealed no objective differences between male and female infants, the parents of girls reported their babies to be softer, smaller, and less attentive than did the parents of boys. More than mothers did, fathers described their sons as larger, better coordinated, more alert, and stronger than girls; also more than did mothers, fathers described their daughters as delicate, weak, and inattentive (Rubin, Provenzano, and Hull; 1974). In an interesting twist of this classic study, researchers have more recently found that young children describe infants in more gender-stereotyped ways than do adults (Stern and Karraker, 1989).

Research continues to show that parents treat their infants differently, depending on the infant's sex. How parents act may even be unintentional or subtle, but it has an effect on later life, nonetheless. In one fascinating series of studies, researchers observed fathers and mothers (in couples) walking young children through public places. Both fathers and mothers were more likely to let boy toddlers walk alone than they were to allow girls to do so. These same observers
found that even when the child was out of the stroller, mothers were far more like-
ly to push the empty stroller than were the fathers, demonstrating the attachment
of mothers to child care roles. (Mitchell et al., 1992). Despite the fact that mothers
are much more likely than fathers to engage in and manage child care, research
also finds that fathers are more likely to gender-type their children (Mitchell et al.,
1992). Parents living in nontraditional households, however, do tend to gender-
sterotype their children less than parents do in traditional families (Weisner et
al., 1994).

Parents are not the only agents of gender socialization, however. Other chil-
dren have just as important an impact on learning gender roles. Children of all
ages notice the sex of infants and use it as a basis for responding to the child. As
children grow, their engagement in gender stereotyping also increases, especially
between the ages of 3 and 14 (Vogel et al., 1991). Peers develop expectations and
definitions of gender-appropriate behaviors and use those expectations as the
basis for their interaction with others.

**Childhood Play and Games**

Research in child development emphasizes the importance of play and games in
the maturation of children. Through play, children learn the skills of social inter-
action, develop cognitive and analytical abilities, and are taught the values and
attitudes of their culture. The games that children play have great significance for
the children’s intellectual, moral, personal, and social development—and for their
gender identity.

George Herbert Mead, a social psychologist and major sociological theorist in
the early twentieth century, described three stages in which socialization occurs:
imitation, play, and game. In the imitation stage, infants simply copy the behav-
ior of significant persons in their environment. In the play stage, the child begins
"taking the role of the other"—seeing himself or herself from the perspective of
another person. Mead argues that taking the role of the other is a cognitive
process that permits the child to develop a self-concept. Self-concepts emerge
through interacting with other people and from learning to perceive how others
see us. The other people most emotionally important to the child (who may be
parents, siblings, or other primary caretakers) are, in Mead’s term, significant others.
In the play stage, children learn to take the role of significant others, primar-
ily by practicing others’ social roles—for example, “playing Mommy” or “playing
Daddy.”

In the game stage, children are able to do more. Rather than seeing themselves
from the perspective of only one significant other at a time, they can play games
requiring them to understand how several other people (including more than just
significant others) view them simultaneously. Playing baseball, to use Mead’s
example, involves the roles and expectations of many more people than does
“playing Mommy." Eventually, children in the game stage learn to orient them-
selves not just to significant others but to a generalized other, as well. The gener-
alized other represents the cultural expectations of the whole social community.
Mead's analysis of the emergence of the self emphasizes the importance of interpretative behavior in the way the child relates to others in the social environment. Early activity, especially through play, places children's experience in a social environment; therefore, meanings communicated through play help the child organize personal experience into an emerging self. Children's play is then a very significant part of the socialization process.

Research reveals the pervasiveness of gender stereotyping as it is learned in early childhood play. The toys and play activities that parents select for children are a significant source of gender socialization. Current researchers have found that parents perceive gender-neutral toys as the most acceptable (i.e., those that are not stereotyped as presumed for one gender). Interestingly, observations of parents interacting with children playing with masculine-typed, feminine-typed, and neutral toys find that parents spend the least time interacting with children when the children are playing with feminine-typed toys (Idle, Wood, and Desmarais, 1993).

Researchers have observed that, compared with girls' rooms, boys' rooms contain toys of more different classes (educational, sports, animals, spatial-temporal objects, depots, military equipment, machines, and vehicles) and that boys' toys tend to encourage activities outside of the home. Girls' toys, on the other hand, both are less varied in type and encourage play within the home. Girls' rooms are also more likely to be pink and contain more dolls, fictional characters, and children's furniture; boys' rooms, on the other hand, tend to feature the bright colors of red, blue, and white and to have more sports equipment and vehicles (Pomerleau et al., 1990; Rheingold and Cook, 1975). There is little wonder, then, in the fact that that children come to prefer gender-typical toys, although, for girls, this desire lessens as they grow older (Etaugh and Liss, 1992).

Children's literature is also an important source of their learned images of women's and men's places in the world. Although since the 1960s there has been substantial improvement in the inclusion of women in children's literature, girls and women are still depicted as less adventurous, in need of rescue, and in fewer occupations than men. One study comparing nonexist picture books with conventional children's books did find that females are shown as more independent and men as less aggressive in the nonexist books; however, females in the nonexist books are also shown as more nurturing, more emotional and less physically active than they are in the conventional books. Whenever women are shown in children's books as exhibiting power and leadership, they tend to be mythical figures—superheroines or fairy godmothers (Davis, 1984; Purcell and Stewart, 1990; Weitzman, et al., 1972). Female characters are also more likely to be depicted using household artifacts, whereas men use nondomestic objects (Crabb and Bielawski, 1994). Books written by African Americans are also more likely to show girls and women as less dependent and more competitive but also as more nurturing than do books written by White authors (Clark, Lennon, and Morris, 1993).

Detailed observations of children's play and games reveal the significance that they have for learning gender roles. In a classic study, Lever (1978) observed fifth-grade children (most of whom in her study are White and middle-class) and measured the complexity of boys' and girls' activities. Based on observations in
school playgrounds and analyses of questionnaires, interviews, and the children’s
diaries of leisure activities, she measured the complexity of play along six dimen-
sions: role differentiation (how many distinct roles occur in the game), player
interdependence (whether the action of one player affects the performance of
another), size of the play group, explicitness of goals, number and specificity of
rules, and, finally, team formation. She distinguished play from games by noting
that play does not involve explicit goals, whereas games tend to have a recog-
nized goal or end point. Games also tend to be structured by teams that work
together toward a common goal; play, although it involves cooperative interac-
tion, is not structured in team relationships.

Lever’s findings reveal several patterns in the gender differences of children’s
play. Girls tend to play, whereas boys interact through games. Girls’ games have
fewer rules than boys’ games, and, for girls, the largest category of activity is play
involving a single role. Girls’ games focus on a single central person (e.g., tag),
whereas boys play in larger groups and with more complex role differentia-
tion. Girls are also more cooperative, whereas boys are more competitive; boys’ play
and games often include face-to-face competition, whereas girls’ competition is
more indirect. Girls are more likely to play games involving repeated ritual (such
as jumping rope), whereas boys will follow more elaborate rules. According to
Lever, ritualistic play does not exercise physical and mental skills to the extent
that rules do, because it is repetitive and more passive. Finally, when girls play
games with rules, they tend to ignore the rules, whereas boys more rigidly adhere
to established principles of play.

Lever concludes that through play and games, boys learn involvement with
the generalized order; girls, on the other hand, are more involved with “particu-
lar others.” Such differences are significant because the dimensions of complexity
that characterize children’s play also describe the organization of modern indus-
trial societies. Complex societies involve an elaborate division of labor and elabo-
rate differentiation of roles; these societies also are heterogeneous and are organ-
ized according to rationalized rules and social structures. Lever concludes that
boys’ games better prepare them for leadership and organizational skills that are
useful both in childhood and in adult life. Her implication is that the socialization
girls’ get through games leaves them inadequately prepared to succeed in the
complex organization of modern society. Her speculation has been borne out by a
recent study finding that professional business women were more likely than
other employed women to have played competitive sports as children; they also
had more male playmates (Coats and Overman, 1992).

Lever’s conclusions imply, however, that girls’ experiences are deficient
because they develop different skills and modes of relating than do boys.
Although to function in a male-dominated society, girls may need some of the
skills that boys develop, we should be careful not to make the normative judg-
ment that the female world is inferior to the male world. Childhood socialization
certainly teaches boys and girls different abilities and different identities, but just
as girls may not learn to be rational, competitive, and rule oriented, so boys may
not learn to be as nurturing and emotionally expressive.
Socialization and the Schools

Socialization takes place not only in the home, but also through other institutions and relationships. Although we tend to think of the family as the primary source of social values and identity, peers, teachers, the media, and other significant others are important agents of the socialization process. Schools, in particular, exercise much influence on the creation of gendered attitudes and behavior, so much so that some researchers call learning gender the "second curriculum" in the schools (Best, 1983). In the schools, curriculum materials, teachers' expectations, educational tracking, and peer relations encourage girls and boys to learn gender-related skills and self-concepts.

Within schools, teachers and older children display expectations that encourage children to behave and think in particular ways; moreover, these expectations are strongly influenced by gender. Teachers, for example, respond more often to boys in the classroom. Even when they do so in response to boys' misbehaving, they are calling more attention to the boys (Sadker and Sadker, 1994). Differences between boys and girls become exaggerated through practices that divide them into two distinct human groups (Thorne, 1993). In schools, children are often seated in separate gender groups or sorted into play groups based on gender; these practices heighten gender differences, making them even more significant in the children's interactions. In school, boys tend to be the center of attention, even when they are getting attention for disruptive behavior; girls are, in general, less visible and more typically praised for passive and acquiescent behavior (Sadker and Sadker, 1994; American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 1991).

These gender-typical behaviors have consequences for what boys and girls learn in school. Although boys and girls enter schools with roughly equal abilities, by the time they graduate from high school, girls' abilities have fallen behind boys' in important areas such as higher-level mathematics and measures of self-

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**Doonesbury**

*BY GARRY TRUDEAU*

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esteem (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 1991). Although girls tend to earn higher grades than boys throughout school, gender stereotypes that project some fields of study, such as math and science, as more "male" than others tend to discourage girls from pursuing studies that would lead them into some of the most lucrative careers later in life. The influences that young girls experience in their early years at school can thus have profound effects on the extent of their gender segregation in the labor market in their adult years.

Families and schools are not the only sources of gender socialization. One of the reasons that gender is so extensive in its influence on our lives is that it is so pervasive throughout all social institutions. Gender expectations are also visible at work, in voluntary organizations, and in health care organizations and athletics. Religion, as we will see in Chapter 8, also has a significant effect on our concepts of who we are and our consciousness of gender. Families and schools are primary sources for some of the earliest influences of gender socialization, but the process of learning and enacting gender goes on throughout people's lifetimes.

Adult Socialization and the Aging Process

As we encounter new experiences throughout our lives, we learn the role expectations associated with our new statuses. Although our gender identity is established relatively early in life, changes in our status in society—for example, graduation, marriage, or a new job—bring new expectations for our behavior and beliefs.

Aging is perhaps the one thing about our lives that is inevitable; yet, as a social experience, it has different consequences for men and women. Cross-cultural evidence shows that aging is less stressful for women in societies where there is a strong tie to family and kin, not just to a husband; where there are extended, not nuclear, family systems; where there is a positive role for mothers-in-law (rather than the degrading status attached to it in our society); and where there are strong mother-child relationships throughout life. Even within our own society, racial and ethnic groups attach more value to older persons, thereby easing the transition to later life. Although the elderly in African American and Latino communities experience even greater difficulties with poverty and health than do the White elderly (Jones, 1985), their valued role in the extended family seems to alleviate some of the stress associated with growing old.

Gender differences in the social process of aging can be attributed greatly to the emphasis on youth found in this culture and, in particular, to the association of youth and sexuality in women. Cultural stereotypes portray older men as distinguished, older women as barren. As a woman ages, unlike a man, she will generally experience a loss of prestige; men gain prestige as they become more established in their careers. The consequences for both are great. Because men draw their self-esteem and their connections to others largely from their jobs, they may find retirement to be an especially stressful period. Sociologists also point out that because men have learned to be task oriented rather than person oriented, they
may have difficulty establishing new relationships in retirement or widowhood (Hess and Markson, 1991).

Aging also relaxes some of the social pressure experienced by younger people. Many women report more satisfaction and personal freedom in their later years than they felt during their earlier lives (Hess and Markson, 1991). How positively one experiences the aging process depends on a large extent on the economic and cultural resources one has available, as well as the social supports received from family and friends.

There is little doubt that women experience significant disadvantage during the aging process. At the same time, however, the capacities and strengths that women acquire over their lifetimes also give them certain advantages as they grow old. Older women report higher levels of emotional support than do older men, and they tend to have more extensive social contacts and friendships. In general, the fact that women work throughout their lives to maintain social and emotional networks helps them maintain this connection in their older years, whereas men may experience greater social isolation. Better social support also has a known positive effect on people’s ability to withstand stressful life events; thus, this learned ability among women helps them face the difficult problems of death, loss, and, perhaps, poor health in their elder years (Gibson, forthcoming).

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**Theoretical Perspectives on the Formation of Gender**

Social scientists use different theoretical perspectives to explain gender socialization and the formation of gender. Each carries different assumptions, but all contribute to our understanding of the social construction of gender identity.

**Identification Theory**

Identification theory interprets children as learning gender-appropriate behaviors by identifying with their same-sex parent. This explanation is based on a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective that assumes that children unconsciously model their identities on the behavior of their parents. Identification theory posits that children learn behaviors, feelings, and attitudes unconsciously; through unconscious learning, children develop motivational systems. The child’s identification with the same-sex parent, coupled with the powerful emotion associated with the parent-child relationship, results in an unconscious psychosexual bond that shapes the child’s sex-role identity.

Empirical evidence to support the perspective of identification theory is, at best, shaky. Because the focus of this theory is on unconscious states of mind, it is impossible to measure directly the internal motivation of the child. Instead, researchers study motives indirectly by examining characteristics of the parents and associating those characteristics with behaviors and attitudes of the child. Such associations do not show a causal relationship between the parents’ charac-
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SERIES: FORCE OF ISLAM: A Woman's Place

BYLINE: By SUSAN SACHS

DATELINE: RABAT, Morocco

BODY:
Islam preaches equality, yet in most Muslim countries a woman's place is determined by a man's will. It's the law.

A husband can prevent his wife from traveling abroad, and the police will back up his legal right to stop her. A father can marry off his daughter against her will, and she, by law, must obey. A woman is trapped in a loveless marriage; with few exceptions, her husband is free once he declares himself divorced. But the days when Muslim women could be kept housebound, cosseted and remote from society are long gone in most parts of the Muslim world. As modernity collides with religious tradition, women have begun to demand a reinterpretation of the civil codes that presume a woman, in her private life, is a capricious creature in need of a man's guiding hand.

The agitation in countries like Morocco is coming from female scholars who are confident of their religious judgment and use the Internet as a forum to promote an alternative vision of the rights of Muslim women. It is coming, as well, from politically active women who push for change from within Islamist movements. It is coming from ordinary women who fear that legal strictures will prevent their countries from integrating into the modern world.

Their challenges to Islamic orthodoxy have placed these women at the heart of the main political battle in the Muslim world, where one side claims Islam as a shield against foreign culture and the other presents it as a road map for progress.
To the extent there is public debate over the role of Islam -- as armor or emancipator -- that debate often turns on the subject of women.

For many Muslim women, the religious laws that subordinate them to the authority of male relatives represent a final frontier. They already vote, unless they live in the gulf nations. They go to school, unless they lived under Taliban rule in Afghanistan. They choose whether or not to wear a veil, unless they live in Iran or Saudi Arabia.

But in the personal sphere, laws remain mired in patriarchal tradition and a medieval reading of Islam. To alter them, Muslim women face not only an entrenched religious establishment, but also a battle with fundamentalists in the political arena.

Many Muslim women say they do not want instructions for their struggle from the West. As they demonstrated at many international conferences on women's rights, they resent being told what it is they need.

Still, in many countries, Islamist movements have attacked those seeking change as Western stooges and enemies of Islam, and they have seized on resistance to women's rights as an issue in their power struggle with moderate Muslim rulers.

In Kuwait, Islamist members of Parliament rejected the emir's efforts to grant voting rights to women and pushed through a law to segregate Kuwait University. In Jordan, Islamists have campaigned successfully against the king's attempt to stiffen penalties for honor killings, or the murder of women whose behavior is deemed shameful to family honor.

Nowhere in the Islamic world does the conflict over women's rights come into sharper relief than in Morocco, where society has split in two over a government proposal to eliminate inequities in the kingdom's laws. Last year, in a remarkable public demonstration, more than 400,000 people took to the streets in response to the plan. Half of them, marching in Rabat, supported the plan for equal rights. The other half, in Casablanca, rallied against it as an attack on religious values.

The most contentious part of the proposal concerned the country's personal-status law, or moudawana, and the debate has become as much a political battle as a discussion of women's rights. The plan would raise the legal age for marriage to 18 from 15 for women (as it already is for men), outlaw polygamy in most cases and allow divorced women for the first time to retain custody of their children if they remarry. Women would also be granted equal rights to ask for a divorce and equal claims to assets acquired during the marriage, rather than just their personal property.

Invasion of Ideas

An Islamist dissident group, Justice and Spirituality, has organized the campaign against the plan. Led by Abdessalam Yassine, who accuses "Westernized elites" of destroying the Muslim world and its culture, the once-clandestine group has cast itself as the only line of defense against an invasion of foreign ideas.

"It's not that we don't want women to evolve," said Nadia Yassine, the leader's daughter and a spokeswoman. "But we can't accept a plan simply because Westernized women with a Western mentality proposed it."

Under Moroccan law, a man can divorce his wife by simply declaring it in front of a judge. A woman is
entitled to file for divorce only if she can prove her husband abuses her or fails to support her. Otherwise, she must buy her way out of a marriage by paying her husband any amount of money he demands.

Unlike Mrs. Yassine, who said the moudawana does need adjustment, other Moroccan Islamists denounced the proposals as a threat to religion and family.

The vehemence of the opposition took many supporters of the plan by surprise. "The fundamentalists are fixated on the question of women, but they have no program," said Mohammed Said Saadi, a former minister of state and one of the authors of the plan. "Their preoccupation is morality and they put out a lot of lies about the plan, saying it would encourage homosexual marriage, make condoms available everywhere and encourage the debauchery of high school girls."

In Morocco, the king is called "commander of the faithful," making him the highest religious authority in the country. King Mohammed VI has called for the advancement of women. But he has not yet said whether he will endorse the plan on women, which would open a direct confrontation with the Islamist opposition. After the demonstrations in March 2000, he appointed a committee to sound out public opinion. It is still holding hearings. Many Moroccan women fear that the moudawana reforms will be put aside to avoid more political turmoil.

"And if you put that part aside, what's left?" asked Fatiha Layadi, a stylish young television reporter who drew stares for smoking cigarettes in public at an outdoor cafe in Rabat. "If it's not the whole package, then how are you going to talk about women's empowerment?"

Islam's Evolution

Her frustration says much about the evolution of Islam. Born in the tribal societies of the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, Islam vastly improved the lot of women of that time. It instructed men that they could have up to four wives, but only if they treated all of them equally and had the means to support them. A woman could inherit wealth instead of being inherited as part of her husband's or father's estate.

As codified over the years, however, Islam eventually institutionalized the inferiority of women. The prophet Muhammad is said to have urged his followers to treat women with respect, but respect has come to mean control. And while some scholars have argued that Islam was meant to be flexible enough to adjust to a changing society, conservatives have held sway for centuries.

Muslim women now find themselves constrained by tradition as much as religious law. Saudi women are forbidden to drive, ostensibly to protect their Muslim honor, just as most Muslim women need a male relative's permission to get a passport.

"Our prophet made his own bed, sewed his own shirts, helped his wife at home," said Sibel Eraslan, a veiled Istanbul lawyer who once headed a women's committee in the Turkish Islamist party, Refah. "Today men don't want to follow Muhammad because it is easier not to. Even the hard-line Islamists ignore these details from our prophet's life."

She, at least, lives in a country that recently changed its laws to give women equal rights in family life. But Turkey did so to aid its application to join the European Union, leaving Mrs. Eraslan uneasy with what she called "imposed changes."

For women seeking change, however, there are reasons for optimism. Women's votes can count, as they
did in bringing a moderate president, Mohammad Khatami, to power in Iran in 1997. And traditionalists no longer control all the religious debate.

'Educated women armed with computers have defeated extremists by denying them a monopoly to define cultural identity and interpret religious texts,' said Fatema Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist who has written extensively on women and democracy in Islam.

"No extremist can say that women are inferior to men without being made a laughingstock on Al Jazeera," she added, referring to the Qatar-based satellite news channel. "Islam insisted on equality between everyone."

Islamic jurisprudence is based on the Koran, which Muslims consider the word of God, and on the hadith, the prophet's words and actions as recorded after his death. Koranic verse is the basis for giving a woman's testimony half the weight of a man's. Laws limiting women's political role rely on the hadith, particularly one that attributes to the prophet a particularly damning view of women's abilities to lead. "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman," he is believed to have said, "will never know prosperity."

Women, of course, have led Muslim countries in Asia. But they have advanced no higher than government minister in modern Arab countries, in part because Arab scholars have not strayed far from the most literal interpretation of that hadith.

Yusuf al Qaradawi, an Egyptian scholar whose opinions reach millions through his weekly call-in show on Al Jazeera television, has written that "a woman's first and greatest job" is to produce and raise children. If she must work, he says in his published religious rulings, it should only be in jobs where she would not spend time alone with a man or neglect her family duties.

In the context of traditional religious rulings, the sheik's views might be considered progressive. But some religious women have begun to push the boundaries of even modernist male scholars. Among them is Suad Salih, a professor of religious jurisprudence at Al Azhar University in Cairo, who considers herself as capable of issuing religious rulings as any man with the title sheik, which she does in unofficial forums.

Last month, on Islam Online (www.islam-online.net), Dr. Salih tackled the Koranic verse about the testimony of women. The verse actually demonstrates Islam's respect for women, she wrote. "In cases of crimes like murder and adultery, Islam makes it clear that in principle, a woman should be kept safe from all these fields that may hurt her feelings," Dr. Salih wrote. "However, if no other one is there to witness except a woman, her testimony may be accepted in such cases in order to preserve the course of justice."

Force of Islam

Articles in this series are examining growth in the influence of Islam. Later articles will focus on the place of Islam in a secular and democratic Turkish state and the Taliban and the concept of holy war. Articles in this series and related coverage are available at:

nytimes.com
http://www.nytimes.com

GRAPHIC: Photo: Nadia Yassine, right, a spokeswoman for a dissident Moroccan Islamist group and the daughter of its leader, giving advice to two men in Rabat. (Jean Blondin for The New York Times)(pg. B4)
Hazel Dews is slightly embarrassed when you ask about her salary. She pauses and then confesses that after 25 years cleaning the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington five nights a week, she makes barely $22,000 a year. That’s not what really bothers her, though. What irks her is that men who do the same job earn $30,000.

The men, she explains, are called “laborers.” They can progress five grades. The women, however, are called “custodial workers,” which means they can only advance two grades. “But,” she protests, “they scrub with a mop and bucket. We scrub with a mop and bucket. They vacuum. We vacuum. They push a trash truck. We push a trash truck. The only thing they do that we don’t is run a scrub machine. But that’s on wheels, so we could do it too.”

Thirty-seven years after the Equal Pay Act of 1963, American women working full time still earn an average of 74 cents for each dollar earned by men, according to a new report published jointly by the AFL-CIO and the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) in Washington. This affects all economic classes, but its impact is strongest on lower-income workers: If men and women were paid equally, more than 50 percent of low-income households across the country—dual-earner as well as single-mother—would rise above the poverty line.

New figures challenge the long-held arguments that women’s lower pay results from fewer years in the work force or time out for childbearing and rearing. The Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor cites a study by the president’s Council of Economic Advisers showing that even in light of the vicissitudes of motherhood, 43 percent of the wage gap remains “unexplained,” evidently due in large part to discrimination.

The Overview of Salary Surveys, published last year by the National Committee on Pay Equity (NCPE), summarized 23 surveys of specific salary titles conducted by professional associations and trade magazines. It reported that, for instance, among women engineers—where the salary gap averages 26 percent—women with the same qualifications continue to earn less than men even after they’ve been in the field for many years (20.4 percent less among women with a B.S. degree and 20–24 years of experience; 19.2 percent less among women with an M.S. and 20–24 years experience). Yet another study found that women physicians earned less than men in 44 of 45 specialties, including obstetrics-gynecology (14 percent less) and pediatrics (15.8 percent less), with lower compensation only partly explainable by hours worked or time spent in the field. And a 1999 report by the American Association of University Professors found that though women had grown from 23 to 34 percent of faculty since 1975, the salary gap had actually widened in that time period.

But the biggest reason for the pay gap is not discrimination against individual women but rather discrimination against women’s occupations. As the percentage of women in an occupation rises, wages tend to fall. More than 55 percent of employed women work in traditional “women’s jobs”—librarians, clerical workers, nurses, teachers, and child care workers. If these women are compared not to male workers, but to women with similar education and experience in more gender-balanced occupations, they would earn about 18 percent—or $3,446—more per year, according to the IWPR. (The 8.5 percent of men in these jobs earn an average of $6,259 less per year than men of comparable backgrounds working in “men’s” fields.)

Why are “women’s jobs” less lucrative? Is a truck driver—who earns an average annual wage of $25,030—really 45 percent more valuable than a child care worker who may have a four-year degree in early childhood education? Is a beginning engineer really worth between 30 and 70 percent more than a beginning teacher? Rarely, in the almost daily reports of teacher shortages, is it mentioned that the market alone cannot account for the striking disparity between teachers’ and other professionals’ salaries. No one ever suggests that it might have something to do with the fact that 75 percent of elementary and secondary schoolteachers are women.

In response to these disparities, women are beginning to mobilize. Three years ago, for example, Hazel Dews and 300 of her fellow women custodians joined the American Federation
of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which, after several futile attempts to negotiate, is now suing Dew's employer, the Architect of the Capitol, for equal pay. Since 1997, as women's membership in the labor movement has mushroomed to 40 percent, the AFL-CIO has conducted two surveys to discover the chief concerns of both union and nonunion working women. "And the runaway answer was equal pay," reports Karen Nussbaum, the director of the AFL-CIO's working women's department. Ninety-four percent of women in both surveys said equal pay was a top concern, and one-third—one-half of African-American women—said they did not have equal pay in their own jobs.

Last year, calling pay equity a "family issue," the labor movement helped launch equal-pay bills in both houses of Congress and 27 state legislatures. Also last year, as Dew's and her co-workers were demonstrating at the Capitol, the Eastman Kodak Company was agreeing to pay $13 million in present and retroactive wages to employees underpaid on the basis of either race or gender. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, after protests by women faculty, made an unprecedented admission that it had discriminated against women "in salaries, space, awards, resources and response to outside offers."

Moreover, since 1997 the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) has collected $10 million in equal-pay settlements from such corporations as Texaco, US Airways, Pepsi-Cola, the computer manufacturer Gateway, and health insurer Highmark, Inc. At the same time, two major national chains, the Home Depot and Publix Supermarkets, agreed to pay more than $80 million each to settle lawsuits based on sex discrimination.

Recently, advocates have arrived at what they believe to be an effective means of generating pay equity—the concept of "comparable worth," which, as the name suggests, requires two people with comparable skills, education, and experience to be paid comparable amounts, even when they're working at two very different jobs. The Xerox Corporation, for example, uses comparable worth analysis, weighing such factors as education, experience, skill, responsibility, decision making, and discomfort or danger in working conditions, to set salary levels within the country. During the 1980s, some 20 state governments studied the comparable worth of their own employees and made adjustments totaling almost $750 million in increased pay to women. Minnesota, the leader in the field, has made pay equity adjustments in 1,544 counties and localities.

Perhaps the most dramatic argument for comparable worth, however, was made by a man. In the class action suit AFSCME v. Washington State in 1982, one of the nine named plaintiffs was Milt Tedrow, a licensed practical nurse at Eastern State Hospital in Spokane. Approaching retirement and realizing that his "woman's" job wouldn't give him much of a pension, Tedrow switched to carpentry at the same hospital. To qualify as an LPN he had needed at least four years of experi-

ence, four quarters of schooling, and a license. As a carpenter, he was self-taught, had no paid work experience, and had no need of a license. And yet when he transferred from the top of the LPN wage scale to the bottom of the carpenter's, his salary jumped more than $200 a month—from $1,614 to $1,826.

Tedrow wondered at the time, does the state resent "paying people decently who are taking care of people's bodies, when they'd pay a lot for someone fixing cars or plumbing?"

Since then, the courts have ruled that evidence of unfair salaries is not enough to prove violation of the Equal Pay Act. Plaintiffs must prove that employers intentionally discriminated by lowering women's wages in comparison to men's. But some unions have prevailed on comparable worth questions by way of negotiations.

Service Employees International Union Local 715, for example, in Santa Clara County, just south of San Francisco, won nearly $30 million for 4,500 county employees, from secretaries to mental-health counselors. A study of some 150 job titles, performed by a consulting firm chosen jointly by the county and the union, showed that underpayment was common in job classes with more than 50 percent minorities, such as licensed vocational nurses and beginning social workers, and that 70 percent of such positions were filled by women. "We worked for at least three years to bring our male members along on this," says Kristy Sermersheim, Local 715's executive secretary. "When the county argued that in order to raise women's wages they'd have to lower men's, we refused to even discuss it. We kept regular pay negotiations completely separate."

Another key to the local's success was the staunch support of allies among local women's groups. "We had 54 women's community groups on our side," reports Sermersheim. "The National Organization for Women, the American Association of University Women, the League of Women Voters, the Silicon Valley women engineers. ..."

On the day the county board of supervisors voted on whether to proceed with the study, the local delivered 1,000 pink balloons—symbolizing the pink-collar ghetto—to workplaces around the city. "We had balloons everywhere," recalls Sermersheim, "We had Unitarian women out there singing 'Union Maid.' "

I t is this kind of coalition that pay equity advocates are counting on to push through the equal-pay bills now before state legislatures. Many of the new bills, unlike those passed in the 1980s, would extend comparable worth to private as well as public employees and would specifically extend benefits to minorities. Most are based on the fair pay act designed in consultation with the NCPE—a coalition of 30 women's, labor, civil rights, and religious groups—and introduced in Congress in 1999 by two Democrats, Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa and Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton of the District of Columbia. (A more modest paycheck fairness act, backed by the Clinton administration, would toughen the Equal Pay Act of 1963 by removing present caps on damages and making it easier to bring class action suits.)
So far the new state bills have met with only modest success. The New Jersey and New Mexico legislatures have voted to study pay equity in both public and private employment, and Vermont's legislature voted to study just state employment. In Maine, where the new welfare laws gave rise to a commission to study poverty among working parents, it was discovered that the state already had a 1965 law on the books that mandated equal pay for both public and private employees and that specifically mentioned comparable worth. The state is now studying ways to put the law into effect.

Efforts like these have raised opposition from business and conservative groups. Economist Diana Furchgott-Roth, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who recently represented business at an NCPE forum, supports "equal pay for equal work" but claims that comparable worth causes labor shortages because men refuse to take jobs where their wages will be tied to women's. "How can a government bureaucrat calculate if a secretary is worth the same as a truck driver, or a nurse as an oil-driller?"

In Ontario, Canada, Furchgott-Roth says, where the practice of comparable worth is more common, day care centers are actually closing down because parents can't afford to pay for the higher salaries. But these charges turn out to be only partially true. Child care centers in Ontario were threatened when a Progressive Conservative government succeeded the liberal New Democrats and slashed funding. But the centers have not closed down. After a court challenge and an enormous public outcry, the provincial government is still subsidizing pay equity for child care workers (who, even with subsidies, earn an average of only $16,000 a year).

State employment officials in Minnesota and Wisconsin, two states with comparable worth laws, say that any labor shortages have far more to do with the tight labor market than with comparable worth. "There's a lot of flexibility in the law," says Faith Zwemke, Minnesota's pay equity coordinator. "For information technology people, for instance, we can give them signing bonuses and let them advance faster within the parameters of the policy."

Some male workers inevitably do resent women getting increases. "But many men can see pay equity as a family issue," says Karen Nussbaum of the AFL-CIO. A recent poll by Democratic pollster Celinda Lake showed that six out of 10 voters, both men and women, said equal pay was good for families.

Pay equity advocates had better be patient and persistent. The market has been biased against women at least since it was written in the Old Testament that when a vow offering is made to God, it should be based on the value of the person, and "[if] a male, from the age of twenty years up to the age of sixty your assessment shall be fifty silver shekels . . . and if it is female, your assessment shall be thirty shekels." At this rate, winning equal pay may take a long time.