Some Social Structural Correlates of the Status of Women in the Modern World

Merlin G. Myers

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol11/iss1/9

This Article or Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
SOME SOCIAL STRUCTURAL CORRELATES OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE MODERN WORLD

MERLIN G. MYERS, Ph.D.

In his great poem, Jerusalem, William Blake (1961) notes:

If Perceptive Organs vary, Objects of Perception seem to vary: If the Perceptive Organs close, their Objects seem to close also. “Consider this, O mortal Man, O worm of sixty winters,” said Los, “Consider Sexual Orientation and hide thee in the dust.”

If such a genius as William Blake can make this observation regarding our topic today, I am apprehensive concerning what warrant I have for entering the discussion. I am made to recall the words, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

As Social Anthropologists, we feel that the roles of men and women in any society are the product of the total culture. They are interlaced with the themes and ethical values of that culture. For example, in many parts of the world and formerly in our own country, the domestic organization was the extended family. This was the collective cooperating unit not only for economic purposes, but for religious and even many political purposes as well. The
members of this kin group did not always occupy a single dwelling, but usually shared a common homestead or neighborhood. Gender roles were separate and well-defined. All the men of the unit were involved in male pursuits, and a set of correlated activities characterized the lives of women. Life went on in a kind of balanced reciprocity. Even today this is the nature of social life in contemporary, non-industrial societies and also, to a limited extent, in agrarian America.

With the rise and spread of factory industrialism and the all-purpose, free market, all this has changed. The unit of production has been separated from the unit of consumption. The extended family, with its balanced reciprocity and well-defined complementary roles, has been torn apart at its very foundation. Both men and women are thus affected.

With the fragmentation of the extended family, a man is in large measure deprived of the context that establishes his identity as a man. He is drawn as an individual out of the domestic scene to supply energy factors or skills to factories, business firms, or other market entities in return for a personal money wage. The nature of his status is changed. He has a greater degree of personal freedom, but the ties with the group which formerly defined his identity as a person generally, and as a man in particular, have been obliterated. He is not now important for who he is, but for what he does. This is somewhat like being transformed from a person to a thing. Many of his personal attributes can be ignored, and he can be assigned a number. With the dispersion of his children from the now abbreviated domestic unit for school, and later for work, etc., the setting for his masculine role as father is further diminished, and his personal importance is further attenuated.

As the forces generated by industrialization and the all-purpose market have extended their influences, the importance of individuals, and nearly everything else, has been assigned a money value. (I am told that the U.S. Supreme Court has in certain cases awarded damages in the amount of $400,000 when life has been lost due to personal negligence.) Personal identity is as temporary and fleeting as the money that determines it.

Let us now see what this means for the woman. The begetting and bearing of children does not produce gain in the currently accepted monetary sense of the word. Rather, this may put strain on what gain is available, or may impede the freedom and mobility of a woman in her quest for gain. She is thus caught in the very uneviable position of having the most decisive attributes of her femininity denigrated by the society in which she lives. They become an obstacle to her achieving worth.

Women have sought to alter this circumstance, among other ways, by entering the market place. They have done this indiscriminately—entering occupations held by men. This has put stress on the already fragile position of men and has aggravated their already tenuous circumstance.

William Blake (1961) expresses it in this way:

There is a throne in every man, it is the Throne of God; This woman has claimed as her own, and man is no more!

Man's position is fragile from the start, and this taking-over (as it were) of his last domain is often the final blow to his identity. Yet, who can blame women for desiring "a place in the sun"?

Balanced reciprocity or exchange is desirable and has, in some measure, at different times and places, been achieved. But we are caught in the paradox of the modern industrial/market world. Led by the hope of less stressful effort and the prospect of material bounty, we discover that the means of attaining "the good life" also entails conflict.

Seldom do we have an analytical appreciation of the forces at work in our social lives. We can gain this appreciation only with great effort and keen perception. The Church itself seems to partake of this paradox. Likely on the basis of the fundamentally important
teaching of Free Agency, the Church champions the "free market." At the same time it encourages its women members to stay close to the domestic scene. But it is the free market, more than any single force—by breaking down the extended family networks and by assigning money value even to life itself—that draws women away from the home. So, who is to blame? Is anyone to blame? Who is the chauvinist? If there is an adversary (and I believe there is), he must take great delight in the confusion and conflict thus generated.

Evans-Pritchard (1965), in writing about the position of women in non-industrial society as compared to our own, notes that the question of the equality of the sexes would have no meaning for an Azande woman. If what the enquirer had in mind with this question became clear to her, she would puzzle, "How could two beings so different ever be equal?" And let us be clear about it, men and women are different in some very profound ways. We should be thankfully aware of that!

Evans-Pritchard says further that the question of equality is fundamentally a moral question rather than an economic one, and ultimately must come to rest upon some code of ethics. Many of the difficulties that arise in the relationship between men and women are inherent to their very being. They are the same kind of problems that arise in nearly every situation and department of social life.

They cannot be resolved by insistence on absolute equality, but only by the recognition of differences and then by the exercise of charity and the acknowledgment of authority. Otherwise antagonism is unavoidable and peaceful, harmonious social life is impossible. Far from the acceptance of authority entailing inferiority, it expresses the only true form of equality obtainable in human relationships—an equality of service. (Evans-Pritchard [1965], p. 56)

We find a good example of this among the Iroquois Indians. The women have the role of selecting chiefs and also of deposing them for malfeasance. When I questioned the men about this, they told me, "The women are they who know the hearts of them; they will make a better choice than we." But the men still occupy the throne—they are the administrators. Here is an exceptionally fine example of a nicely balanced set of roles, each serving the other for the good of all.

Rather than snipe, chide, and compete with one another and thus drive each other into neurotic behaviors such as those accompanying emasculation anxiety among men and the despising of womanly attributes among women, ought we not seek to identify the contexts and the ways in which we can serve and sacrifice one for another? It would be interesting to see the result of this kind of creative enterprise.

References
Merlin Myers is professor of anthropology at Brigham Young University.