

DIVISION OF LABOUR BY SEX

The sexual division of labour is a basic structural element in human social organization. Humans are the only primates who have a highly developed sexual division of labour in food production. They also are the only primates that share food on a regular basis. However, there is substantial variability in the sexual division of labour across societies and the female contribution to food supply in foraging societies is far greater than was once believed.

Evidence for the original human division of labour comes from two sources: primate ethology and the ethnology of foragers. Male specialization in hunting is consistent with the tendency of male terrestrial primates to specialize in defense, a specialization that gives a selective advantage to larger males. Sexual dimorphism is a consequence of this original division of labour. However, while it is true that in forager societies, men tend to hunt and women to gather, early studies of foragers greatly underestimated the importance of female gathering. They therefore exaggerated the dependence of wives on their husbands. Modern studies of foragers (Lee and DeVore 1968) show that women's gathering often contributes more than half of the subsistence calories.

The rise of cross-cultural and cross-national research makes it possible to estimate the relative frequencies of male and female effort to various tasks. As a result of Murdock's work (Murdock 1937; Murdock and Provost 1973) we now have cross-cultural codes on sexual division of labour for fifty tasks. These codes confirm earlier generalizations about near-universals. Tasks done by males in more than 95 per cent of the sample societies include hunting

large land animals, metal-working, wood- and bone-working, boat building, and trapping. Tasks done by females in more than 95 per cent of the sample include only cooking and care of infants. Patterns of sexual division of labour appear to have only a partial basis in biology, and most tasks exhibit high variability. This is especially true of the important food-production tasks pertaining to agriculture and the care of domesticated animals.

These variations, however, fall within constraints of a relative rather than universal nature. Many researchers have sought rules of consistency in the variable allocation of tasks. While earlier researchers emphasized the male strength advantage, research in the 1970s placed more emphasis on constraints due to the reproductive specialization of women. Brown (1970) emphasized the compatibility of women's tasks with simultaneous childcare responsibilities. Women's tasks are likely to be relatively close to home, not dangerous, and interruptible. Burton, Brudner, and White (1977) proposed that these relative constraints produce entailments within production sequences. Women tend to take on additional tasks within production sequences in an order that begins with tasks closer to the home and ends with tasks farther afield. Men take on additional tasks in the opposite order from the more distant to those closer to home. Burton and colleagues found entailment chains for the following production sequences: animal tending, animal products, textiles, fishing and agriculture. An example from agriculture: if women clear the land, they also prepare the soil: if the latter, they also plant, tend crops, and harvest. If they tend crops, they also fetch water, and if they plant, they also prepare vegetables for cooking.

Women also seem to participate in more tasks in less complex societies. For example, women build houses in nomadic societies but not in sedentary societies, and female participation in pottery-making declines with increasing population density. For crafts, the explanation for these changes seems to be the evolution of occupational specialization, which displaces craft activities from the domestic arena to the workshop. Agricultural intensification is accompanied by dramatic decreases in female contributions to farming. For Boserup (1970) agricultural intensification results from population pressure and

introduction of the plough, and pulls men into agriculture to meet the increased demand for labour. Ember (1983) suggested a second mechanism in the shift to male farming: women are pulled out of farming into the household economy by increased time spent on food processing, household chores and childcare. Burton and White (1984) carried this work further with a model of four factors – a short growing season, presence of the plough, processing of cereal crops, and high dependence on domesticated animals – which lead to the displacement of women's labour from agriculture to the domestic and less economically visible activities.

The four-factor intensification model accounts for many empirical observations concerning female subsistence participation: that it is higher in tropical climates and in horticultural societies, and that it is higher with root crops than with cereal crops, for these attributes are correlated with a long rainy season, low dependence on

domestic animals and the plough. While Burton and White's four factors account for a high percentage of the variance, a smaller portion of the variance is attributable to historical processes, which they think, using network autocorrelation analysis, [is due] to the Bantu societies of Africa. Guyer (1988) further develops the theme of historical factors of assignment of new crops by gender.

Finally, several researchers following Boserup (1970) hypothesized that agricultural intensification has a negative impact on female control of economic resources. This research suggests that high female subsistence contributions are a necessary prerequisite to females control of economic resources, and to women's freedom of choice in life events. In searching for other consequences, of the sexual division of labor, Heath (1958) and several other researchers (e.g., Burton and Reitz 1981) found that low female subsistence contributions lead to monogamy. Such studies shed light on puzzles such as the rise of monogamy and decline in women's status, originally noted by nineteenth-century theorists. However, White and Burton (1988) showed that the sexual division of labour has little effect on polygyny, given statistical controls for the effects of residence patterns and warfare.

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