Chapter One
INTRODUCTION

Women are not a homogeneous group. Women's social position varies from culture to culture, throughout the world, and it has varied greatly from century to century, too. Womanhood is a concept that is socially constructed by each society, and it has a system of meanings attached to it, whereby woman is culturally, philosophically, psychologically and biologically defined (1).

Historically, women's work has been constrained to mesh with pregnancy and lactation lest a society fail to reproduce itself and die out (2). This has been the case not only through the ages, but in various types of societies, too. Cross-cultural and cross-temporal studies thus reveal that the human dichotomy of woman and man finds its corresponding parallel in the private and public spheres of social life. A woman's world, traditionally, consists in the care of the family, home and nearby assignments that bolster the family economy. The man, on the other hand, has traditionally taken charge of the world that is further away from home: hunting, war, politics, and so on. In this complementary duality, society works out system and
order for human beings.

While it is not my intention to attempt the well-nigh impossible task of compiling a comprehensive history of womanhood cross-culturally and cross-temporally, it is important, by way of introduction, that I give a brief overview of some of the important aspects of this private-public dichotomy across time and space. This will clarify the location of later arguments in this study.

I) PRIVATE WORLD:

Family, kinship and familial ideology.

In societies throughout the world, today and all through recorded history, women's primary roles have been family-oriented (3). It is the role of the woman in the family that is the main reference-point for deciding the importance of all her activities and relationships. Outside activities tend to be extensions of her familial roles. Her entire life is ordered in a manner that equips her for her central role of motherhood. In many tribes today, girls are trained to be good
housewives and mothers while boys are trained to be good warriors. In literate societies, careers of women who are educated are posited against their motherhood, creating tensions that are difficult to resolve. Even as a grandmother, a woman has a special role in the family, especially in the case of her grandchildren (4).

Since a woman's most important role is to be a good wife and mother, her training includes requisite skills, attitudes and values that are considered appropriate to feminine roles. The larger proportion of women in this world are taught that femininity implies submissive, unaggressive compliance, and the occupation of an inferior and subordinate status in society. However, her status varies according to the kinship system that exists in each culture.

a) Woman in matrilineal societies

Matrilineal descent systems are comparatively few in the world, today. Murdock cites 565 representative cultures of the world, out of which only 84 are matrilineal (5). Matriliney appears to be correlated with horticultural economies of rather low productivity, and it is rarely to be found in politically complex cultures.
In a matrilineal system, descent is traced through the women of the family; property is passed on by the men in the female line. Authority is vested in the males of the descent group — often, the woman's brother. The authority of the husband, over his wife and children, is limited.

In such a society, woman's position is one of importance. The pivotal relationships in matrilineal systems are those of brothers and sisters. In some matrilineal societies, matrilocaity is also practised. Matrilocaity can be defined as a postmarital residence pattern in which the couple go to live in the woman's home, with, or close to, her maternal family. Fewer than half of the known matrilineal societies are matrilocal (6). In fact, it is believed that matrilocal residence was the prior condition for the development of matrilineal descent groups (7). Matrilocaity is a most significant factor in creating an advantageous situation for women. Marriage in such a society demands few adjustments on the part of the woman, and she stands strong in the familiarity and protection of her natal household.
b) **Woman in a matrifocal family**

The matrifocal family is a comparatively recent phenomenon (8). The core of the matrifocal family is a mother and her children. The father is a peripheral figure, often absent or transient. An older woman usually heads the matrifocal family. She is often a very strong authority figure, as close to the archetypal matriarch as exists anywhere.

However, this type of family or group exists - mostly by default - among the poorer groups in complex societies, and as individuals improve their economic status they establish families in which the husband is a consistent economic provider and authority figure.

c) **Woman in patrilineal societies**

In patrilineal societies, descent is traced through the men of the families; a man passes on his name and property through his son. Authority is vested in the father of a family.

In such a society, women occupy a markedly inferior status relative to men. Where patrilocality is practised in a patrilineal
system, male authority is most fully expressed.

Often, women are considered to be economic liabilities in such societies, as was the case in ancient Greece and Rome, as well as India and China (9). Women's work is not considered economically productive and families have the additional burden of providing daughters with substantial dowries. Several societies found a "solution" in female infanticide.

It is not difficult to understand how woman is made to accept a subordinate status with an accompanying sense of inferiority.

**Familial ideology**

Studies in familial ideology are of recent origin, having sprung up within the last decade, in America (10). Such studies deal with the structure and implications of power-relations in the family.

In a joint family, authority is vested in the eldest man of a patriarchal family, and in the men of the woman's line of descent in a matrilineal society. In a nuclear family of the patriarchal society,
authority is vested in the husband. He is the "head" of the home, even though the norms of the same society decree that a "woman's place is in the home". The complementary duality of male headship and female submission, may be practised with varying amounts of rigidity. Other ideologies are also possible, e.g. equal sharing of power for husband and wife, or the dominance of the wife.

One Marxist approach to the family sees it as a powerhouse of capitalism, and advocates the destruction of the family (11). In the initial years after the Marxist Revolution in Russia, this was actually attempted, but it resulted in too much chaos, so it was eventually abandoned.

In conclusion, we can say, firstly, that in no society do we see a cultural norm that sets a woman up in importance above a man. Even in matrilineal societies, a man's role as administrator and authority-figure is very important.

Secondly, a woman's world has traditionally centered around the family and home, in all societies and all ages. In postliterate
patriarchal societies, she has been severely limited to the home, and this has devalued her in the eyes of society.

The specific details of women's roles differ from culture to culture, but there is an underlying common denominator, the predominance of the familial context. All their education and training, all their social expectations, and even their own personal ambitions are geared to the roles of wife and mother. Almost no alternatives are available. Thus women's lives are circumscribed—their interests, activities, and effectiveness contained within the domestic sphere. While men may not have alternatives for their roles either, their lives being similarly set by the terms of the culture, they do hold a more dominant position and operate in a large sphere.

II. PUBLIC WORLD:

a) Women in politics

By definition, political organization is the very essence of the public domain (12). In various types of societies, it appears to be
one area of societies, it appears to be one area of social life that is heavily dominated by men.

The basic concerns of political organization — allocation of authority, setting of policy, and decision making — are normally distanced enough from the domestic realm to be the aspect of traditional society in which women participate the least. Official positions in the formally organized governments of the world are almost entirely held by men (13). The modern nation-state partake only superficially in political egalitarianism. Enfranchisement has theoretically enabled women to have an equally overt and active political role as men, but in reality this does not happen.

Women, as a rule, do not rule. There are cases where they do, but it is normally the exception. Women hold office in place of dead husbands, or in place of fathers where strict rules of dynastic succession apply, and there are no sons to step into the father's shoes. Their opportunity arises through default.

There are cases where a woman's exceptional abilities have
enabled her to hold office, but as Rowbothan has argued, women are allowed entry into a man's world as long as they behave there as men. Otherwise they are required to remain invisible in the public domain (14). The elevation of one woman to political preeminence has no relevance to the political status or participation of the rest of the women in society (15). This is true even when bureaucratic structures specifically provide that special offices are to be held by women only. Frequently African kingdom are ruled by dual monarchs, the king and his mother or his sister as the queen. The Swazi king is the supreme ruler, but the queen mother may provide sanctuary for those who seek protection. She may publicly admonish the king for extravagance with national wealth; and they must both cooperate in performing the national rituals. The fact that there is a queen with power does not confer any authority on other Swazi women, nor does she represent them or their interests. They remain jural minors, without a voice in the councils of government (16). This is equally true of the Lovedu of East Africa, where the queen reigns alone. There her power is limited to religious ritual; political decisions are made by her male councillors. Her presence has no effect on the political status of Lovedu women. (17).
In small-scale band or village societies, sharp distinctions between the public and domestic spheres cannot be made. These are societies organized on the basis of kinship; the fundamental unit is the family, and larger entities are created by extending kinship relationships through marriage and filiation. Since the groups lack formal political organization and established hierarchies, leadership is apt to be transitory, and political power diffuse. In these loosely structured, relatively egalitarian societies, most social roles can be as much a function of individual capabilities as of ascription by age or sex.

Individual women can, in some instances exert considerable power by virtue of the strength of their personalities. They are forceful women who command respect and even fear. Strong-mindedness combined with seniority makes for a formidable woman. It is a far cry from the standard image of the gentle and submissive Chinese woman to the indomitable octogenarian who “hobbled for miles on her tiny bound feet, arranging marriages and adoptions, settling family disputes and negotiating face-saving compromises for quarrels of various kinds. Her age and personality
commanded respect from even the most arrogant of men, and her tongue lashed the reluctant into (submission)" (18). Any traditional society, whatever its structure, can produce similarly intimidating old women. They have nothing to lose, and with age they have acquired the freedom to unleash the full power of their personalities.

Women's greatest impact on the political process is indirect, through the exertion of influence on their menfolk. Women can usually make their opinions known through their male kinsmen or husbands, in a manner that reaches far beyond the precincts of their domestic confines. Decisions taken by a village headman could thus be more influenced by the opinions of his wife than by those of the council of elders that he consults. Women can thus avail of unofficial channels of power, even when they are explicitly denied it, officially. On the other hand, women may have to exert their influence from behind the scenes, even when they are formally participating in the political power-structure of a society, as in the case of the Iroquois.

The Iroquois have been described as a matriarchal society
at least partly because the women had an active role in political life: they nominated the chiefs, attended councils, and instigated warfare. These formal rights seem to confer greater authority on women that they actually had. Chieftancy, held only by men, was hereditary in certain maternal lineages, and the senior women of those lineages could name the successors of dead chiefs. Their nominees, however, had to be acceptable to the council of chiefs who had veto power. While Iroquois women might be present at council meetings, they did not, as a rule, speak in council. They lobbied behind the scenes to influence council decisions. Women might instigate a war party out of a personal desire for vengeance, but warfare was so much a part of the expansionist policies of the Iroquois that the women’s exhortations to fight were incidental, more cue than cause. (19).

Woman’s access to political power, therefore, is severely limited. Given this background, Stacey and Price express amazement that women should have been able to advance as far as they have, within the last fifty years (20).
b) **Women and the Economy**

However sparse the ethnographic material on women may be, the one aspect that has constantly been mentioned is their work (21). Perhaps this is because in primitive societies, women's work is highly visible.

The economic systems of tribal and peasant societies share certain basic characteristics: they are subsistence economies with limited resources, hand technology, and small populations: the level of production is relatively low, and the items produced are primarily geared toward use (22). Food is a major preoccupation, and since women are major providers of food, their role assumes direct and immediate importance.

In primitive economies, work is relatively unspecialized. Each sex is assigned certain types of occupations, and they adhere to this sexual division of labour, strictly. The basis for assignment of a particular kind of work to one or the other sex is mainly a matter of convention, and it varies from society to society. In the Southwest United States, for example, Navaho women do the weaving, but
among their Pueblo neighbours, weaving is done by the men (23). Even when women and men work jointly, men do certain tasks and women do others; building houses in Nigeria, for example, is a joint enterprise, but men do the carpentry and thatching, while women are always responsible for making the floors (24).

In traditional societies, women begin their working careers early in life and continue working on through old age. Women are responsible for the provision and preparation of food, and the upkeep and order of the home. In primitive and peasant societies, the provision of food is an arduous, time-consuming task; meals are not elaborate and their preparation not very complicated. Primitive housing and furnishings are simple, and housework is not an endless series of chores. In industrialized societies, on the contrary, women spend a much larger proportion of their time on cooking and housework, than on collecting foods and fetching water. In addition, women may work outside the home, in jobs that fetch an income for the home.

In hunting and gathering economies, women's contribution to
the production of food is estimated to be as high as 80% of the total food supply of the home (25). Perhaps this explains the relatively better social position of women in these societies as compared with that of women in industrial and technological societies.

In this connection, an interesting theory has been advanced which begins with the question, "Why do men and women do certain tasks, and which ones yield the most prestige and power?" (26). Friedl answers this question with two principles of sex stratification:

(i) The first principle applies to the family. Producers in the family economy have more power and prestige than consumers.

(ii) The second principle applies to society. The most power and prestige accrue to those who control the distribution of valued goods beyond the family. Few men attain such positions. Almost no women have done so.

Friedl applied these principles to foraging and hoe cultures.
In foraging societies, men hunted the animals that were large enough to be distributed and consumed beyond the nuclear family. Women never hunted large animals because spending an uncertain period of time away from camp made nursing impossible. Since younger women were constantly pregnant or lactating to offset high death rates, the need to maintain population thus immobilized women, thereby excluding them from the most productive work.

In hoe cultures, men monopolized land clearing and, after the invention of metallurgy, warfare. Since warfare brings in more surplus than does landclearing, men outrank women more in advanced than in simple hoe cultures. But in both types women's food production equals men's on an average because the hoe is used near home.

The principles can be extended to relate production, reproduction and stratification in societies based on herding, plow and industrial technology (27). In herding societies, low rainfall, a short season, or mountains preclude growing crops. The need for water and grazing land makes war a major means of subsistence,
enabling elites to control both economy and polity. Women lack access to major subsistence tools; warfare and herding are conducted far from home. These conditions permit "elite polygny." A few rich men have many wives while some poor men have none.

In Eurasia, the iron-shared plow vastly increased the food supply but depressed the status of ordinary people. Iron weapons enabled elites to extract heavily from peasants. Women's share of food production decreased relative to that in hoe cultures. The plow's effect on inheritance patterns also degraded women. The plow makes land the chief form of wealth. Since land tends to be an impartible inheritance, the number of legal heirs must be limited. Monogamy prevails. Divorce is rare. Women's sexual behavior must be constrained lest a man's property go to another man's child. The richer her family, the greater the constraints placed on her — foot-binding in China, suttee in India.

Industrialization first emerged in northwest European plow kingdoms. Men continued to use the most productive tools, which ensured that their wages would exceed women's. In addition, the
concept that a man's wage should be enough to support the family, came in. The dual demands made upon women to help in industrial production and to reproduce and to nurture the young imposed a heavy double burden. The contradictions of these demands were borne by the women themselves. They did not lead to any fundamental change in the social order, but the double burden increased their powerlessness (31).

In this ideology, women were to "complete, sweeten, and embellish the existence of others", and were idealized by virtue of their confinement within the family. The number of idle and ornamental wives increased. "Treated like hot-house plants, women were asked to aspire to being Angels in the House; their helplessness, frivolity and illogicality became part of the commonsense knowledge of the day and a benign paternalism began to mask their real powerlessness; it was the task of men to protect such weak creatures from the outside world. Each sex was thought to monopolize the characteristics consistent with its proper sphere: for women the private, for men the public" (32).
The rise of bureaucracy and depersonalized public administration had the effect of reducing such power and influence as women had. It completed 'the separation of the public and private sphere fully and in principle' (33).

In the area of property owned by a woman, too, the dichotomy between the private and the public could be seen. Women in traditional societies usually own only personal items such as clothing, ornaments, and certain household equipment. These are acquired as gifts, payment of services, and inheritance. It is relatively rare for women to own land, cattle, or other forms of capital goods, and even when women hold title to such property, their control over its disposition is limited and shared with male relatives. However, in the private sphere, a woman does have overt, formal control of the goods within her own household (34).

c) Women and Law

Laws normally reflect and enforce the social system, and hence play an important role in perpetuating restrictions on women which render them powerless. This is true of both formal and
unwritten laws. Automatic exclusion from direct political participa-
tion is mandated in the many parts of the world where women are
assigned the jural status of minors (35). Wife-beating was specifi-
cally mandated by laws that saw the woman as a creature that
needed to be kept in check by her 'owner' (husband), in order that
she may preserve her virtue and the good name of the family. It saw
a need to equip the husband with the means to control untoward
behaviour in his wife (36). Unwritten laws, such as those of
socialization, contribute heavily to reproduction of the social
system. In the roles that a woman adopts within the family, and
her differential treatment of the children in the family, she herself
perpetuates gender roles that ensure a subservient role for women
(37).

Laws can have an opposite effect, as well, as when 'Sati' was
legalized out of Goa, with the advent of Portuguese rule in Goa, four
hundred and fifty years ago. In spite of the continuance of the
custom in the rest of India, it was abolished in Goa, and alternatives
provided. This changed the social situation for women in Goa.
Unwritten social laws have a more potent effect, yet, they do not always work towards the enhancement of a woman's social position, even when they seem to do so. A Fulani girl, for example, receives cattle from her parents; the cattle remain part of her father's herd until she marries, and then are transferred to her husband's herd. The milk from these cattle may be used only by her, and only her children have the right of inheritance, but she cannot dispose of her cattle without her husband's consent (38).

The Fulani are a patrilineal society, but male control of capital, even when it is nominally owned by women, is also the case in matrilineal societies. Among the matrilineal Palau, there is a great deal of rhetoric concerning the importance of women as "the channels through which wealth and influence flow...... the path by which all money moves into the family chest...... What is not mentioned is that it is their brothers, fathers and uncles who operate the controls of the system and who plan the tactics for its manipulation" (39).
**Conclusion:**

It is not hard to establish the fact that the 'dominant ideology' in all societies is formulated by, controlled by and biased towards a male perception of the world. Our brief overview indicates that there are degrees of male dominance, escalating towards that end of the continuum where a society combines patrilineal descent with patrilocal residence (40). Woman's social status varies accordingly. We need not belabour the point, however, that all social systems are male-oriented (41).
References

1) Hunter College Women's Studies Collective, "Women's Realities, Women's Choices", Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, Pg. 203. The first part of this book (i.e. pgs 3-210) deals with these definitions in some depth.


7) Gough, K. "Variation in residence". In Schneider and Gough, op.cit. pgs. 545-576.


11) Millett, Kate "Sexual Politics", Doubleday, 1970. pg 33

13) ibid


"Hidden from History", Pluto Press, 1973


18) Wolf, M. "Chinese women: old skills in a new context". In Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, Eds., Women,


21) As early as 1894, accounts had begun on this score. See Mason, Otis T. "Women's Share in Primitive culture", Appleton New York, 1894. It is a compendium of observation of women from a surprisingly generous sampling of world cultures. Not surprisingly, however, "women's share" is work.


23) Hammond and Jablow, op. cit. pg. 62.


27) Huber, Joan, "Macro-Micro Links in Gender Stratification" pp. 1-10 in American Sociological Review, 1990, Vol 55 (Feb 1-10) pg. 4


31) Stace & Price, op. cit pg. 37

32) ibid pg 38.


34) Hammond & Jablow, op. cit. pgs 101-102

35) ibid pg 126

36) Stacey & Price, op. cit. pg 30
37) ibid pg 10


40) Hammond and Jablow, op. cit. pg. 32.

41) ibid pg. 56.