

# GENDER, POWER, AND SOCIETY

Persistence and Change

**Edited by** Marcia Texler Segal  
and Vasilikie (Vicky) Demos

ADVANCES IN  
GENDER RESEARCH

**VOLUME 36**

# GENDER, POWER, AND SOCIETY

This captivating new volume of AGR about gender and power in society, and the influence that culture, social movements, and social policies have on gender relationships, examines how social structure shapes relationships between women and men and how it can sometimes improve these relationships, while gender inequality persists due to power differences.

—*Rodica Lisnic*, PhD, University of Arkansas

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ADVANCES IN GENDER RESEARCH VOLUME 36

# **GENDER, POWER, AND SOCIETY: PERSISTENCE AND CHANGE**

EDITED BY

**MARCIA TEXLER SEGAL**

*Indiana University Southeast, USA*

and

**VASILIKIE (VICKY) DEMOS**

*University of Minnesota Morris, USA*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## ABOUT THE EDITORS

**Marcia Texler Segal**, PhD, is Professor of Sociology and Dean for Research Emerita, Indiana University Southeast, USA. The focuses of her research, teaching, publications, and scholarly presentations include gender and international development; intersections of gender, race, and class; history of sociology; and sociology of religion. Her overseas experience has principally been in Sub-Saharan Africa. A Past President of the North Central Sociological Association, she has served in elective and appointed positions in the American and International Sociological Associations and Sociologists for Women in Society.

**Vasilikie (Vicky) Demos** is a Professor Emerita of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, Morris, USA. Her research focuses on race, ethnicity, history, and gender. It includes a study of the construction of ethnicity among Greek women both in Greece and in the diaspora, as well as an examination of the life of sociologist Ruth Hill Useem. She has received various awards, including the Harriet Martineau Sociological Society Annual Award and the UMM Distinguished Research Award. She has also served on committees in the American Sociological Association and as President of Sociologists for Women in Society and the North Central Sociological Association.

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## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Pamela Aronson**, PhD, is Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, USA. Her research examines the experiences of Gen Z, the transition to adulthood, gender in electoral politics, the #MeToo movement, sexual consent, sexual harassment in the higher education workplace, and how disadvantaged students experience college.

**Francine Banner**, JD, PhD, is Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, USA. Her research focuses on intersections between law and society, particularly in institutional contexts.

**Grace Bradley**, LLMSW, is Co-occurring Clinical Therapist in Community Mental Health, and Alumnus and Research Assistant at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, USA.

**Lauren Danielowski**, MA, is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Connecticut. Her research focuses on human rights, reproductive rights and justice, race, class, and gender, and reproductive technologies.

**Kathleen M. Darcy**, JD, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Criminology, Law, and Criminal Justice at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, USA. Her work explores the intersections between law, civil rights, gender-based violence, trust, and betrayal, with an aim toward improving survivors' access to justice.

**Arunima Datta** is a part-time PhD research scholar at Rashtriya Raksha University, India. Her current research interests include gender-based violence, pre-crime incidents, investigative interview techniques, criminal investigation, prison administration, and inmate management.

**Cynthia Deitch**, PhD, is a Sociologist retired from George Washington University, USA, where she taught in the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program and was affiliated with the Sociology Department and the School of Public Policy & Public Administration. Her research is on intersectional approaches to work and policy.

**Elizabeth M. Legerski**, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of North Dakota, USA. Her research interests include gender issues, social inequalities, families, and social policy, with her most recent work examining sexual harassment and interpersonal violence across a variety of settings.

**Ruoxi Lyu** is a PhD student in Gender and Social Policy at the Trachtenberg School, George Washington University, USA. Her research focuses on gender-based violence, reproductive justice, population policy, and East Asian social policy.

**Lisa A. Martin**, PhD, is Professor and Chair of Health and Human Services and Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, USA. Her research focuses on gender and health, stigma, and reproductive health, emphasizing interdisciplinary collaborations that focus on lived experiences.

**Jamie Oslawski-Lopez**, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Sociology, Indiana University Kokomo, USA. Her research interests include gender inequality within family life and the scholarship of teaching and learning. She has published work in the *Journal of Family Issues*, *Midwest Social Sciences Journal*, *Teaching Sociology*, *TRAILS*, and within edited volumes and encyclopedias.

**Jaelyn A. Tabor**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Illinois College, USA, whose research focuses on family transitions, LGBTQ+ issues, fertility decisions, and division of labor. She is published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, the *Journal of Family Issues*, *Sociology Compass*, and edited volumes.

**Ramyata Tewari**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at School of Psychology and Counselling at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana, India. Her research expertise lies at the intersection of gender-based violence and adverse childhood experiences, with emerging interests in forensic psychology, particularly the psychology of serial killing.

# INTRODUCTION TO GENDER, POWER, AND SOCIETY: PERSISTENCE AND CHANGE

Vasilikie (Vicky) Demos<sup>a</sup> and Marcia Texler Segal<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Minnesota, Morris, USA

<sup>b</sup>Indiana University Southeast, USA

## ABSTRACT

*The relationship between power and gender manifests in different ways, particularly in the context of exerting power over women and empowering them. In the first part of this introduction, the six chapters that make up the three sections of the volume – Harassment and Gender-based Violence, Traditional and Non-traditional Reproductive Decisions and Beliefs, and Gender on the Screen – will be discussed and compared. The second part will provide a summary of each of the six chapters.*

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment; gender-based violence; reproductive decisions; Indian media; empowerment

## GENDER AND POWER

While the basic definition of power – as the ability to influence or control people or events, even when faced with opposition – remains constant among social scientists, philosophers, and the general public, the methods and contexts in which social scientists study power have evolved over time. Recent initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls, alongside the #MeToo movement, have directed both academic and public attention toward the intersections of gender and power

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within families, institutions, communities, and the media. Innovative theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, and data sources have further advanced our understanding of these dynamics.

Both academic research and the news media are currently paying increased attention to the empowerment of women and girls. Two recent examples are the experiences of Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai and the bravery of Gisèle Pelicot in allowing her husband's exploitation of her to become public.

To empower is to move from a position of weakness – relative powerlessness – to one of strength. After 14-year-old Malala Yousafzai survived a Taliban assassination attempt for advocating girls' education in October 2012, she became a global champion for the right to education for girls. She has spoken out at the United Nations and various venues worldwide. Through her voice and courage, she has become an agent of empowerment, advocating for girls and women to speak out. She once said, "When the whole world is silent, even one voice has power" (Saunders, 2024). Years after the attack, even as Yousafzai continues to recover from it, her courage is remarkable. Once overpowered, she has become empowered and, by example, has empowered others.

On December 19, 2024, in Avignon, France, the husband of Gisèle Pelicot, Dominique Pelicot, was found guilty of drugging his wife and repeatedly raping her over nearly a decade. Fifty other men he invited to rape his wife were also found guilty of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault (Jabkhiro 2024). It was Ms Pelicot's decision to make the four-month trial public:

By making this trial public from Sept. 2, I wanted for society to be able to take up the debates that followed ... I have never regretted that decision. I am now confident in our ability to collectively seize a future in which everyone, women and men, can live in harmony, respect and mutual understanding. (Porter, 2024)

Psychologist René Carr called Ms Pelicot's decision empowering to other victims of sexual assault and rape, giving them the strength to "speak out and to see themselves as blameless" (Oliver, 2024).

Up until the day of the verdict, France had been a place where the MeToo movement "hardly gained traction." However, on that day, 72-year-old Gisèle Pelicot became a "feminist icon" (Porter & Le Stradic, 2024). Both Yousafzai and Pelicot were subjected to men who disrespected them as human beings. Despite enduring extreme physical abuse, they found the strength to empower themselves by publicly addressing the injustices they faced and advocating for the rights of girls and women.

The contributors to this volume examine the relationships between gender, power, and empowerment at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. They examine sources and types of power, including cultural traditions, threats and uses of force, and power derived from laws and states. They show that power is not exclusively top-down or zero-sum. Importantly, they show that balances of power can and do change over time and are influenced by legal action, social movements, institutional policies, and personal experiences.

A variety of theories and methods are employed to study the relationships between gender and power. Each of the contributors takes an intersectional perspective, acknowledging that race, class, caste, sexuality, citizenship, and position

in a hierarchy impact power relations. Authors apply feminist, social movement, and media theory and review theories that account for interpersonal violence. They use public and specially created survey data, legal cases, interviews, focus groups, and analysis of popular and advertising media to show the interfaces of gender and power.

The chapters by Cynthia Deitch and Ruoxi Lyu, by Pamela Aronson, Kathleen M. Darcy, Lisa Martin, Francine Banner, and Grace Bradley, and by Elizabeth M. Legerski address power as manifested in sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Deitch and Lyu examine legal cases filed on behalf of immigrant workers with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Such workers are more vulnerable to harassment owing to their place in the organizational hierarchy, their legal status, their economic precarity, and sometimes language barriers. The law provides a means of resistance. The University of Michigan employees who responded to the surveys and interviews analyzed by Aronson and her colleagues come from all levels of the institution, ranging from students employed as part-time workers and adjunct faculty to professors and administrators. Sharing their thoughts about the #MeToo movement, they reflect not only on personal experiences of harassment but also on events at a university where incidents of harassment over a relatively extended period made national headlines, and anti-harassment training was made mandatory.

In the oil town of Legerski's research, threats of gender-based violence loom everywhere. The make-up of the community, with many highly paid male workers living apart from their families, limited housing, and few options for women, has the potential for domestic violence and harassment in public places. Each of these chapters looks at the occurrence of gender-based violence in the workplace or related to the work environment. While not the focus of the chapter, Arunima Datta and Ramyata Tewari, who examine entertainment media from India, also touch on workplace interactions where hierarchies of position and gender provide opportunities for exploitation.

These chapters illustrate the ways in which gendered power operates on all levels. At the micro-level, they are about harassment experienced by individuals and the need for permission from a male superior to act. At the meso-level, they are about the male domination of parking lots in boom towns and the ways that the #MeToo movement empowered women on campus. At the macro-level, they are about lawsuits and immigration status. Workplaces tend to be hierarchical, with power flowing down a chain of command, most often more predominantly male at the higher levels. The power of women to resist the advances of superiors or to act independently of supervisors raises questions about the boundary between legitimate authority and male privilege. They indicate that research is needed on gender and power in different kinds of workplaces and different categories of workers.

Procreation is a profoundly gendered phenomenon and a fundamental human power involving the power of individuals deciding to reproduce, the power of science to facilitate reproduction, and the power of the state to control who can reproduce or decline to reproduce and under what circumstances. These matters, along with the wider debates about abortion, birth control, and the status of embryos, as well as discussions of the right of people not in heterosexual

marriages to be parents, are raised in the chapters by Lauren Danielowski and by Jamie Oslawski-Lopez and Jaclyn A. Tabor. Danielowski focuses on surrogacy as a means for individuals and couples not otherwise able to produce biological offspring, while Oslawski-Lopez and Tabor ask who controls a couple's fertility decision: The wife? The husband? Both wife and husband? Neither husband nor wife?<sup>1</sup>

Power in the context of the home goes beyond the control of reproduction. In new oil towns, the gender-segregated job market and the limited availability of childcare, together with the enhanced incomes of men working in the industry, create a power imbalance that can lead to domestic violence. The fear of violence in the community can also lead men to become rigidly overprotective of the women and girls in their families. Hindi films reflect a sharp discontinuity between home and work. Women shown in roles of power and authority at work, police officers, for example, are shown in stereotyped familial roles. Men, in contrast, exercise power and authority both at work and at home.

Media both reflect and influence the ways in which gender and power interact in society. Four different media venues are represented in the chapters in this volume. Datta and Tewari analyzed the ways gender and power were portrayed in samples of fictional visual media, current Hindi-language films, and Netflix (OTT) series. Social media played a key role in the spread of and responses to the #MeToo movement studied by Aronson and her colleagues. Advertising on websites served as the vehicle for promoting the United States as the ideal place for intended parents (IPs) to seek gestational surrogacy in Danielowski's study.

Stereotypes and the glorification of masculine violence characterize the portrayal of gender and power in Indian cinema; TV series are only slightly more realistic. Given the observations by our contributors, one might ask whether audiences regard what they see as pure entertainment or as models for doing gender. Do the small differences apparent in the series foretell changes in society? How do the images in the Indian media compare to those in other cultural milieus? The University of Michigan study demonstrates the uses and power of social media to influence ideas about gender in a relatively short period of time. Such movements may generate counter or backlash movements that merit research. Commercial websites are one source of information about medical procedures and options. Such information is limited and not necessarily accurate, and it is intended for audiences who are considering decisions that are both life-altering and expensive. Like much advertising, these websites have probably been tested on focus groups to gauge their appeal, but how often are they used for making decisions, and how sound a basis are they for doing so?

Cultural concepts of masculinity are reflected and changed in gendered power dynamics. This is most dramatically illustrated in the oil town chapter, where men living in single-sex camps become protective of the women who provide house-keeping and related services in the camps, and townsmen who become protective of the women in their homes. In contrast, masculinity was enacted aggressively in public spaces. Some of the men surveyed and interviewed at the University of Michigan reflected on past behavior and made changes in their current behavior toward women in the light of #MeToo. The version of masculinity portrayed in

Indian cinema was found to be stereotyped and exaggerated. Where parent/child interactions were depicted, girls were strictly controlled while boys were given freedom, socialization that will lead to very different gender performances.

The term tradition evokes a respect for past practices that hold significance in the present. A questioning of tradition implies a questioning of a sacred order and the power embedded in that order. The traditional gender division of labor within the family, consisting of a patriarchal head and a subordinate wife, has a basis in the Abrahamic religious story of Adam and Eve. In the story, God creates Adam first as the “leader” and Eve second as the “helper.” The religious backing of the story provides a powerful basis for the traditional gender division of labor that can be seen in the chapters in this volume. Regarding fertility decisions, those who state that the husband should decide whether or not the couple should have a child are basing their opinion on the idea that the husband, as economic head of the family, is the more powerful member – the leader – of the couple. The men who sexually assault women who are out shopping in mining towns or the immigrant women who are working in the food industry are indicating that women are not safe and do not belong in the public sphere.

Yet, as philosopher Roslyn Weiss (2024) observes in another reading of the story:

The man who was once alone finds a companion and helper. Sin enters Creation as the woman yields to the serpent’s seduction. Childbirth and work become difficult. The man gives the woman a new name. And the human race becomes subject to mortality. But surely one of the most significant changes is that the woman who is desired by the man is made to return that desire, thus ceding to him some measure of power over her.

The deceptively simple narrative of Genesis 1-3 tells a complex tale of desire and power relations between the sexes. Far from a call to patriarchy, the story of Adam and Eve portends the fraught partnership of equals, which can as easily end in failure as in success. (p. 27)

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Cynthia Deitch and Ruoxi Lyu note that the #MeToo movement has pointed to the issue of workplace sexual harassment as a significant imbalance and abuse of power, a function of hegemonic masculinity. In their chapter “Gender, Power, and Resistance in the Sexual Harassment of Immigrant Workers: Evidence from Legal Cases in the United States,” they consider how much legal action challenges gendered and intersectional power relations among low-wage immigrant workers. The first part includes discussions of discrimination, intersectionality, and sexual corruption. In the second part, they examine 49 lawsuits filed with the US EEOC between 2015 and 2024. Forty of the cases involved harassment of only women, six of only men, and three of women and men. In addition, most were Latinx workers, and most worked in agribusiness.

In their analysis of the cases, Deitch and Lyu show how an intersectional power imbalance can operate on three levels – micro, meso, and macro – and show how the levels reinforce each other. At the micro level, the level of harassment, Deitch and Lyu found that most of the harassers were men in a supervisory position. The harassment included groping, kissing, touching, and rape.

There were complaints of quid pro quo harassment and threats of retaliation for not complying. At the meso-level, the organization level, they found that often, when workers complained to higher-level managers about the sexual harassment they received, the managers ignored their complaints or retaliated against them, at times terminating their employment. Deitch and Lyu noted that some employers mentioned the U Visa – designed to support victims of sexual and gender-based violence – in ways that the EEOC identified as potentially harmful to the victims and their families. For example, during a court hearing, one employer accused a claimant of fabricating a sexual assault to obtain a U Visa. On a more positive note, they identified programs, such as bystander intervention training, that were recommended in settlement agreements to help address sexual harassment.

At the macro-level, Deitch and Lyu show how laws, policies, and political pressures intersect and inform the micro- and meso-levels and intensify the violence of sexual harassment. They note that undocumented workers are nearly half of those employed in agribusiness and that they are protected under the Fair Labor Standards Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. At the same time, as they are in violation of immigration laws, compared to other workers, they do not have the same rights, for example, to back pay. Thus, as Deitch and Lyu show, the sexual harassment of immigrant workers in its physical and verbal manifestations is a form of violent power reinforced at the organizational and national levels. For those victims who risked retaliation and filed successful sexual harassment complaints to the EEOC, there was some relief. However, Deitch and Lyu end pessimistically, noting that under Project 2025, a set of policy recommendations developed by the Heritage Foundation, a US conservative think tank, favored by the US government elected in 2024, the EEOC's power to offset the damage of sexual harassment will be greatly limited.

In their chapter, “Creating a Balance of Power”: Gender and Empowerment in the #MeToo Era, Pamela Aronson, Kathleen M. Darcy, Lisa A. Martin, Francine Banner, and Grace Bradley explore the responses of a representative sample of University of Michigan employees to a survey that included open- and closed-ended questions about sexual harassment, assault, discrimination, and the impact of the #MeToo movement. The survey sampled 25,000 employees on the university's main, medical, and regional campuses and had a response rate of 18.2%. It was conducted after employees had participated in mandatory training about sexual harassment and abuse at the university. Most responses regarding the #MeToo movement were positive, but even those responding negatively acknowledged the impact of the movement on the gendered balance of power.

The authors applied social movement theory, demonstrating the ways in which survey responders saw themselves as members of a community of actual or potential survivors and engaged bystanders, though some indicated a backlash community of rejectors could form as well. Because #MeToo as a movement spread digitally, it had the potential to form such communities quickly and without geographic boundaries.

On the closed-ended section of the survey, three quarters agreed or strongly agreed that “a change had taken place in what behavior society thinks is and isn't

appropriate,” and nearly one-third agreed or strongly agreed that “The #MeToo movement has made me rethink my past behaviors.” A striking characteristic of the open-ended responses was the use of metaphors. The movement was characterized as shining a spotlight on that which was hidden, giving voice to that which was hush-hush, and providing a platform from which to speak out. They credited the movement with moving from darkness into light and allowing people to speak instead of staying silent.

Many of the responses reflected the micro-level of personal experience and interpersonal interaction, but with clear implications for the meso-level of the university and other workplaces and the macro-level of policy, laws, and courts. The authors found acknowledgment of changing norms that alter the gendered balance of power and the empowerment of both survivors and bystanders. Participants mentioned assessing their own past behavior in the light of current norms, but registered concern about the movement leading to an unwarranted focus on past behavior, accusations, people rushing to judgment, and the creation of potential barriers to one-on-one interactions between women and men. While men were somewhat more likely to say that the movement had negative consequences, some women also expressed reservations, and some men were quite thoughtful and reflective in their responses. Several open-ended remarks noted that the movement serves as a vehicle for conversations about harassment and about social change and social power more broadly.

The authors note that a university, especially the University of Michigan given its size and its history of sexual harassment-related behaviors, is a good site to begin to investigate the impact of the #MeToo movement in workplace settings, but its workforce and hierarchy are not representative of the places where most people work. Furthermore, this workplace and sample did not allow for an intersectional analysis of the impact of the #MeToo movement in the work environment.

Elizabeth M. Legerski shows the relationship of context to the interplay of gender and power in “The Impact of an Oil Boom on Gendered Power Dynamics, Inequalities, and Interpersonal Violence.” Studying a boomtown in the Bakken region of the Western United States, she examines how the introduction of fracking altered the sex ratio, the availability of housing and childcare, employment options, and the economy, which, in turn, affected the potential for interpersonal violence.

Legerski reviews sociological theories that account for interpersonal violence, including those that focus on interpersonal dynamics, the impact of the wider environment, the construction of masculinity and femininity, and the ways in which everyday life is organized by gender. She also reviews findings from other studies of the Bakken region and other boomtowns. The data for this chapter come from analysis of 185 interviews and focus groups with a wide range of individuals, including those working in the field of interpersonal violence and law enforcement, people who came to the region because of the boom, and residents not connected to the boom. A wide range of ages, educational backgrounds, and income levels was represented. Women made up three quarters of the sample, of which 77.3% were White, 22.1% American Indian, and 1.6% Hispanic.

The research supports the importance of both structuralist and interactionist theories. Family life is altered in boomtowns. Because housing is scarce and expensive, some men come without families, and some women leave. Families that do find housing struggle with a lack of childcare and a gender-segregated job market, giving men now earning substantial incomes more power. Masculinity is redefined. Men who live in work camps compete for women and become overprotective of the few women who do the service work in the camps. Given the environment, where the imbalanced sex ratio leads women to limit their movements, hesitating to go to the grocery or the gas station where unattached men loiter in parking lots, men in families also become overprotective, limiting the mobility of female relatives.

Community professionals point to the impact of social isolation. Families new to the community and women with no childcare or employment confined to homes by overprotective men or fear of public places have no support systems. In one example from an interview, a woman who left an abusive relationship felt compelled to find a new partner quickly because she had no place to live.

Work in the oil industry has largely benefited men, where, despite the risks and dislocations, there is the opportunity to earn high wages. Interviewees included women who worked in the industry as well. One mentioned that she wished more women would see the opportunities for high-paid professional work in the industry. This would bring women in and make them feel more comfortable. Another said she felt safe with and protected by the men she worked with, but like others, felt less comfortable in public places such as the bar.

In “‘An Oasis of Hope’ and ‘Superior’ Expertise: Advertising Sexual Citizenship in the United States Commercial Surrogacy Market,” Lauren Danielowski examines US websites marketing surrogacy services to international IPs and one United Kingdom site marketing US services. She finds that the sites claim to be ideal for international IPs, emphasizing flexible, individualized care, including available language translation. They present the United States as an ethical and progressive place, one with superior medical expertise and laws that securely support international surrogacy, the rights of the child, such as birthright US citizenship, and those of the IPs. The US market is described as one in which surrogates engage in reproductive labor as an act of altruism, while women in the global south are described as engaging in surrogacy because they are poor and in need of the money that the service provides. The websites studied tend to universalize the opportunities offered to those seeking surrogacy in the United States. However, surrogacy is not regulated by the federal government, but by individual states. These vary in their protection of the sexual rights of LGBTQ+ people, with California and others on the west coast, having particularly liberal regulations.

Danielowski uses the concept of sexual citizenship, which includes all the rights associated with a Western progressive definition of sexuality, including bodily autonomy and individual choice. Not everyone has the same claim to this type of sexual citizenship given the impact of heteronormativity and the inequalities of race, gender, and class. The approach to marketing illustrated by the websites has colonialist overtones, picturing the United States as superior to other destinations for medical tourism. Yet, Danielowski notes that the reality of surrogacy