

## Preface

There is no question that the women's liberation movement has stimulated, in recent years, a good deal of interest in understanding and analyzing women's lives. At Stanford, in 1971, a collective of female graduate students in anthropology organized an undergraduate lecture course, "Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective." At more or less the same time anthropologists in other colleges and universities began to prepare similar courses, and to ask themselves what anthropologists might have to say about women and, conversely, how an interest in women might provide a new perspective in their field.

When Rosaldo (who taught that course, along with Jane Collier, Julia Howell, Kim Kramer, Janet Shepherd Fjellman, and Ellen Lewin) showed Lamphere a copy of the Stanford lectures, we both decided that the issues raised, the problems solved, and the questions that remained unasked (and so, unanswered) were of sufficient importance and interest to be shared. The difficulties of bringing an entirely new perspective to bear on anthropological materials had encouraged a good deal of creative thinking, suggestive questioning, and research. How, for example, in a field that had a long tradition of describing men's place in society, could we begin to characterize the interest of women's lives? And then, again, how were we to evaluate the great variation in female activities, roles, and powers that is found in different human groups? What were we to make of the popular claim that women are, biologically, men's inferiors? If we rejected that claim, how then could we begin to explain and understand the fact that women are treated, culturally and socially, as inferior, in virtually all societies in the world? Ultimately, of course, all of these questions revolve around a need to reexamine the ways in which we think about ourselves.

The impetus for this book lies in our conviction that the lack of interest in women in conventional anthropology constitutes a genuine

deficiency, that it has led to distorted theories and impoverished ethnographic accounts. By focusing on women, and by addressing facts that have conventionally been ignored or taken for granted, we hope to re-appraise old theories and pave the way for future thought. In anthropology, it is clear that our conceptions of human social life will be broadened when they address women's lives and strategies along with those of men.

The problem, for us, was how to do it. The anthropological literature tells us relatively little about women, and provides almost no theoretical apparatus for understanding or describing culture from a woman's point of view. Because of our lack of both materials and theories, it seemed more reasonable to collect papers from a number of people working in this area than to attempt a book ourselves. In the last few years, we have found—all of us—that our own thinking about women has become increasingly sophisticated, and this leads us to believe that a number of the papers here will be superseded by later work. In a sense, then, these papers represent a first generation's attempt to integrate an interest in women into a general theory of society and culture. They outline a number of theoretical issues, and illustrate lines of thought that later studies might pursue. The authors vary in their theoretical commitments, their politics, and their methods. Some of the papers reflect research initiated long before the contemporary women's movement became relevant; others represent thinking undertaken specifically for this book. Most of the papers have not been published elsewhere. Taken together, all should serve, minimally, to correct a dominant bias that sees women's lives as lacking in order or in interest. And they illustrate ways in which anthropologists will have to begin to think about women if they are to understand our human world.

M.Z.R.

L.L.

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