Praise for the first edition

“Wiesner-Hanks . . . accomplishes a near-impossible feat – a review of what is known about the construction of gender and the character of women’s lives in all known cultures over the course of human history. . . . Theoretically sophisticated and doing justice to the historical and cross-cultural record, yet assimilable by students . . .”

Choice

“Professor Merry Wiesner-Hanks draws on this wealth of scholarship and her own research to provide a welcome overview of gender in global history from prehistory to date . . . I would recommend Gender in History as a set text for all students beginning a degree in history, alongside more conventional fare like E. H. Carr’s What is History? It should not be restricted to those students who select a course in which the main topic of study is gender. For, crucially, it demonstrates that gender is as significant as social class, race and ethnicity as a category of historical analysis, as well as providing novice historians with many insights into understanding history. This is not to ignore that it is also of value to more experienced historians, particularly because of its thematically arranged suggestions for further reading.”

Reviews in History

“Merry Wiesner-Hanks has produced a judicious and learned book. Gender in History brilliantly explores the influence of gender constructs in political, social, economic, and cultural affairs. The remarkable cultural, geographical, and chronological range of Wiesner-Hanks’ research is matched only by the sophistication, nuance, and clarity of her analysis. This book offers a rare and valuable global perspective on gender roles in human history.”

Jerry H. Bentley,
University of Hawaii
For my premodern/postmodern women’s reading group
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The division of time into historical eras, a process termed “periodization,” is highly contested in world history: many period labels contain implicit or explicit value judgments; developments that historians have seen as marking a division between one period and the next occurred at widely varying times around the world; and important aspects of life often continued across many periods with relatively little change. Thus every system of periodization is problematic, but it is difficult to give them up entirely, so this chronological table of contents uses the large divisions of time that are most common in world history courses. It does not include references to chapter 4, which is organized topically, nor does it include every brief comment. I have included this table to make it easier to read this book in conjunction with courses that are organized chronologically.

Paleolithic Era (to 9500 BCE) 13–17, 55–60, 109–11
Neolithic Era (9500 BCE–3000 BCE) 17–20, 60–1
Ancient agricultural societies (3000 BCE–600 BCE) 25–9, 61–2, 113–15, 137–41
Classical societies (600 BCE–600 CE) 29–33, 63–5, 115–22, 141–50, 170–8, 195–202
Each book that I have written has encouraged me to range wider chrono-
logically and geographically from my original home base in early modern
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The title of this book would have made little sense to me when I chose to be a history major nearly four decades ago. I might perhaps have thought it an analysis of linguistic developments, as gender was something I considered (and bemoaned) largely when learning German nouns. The women’s movement changed that, as it changed so much else. Advocates of women’s rights in the present, myself included, looked at what we had been taught about the past – as well as what we had been taught about literature, psychology, religion, biology, and most other disciplines – and realized we were only hearing half the story. Most of the studies we read or heard described the male experience – “man the artist,” “man the hunter,” “man and his environment” – though they often portrayed it as universal. We began to investigate the lives of women in the past, first fitting them into the categories with which we were already comfortable – nations, historical periods, social classes, religious allegiance – and then realizing that this approach, sarcastically labeled “add women and stir,” was unsatisfying. Focusing on women often disrupted the familiar categories, forcing us to rethink the way that history was organized and structured. The European Renaissance and Enlightenment lost some of their luster once women were included, as did the democracy of ancient Athens or Jacksonian America. Even newer historical approaches, such as the emphasis on class analysis using social science techniques termed the New Social History which had developed during the 1960s, were found to be wanting in their consideration of differences between women’s and men’s experiences.

This disruption of well-known categories and paradigms ultimately included the topic that had long been considered the proper focus of all history – man. Viewing the male experience as universal had not only hidden women’s history, but it had also prevented analysis of men’s experiences as those of men. The very words we used to describe individuals – “artist” and “woman artist,” for example, or “scientist” and “woman scientist” – kept us from thinking
about how the experiences of Michelangelo or Picasso or Isaac Newton were shaped by the fact that they were male, while it forced us to think about how being female affected Georgia O'Keeffe or Marie Curie. Historians familiar with studying women increasingly began to discuss the ways in which systems of sexual differentiation affected both women and men, and by the early 1980s to use the word “gender” to describe these systems. At that point, they differentiated primarily between “sex,” by which they meant physical, morphological, and anatomical differences (what are often called “biological differences”) and “gender,” by which they meant a culturally constructed, historically changing, and often unstable system of differences.

Most of the studies with “gender” in the title still focused on women – and women’s history continued as its own field – but a few looked equally at both sexes or concentrated on the male experience, calling their work “men’s history” or the “new men’s studies.” Several university presses started book series with “gender” in their titles – “gender and culture,” “gender and American law” – and scholars in many fields increasingly switched from “sex” to “gender” as the acceptable terminology: “sex roles” became “gender roles,” “sex distinctions” became “gender distinctions” and so on. Historians interested in this new perspective asserted that gender was an appropriate category of analysis when looking at all historical developments, not simply those involving women or the family. Every political, intellectual, religious, economic, social, and even military change had an impact on the actions and roles of men and women, and, conversely, a culture’s gender structures influenced every other structure or development. People’s notions of gender shaped not only the way they thought about men and women, but the way they thought about their society in general. As the historian Joan Scott put it: “Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.” Thus hierarchies in other realms of life were often expressed in terms of gender, with dominant individuals or groups described in masculine terms and dependent ones in feminine. These ideas in turn affected the way people acted, though explicit and symbolic ideas of gender could also conflict with the way men and women chose or were forced to operate in the world.

Sex and Gender

Just at the point when historians and their students were gradually beginning to see the distinction between sex and gender (with an increasing number accepting the importance of gender as a category of analysis) that distinction became contested. Not only were there great debates about where the line should be drawn – were women “biologically” more peaceful and men “biologically” more skillful at math, or were such tendencies the
result solely of their upbringing? – but some scholars wondered whether social gender and biological sex are so interrelated that any distinction between the two is meaningless. Their doubts came from four principal directions.

One of these was from biological scientists attempting to draw an absolute line between male and female. Though most people are born with external genitalia through which they are categorized “male” or “female” at birth, some are not. Their external genitalia may be ambiguous, a condition now generally termed “intersex,” though earlier termed “hermaphroditism.” Closer physical examination may reveal that their internal sexual and reproductive anatomy may also not match those usually defined as “male” or “female.” In earlier times most intersex people were simply assigned to the sex they most closely resembled, with their condition only becoming a matter of historical record if they came to the attention of religious, medical, or legal authorities. Since the nineteenth century this gender assignment was sometimes reinforced by surgical procedures modifying or removing the body parts that did not fit with the chosen gender. Thus in these cases “gender” determined “sex” rather than the other way around.

Because the physical body could be ambiguous, scientists began to stress the importance of other indicators of sex difference. By the 1970s chromosomes were the favored marker, and quickly became part of popular as well as scientific understandings. In 1972, for example, the International Olympic Committee determined that simply “looking like” a woman was not enough, but that athletes would have to prove their “femaleness” through a chromosome test; an individual with certain types of chromosomal abnormalities would be judged “male” even if that person had been regarded as “female” since birth, and had breasts and a vagina but no penis. The problem with chromosomes is that they are also not perfectly dichotomous, but may involve ambiguous intermediate categories, so that more recently the source of sex differences has also been sought in prenatal hormones, including androgen and testosterone. Tests came to evaluate all of these factors: in 2009, the International Association of Athletics Federations required South African middle-distance runner Caster Semenya to undergo an examination of her external genitals, internal reproductive organs (through ultrasound), chromosomes, and hormones.

Given the uncertainties in most “biological” markers, the intensity of the search for an infallible marker of sex difference suggests that cultural norms about gender (that everyone should be a man or a woman) are influencing science. Preexisting ideas about gender shape many other scientific fields as well; the uniting of sperm and egg, for example, was long described as the “vigorous, powerful” sperm “defeating all others” and attaching itself to a “passive, receptive” egg. (The egg is now know to be active in this process.)
Introduction

A second source of doubts about the distinction between sex and gender is anthropology and ethnography. Though most of the world’s cultures have a dichotomous view of gender, occasionally cultures develop a third or even a fourth gender. In some cultures, gender is determined by one’s relationship to reproduction, so that adults are gendered male and female, but children and old people are regarded as different genders; in such cultures there are thus four genders, with linguistic, clothing, and behavioral distinctions for each one. In a number of areas throughout the world, including Alaska, the Amazon region, North America, Australia, Siberia, Central and South Asia, Oceania, and the Sudan, individuals who were originally viewed as male or female assume (or assumed, for in many areas such practices have ended) the gender identity of the other sex or combine the tasks, behavior, and clothing of men and women. Some of these individuals are intersexed and occasionally they are eunuchs (castrated males), but more commonly they are morphologically male or female. The best known of these are found among several Native American peoples, and the Europeans who first encountered them regarded them as homosexuals and called them “berdaches,” from an Arabic word for male prostitute. Now most scholars choose to use the term “two-spirit people,” and note that they are distinguished from other men more by their work or religious roles than by their sexual activities; they are usually thought of as a third gender rather than effeminate males or masculine women. (Third genders will be discussed in more detail in chapter 8.)

Comparative ethnography thus indicates that in some of the world’s cultures, gender attribution is not based on genitals, and may, in fact, change throughout a person’s life. In fact, day-to-day gender attribution is based everywhere on cultural norms rather than biology; not only are chromosomes and hormones not visible, but in most of the world’s cultures clothing hides external genitalia. (Of course the clothing of men and women may be very different, but that is a culturally imposed gender distinction.) Children are taught these gender norms from a very young age – long before they learn anything about hormones and chromosomes – and even blind children share their culture’s ideas about typical gender differences, so that these lessons are not based on external physical appearance alone, any more than they are based on internal body chemistry.

The arbitrary and culturally produced nature of gender has also been challenged by transsexual and transgender individuals, a third source of doubts about the distinction between sex and gender. Individuals whose sexual and reproductive organs and even chromosomal and hormonal patterns mark them as male or female may mentally regard themselves as the other, and choose to live and dress as the other, a condition known medically as “gender dysphoria” or “gender identity disorder.” In the 1950s, sex reassignment operations became available for gender-dysphoric people who could afford
them. Sex reassignment surgery could make the body fit more closely with the mind, but it also led to challenging questions: At what point in this process does a “man” become a “woman,” or vice versa? With the loss or acquisition of a penis? Breasts? From the beginning? What does the answer to this imply about notions of gender difference? In the 1990s such questions began to be made even more complex by individuals who described themselves as “transgendered,” that is, as neither male nor female or both male and female. Should such individuals be allowed in spaces designated “women only” or “men only”? Should they have to choose between them, or should there be more than two choices? As had been true with the women’s and gay-rights movement, people involved in the transgendered movement also began historical study of people they identified as sharing their experiences.

The relationship between sex and gender is further complicated by sexuality, for persons of either sex (or transgendered persons) may be sexually attracted to persons of the other sex(es), persons of their own, or everyone. The transgendered movement is politically often associated with gay, lesbian, and bisexual groups (reflected in the LGBT acronym), though some adherents dispute this link, noting that the issue for them is gender, not sexual orientation. (The boundaries between the physical body and cultural forces in the issue of sexual orientation are just as contested as those in the issue of gender, of course, as some scientists attempt to find a “gay gene” and others view all such research as efforts to legitimize an immoral “lifestyle choice” or a futile search for something that is completely socially constructed.)

A fourth source of doubts about the distinction between sex and gender came from historians of women. They put increasing emphasis on differences among women, noting that women’s experiences differed because of class, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and other factors, and they varied over time. Because of these differences, some wondered, did it make sense to talk about “women” at all? If, for example, women were thought to be delicate guardians of the home, as was true in the nineteenth-century United States, then were black women, who worked in fields alongside men, really “women”? If women were thought to be inferior and irrational, then were intelligent queens such as Elizabeth I of England really “women”? Was “woman” a valid category whose meaning is self-evident and unchanging over time, or is arguing for any biological base for gender difference (or sexual orientation) naive “essentialism”? These historians noted that not only in the present is gender “performative,” that is, a role that can be taken on or changed at will, but it was so at many points in the past, as individuals “did gender” and conformed to or challenged gender roles. Thus it is misguided to think that we are studying women (or men, for that matter) as a sex, they argued, for the only thing that is in the historical record is gender; “women” and “men” are thus conceptual categories, not enduring objects.
Introduction

Gender History and Theory

All of these doubts came together at a time when many historians were changing their basic understanding of the methods and function of history. Historians have long recognized that documents and other types of evidence are produced by particular individuals with particular interests and biases that consciously and unconsciously shape their content. Most historians thus attempted to keep the limitations of their sources in mind as they reconstructed events and tried to determine causation, though sometimes these got lost in the narrative. During the 1980s, some historians began to assert that because historical sources always present a biased and partial picture, we can never fully determine what happened or why; to try to do so is foolish or misguided. What historians should do instead is to analyze the written and visuals materials of the past – what is often termed “discourse” – to determine the way various things are “represented” in them and their possible meanings. Historians should not be preoccupied with searching for “reality,” in this viewpoint, because to do so demonstrates a naive “positivism,” a school of thought whose proponents regarded the chief aim of knowledge as the description of phenomena. (Both advocates and critics of positivism often quote the words of the nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke, who regarded the best history as that which retold events “as they actually happened.”)

This heightened interest in discourse among historians, usually labeled the “linguistic turn” or the “cultural turn,” drew on the ideas of literary and linguistic theory – often loosely termed “deconstruction” or “post-structuralism” – about the power of language. Language is so powerful, argued some theorists, that it determines, rather than simply describes, our understanding of the world; knowledge is passed down through language, and knowledge is power. This emphasis on the relationship of knowledge to power, and on the power of language, made post-structuralism attractive to feminist scholars in many disciplines, who themselves already emphasized the ways language and other structures of knowledge excluded women. The insight of the French philosopher Michel Foucault that power comes from everywhere fit with feminist recognition that misogyny and other forces that limited women’s lives could be found in many places: in fashion magazines, fairy tales, and jokes told at work as well overt job discrimination and domestic violence. Historians of gender were thus prominent exponents of the linguistic turn, and many analyzed representations of women, men, the body, sexual actions, and related topics within different types of discourses.

The linguistic/cultural turn – which happened in other fields along with history – elicited harsh responses from other historians, however, including
many who focused on women and gender. They asserted that it denied women the ability to shape their world – what is usually termed “agency” – in both past and present by positing unchangeable linguistic structures. Wasn’t it ironic, they noted, that just as women were learning they had a history and asserting they were part of history, “history” became just a text? They wondered whether the idea that gender – and perhaps even “women” – were simply historical constructs denied the very real oppression that many women in the past (and present) experienced. For a period it looked as if this disagreement would lead proponents of discourse analysis to lay claim to “gender” and those who opposed it to avoid “gender” and stick with “women.” Because women’s history was clearly rooted in the women’s rights movement of the 1970s, it also appeared more political than gender analysis, and programs and research projects sometimes opted to use “gender” to downplay this connection with feminism.

As we enter the twenty-first century, however, it appears that the division is less sharp. Historians using gender as a category of analysis do not all focus solely on discourse; many treat their sources as referring to something beyond the sources themselves – an author, an event, a physical body. Historians who were initially suspicious of the linguistic turn use its insights about the importance of meaning to include a wider range of literary and artistic sources as they investigate “traditional” topics in women’s history, such as organizations, work patterns, legal systems, and political movements. Scholars may not agree on the distinction between sex and gender, or between women as a group and “women” as a conceptual category, but they now describe the field as “women’s and gender history” – occasionally even using the acronym WGH – thus highlighting the link between them rather than the differences.

New theoretical perspectives are adding additional complexity and bringing in still more questions. One of these is queer theory, which was developed in the early 1990s, a period of intense AIDS activism, and combined elements of gay and lesbian studies with other concepts originating in literary and feminist analysis. Queer theorists argued that sexual notions were central to all aspects of culture, and called for greater attention to sexuality that was at odds with whatever was defined as “normal.” They asserted that the line between “normal” and “abnormal” was always socially constructed, however, and that, in fact, all gender and sexual categories were artificial and changing. Some theorists celebrated all efforts at blurring or bending categories, viewing any sort of identity as both false and oppressive and celebrating hybridity and performance. Others had doubts about this, wondering whether one can work to end discrimination against homosexuals, women, African-Americans, or any other group, if one denies that the group has an essential identity, something that makes its members clearly homosexual or women or African-American. (A similar debate can be found
within the contemporary trans movement, with some people arguing that gender and sexual orientation are fundamental aspects of identity and others that they are not or should not be.) In the last decade, queer theory has been widely applied, as scholars have “queered” – that is, called into question the categories used to describe and analyze – the nation, race, religion, and other topics along with gender and sexuality. This broadening has led some – including a few of the founders of the field – to wonder whether queer theory loses its punch when everything is queer, but it continues to be an influential theoretical perspective.

Related questions about identity, subjectivity, and the cultural construction of difference have also emerged from postcolonial theory and critical race theory. Postcolonial history and theory was initially associated with South Asian scholars and the book series Subaltern Studies, and focused on people who have been subordinated (the meaning of subaltern) by virtue of their race, class, culture, or language as part of the process of colonization and imperialism in the modern world. Critical race theory developed in the 1980s as an outgrowth (and critique) of the civil rights movement combined with ideas derived from critical legal studies, a radical group of legal scholars who argued that supposedly neutral legal concepts such as the individual or meritocracy actually masked power relationships. Historians of Europe and the United States are increasingly applying insights from both of these theoretical schools to their own work, particularly as they investigate subaltern groups such as racial and ethnic minorities. World historians also now often use ideas developed by postcolonial theorists to analyze relationships of power in all chronological periods.

An important concept in much postcolonial and critical race theory has been the notion of hegemony, initially developed by the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony differs from domination because it involves convincing dominated groups to acquiesce to the desires and systems of the dominators through cultural as well as military and political means. Generally this was accomplished by granting special powers and privileges to some individuals and groups from among the subordinated population, or by convincing them through education or other forms of socialization that the new system was beneficial or preferable. The notion of hegemony explains why small groups of people have been able to maintain control over much larger populations without constant rebellion and protest, though some scholars have argued that the emphasis on hegemony downplays the ability of subjugated peoples to recognize the power realities in which they are enmeshed and to shape their own history. Many historians have used the concept of hegemony to examine the role of high-status women, who gained power over subordinate men and women through their relationships with high-status men. The Australian sociologist R. W. Connell has also applied the idea of hegemony to studies of masculinity, noting that
in every culture one form of masculinity is hegemonic, but men who are excluded from that particular form still benefit from male privilege.

Both postcolonial and critical race theory point out that racial, ethnic, and other hierarchies are deeply rooted social and cultural principles, not simply aberrations that can be remedied by legal or political change. They note that along with disenfranchising certain groups, such hierarchies privilege certain groups, a phenomenon that is beginning to be analyzed under the rubric of critical white studies. (This is a pattern similar to the growth of men’s studies out of women’s studies, and there is a parallel development in the historical study of heterosexuality, which has grown out of gay and lesbian history.)

Queer theory, postcolonial studies, and critical race theory have all been criticized from both inside and outside for falling into the pattern set by traditional history, that is, regarding the male experience as normative and paying insufficient attention to gender differences. Scholars who have pointed this out have also noted that much feminist scholarship suffered from the opposite problem, taking the experiences of heterosexual white women as normative and paying too little attention to differences of race, class, nationality, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. They argue that the experiences of women of color must be recognized as distinctive, and that no one axis of difference (men/women, black/white, rich/poor, gay/straight) should be viewed as sufficient. These criticisms led, in the 1990s, to theoretical perspectives that attempted to recognize multiple lines of difference, such as postcolonial feminism. Such scholarship has begun to influence many areas of gender studies, even those that do not deal explicitly with race or ethnicity. It appears this cross-fertilization will continue, as issues of difference and identity are clearly key topics for historians in the ever more connected twenty-first century world.

This discussion of scholarly trends may make it appear as if focusing on women or using gender as a category of analysis has swept the discipline of history, with scholars simply choosing the approach or topic they prefer. This is far from the actual situation. Though investigating gender may seem self-evident to students in some graduate programs, there are also many historians who continue to view this as a passing fad, despite the fact that such judgments become more difficult to maintain as the decades pass. Until very recently, books that explicitly take a world, global, or transnational history perspective have focused largely on economic and political developments without examining their gendered nature. Other historians invoke “gender” without really thinking through its implications for their interpretations of the past. Though titles like “man the artist” have largely disappeared, as most authors – or their editors – have recognized their false universality, books still divide their subjects into “artists” and “women artists” or “rulers” and “women rulers.”
Studies of women and gender are also very unevenly distributed geographically and chronologically. Books on women’s experience or that use gender as a category of analysis in the twentieth-century United States or early modern England, for example, number in the hundreds, while those that focus on Kiribati or Kazakhstan may be counted on one hand. This unevenness is related, not surprisingly, to uneven growth in women’s studies programs, which is in turn related to the structure of higher education around the world and the ability or willingness of institutions of higher education to include new perspectives and programs. By the late 1970s, hundreds of colleges and universities in the United States and Canada offered courses in women’s history, and many had separate programs in women’s history or women’s studies. Universities in Britain, Israel, and Australia were somewhat slower to include lectures and seminars on women, and universities in western and eastern Europe slower still. In Japan and elsewhere, much of the research on women has been done by people outside the universities involved with local history societies or women’s groups, so has not been regarded as scholarly. Women in some countries in the early twenty-first century still report that investigating the history of women can get them pegged as less than serious and be detrimental to their future careers as historians.

The history done in any country is shaped by regional and world politics, and issues other than gender have often seemed more pressing to historians in Latin America, eastern Europe, and other parts of the world where political and economic struggles have been intense. Universities and researchers in developing countries also have far fewer resources, which has hampered all historical research and limited opportunities for any new direction. Thus an inordinate amount of the work in women’s history and gender studies, including that which focuses on the continent of Europe and many other parts of the world, has been done by English-speaking historians, and the amount of research on English-speaking areas far outweighs that on the rest of the world. There is also imbalance within English-speaking areas, for studies of the United States vastly outnumber those of anywhere else; as one measure of this imbalance, more than two-thirds of the proposals to present papers at the Berkshire Conferences on Women’s History during the 1980s and 1990s, the largest women’s history conferences in the world, were on US topics.

There are signs that this imbalance is changing somewhat, as organizations to promote women’s and gender history and academic women’s or gender studies programs are gradually being established in more countries. Yet the head-start of English-language scholarship, combined with the ability of many students and scholars throughout the world to read English – and the inability of many English-speaking students and scholars to read anything but English – have meant that the exchange of theoretical insights and research results has to this point been largely a one-way street.
Structure of the Book

The dominance of English-language scholarship is both a blessing and a curse for the purposes of this book. Because of the sheer amount of materials available and the book’s intended audience of students as well as scholars, I decided to include only English-language materials in the suggestion for further reading that follow each chapter and that appear on the accompanying website. You can trust that these works contain much of the newest and best research available, and they point to materials in other languages, but even these also represent only a small fraction of what is there. To explore any topic fully, you will need to go far beyond them, and in many cases, as with any historical topic, to read source materials, analyses, and theoretical discussions in other languages as well.

Organizing a brief book on a subject this huge was a challenge, made even greater by the fact that a key theme in women’s and gender history has been the arbitrary and artificial nature of all boundaries – chronological, national, methodological, sexual. One of the central concepts in feminist history is that of intersection – most commonly used in the phrase “the intersection of race, class, and gender” – which highlights connections rather than boundaries. I thus decided to organize the book topically rather than geographically or chronologically, in order to highlight the specific connections between gender and other structures and institutions. Each topical chapter investigates the ways in which what it meant to be male and female was shaped by such aspects of society as economic or religious structures, and also explores the reverse – how gender in turn shaped work, for example, or religious institutions. This organization risks presenting gender as monolithic and ahistorical, however, and to lessen that tone most chapters are arranged chronologically to stress the ways in which gender structures have varied over time. (The Chronological Table of Contents at the start allows you to follow this organization.)

A key insight in world history presented another challenge: that human history begins not with writing, but with the earliest evolution of hominids, or perhaps even earlier. The world historian David Christian, for example, begins his consideration of world history with the Big Bang. This book does not start that early, but it does include material on the Paleolithic (2,000,000–9500 BCE) – the longest phase of human history – and the Neolithic (9500 BCE–3000 BCE) eras. It thus relies on the work of archaeologists, anthropologists, and others who study the physical remains of the past as well as historians, reflecting the view that the line between “prehistory” and “history” is no longer very sharp. Each chapter includes material from many of the world’s cultures, notes both distinctions among them and links between them, and suggests possible reasons for variations among cultures and
among different social, ethnic, and racial groups within one culture. I cer-
tainly could not cover every topic in every culture, so I have chosen to high-
light specific developments and issues within certain cultures that have
proven to be especially significant. World historians emphasize that varia-
tions in both chronological and geographic scale are important tools of
understanding, and I have used this insight here.

The order of the chapters is in some ways arbitrary, though it seemed
appropriate to begin with the family, the smallest, oldest, and arguably most
powerful shaper of gender. Thus chapter 2 explores the ways in which expe-
riences within the family group differed for boys and girls, men and women.
Taking insights from anthropology and demography, it notes changes in
family structure and function over time, and discusses marriage patterns,
family size, links between the family and other institutions, and norms and
traditions of family life. Chapter 3 focuses on the economy, tracing the ways
in which changes in economic structures – such as the means of production,
patterns of work and consumption, and ownership practices – and in the
meaning of those structures, shaped and were shaped by gender. Chapter 4
looks at ideals, norms, and laws, observing the ways in which groups defined
what it meant to be a man or woman, linked these meanings with other
cultural categories, and developed formal and informal means both of
heightening and lessening distinctions based on gender. Chapter 5 investi-
gates one type of particularly powerful institution, religion, and looks at the
ways in which traditional religions and the major world religions have
simultaneously strengthened and questioned existing gender patterns
through their basic doctrines and the structures established to enforce those
doctrines. Chapter 6 considers another type of institution, politics, and
explores how different forms of government have both shaped and been
shaped by gender, from the earliest evidence of state formation to the con-
temporary political scene. It takes a broad view of political life, discussing
civic and voluntary organizations along with local, national, and interna-
tional political bodies, and it traces the movement for women's rights.
Chapter 7 focuses on how gender figures in what is normally described as
“culture,” such as literature, art, architecture, and music, investigating the
differing opportunities for men and women to be involved in education,
training, and cultural production. Chapter 8 switches from a focus on insti-
tutions to a more individualized topic, sexuality, and traces the ways in
which sexual attraction and sexual activity have been viewed and shaped,
noting also how these interact with gender to create a historicized body.

The main themes and questions within each chapter often link with many
of the other chapters, as one would expect for an issue as complex and per-
vasive as gender. This is particularly true as one goes further back in history,
for most of the records we have refer to institutions that had multiple func-
tions: Buddhist or Christian monasteries that owned land, supported cultural
endeavors, and ruled territories, for example, or noble families who supported particular religious groups, organized work on their land, and used their children’s marriages to increase family power. This interconnection is especially strong when looking at what many people regard as the key question in all of gender history, the origins of a gender hierarchy in which men are dominant and women are subordinate, what is normally called patriarchy. In every culture that has left written records, men have more power and access to resources than women, and this imbalance permeates every topic that will be a focus of subsequent chapters in this book – legal sanctions, intellectual structures, religious systems, economic privileges, social institutions, and cultural norms. Thus before we look at the ways these have separately interacted with gender, it will be helpful to explore various explanations that have been proposed as to the source of male dominance.

The Origins of Patriarchy

Searching for the origins of patriarchy first involves forgetting what biology, anthropology, psychology, and history have all revealed about the instability and ambiguity of dichotomous gender categories. Despite the presence of third and fourth genders, intersexed people, and transgendered individuals, most of the world’s cultures have a system of two main genders in which there are enormous differences between what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. This dualistic gender system has often been associated with other dichotomies, such as body/spirit, public/private, nature/culture, light/dark, up/down, outside/inside, yin/yang, right/left, sun/moon, a process we will examine more closely in chapter 4. Some of these dichotomies, such as sun/moon and light/dark, are naturally occurring and in many cultures viewed as divinely created, which has enabled people to view the male/female dichotomy also as natural or divinely ordained. This dichotomy, along with others with which it was associated, has generally been viewed as a hierarchy, with the male linked with the stronger and more positive element in other pairs (public, culture, light, right, sun, etc.) and the female with the weaker and more negative one (private, nature, dark, left, moon, etc.).

This gender hierarchy is highly variable in its intensity and manifestations, but it has survived every change: every revolution, whether French, Haitian, Scientific or Industrial, every war, religious transformation, technological development, and cultural encounter. Twentieth-century Russia is a good example of this; whether under the czars or the Communists or the post-Soviet government, women still did the shopping and the housekeeping and most of the child care, adding an unpaid “second shift” to their jobs in