Gender

Margaret Mead (1901–1978; Figure 11.1) was one of the first anthropologists to question the relationship between biology and behavior considered to be masculine or feminine. She organized much of her ethnographic research around the question of whether characteristics that Americans in her era thought of as masculine and feminine were universal. In one of her many field research projects, she considered three groups in New Guinea: the Arapesh, the Mundugumor, and the Tchambuli (Mead, 1963/1935). She reported that among the Arapesh, men and women both were expected to act in ways that Americans considered feminine. Both sexes were concerned with taking care of children and nurturing. Neither sex was expected to be aggressive. In Mundugumor society, both sexes were what American culture would call masculine: aggressive, violent, and with little interest in children. And among the Tchambuli, traditional American notions of masculine and feminine were, to some degree, reversed. Women had the major economic role and were noted for common sense and business shrewdness. Men were more interested in aesthetics. They spent much time decorating themselves and gossiping. Their feelings were easily hurt, and they sulked a lot. From this study, Mead concluded that although many of the behaviors, emotions, and roles that go into being masculine and feminine may have biological roots, they are patterned by culture.

In addition to its importance in gender studies, Mead’s work is significant because it reinforces a central anthropological thesis: To grasp the potential and limits of diversity in human life, we must look at the full range of human societies, particularly those outside Western historical, cultural, and economic traditions. In nonindustrial, small-scale, kinship-based, more egalitarian societies, gender relationships clearly differ from those of the West. Indeed, research on gender diversity indicates that the very construction of sex and gender is extraordinarily diverse, as are the relationships between sex, gender, and other aspects of culture.

Figure 11.1 Margaret Mead was a pioneering researcher on gender and sexuality. In this 1953 picture, she visits a mother and child on Manus, a Pacific Island near Papua New Guinea.
Sex, Sexuality, and Gender

To begin, it is extremely useful to differentiate between sex, sexuality, and gender. **Sex** is the term used to describe the biological differences between male and female, particularly the visible differences in external genitalia and the role each sex plays in the reproductive process. Overwhelmingly, people are born with either male or female genitalia. However, somewhere between 1 in 1,500 to 1 in 2,000 people are born with genitals that are not easily classified as either male or female (American Psychological Association, 2018). Thus, this type of intersex people accounts for about 0.075% to 0.05% of the population. That’s a small number . . . but it’s a big world. This means that of the U.S. population of 323 million, as many as a quarter million may have genitalia that cannot be easily classified as male or female.

Sexuality is difficult to define. However, for our purposes, it refers to sexual desire. Sigmund Freud proposed that children are all “polymorphously perverse,” by which he meant that they can experience pleasure through every surface of their bodies (in Bordo, 2015: 233). This seems to be true of adults as well. People in every society may desire physical contact and sex with all manner of others. Sexual desire may vary depending on age, social conditions, and any number of other factors. Whether people are inclined to be attracted to members of their own or the other sex seems to be biologically determined. However, whether they express that attraction and how they do so is molded by culture.

**Gender** is the term for the sex-related cultural and social roles that individuals play. It is a social, cultural, and psychological construct that society superimposes on the biological differences of sex and temperament (Worthman, 1995: 598). Gender is a type of performance—the way we enact our biological sex and our biopsychological sexuality. However, it is a performance that is channeled by the social ideas and specific roles available in any specific society.

Every culture recognizes a variety of **gender roles**, or behaviors that societies consider appropriate for people of different sexes. However, cultures have different numbers of named roles. These roles differ in the meanings people attach to them, the supposed sources of the differences between them, and the relationship of these categories to other cultural and social facts. All cultures recognize at least two sexes (male and female) and two genders (masculine and feminine), but some cultures recognize additional sexes and genders. For example, among the Bugis, an ethnic group with a population of about 6 million in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, five genders are recognized: male, female, calalai (biological woman but living as a man), calabai (biological man but living as a woman), and bissu (a priest embodying equal elements of male and female). The Bugis believe that all five must be present for harmony to exist in the world (Davies, 2006).

The anthropological approach to gender emphasizes the central role of gender relations as a basic building block of culture and society (Yanagisako & Collier, 1994: 190–203). Gender is central to social relations of power, individual and group identities, the formation of kinship and other groups, and meaning and value.

The Cultural Construction of Gender

Except for a few thinkers like Mead, the idea that maleness and femaleness were biologically determined prevailed in the social sciences until the 1970s. Given this assumption, the different roles, behaviors, personality characteristics, emotions, and development of men and women were viewed as a function of sex differences and thus as universal. This meant that many important questions about the role of gender in culture and society were never asked. The emergence of feminist anthropology in the 1970s focused attention on cross-cultural variability in the meaning of gender. Biological determinism began to give way to understanding gender as established by social norms and values rather than by biology (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981).

Most anthropologists understand genders as cultural constructions. The traits considered to be masculine or feminine have some basis in biology but are molded by cultural forces. They are related to the specific history of each culture but also to the distribution of power within each culture and the ways in which members of the culture earn their livelihood. For example, as we saw in Chapter 6 (page 139), moving from agricultural and craft production to industrial production involved a change in the way people in the United States and western Europe viewed masculinity.

People in all cultures consider the ways that their fellow members express masculinity, femininity, and other gender roles to be normal and natural—as simply the result of the way people are. However, gender roles are learned and channeled by culture. Because learning gender starts so early in people’s lives and is so pervasive in their cultures, people often mistake the cultural for the natural.

Consider American child-rearing behavior. From the moment that parents learn the sex of their child, often months before the child is born, many of them begin to prepare to teach the child about his or her gender role. If parents are fortunate enough to have a room set aside for the child, they will often begin to decorate it. Boys get rooms decorated in primary colors with sports, science, or transportation themes (airplanes are popular). Girls get rooms decorated in pastel colors with flowers, cute animals, or fairy tale themes (princesses are popular). Of course, not all parents do this, and there is nothing wrong with decorating your child’s room this way. But these choices help teach children what kinds of
colors, objects, behaviors, and professions are appropriate for their gender (Figure 11.2).

Learning gender continues as children grow. Parents, teachers, and, most important, children’s peers monitor, police, and channel their behavior. Children (and adults) are given almost continual feedback on their performance of gender. They are told “boys do this” (play baseball for example) or “boys don’t do this” (cry, or tell on others). They are told “girls do this” (dance, wear dresses) or “girls don’t do this” (play rough sports, use profane language). In our own culture, these messages are reinforced through the media. Mainstream Hollywood films often valorize male heroes who use violence to achieve their goals and female heroines who use beauty and innocence to achieve theirs. These archetypes are drawn from American culture. However, other cultures have parallel features.

Of course, people differ greatly in the degree to which they are able to or desire to fit into the dominant gender roles in their society. In some societies, like the Bugis, there are alternate gender roles available. However, in societies where only male and female gender roles exist, people may understand themselves, both positively and negatively, by the degree to which they are able to perform their gender roles. Even in a society that offers many possibilities for the expression of gender, some people may not be easily “legible”; their performance of gender may not fit into any socially established role. For example, David Valentine (2003) conducted research on trans people in New York City. He found that members of the lesbian, straight, and gay communities all had difficulty in understanding how to respond to them. None of the ways that outsiders attempted to classify them captured the experience of their community.

Anthropologists who focus on the cultural construction of gender emphasize the different ways people in different cultures think about, distinguish, and symbolize the nature of maleness and femaleness. They focus attention on historical changes in gender relations (Lancaster, 1989; Zihlman, 1989), the role of gender in human development (Chodorow, 1974, 1978), the constructions of feminine and masculine in different cultures, and the connections between gender systems and other sociocultural patterns (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981). They also raise questions about the effect of European expansion on gender relations in non-European societies (Nash & Safa, 1986) and the changes in gender relations within Europe and North America resulting from industrialism, capitalism, and expansion of the global economy (Andersen & Collins, 1995; Warren & Bourque, 1989).

A culture’s construction of gender always includes reference to the differences between male and female sexuality. Such understandings are often used to support sexual ideologies that intersect with the construction of race, class, and other forms of social hierarchy. People are not just male and female. Rather, they live at the intersection of many different identities. They are, for example, male, black, gay, urban, middle class, and college educated, or they are female, straight, rural, poor, and have a GED. All of these identities can be critical in understanding how people experience themselves and how they interact in society.

Gender Ideologies: Women’s Sexuality and Male Prestige Behavior

“Beautiful girls never have any pain with anything that makes them beautiful . . . When a Rangerette goes in to get a job from somebody, if they find out she’s a Rangerette, she will always get the job because they know she will always look well groomed.” Gussie Nell Davis, 1906–1993 (in Erwitt, 1973)

A gender ideology is the totality of ideas about sex, gender, and the natures of men and women within a culture. Gender ideologies are ideas, usually stereotypical, about what the abilities, characters, and proper roles of different genders are. Gender ideologies are linked to social stratification and justify the distribution of power between members of different genders. The quote that begins this section is an expression of gender ideology. Gussie Nell Davis was the founder and director of the Kilgore Rangerettes, a revolutionary precision dance team founded in 1940 at Kilgore College in Texas. The Rangerettes
performed at football halftime shows and were the forerunners of much of modern American precision dancing. Most large universities and many high schools now have dance teams similar to the Rangerettes. In the quote, Davis expresses beliefs about how women should behave and what they should do in society. They should be effortlessly desirable to men and, if they work, they should do so in positions in which their employer’s primary concern will be how they look. In the early 1970s, when Davis said this, she was probably expressing part of the dominant gender ideology in the United States.

**Gender Ideology in Fairy Tales**

Gender ideologies are articulated in societies in many ways. They are shown in classrooms, in games, in rituals, in dress, and in the ways men and women are portrayed in myths and stories. For example, Sherry Ortner (2006) has examined the way women are portrayed in the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales. She notes that women who take active roles and have goals of their own are inevitably wicked. These tales feature wicked witches and evil stepmothers who have antisocial goals and use evil means such as poison, gossip, and magic to carry them out. Girls often play heroic roles in these stories, but they do so first as victims. They only become active because bad things happen to them. Frequently, their heroism is linked to their passivity.

The story “The Six Swans” is typical. An evil witch forces a king to marry her equally evil daughter. The king has six sons and one daughter from a previous marriage. Knowing that his new wife is evil, he hides the children from her. But she finds them and turns the sons into swans. To save her brothers, the daughter is forced to remain silent for six years while she sews six shirts from flowers. While she is engaged in this task, another king falls in love with her and marries her. However, her husband’s wicked mother conspires against her daughter-in-law by stealing her children and accusing her of cannibalism. After six years, her brothers are saved, and the daughter can speak against her mother-in-law, who is then burned to death. In this story, the women who have active plans (marry her daughter to the king, discredit her daughter-in-law) are evil. The heroine acts only because something has happened (her brothers are turned into swans), and her action is really inaction (she must remain totally silent and sew). It is her inaction that saves her brothers and proves her value.

**Proving Manhood**

The concept of a “real man” as one who proves himself to be virile, controls women, is successful in competition with other men, and is daring, heroic, and aggressive (whether on the streets, in bars, or in warfare) is a widespread cultural pattern. On the island of Truk, a U.S. trust territory in Micronesia, masculinity is defined in terms of competitiveness, assertiveness, risk taking in the face of danger, and physical strength. In the past, young men were warriors. Now they are hard drinkers and violent brawlers (M. Marshall, 1979).

David Gilmore (1990) has argued that the idea of manhood as something that must be sought through rigorous tests of skill, endurance, or power is ubiquitous. The call for boys to “act like men” is found in cultures throughout the world. This points to critical aspects of the nature of maleness (Figure 11.3).

There is certainly no one way of being male across different cultures. The specific types of behavior that constitute maleness vary enormously from place to place. Even within a culture, there are almost always numerous roles men play. In a small foraging society, the way that one displays maleness as a shaman is different from the way one displays maleness as a hunter or fighter. In large and complex societies, the range of different male roles and male behaviors is enormous.

However, it is also true that demands for men to display traits such as bravery, strength, fortitude, creativity, and intellect are extremely common across cultures (Figure 11.3). This is probably linked to a male desire for prestige that is universal and that might ultimately be based in human biology. There are many ways of showing maleness and many ways of gaining prestige, but there is no culture in which prestige is not an issue.

**FIGURE 11.3** Displaying maleness through competition, assertiveness, or risk-taking behavior is common in many societies. In this image a jockey holds on to the tails of cattle racing through muddy rice paddy fields in the annual Pacu Jawi race in Batusangkar, Indonesia.
Richard Lee, an anthropologist who worked among the Ju/'hoansi, a foraging group in South Africa, tells the now-classic story of his attempt to hold a feast for his Ju/'hoansi friends. Lee bought an ox to slaughter. Returning to the camp, he informed his friends of his purchase, but rather than praising him, they insulted him, telling him that he was gypped and the ox he had purchased would never be sufficient for the camp. However, when they had the feast, food was plentiful. Of course, as hunters, the Ju/'hoansi have keen eyes for appraising animals. They must have known that the ox would be sufficient. Why did they tell him it was not? When Lee asked this question, his friends told him that whenever a hunter bragged about the size of his kill or the way he was providing for others, they always insulted him. Such bragging was a sign of arrogance. Lee's friend Tomazo said, “When a young man kills much meat he comes to think of himself as a chief or big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this... so we always speak of his meat as worthless” (R. Lee, 1969).

Lee's story shows two very important things. First, even in an extremely egalitarian society such as the Ju/'hoansi, issues of male prestige are important. The practice of insulting or ignoring someone who boasts can exist only if people searching for prestige through boasting also exist. That argues for the universality of such searching. However, it also reminds us of the critical importance of culture. It is possible that the male search for prestige is biologically based (though no one has yet found a gene for it). But even if this is the case, it is expressed only through culture. Culture, as among the Ju/'hoansi, can serve to suppress and tamp down the desire for prestige. Alternatively, hierarchical societies such as chiefdoms (or our own society for that matter), emphasize it.

**Gender and Bullfighting in Spain**

Games and sports such as football in the United States, cockfighting in Bali, rugby in Tonga, or bullfighting in Spain are all ways of both learning and reinforcing culturally constructed gender ideologies. Clifford Geertz called these activities “deep play” (Geertz, 1973a) because they heighten emotions, display compelling aspects of social structure and culture, and reinforce culturally constructed identities (see Chapter 2, p. 43). The construction of masculinity in the Spanish bullfight is a good example.

Honor is a central concept in Spanish masculine identity—and indeed in much of Mediterranean culture (Gilmore, 1996). The art of the bullfight is one of the ways in which this cultural value is expressed. Although many outsiders and a growing number of Spaniards consider bullfighting a cruel assault on animals, people who enjoy bullfighting view it as a sport and an aesthetic ritual, not as a form of violence or cruelty (Eller, 2006: 104). Bullfights involve a complex and elaborate process that makes violence not only acceptable but also beautiful. The point of a bullfight is not simply to kill a bull. That would be easy and would lack any cultural meaning. Rather, the skill, grace, and courage of the bullfighter are central to the performance. The bullfight embodies the values of male competition in defense of honor.

The key to the bullfight is understanding that it symbolizes a public physical showdown between two men. The matador symbolizes the honorable male. He appears in formal dress that does not overtly suggest violence. Although matadors are certainly athletic, they do not appear obviously big, strong, or particularly aggressive. The bull symbolizes the dishonorable male. The bull is angry, out of control, but obviously powerful. In the fight, the matador demonstrates enormous skill with a calm, self-controlled attitude (Figure 11.4). He uses violence but without becoming violent himself. For spectators, the aesthetics and style of this performance are central.

The kill is the most dangerous part of the performance for the matador. Ideally, the matador dispatches the bull with a single sword thrust that severs the animal's aorta, causing it to collapse immediately. A matador who needs many attempts to kill the bull or fails to enact a speedy death is judged poorly by spectators and may be called a murderer. Boxing is unpopular in Spain, where it is frequently interpreted as men indulging their animal nature, and it is considered an underground activity for delinquents (Gibson, 2015). But a bullfight is a performance that allows man to transcend his animal nature as it distinguishes a man of honor from a man of anger.

The construction of gender identity is complex, and people have probably always challenged gender roles. There is a deep and well-established connection between bullfighting.
and masculinity wherever the sport is practiced. Matadors have almost always been men. However, there is evidence of a few female matadors going back to the mid-17th century. A female matador known as “La Pajuelera” is depicted in an etching by Francisco Goya from the early 1800s. The 20th century saw numerous female matadors, including Bette Ford, an American actress who became the first woman to perform on foot at the world’s largest bullfight arena in Mexico City. Christina Sanchez was one of the most successful female bullfighters of the late 20th century, but she retired after three seasons. On the one hand, Sanchez’s bullfighting success brought debates about modern Spanish gender roles into the open. On the other hand, she was the victim of attacks and slurs by male matadors (Pink, 2003).

Controlling Female Sexuality

Ideas about distinctions in gender and sexuality are central to the ways in which societies are organized. Often, they are part of a gender hierarchy that associates specific forms of male performance with power and justifies control of female sexuality. This is often linked to notions of honor and shame, and thus to cultural understandings of masculinity (Gilmore, 1996; Wikan, 2008). In some cases, the belief that women are more sexually voracious than men is used to justify men’s control over women. However, even when this is not the case, most societies exercise far greater control over women than over men. Frequently this includes cultural practices such as the seclusion of women, control over women’s dress, laws that favor men in marriage and divorce, and laws regarding adultery and abortion. It may also include discrimination against women who work, go to school, or appear outside their homes without a male escort.

Society’s control of female sexuality is often physically inscribed on female bodies. One example of this is the female genital operations performed in some African and Middle Eastern societies. In these procedures, the clitoris is removed, both the clitoris and labia are removed, or, in some cases, all external genitalia are removed and the vaginal opening is sewn partially closed (Barnes-Dean, 1989). A second example is Chinese foot binding, which may have affected 40% to 50% of Chinese women in the 19th century (Lim, 2007). Foot binding involved modifying the shape of feet by breaking the toes and the arch of the foot, then using tightly wrapped cloth to shape the foot as the breaks healed. (Rossi, 1976; Figure 11.5). The practice was banned in 1912. Gang rape in the United States (Sanda in, 1991) and sati, the practice of women being burned to death on their husbands’ funeral pyres (Narasimhan, 1990), provide additional examples.

Violence against women is both a political and economic tool. Rape has long been used as a tactic of warfare. It is not only devastating for the individual woman, it destroys families and communities as well (Milillo, 2006). In recent years, it has been associated with war, genocide, and “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia, Congo, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, and other places. It may also be used to maintain male economic superiority. For example, in 2012, Jyoti Singh was a young woman working nights at a tech company’s call center in Delhi in India. She was accompanied by a male friend when she was gang raped and brutally beaten by six men while riding on a bus. She survived long enough to report the details of the incident, such as the fact that the bus driver joined in the rape, but ultimately she died of her injuries. The incident resulted in international publicity and highlighted violence against working women. The perpetrators were convicted. However, between 2012 and 2014, there were more than 31,000 other crimes against women in Delhi but only 150 convictions (Chamberlain & Bhabani, 2017).

Closer to home, the #MeToo movement of the fall of 2017 revealed the commonality of sexual violence in American business and political culture. The movement began with accusations against Harvey Weinstein, one of the most powerful movie producers in Hollywood. By the end of October, over 80 women had accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct. As accusations against Weinstein mounted, others began to be accused as well. By early February 2018, 71 men, including U.S. Senator Al Franken; Stephen Wynn, the finance chair of the Republican National Committee; and Larry Nassar, the doctor for the USA Gymnastics national team, had been fired or forced to resign their positions. In the case of Nassar, he was sent to prison. The scandal included politicians, entertainers, and the executives of major corporations (Almuktar et. al., 2018). The #MeToo movement spread to
other wealthy nations as well. In France, women used the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc, loosely translated as “out your pig” (Beardsley, 2017).

It is no accident that women are increasingly demanding an end to oppression. Women have often been almost silent in deeply oppressive societies. However, education and globalization are giving women increasing economic power. In 1940, only 3.8% of women in the United States had college degrees. In 2016, more than 33% did—a figure slightly higher than the percentage of men with college degrees (Statistica, 2018c). In India and other nations, the spread of international business has opened job opportunities for women where few existed before. In these and in many other cases, increased economic power leads to increased political power. People with economic and political power are less likely to submit to oppression. However, their resistance can sometimes result in violence.

**Modest Dress in Islam**

The issue of female modesty and control of sexuality in Islam provides a useful example of variability in the control of female sexuality. Islam is practiced in many different societies and gender ideologies, and practices regarding women’s sexuality and requirements for modest dress vary among these communities. This is illustrated by the debates over the wearing of the hijab, or headscarf. For some Muslims as well as for many non-Muslim Westerners, the hijab is a sign of the oppression of women, making them invisible and restricting their freedom of choice. But some young Muslim women in Europe and the United States view the hijab as a liberating garment that forces the world to see them as more than sexual objects and establishes their identity as Muslims (Bowen, 2007).

The Qur’anic injunction requiring modest dress for Muslim women (Sura 24: 30–31) does not command any specific styles, nor specifically mention hijab, making room for much local variation and interpretation. Practices regarding female modesty are shaped by the history, culture, religious politics, and degree of male dominance in a society. Within Islamic groups, actors influencing modest female dress vary among social classes, between rural and urban populations, and between generations. They range from the strict restrictions on women’s autonomy in Saudi Arabia to the relatively liberal atmosphere of cosmopolitan Dubai. In some societies, most Muslim women wear a hijab that only loosely covers their hair and neck. In others, like Yemen, women wear full head and body coverings as well as a face veil. On Emirates airline flights, air hostesses wear “jaunty little caps with attached gauzy scarves that hint at hijab” (Zoepf, 2008: A1). In international sporting events, women wear sports hijabs (Figure 11.6), some made by famous international brands such as Nike®. In Afghanistan, under the Taliban, women were required to wear a burqa, or full body and face covering.

The variations in Islamic practice are the subject of intense debate. For example, both wearing and not wearing the hijab can be symbolic of resistance. Some see wearing the hijab as a rejection of the modern world and of progressive values (Alibhai-Brown, 2015). Others see wearing it as a protest against Islamophobia. A 2005 poll of Muslim women asked what they disliked the most about their own societies. The answers ranged from violence to lack of unity to corruption. However, the hijab and other forms of body covering were never mentioned. Dalia Mogahed, the director of a nonprofit that works to empower Muslim women, has noted that “a woman wearing a hijab is only covering her body and hair, not her voice or intellect” (Abbasi, 2017). The concern and interest of many Americans and Europeans in patterns of Islamic dress may tell us much more about their own ethnocentrism and fear of outsiders than it does about the oppression of women.

Western understandings of the hijab and other forms of modest dress also exact a heavy toll on Muslim men. Anthropologist Katherine Ewing (2008b) examined the position of Turkish men in German society. She found that they were often demonized and that one aspect of this was the widespread belief that they oppressed their wives and daughters. Ewing argues that these assumptions about Turkish masculinity play an important role in the construction of German national identity and are reinforced by the popular media, films, social work policies, and public policy. Ewing notes that European ideas about Middle Eastern gender relations are based on long-standing fantasies that imagined the Middle East as exotic, autocratic, and oppressive.

![FIGURE 11.6](https://example.com/figure11.6) An Iranian athlete wearing a hijab demonstrates a kick at the World Taekwondo Championship in Lima, Peru, in 2016.
Variability in Gender and Sexuality

Research shows that there is a great deal of variation in the ways in which different cultures construct sex and gender. Cultures differ on (1) the extent to which this variation is recognized, (2) whether this variation is ritualized, (3) the degree to which sex and gender transformations are considered to be complete, (4) the association of sex and gender transformations with males or females, (5) the special functions of alternative sexes and genders, such as healing or acting as go-betweens in marriages, and (6) the value or stigma placed on such variations (Nanda, 2000).

Variation in Gender Roles

Sex and gender alternatives occur under many conditions and in many cultures around the world. In some cases—for example, among some Native American groups or in Polynesia—sex and gender diversity is associated with an ideology that recognizes all individuals as having their own special characteristics, including sex and gender variation. In other cases, such as in Thai culture, there is little concern for an individual’s private life. As long as people observe public social obligations, sex and gender diversity is not severely stigmatized. In India, the sex/gender alternative of the hijra (see “Ethnography” section) is related to the Hindu philosophy of dharma that instructs each person to follow his or her own life path, no matter how different or even painful that may be. Hinduism also has a great ability to incorporate cultural contradictions and ambiguities, and this, too, is congenial to the emergence of sex and gender diversity.

In some cases, sex and gender alternatives appear to be related to cultural systems with relatively little gender differentiation, or distinction between male and female gender roles. However, this is not an explanation because these alternatives also appear in cultures such as Brazil, where gender differentiation is high. Sex and gender alternatives also are found in cultures where belief in transformations of all kinds—for example, of humans into animals or vice versa—are common, such as in some African and African diasporic cultures. In societies where androgyny (the mixture of male and female) is considered sacred and powerful, such as in island cultures in Southeast Asia, sex/gender alternatives also frequently appear. And in cultures where continuation of a patrilineage is central to a society’s kinship structure, such as in the Balkans or among the Igbo of Nigeria, one way of making sure there are people to fill all important kin positions is to permit women to take on male roles and also other male gender characteristics. As in all things, from the seemingly most ordinary to the seemingly most exotic, anthropology not only documents human diversity but also tries to explain that diversity by drawing on the ethnographic record and the related aspects of culture and society.

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, Amadiume (1987) noted that members of either sex can fill male roles. Daughters can fill sons’ roles and women can be husbands without being considered masculine or losing their femininity. Before the influence of Christianity, Igbo women and men could use wealth to take titles (achieve rank) and acquire wives. In fact, although Christian missionaries attempted to eliminate woman–woman marriage in many places, the presence of female husbands has been reported for more than 40 African groups (B. Greene, 1998). In some African societies that practice woman–woman marriages, such as the Nandi of Kenya, the female husband is considered to be a man and adopts many aspects of the male gender role, such as participating in male initiation ceremonies and public political discussions (Oboler, 1980). Woman–woman marriage provides descendants to wealthy women who are childless. It assures marriages for women who might not otherwise be able to marry and may offer greater social and sexual freedom to them as well (N. Levine, 2008).

Alternative gender roles—neither man nor woman—have been described for many societies. The xanith of Oman on the Saudi Arabian peninsula (Wikan, 1977), the mahu of Tahiti (Besnier, 1996; Levy, 1973), the muxe of Mexico (Lacey, 2008), and the hijra of India (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005) are examples of in-between genders in which men take on some of the attributes of women.

The Native American two-spirit, an alternative gender in some Native American societies (often called berdache before the late 20th century), has long been a subject of anthropological interest. Two-spirits took different forms in different Native American cultures, but the two-spirit was most often a man who dressed in women’s clothing, engaged in women’s work, and was often considered to have special supernatural powers and privileges in society (Whitehead, 1981). There were also female two-spirits (Blackwood, 1984). Although alternative-gendered people were not equally valued in all Native American cultures, they were very highly valued in some, such as the Zuni (W. Roscoe, 1991). We’wah (Figure 11.7) was a Zuni two-spirit who was a religious leader and a highly respected potter and weaver. In 1886, We’wah visited Washington D.C., and met with President Grover Cleveland (W. Roscoe, 1988).

Variable Norms of Sexual Behavior

Understanding gender systems as being culturally constructed helps explain the cultural variations in sexual behavior. People of all cultures tend to believe that sexual activity is doing what comes naturally. However, a cross-cultural perspective demonstrates this isn’t the case. In sexuality, we do what comes culturally. Every aspect of human sexual activity is patterned by culture and influenced by learning, sometimes in contradictory or paradoxical ways.
Culture patterns the habitual responses of different peoples to different parts of the body. Things that are considered erotic in some cultures evoke indifference or disgust in others. For example, there are many societies in which people do not kiss. The Samoans learned to kiss from the Europeans, but before this cultural contact, they began sexual intimacy by sniffing. The patterns of social and sexual preliminaries also differ among cultures. For example, Westerners might find it disgusting that Trobriand Islanders “inspect each other’s hair for lice and eat them . . . [which is] to the natives a natural and pleasant occupation between two who are fond of each other” (Malinowski, 1929b: 327). In contrast, Malinowski also reported that the Trobrianders believe “the idea of European boys and girls going out for a picnic with a knapsack full of eatables is . . . disgusting and indecent” (1929b: 327).

Who is considered an appropriate sexual partner also differs in different cultures. In some societies, for example, same-sex sexual activity is considered shameful and abnormal, but in other societies, it is a matter of indifference or approval. In some cultures, it is even required. The Sambia of Papua New Guinea believe that boys are made men through the receipt of semen during an initiation. These rites include boys receiving semen through oral and anal sex with older males, a process anthropologist Gilbert Herdt (2014) has referred to as “boy insemination.” This process is understood as masculinizing boys. As boys grow through puberty, they progress from being inseminated to inseminating other boys. The process of marriage begins for boys when they are around 16 years old. At this time, they are expected to reduce...
The word *hijra* may be translated as either eunuch or hermaphrodite; in both cases, male sexual impotence is emphasized. Few hijras are born hermaphrodite; almost all are born biologically male. To the British colonizers, the hijra seemed to be people who failed at being men. In Victorian Britain, impotence was a marker of failed masculinity, so British colonial authorities often class hijra as impotent. This was and still is rarely true. In India, hijra are understood as either unable or disinclined to have sex with women (Hinchy, 2013). In some parts of India, it is believed if such men do not become hijra, they will be reborn impotent for seven future lives.

The concept of the hijra as neither man nor woman emphasizes that hijras are not men because they cannot function sexually as men, though they were assigned to the male sex at birth. Hijras also claim that they do not have sexual feelings for women, and a real hijra is not supposed to have ever had sexual relations with a woman. But if hijras, as a third gender, are “man minus man,” they are also “man plus woman.” The most obvious aspect of hijras as women is in their dress. Wearing female attire is a defining characteristic of hijras. They are required to dress as women when they perform their traditional roles of singing and dancing at births and weddings and whenever they are in the temple of their goddess. Hijras enjoy dressing as women, and their feminine dress is accompanied by traditionally feminine jewelry and body decoration. Hijras must also wear their hair long like women.

Hijras also adopt female behavior. They imitate a woman’s walk, they sit and stand like women, and they carry pots on their hips as women do. Hijras adopt female names when they join the community, and they use female kinship terms for each other, such as aunt or sister. They also have a special linguistic dialect that includes feminine expressions and intonations. In public buildings, such as the movies, or on buses and trains, hijras often request “ladies-only” seating.

Although hijras are like women in many ways, they are clearly not women. Their female dress and mannerisms are often exaggerations almost to the point of caricature, especially when they act in a sexually suggestive manner. Their sexual aggressiveness is considered outrageous and very much the opposite of the expected demure behavior of ordinary Indian women in their roles of wives, mothers, and daughters. Hijra performances are essentially burlesques of women; the entertainment value comes from the difference between themselves, acting as women, and the real women they imitate. Hijras often use obscene and abusive language, which again is contrary to acceptable Indian feminine behavior. In some parts of India, hijras smoke the hookah (water pipe) and cigarettes, which only men normally do.

The major reason hijras are not considered women, however, is that they cannot give birth. Many hijras wish to be women so that they can give birth, and there are many stories within the community that express this wish. But all hijras acknowledge that this can never be. As neither man nor woman, the hijras identify themselves with many third-gender figures in Hindu mythology and Indian culture: male deities who change into or disguise themselves as females temporarily, deities who have both male and female characteristics, male religious devotees who dress and act as women in religious ceremonies, and the eunuchs who served in the Muslim courts. Indian culture thus not only accommodates such androgynous figures but views them as meaningful and even powerful.

The emphasis in this ethnography is on the cultural conception of the hijra role. The realities of hijra life do not always match the ideal, and, as in all other societies, there are tensions between the ways in which hijras understand themselves and the realities of their lives. A significant source of
conflict among hijras is their widespread practice of prostitution. Hijras serve as sexual partners for men, which contradicts their identity as ascetics. Hijras see prostitution as deviant within their community, and many deny that it occurs. Others justify it by pointing to their declining incomes from traditional performances.

In many societies, alternative gender roles declined because they were suppressed by colonial authorities and Christian missionaries. Hijras, however, continue to function as an integral part of Indian culture, both in traditional roles and in changing roles that reflect new adaptations. One new role for hijras is in contemporary Indian politics, where they have achieved some notable success. In recent years, hijras have stood for and sometimes won election to local, state, and even national office (Reddy & Nanda, 2005). Significantly, hijra success in politics has been achieved by emphasizing rather than denying their ambiguous gender.

When they enter politics, hijras explicitly construct themselves as individuals without the obligations of family, gender, or caste and emphasize that they are therefore free from the corrupting influence of nepotism, which plagues Indian politics. They also emphasize their identity as ascetics—Hindu religious figures who renounce sexual relations—and claim historical continuities with many Hindu political reformers. Many Indians believe that hijras are more empathetic to issues of poverty and social stigma because of their own low social status, and this has enabled hijras to defeat traditionally powerful upper-caste opponents.

Hijra participation in Indian politics is sometimes contested. For example, the election of one hijra was overturned on the grounds that because they are not women, hijras cannot stand for election to seats reserved for women. In this case, we see the clash between a political system based largely on Western models that recognize only two genders and Indian understandings that recognize in-between or alternative genders.

The continued recognition of hijras in Indian society is a strong testimony to the cultural construction of genders. Unlike many other traditional alternative genders among indigenous peoples that have been stamped out or repressed by the powerful states in which they live, the hijras continue both in their traditional roles and in new roles, contributing to the cultural variation that characterizes the human species.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How does a study of the hijras contribute to an understanding of gender as culturally constructed?

2. Discuss some of the similarities and differences between the hijras and similar gender roles in other societies.

3. In what ways do elements of Indian culture relate to the maintenance of the hijra role?


their sexual activity with other boys. After the birth of their first child, the vast majority of Sambia men are exclusively heterosexual (Herdt, 2004).

Often, students in the United States ask if the practices just described mean that Sambia men are gay. This question reveals something profound about our own understanding of sexuality. Western cultures have, in the past 150 years, institutionalized the idea that engaging in certain types of behavior makes one a certain type of person. The historian and sociologist Michel Foucault argued that throughout most of Western history, although certain types of sexual acts may have been encouraged or forbidden, they did not define a
certain type of person. It was only with the expansion of state and institutional power in the second half of the 19th century that sexual acts and desires became ways to classify types of people. Foucault (1990: 43) dated the birth of the homosexual to the appearance in 1870 of the first article describing homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder. In the following years, a new understanding that identified and classified people by the nature of their desires and the types of sexual activity in which they engaged became prevalent in Western Europe and the United States. Thus, our notion that engaging in specific types of sexual behavior classifies one as a specific type of person is as culturally particular as the Sambian idea that the process of growing men requires that boys both receive semen from and then later give semen to other boys.

The ages at which sexual response is believed to begin and end, the ways in which people make themselves attractive, the importance of sexual activity in human life, and variation in sexual activity according to gender are all patterned and regulated by culture and affect sexual response and behavior. Two classic ethnographies that highlight the role of culture in impacting sexuality are John Messenger’s work on the Irish of Inis Beag, an island in the north Atlantic near Galway, Ireland, and Donald Marshall’s work on the Polynesians of Mangaia.

Messenger described Inis Beag (Figure 11.9) as “one of the most sexually naive of the world’s societies” (1971: 15). Sex is never discussed at home when children are near, and parents provide practically no sexual instruction to children. According to Messenger (1971: 109), adults believe that “after marriage nature takes its course.” As we shall see, nature takes a very different course in Inis Beag than it does in Polynesia! Women are expected to endure but not enjoy sexual relations; to refuse to have intercourse is considered a mortal sin among these Roman Catholic people. There appears to be widespread ignorance in Inis Beag of the female capacity for orgasm, which is considered deviant behavior. Nudity is abhorred, and there is no tradition of dirty jokes. The main style of dancing allows little bodily contact among the participants; even so, some girls refuse to dance at all because it means touching a boy. The separation of the sexes begins very early in Inis Beag and lasts into adulthood. In sexual relations, there is a virtual absence of sexual foreplay, almost no premarital sex, and a high percentage of celibate males. In explaining the extraordinarily late age of marriage, one female informant told the anthropologist, “Men can wait a long time before wanting ‘it’ but we [women] can wait a lot longer” (Messenger 1971: 16).

The extreme sexual repression in Inis Beag can be usefully compared to sexual ideology in Mangaia, one of the Cook Islands in the South Pacific, which was described by Donald Marshall (1971). Fantasies of complete sexual freedom in the South Seas have long been a part of Western culture. In fact, no society has complete sexual freedom, but compared to the traditional Puritan culture of the West, Polynesia comes perhaps closest. In Mangaia, sexual intercourse is one of life’s major interests. Sex is not discussed at home, but Mangaia elders teach sexual information to boys and girls at puberty. For adolescent boys, this formal instruction about the techniques of intercourse is followed by a culturally approved experience with a mature woman in the village. After this, the boy is considered a man. This contrasts with Inis Beag, where a man is considered a “lad” until he is about 40. In Mangaia, there is continual public reference to sexual activity: Sexual jokes, expressions, and references are expected as part of the preliminaries to public meetings. And yet, in public, sex segregation is the norm. Boys and girls should not be seen together in public, but practically every girl and boy has had intercourse before marriage. The act of sexual intercourse itself is the focus of sexual activity. Both men and women are expected to take pleasure in the sexual act and to reach orgasm. Celibacy is practically unknown.

The contrast between Inis Beag and Mangaia indicates clearly that societies’ different attitudes pattern the sexual responsiveness of males and females in each society.

Theories of Gender and Stratification

Fueled by European and American concerns about male dominance and women’s subordination, theories of gender from the 1970s to the 1990s focused on the hierarchy and the status of women. Studies examined (1) the significance of women’s roles as mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters, (2) women’s economic contributions, (3) women’s perceptions of their cultures, (4) women’s roles in creating symbolic and collective worlds within the context of ideologies of male
superiority, (5) the sources of women's power and influence, (6) the development of women's identities, and (7) the ways in which violence against women is related to gender hierarchy.

The question of whether male dominance is universal emerged as an early debate in the anthropology of gender. One theoretical position held that women's subordination to men is universal, based on women's roles as mothers and homemakers (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974). In this view, all societies are divided into a less prestigious domestic (private) world inhabited by women and a more prestigious public world dominated by men. This private/public dichotomy emerged most sharply in highly stratified 19th-century capitalist societies, such as those of Victorian Europe and the United States, as productive relationships moved out of the household and middle-class women (but not working-class women) retreated into the home. There, they were supposed to concern themselves solely with domestic affairs, repress their sexuality, bear children, and accept a subordinate and dependent role (E. Martin, 1987). However, anthropologists debate how common the public/private dichotomy really was. It may have been far more typical of 19th- and 20th-century capitalist societies than of others. In many cases, home, family, economics, and politics are not easily separated. Indeed, analyzing society in terms of a private/public dichotomy can hide the relationships among power, workplace, and family structures critical to understanding gender relations.

Ernesteine Friedl was an early critic of the notion that the private/public dichotomy was the key to women's status. She attributed widespread male dominance to economic factors. In her comparative examination of foraging and horticultural societies, Friedl (1975) noted that one key factor in women's status was the degree to which they controlled the distribution and exchange of goods and services outside the domestic unit. She argued that in foraging societies, the fact that men exercised control over the distribution of meat within the larger community gave them more power and status in society than women. In horticultural societies, men cleared the forest for new gardens and thus were able to exercise control over the allocation of land, which put them in a position of power. On the other hand, in societies where women had control over resources beyond distribution within the domestic unit (such as some West African societies, where women sold produce in the market), their status increased. Friedl also suggested that because the care of small children can be shared by older children, neighbors, relatives, and others, women's low status cannot be explained by their obligations in child-rearing. Thus, cultural norms regarding family size and systems of child care are arranged to conform with women's productive work, rather than the norms of work being an adaptation to pregnancy and childcare.

Marxist-oriented feminist anthropologists added another dimension to the importance of economic factors, emphasizing the cultural and historical variation in women's status, particularly the effects of the expansion of capitalism and European colonialism. Eleanor Leacock's (1981) work on the Innu (Montagnais) people of far northeastern Quebec, for example, documented the equality of men and women before European contact and demonstrated how European expansion led to gender inequalities. Leacock's work resulted in a greater focus on changes in gender relations wrought by the European encounter.

In yet another approach to understanding the cultural variability in male dominance, Peggy Sanday (1981) used a controlled cross-cultural comparison to ascertain whether male dominance was universal and, if not, under what conditions it emerged. Sanday concluded that male dominance was not universal, but it was correlated with ecological stress and warfare. She showed that when the survival of a group rested more on male actions such as warfare, women accepted male dominance for the sake of social and cultural survival.

Although all of these theories remain valuable, they all tended to consider women and men as two unified classes. They focused their attention on looking at status distributions and tensions between men and women. More recent work breaks away from this mold. In 1989, in a landmark essay, the legal scholar Kimberé Crenshaw pointed out that women are not necessarily a unified group of people with single interests. Both men and women are members of multiple overlapping groups. In addition to their gender identity, women may be members of different races, have different educational levels, be wealthy or poor, be young or old, and experience their sexuality differently. Crenshaw termed this intersectionality. Thinking about intersectionality forces us to focus on the fact that gender, class, sexual orientation, and other aspects of people's experience of society do not exist independently. Rather, they are woven together in complex patterns.

The sociologist Patricia Hill Collins focused Crenshaw's theory on the experience of black women in the United States. Collins (1990) traced the history of black feminism and pointed to the vast differences between the historical experiences of white women and black women in the United States. She coined the term outsider-within to describe the position of black women who worked for and had in-depth knowledge of white families. Such individuals gained a profound knowledge of the nature, limitations, and flaws of the power hierarchy but remained outsiders to it. Similar positionality affects others, such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

Many anthropologists, including Lynn Bolles (2016), Tom Boellstorff (2016), and Louise Lamphere (2016), have built on the insights of intersectionality. Thinking about cultures in terms of intersectionality increases our analytical insight. It leads us to expect that people will not necessarily experience solidarity based on their gender identity. Current-day wealthy societies are composed of innumerable
Gender Relations and Systems of Production

Because each cultural situation is complex and unique, it is difficult to generalize the ways in which gender affects the distribution of prestige and power. Local conditions must always be considered, and variability is the rule rather than the exception. Despite this, it remains useful to offer some generalizations about the ways in which the productive systems that are the essential basis of society tend to affect and correlate with systems of gender hierarchy. As will be seen, relations between men and women are related to their participation in the economic system.

Gender Relations in Foraging Societies

Earlier anthropological descriptions of foraging societies viewed male hunting as the major source of the food supply, thus providing the basis of male dominance in these societies. Later ethnographic studies modified this view. In many foraging societies, such as the Tiwi of Australia and the Ju/'hoansi of the Kalahari Desert in Namibia, women make very significant contributions to the food supply by gathering vegetable foods (Hart & Pilling, 1960; R. Lee, 2003). In other societies, like the Agta of the Philippines, women also substantially contribute to the food supply by hunting (Estioko-Griffin, 1986), although in different ways and for different kinds of animals than men. The large contributions to the food supply made by Tiwi, Ju/'hoansi, and Agta women are typical of many foraging societies. Such contributions are an important source of female power and have led to greater gender equality than is present in most other types of societies. In addition, women frequently participate in making alliances outside of the household, and this is also important in women's power. However, even in these societies, men have avenues to prestige that are unavailable to women. In many cases, as among the Inuit, only men hunt large animals and gain the prestige associated with the distribution of meat from these kills. Men often dominate ritual activities as well.

The Tlingit of the Northwest Coast of North America are a foraging society in which women traditionally have had equal power and prestige with men. Important Tlingit social roles are based on individual ability, training, and personality rather than on gender (Klein, 1995). Both Tlingit women and men achieve prestige through their own efforts and their own kin relationships. Women may be heads of clans or tribes, and Tlingit aristocrats are both male and female. Titles of high rank are used for both men and women, and the ideal marriage is between a man and woman of equal rank. The prestige the Tlingit achieve through extensive trade with other coastal societies is open to both men and women. Although long-distance trade centered on men in the past, women often accompanied the men, acting as negotiators and handling the money, and both girls and boys were—and are today—expected to “work, save, get wealth and goods” (Klein, 1995: 35).

Gender egalitarianism continues to be a core Tlingit cultural value. Today, women occupy the highest offices of the native corporations administering Tlingit land and are employed in government, social action groups, business and cultural organizations, and voluntary associations (Klein, 1976). Tlingit women take advantage of educational opportunities and easily enter modern professions. Unlike in many non-Western societies, where European contact diminished women’s economic roles and influence, modernization expanded Tlingit women’s roles, and modern gender egalitarianism is not experienced as diminishing men, who encourage their wives and daughters to go into public life.

Gender Relations in Horticultural Societies

Women usually have less autonomy and power in horticultural societies than in foraging ones, but, again, there is great cross-cultural variation. For example, the Iroquois of the eastern United States are highly egalitarian (J. Brown, 1975), whereas the Yanomamó of Venezuela and Brazil are highly sex segregated and male dominated (Chagnon, 1997), as are most societies in highland New Guinea (Strathern, 1995).

The importance of male ritual may well be linked to the prevalence of violence in gardening societies. Certainly not all horticultural societies are violent. However, many of them are. Anthropologists debate the amount of violence that existed in societies such as the Yanomamó before they had contact with outsiders. However, there is little doubt that violence was present. Horticultural societies in New Guinea and in other places also historically experienced high levels of violence (Keeley, 1996; Blick, 1988). In societies where violence between villages, kin groups, or members of different ethnic groups is common, the prestige and power gap between men and women tends to widen. Men gain social prestige through their effective use of violence.
The presence of warfare may also be linked to rituals that focus on men and create solidarity among them. Among the Mundurucu of the Brazilian Amazon, for example, adolescent boys are initiated into the men's cult and thereafter spend most of their lives in the men's house, only making visits to their wives, who live with the children in the village. The men's cults exclude women and are surrounded by great secrecy. The men's house itself usually is the most imposing structure in the village. It houses the cult paraphernalia and sacred musical instruments, which are flutelike in shape (like male genitals) and are the symbolic expressions of male dominance, just as the men's house is an institution of male solidarity (Murphy & Murphy, 1974; Figure 11.10). Of course, women may be skeptical of men's ritual power. One woman's comment on hearing the men play their sacred flutes was a rather unimpressed “There they go again” (Gregor & Tuzin, 2001: 332).

Gender Relations in Pastoral Societies

Pastoral societies tend to be male dominated, though some variation exists. In pastoral societies, women’s status depends on the degree to which the society combines herding with cultivation, the society’s specific historical situation, and the diffusion of cultural ideas, such as those associated with Islam. Women usually make a smaller contribution to the food supply than men in pastoral societies (Martin & Voorhies, 1975). Men do almost all the herding and most of the dairy work as well. Male dominance in pastoral society is partly based on the fact that handling large animals requires strength, but females sometimes do handle smaller animals, engage in dairy work, carry water, and process animal by-products such as milk, wool, and hides (O’Kelly & Carney, 1986). Pastoral societies generally do not have the rigid distinction between public and domestic roles. Herders’ camps are typically divided into male and female spaces, but both men and women work in public, blurring the private/public dichotomy.

In pastoral societies, men predominantly own and have control over the disposition of livestock, which represents an important source of power and prestige. However, such control is always subject to kinship rules and responsibilities, and in some instances, animals may be held jointly by men and women. Still, the male economic dominance in pastoral societies seems to be associated with general social and cultural male dominance and reinforced by patricentric kinship systems and the warfare frequently present in these societies (Sanday, 1981).

Within this broad pattern, there is considerable variation in gender relations. Among the Tuareg, a largely Muslim society of the central Sahara, for example, women generally have high prestige and substantial influence (Rasmussan, 2005). The Tuareg herd camels, sheep, goats, and donkeys. Because the Tuareg are matrilineal, Tuareg women enjoy considerable rights and privileges: They have minimal social and economic separation from men and do not veil their faces. Women are singers and musicians and organize many social events. They generally enjoy freedom of choice in sexual involvements, though this has been somewhat modified among those Tuareg who are more devout Muslims. The high status of Tuareg women—and matrilineality itself—are also undermined today by the migration of men to cities, where they work for wages, and the incorporation of the Tuareg into larger nation-states with their patrilineal cultures. Cities, however, may also provide increasing opportunities and freedom for Tuareg women. The Tuareg appear to be an unusual exception to the generally patriarchal nature of pastoral—and Muslim—societies, but they are also an essential reminder that gender roles vary greatly, even within similar economic types of societies and within religious traditions.
Anthropology Makes a Difference

ADVOCATING FOR FEMALE FACTORY WORKERS IN CHINA

The importance of women’s work in meeting the demand for cheaper goods in the national and global economies is clear in the People’s Republic of China. Global capitalism is expanding, and harsh working conditions in factories that produce goods for a global market particularly affect women.

Pun Ngai (2005), a Hong Kong anthropologist, spent eight months tightening screws in computer hardware at an electronics factory in Shenzhen as part of her ethnographic study of how dagongmei, or “working girls,” are responding to the pressure of China’s increasing participation in the global economy. The factory directors were interested in Pun’s work because they hoped to learn more about what the workers wanted so they would know better how to deal with their employees. At first, the factory directors assumed that Pun would focus on the factory’s operations and inundated her with personnel and administrative documents. They were astounded when she told them she wanted to work on the line and live with the workers, in the participant-observation mode of anthropology.

Although the dagongmei were initially suspicious of Pun, when they saw she was really interested in their lives, they were so eager to talk with her that she didn’t have enough time to listen to them all. Even though she was an outsider, Pun quickly became a confidante, dealing with workers’ complaints, offering academic guidance, and giving advice on love and other personal relationships.

Pun found the factory work interesting for the first week, but it soon became a monotonous routine. Dagongmei, most of whom are in their late teens or early 20s, spend 15 hours a day in the factory. They sleep in dormitory-type accommodations called cage houses. In addition to boredom on the job, dagongmei also suffer from many physical ailments. Long working hours cause menstrual pain and anemia. Those who weld microchips suffer eyesight problems, and those who wash plates with acids are constantly at risk for chemical poisoning. Accommodation and other expenses are deducted from their already low wages. The dagongmei also work and live under very strict rules. They must wait their turn to go to the restroom. They are thoroughly searched before they can leave the factory premises. Security guards wielding electric batons guard the locked quarters at night.

Pun has followed up her field study with a continuing commitment to improving conditions for dagongmei in China. She represents the interests of dagongmei at labor conferences and fights for their rights. As migrants to urban areas, Dagongmei have difficulties establishing residency. They are overcharged for medical and other services and consumer goods. Urban factories recruit dagongmei as cheap labor but then do not want to take proper care of them. When unemployment hits, the first thing people want to do is send the dagongmei back to their rural villages, but after years of urban living and participation in a consumer-oriented global lifestyle, dagongmei find it difficult to readapt to village life.

In spite of all these hardships, dagongmei see advantages in their factory work. It exposes them to a wider view of the world and permits some escape from the rigid patriarchal structure of the village. Dagongmei enjoy having boyfriends, keeping up with the latest fashions, and searching for the secrets of success, especially in the form of making money (toward which goal many are determinedly studying English) and maybe finding a husband (Chang, 2008). By pooling their earnings, some dagongmei have managed to open small factories. Others have ambitions for business careers or seek to improve their education. Urban migration offers the opportunity to take a computer class or learn a little English, which can lead to switching jobs and earning more money. Indeed, it may be that dagongmei are at the cutting edge of a changing Chinese culture: moving from traditional commitments and filial loyalty to the cultural values of upward social mobility, individualism, and the pursuit of a more prosperous future. However, Pun cautions that few of the 70 million dagongmei succeed in this.

Multinational corporations’ desire for cheap labor will lead to more women working in the global factory. Anthropologists such as Pun Ngai are trying to make sure the rights of these women are protected when they do.
Gender Relations in Agricultural Societies

Generally, agricultural societies are a good example of the principle that women lose status in society as the importance of their economic contribution declines. In most cases, women are less directly involved in food production in agricultural societies than in the other systems we have discussed, and their social status is correspondingly lower. However, this does vary. For example, women tend to play larger roles in wet rice agriculture than in plow agriculture.

As women's economic contribution declines, they lose status, and this is also generally accompanied by their increasing isolation in domestic work in the home and greater numbers of children (Ember, 1983). Machine technology reduces the overall labor force, and this also particularly affects women, who are disproportionately excluded from mechanized agriculture. Women are also paid lower wages as agricultural laborers and are concentrated in such labor-intensive agricultural tasks as weeding, transplanting, and harvesting. Also, men more easily enter a cash economy—selling crops and animals, for example—and the transition to this economic system typically also lowers women's status and makes them more dependent on men.

Gender and Globalization

Over the past 500 years, the processes of invasion, colonization, trade, and, ultimately, globalization have transformed economies worldwide, leading to a tightly interwoven global economy; a process we will examine more fully in Chapter 14. This process altered the nature of gender relations in societies around the world and continues to have a deep impact.

Until the late 20th century, much of globalization involved enmeshing societies throughout the world in an increasingly industrialized economy centered in Europe, North America, and Japan. Vast areas of Latin America, Africa, and Asia were forcibly joined to this economy, functioning largely as areas that produced the raw materials for industry and consumed some of the production of that industry. For this to work, economies had to be drawn into the financial systems centered in the wealthy nations. This way, raw materials could be paid for and the money used to purchase manufactured goods.

This process changed gender relations. In many cases, men had control of the raw materials that wealthy nations wanted, such as cotton, rubber, oil seed, and grain. The result was that men's labor was increasingly paid for in cash. However, women's labor was often in the home and in craft production. Household labor was not compensated in cash, and although crafts could be sold, their value was much less than the value of industrial raw materials. Thus, women's position and power tended to decline relative to men's.

However, the processes of globalization have not had a single uniform effect and also have changed with time. Globalization began or augmented processes of population growth and urbanization and has opened new roles for both men and women. For example, in Mata Chico, Peru, in the 1930s, access to land was critical, and the only way for women to get land was to marry. By the 1980s, however, Peru had become increasingly urbanized, and many occupations were available to both men and women. Because women could support themselves and their children through employment in urban areas, they remained single longer or, in some cases, chose not to marry at all (Vincent, 1998).

In the past 25 years, industrial production by multinational corporations in Latin America, Asia, and Africa has exploded. Clothing manufacturing, food processing, pharmaceutical production, electronics assembly, and other types of manufacturing have opened job possibilities for both men and women worldwide. Young women are frequently considered ideal employees for manufacturing processes that require concentration and dexterity. These jobs give women a chance to earn money on their own and offer women an important opportunity to act in their own interests. The move away from agriculture and the production of raw materials and toward urban factory employment may thus reduce the power differentials between men and women. However, the conditions of employment in factories, particularly in poor nations, are often extremely difficult (see the "Anthropology Makes a Difference" section in this chapter).

Gender and Family in Current-Day Wealthy Societies

As societies have moved to highly industrialized agriculture, the importance of direct participation in agriculture has diminished greatly. In current-day wealthy nations, less than 2% of the population is engaged in agriculture, and the gendered distribution of this kind of labor is no longer a crucial pattern for the rest of the society.

Current-day societies are increasingly characterized by substantial population levels, increased degrees of urbanization, high values placed on education, job uncertainty, and mobility. These characteristics have been correlated with dramatic changes in the family and in our understanding of ourselves and our genders. Movement in this direction has gone the furthest in the wealthy nations of North America, Europe, and Asia, but it is increasing throughout the world, particularly in urban settings where, even in poor nations, the majority of people increasingly live.

In most societies for most of human history, the family was central to people's identity. No matter how society was organized, family played a vital role. In societies without centralized governments, all politics was based around family. Most societies with centralized governments had few if any social and economic institutions dedicated to raising children, caring for the sick, or caring for the elderly.
These activities were carried out primarily within the family. Except in foraging societies, large families tended to be the rule rather than the exception. And, as we saw in Chapter 10, the large families were linked to both economic wealth and political power. In these circumstances, building, managing, and organizing families was a crucial social concern, and this had important implications for understandings of gender.

Historically, one of the most basic concerns of almost every family was to assure its survival and growth. Almost every family aggressively sought to create kinship networks that promoted its prosperity and its safety. The key to this was marriage and offspring. Thus, pressure for people to get married and have children was enormous. As we have seen, marriage in many societies was arranged by families. Frequently, spouses did not meet before their marriage and had little knowledge of each other. This was not terribly important because the purpose of marriage was to produce and legitimize children and to create alliances between networks of families. Whether marriage partners liked each other or were sexually attracted to each other was not central to the meaning and function of marriage. Problems in marriage happened when there were no children or when alliances failed, not when partners discovered that they did not care for one another.

Under these circumstances, love and sexual desire were secondary, and, in most cases, people did not seek emotional fulfillment in their marriages. It is important to understand that, as far as we can tell, love and sexual desire exist equally in all societies. There is no reason to believe that people in gardening or agricultural societies or in societies 100 or 10,000 years ago felt love or desire less often that people do today. However, they did not necessarily expect to feel it in marriage. People formed intense bonds with their siblings, their parents, and their children. They sought sexual partners outside of marriage and may have experienced themselves as more or less sexual and more or less attracted to members of the opposite sex. In most cases, as long as marriage partners remained together and fulfilled their obligations to have children, none of this was important. Most people neither defined themselves by their sexuality nor understood their marriages as successful or unsuccessful as a consequence of the degree to which they were emotionally satisfying. Certainly, some people married for romantic love in almost every society, but this was the exception rather than the rule.

Patterns of marriage and family underwent fundamental shifts with industrialization, improvements in health care, urbanization, and the emergence of a large middle-class population in Europe and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries. These shifts continued as industrialization and urbanization spread to many other places in the world in the 20th and 21st centuries. Better health care—in particular, improved sanitation—meant that more children survived. Urbanization, industrialization, and, later, the emergence of the information economy led to an increasing emphasis on mobility; a greater investment in children, and a rise in child-care costs. At the same time, the state and private institutions began to increasingly provide education, health care, and old-age care. Although the very rich still controlled dynastic fortunes, these patterns reduced the importance of family connections and family size in assuring prosperity and security. This is reflected in the steadily diminishing number of children born per married couple throughout the world's wealthy nations (see Chapter 10, pp. 248–249).

As the family's importance diminished, family control over marriage lost importance. When a family's economic, social, and political futures are no longer tied to trying to achieve certain marriage alliances and having large numbers of children, family interest in controlling marriage declines. In this context, although some people certainly still marry for money or status, marriages built around the idea of romantic love have tended to replace other forms.

The rise of romantic love as the dominant social form in wealthy nations has had profound consequences for the ways in which we express gender and sexuality. When the purpose of sex and marriage is to produce children and make alliances, people may experience and express their sexuality in many different ways, but there are unlikely to be many different genders. Most people marry and have children regardless of their sexuality. But when the purpose of sex and marriage is to achieve personal fulfillment through romantic love and when people are no longer critically concerned with achieving success and security through family, a multiplicity of genders can flourish (Figure 11.12).

This is what has happened and will almost certainly continue to happen in the United States and in all other wealthy nations. Modernity has created the social and economic conditions that allow people to believe that personal fulfillment, rather than simply survival or family preservation and power, should be a basic goal of life. The idea that we should as individuals live lives in which we achieve happiness through reaching our potential is a fundamental part of the ideology of almost all current-day wealthy societies. Since the ideology (if not the reality) of all current-day wealthy nations also insists on the legal equality of all citizens, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny people the rights to pursue love and happiness through whatever mechanism they see fit (as long as that mechanism does not cause obvious harm to others). In 2014, the social media site Facebook allowed people to choose from among 50 gender identities. However, within a year, its administrators determined that even this was insufficient and added an additional 10 customizable fields (Facebook, 2015).

At one time, the idea that there are more than 50 genders would have struck people in the majority of societies
as extremely strange. It would definitely have seemed unusual to earlier generations of Americans and Europeans. However, it is very important to remember that the idea that people be personally fulfilled would also have seemed highly unusual to them. The ability of individuals to pursue their own economic, social, and emotional desires and the achievement of satisfaction through deeply committed and emotionally engaged marriages and partnerships is a great triumph of current-day society—though admittedly one only partially achieved. The authors of this book (and probably most of its readers) look forward to a day when all people can achieve their social, economic, and emotional desires. However, it is wise for us to remember that this liberation comes at a price. In earlier generations of almost all human societies, individuals were enmeshed in powerful webs of kinship. Most lived in large families connected through systems of marriage and alliance. The greatly diminished size and social importance of our families today has stripped us of most of these connections. We are far freer to express ourselves and become fully ourselves, but we may be more isolated and lonely as well.

FIGURE 11.12 The prevalence of the idea that personal fulfillment through romantic love should be central to our identities allows for a proliferation of gender identities. Here, some of the hundreds of thousands celebrating the 40th annual LGBT Mardi Gras parade in Sydney, Australia, on March 3, 2018.

The Global and the Local
WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

How Much Does Poverty Count?

In fall 2017, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security published a report on global inclusion, justice, and security for women (Klugman, 2017). The report included a ranking of nations by their treatment of women that covered 153 countries and accounted for more than 98% of the world’s population. The ranking’s first criterion was inclusion, which was based on measurements of education, employment, cell phone use, economy, and political engagement as shown by the number of women elected to positions in national government. The second criterion was justice, which included discrimination as measured by (1) the percentage of men who agreed with the statement, “It is perfectly acceptable for any woman in your family to have a paid job outside the home if she wants one,” (2) the degree to which the number of boys born in the country exceeded the number of girls, and (3) the extent to which there were legal restrictions on women that did not apply to men. The third criterion was security, which included the presence of armed conflict, the degree to which women said they felt safe walking alone at night in the city or area where they lived, and the level of domestic violence. Some of the results of the study are listed in Table 11.1.

There are several things about this chart that immediately stand out. First, the countries at the top of the chart are much wealthier than the countries at the bottom. The average yearly income of the top 10 nations is about $52,000; that of the countries at the bottom is less than 10% of that amount. Second, except for Singapore, all the nations at the top of the list are European; the countries at the bottom are in Africa and in the Middle East. Third, active warfare persists in many of the countries at the bottom. And, lastly, many countries in which readers might be interested are neither in the top nor bottom 10. Here are the rankings for some of these countries: Germany and the United Kingdom tie at #12. France is #21; Japan, #29; the Russian Federation, #55; China, #87; and India, #131.

The presence of so many European nations at the top of the list and Middle Eastern and African nations at the bottom may make anthropologists uneasy.

(Continued)
TABLE 11.1  Domestic Violence and Income. The table ranks the countries of the world by their treatment of women, with 1 being the best treatment and 152 being the worst.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY RANKING</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>GDP PER CAPITA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>52,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>59,302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>61,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>34,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>38,171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>44,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (tie)</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>48,141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (tie)</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>53,582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (tie)</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>51,264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (tie)</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>46,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (tie)</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>90,531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>142</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>3,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>19,486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>144</td>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>1,158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>145</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>4,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>146</td>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>2,169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>147</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>17,004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>148</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
<td>785</td>
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<tr>
<td>149</td>
<td>Central African Republic</td>
<td>681</td>
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<td>150</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>5,354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>2,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>152 (tie)</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>1,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>152 (tie)</td>
<td>Syrian Arab Republic</td>
<td>2,900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It asks that we consider the possibility that what the index measures is the degree to which other nations conform to the behavioral expectations of wealthy European nations. Is the list an exercise in ethnocentrism? Perhaps. But that implies that we should treat things such as domestic violence and laws that systematically favor men over women as acceptable parts of culture in the places at the bottom of the list—a position that also makes anthropologists uncomfortable.

The chart shows a strong correlation between wealth and women’s rights. This fits with the analysis presented in the last section of the chapter. It also suggests that perhaps the best thing that we can do to improve conditions for women is to improve conditions for everyone. It may be that in current-day societies, wealth is a necessary precondition for improvements to the position of women.

Wealth may be necessary, but it’s certainly not sufficient on its own. There are many countries with high levels of wealth that do not rank as high as others that are far poorer. The world’s wealthiest countries are Qatar and Luxembourg, which are #6 and #15, respectively. Slovenia and Slovakia are only about 125 miles away from each other (separated by Austria and Hungary) and have almost identical average incomes, but Slovenia is #4 and Slovakia #35. Similarly, Namibia and Swaziland are both in southern Africa and have similar average incomes, but Namibia is ranked #48 and Swaziland #133. Clearly culture counts!

And what about the United States? The United States ranks #22, within the top 20% but well out of the top 10 and far below where it would be expected to rank based on wealth alone. Some of the things that kept the United States out of the top rankings were the low number of women elected to public office, the absence of a law mandating equal pay or paid maternity leave, and the high level of domestic and gun violence. The United States also ranks low on people’s perception of safety. Forty-six percent of men in the Georgetown Institute survey said they felt safe walking alone in their community, but only 26% of women did. A recent Gallup survey on the same issue reported that 45% of women said they did not feel safe walking alone at night compared to 27% of men (Dugan, 2014). Both of these surveys show a gender gap of 20%, which is far greater than the global average of 7%.

**Key Questions**

1. Do you believe that the United States should take legal and political steps to reduce the levels of inequality between men and women? Why or why not?

2. Disparities in inclusion, justice, and security for women are clearly affected by culture. What specific cultural practices and beliefs might explain the differences between countries at similar income levels?

3. By placing all nations on a single scale, the index assumes that inclusion, justice, and security for women can be measured in a universally acceptable way. Do you believe that this belief is correct or should there be different standards for different societies?
SUMMARY

1. What are the differences between sex, sexuality, and gender? Sex refers to biological differences between male and female. Sexuality refers to people’s emotional and physical desires. Gender refers to the sex-related social and cultural roles that individuals play in society.

2. What does it mean to say that gender is culturally constructed? People in all societies think that gender is the “natural” expression of underlying biological differences. However, anthropology shows that gender is learned and is shaped by society. We are (mostly) born with male or female genitalia, but our culture teaches us how to be men and women.

3. What is a gender ideology and how is it expressed in society? A gender ideology is the totality of ideas about sex, gender, and the nature of men and women. Gender ideologies justify the distribution of power between members of different genders. Gender ideologies are expressed in many aspects of society, such as stories, sports, games, and art.

4. How is proving manhood related to gender ideology and how is it expressed in society? The idea of manhood as daring, heroic, and aggressive is widespread. The call for boys to “act like men” is found in almost all cultures. However, what this means varies widely. Bullfighting in Spain provides an example of maleness understood as the ability to exert lethal violence in calm, rational, and artistic ways.

5. What role does the control of female sexuality have in establishing gender hierarchies? Female sexuality is often perceived as dangerous to society. This justifies male control and feeds back into gender ideology. In many cases, control over women is inscribed on female bodies in dress and in physical alterations. However, private sexual violence also plays a large role. The #MeToo movement of 2017–2018 is a response to this violence and shows the increasing power of women.

6. How does cross-cultural evidence raise questions about the division of humanity into male and female? Although all cultures distinguish between masculine and feminine, some cultures also include alternative, in-between, or third gender roles. These include the two-spirit role among Native Americans and the hijras of India.

7. What are hijras and how is their position in Indian society different from sex/gender roles in U.S. culture? Hijras are men who dress and act like women, who are regarded as ritually powerful devotees of the goddess Bahuchara Mata, and who perform ritually at weddings and childbirths. In India, hijras are widely accepted as a third gender category—neither man nor woman. Although there is great gender diversity in the United States, there is no similar broadly accepted category.

8. Give some examples of the variability of sexual behavior. What is considered proper sexual behavior varies greatly among societies. For example, among the Sambia, boys become men through the oral and anal receipt of semen from other men. People on the Pacific Island of Mangaia engage in sex when they are young, but on the Irish island of Inis Beag, men and women wait a very long time to have sexual relations.

9. What are some theories of gender stratification? Early work in feminist anthropology assumed universal male dominance. However, more recent work shows that the position of women is extremely complex in most societies. Two factors that affect women’s position are their frequent association with the domestic sphere rather than the public sphere and the fact that men often control more economic resources than women. More recent work focuses on gender variation and intersectionality, or the ways in which sexuality and gender interact with factors such as race, class, and education.

10. What is the relationship between how societies produce their livelihoods and gender stratification? Although there is much variability, power differentials between men and women are related to their economic contributions and the degree to which these contributions can be monetized. Men and women have substantial equality in foraging societies, but this diminishes in horticultural, pastoral, and agricultural societies where warfare and trade tend to lead to male dominance.

11. How has globalization affected gender relations? Because it involved monetizing societies and incorporating them as suppliers of raw materials to industry, most globalization increased men’s status at the expense of women. However, globalization also opened new possibilities for women and, as production shifts from supply of raw materials to skilled factory jobs, may lead to reducing power differentials between men and women.

12. What are dagongmei and how do they inform us of the new roles that women play in the global economy? Dagongmei are young Chinese women who emigrate from rural areas to cities in search of factory employment. They face hardships and discrimination but are also able to earn money and gain personal freedoms.
13. How have rising populations, urbanization, mobility, and increasing dependence on manufacturing and information affected family and gender? These factors (and others) have led to a steep reduction in the importance of family. This has propelled a shift from marriages that focus on perpetuating family to marriages that focus on personal fulfillment. This has given love, romance, and sexuality a greater role in society and opened the possibilities for vastly increased numbers of gender identifications.

14. What is the relationship between women’s rights and wealth? A 2017 survey found a strong correlation between national wealth and women’s rights as measured by inclusion, justice, and security. However, the wildly divergent rankings of nations with similar incomes shows that culture also plays a strong role.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Describe the difference between sex and gender and give several examples of different genders.

2. Present an analysis of the degree to which gender and sexuality are determined by genetic inheritance and biology and the degree to which they are socially and culturally determined.

3. Interpret the role of prestige behavior for both men and women and discuss its effect on gender relations and social hierarchy.

4. Compare and contrast gender relations in foraging, horticultural, pastoral, and agricultural societies.

5. Analyze the ways in which globalization and the spread of market economies have changed gender roles in different societies. Give several examples.

KEY TERMS

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<td>gender role</td>
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<td>private/public dichotomy</td>
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<td>sex</td>
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<tr>
<td>two-spirit role</td>
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</table>

GLOSSARY

**gender** A cultural construction that makes biological and physical differences between male and female into socially meaningful categories.

**gender hierarchy** The ways in which gendered activities and attributes are differentially valued and related to the distribution of resources, prestige, and power in a society.

**gender ideology** The totality of ideas about sex, gender, and the natures of men and women within a culture.

**gender roles** Behaviors that societies consider appropriate for people of different sexes.

**hijra** An alternative gender role in India conceptualized as neither man nor woman.

**intersectionality** The overlapping nature of social categories such as race, education, wealth, age, and gender.

**private/public dichotomy** A gender system in which women’s status is lowered by their almost exclusive cultural identification with the home and children, whereas men are identified with public, prestigious, economic, and political roles.

**sex** The biological difference between male and female.

**two-spirit role** An alternative gender role in native North America (formerly called *berdache*).
During Semana Santa (Holy Week), the week before Easter, in Antigua, Guatemala, worshipers dressed in purple robes march in procession and carry floats with images of Jesus and the Virgin Mary through town.