

## Introduction

Amy is a 20-something. Mary is her 50-ish mother.<sup>1</sup> Neither believes that anatomy is destiny. Indeed, both women are college educated, ambitious, and critical of attempts to define them by virtue of their gender. Both are strong supporters of the women's movement and the egalitarian change that it spurred. They also believe that women today are living in ways that bring them more fulfillment relative to women of past generations.

Knowing nothing more about this mother and daughter, one might assume that they also endorse the practical application of feminist principles to women's lives. Yet when asked their thoughts regarding the freedom that women have today to pursue careers in addition to becoming wives and mothers, they both express the belief that women should be mindful of the limitations before them. The need for women to continue to make choices weighs heavily in their minds, and they believe that women who attempt to do too much, such as combine motherhood and career in ways that do not give primacy to their role as caregivers, should be prepared to suffer the consequences and assume responsibility for the difficulties that they and their families will undoubtedly experience. If women today are experiencing burn-out and frustration due to resisting the pull of traditional gender roles, they should reconsider their choices. Women, it seems, are to blame for the problems associated with not living up to gendered expectations.

Supportive attitudes toward equal rights are insufficient for remedying the baneful effects of gender discrimination. Individuals must also recognize the role that adherence to traditional gender roles plays in maintaining gender inequality.<sup>2</sup> As Amy's and Mary's remarks demonstrate, one should not simply assume that the widespread embrace of equal rights for women has been

accompanied by a reevaluation of gender roles and their role in maintaining inequality among men and women. For Amy and Mary, supportive attitudes toward the women's movement and egalitarian change do not go hand in hand with a belief that women should resist the pull of traditional gender roles that often limit their choices outside the home. Amy and Mary, like many others whose voices form the basis of this book, hold beliefs that are somewhat contradictory: supportive attitudes toward ending gender discrimination coupled with a hesitancy to challenge norms of behavior upon which gender inequality is largely based.

The extent to which women today adhere to norms that ultimately serve to keep them "in their place" (i.e., confined to the role of caretaker; away from positions of power in business, politics, and other areas of public life; resigned to the persistence of discrimination, etc.) is critical for understanding what it means to say that one is supportive of equal rights for women. As history can attest, equality for women is not a foregone conclusion. Progressive change is fueled in part by women and men who challenge traditional gender norms.

How Amy, Mary, and women like them acquire their attitudes toward gender roles and behaviors in the post-women's movement years is the subject of this book. It is a study in the contemporary political socialization of American women regarding their willingness to maintain a commitment to ending gender discrimination, challenge the constraints imposed by traditional gender roles, and ensure that women's participation in public life continues to increase so that political outcomes are reflective of women's as well as men's interests. This book's inquiry centers largely on gender-role attitudes and behaviors, but it also examines attitudes toward the women's movement given its critical role in challenging gender discrimination and the political and social inequities that follow.

I consider two forces that are influential in shaping a woman's understanding of gender roles and behaviors in the post-women's movement years. First, I examine the role of intergenerational transmission and ask, for example, whether Amy's attitudes are reflective of a maternal influence. Second, I note the importance of generational effects and look for differences among women in their attitudes and behaviors relative to gender roles that might be attributed to the nature of the times during their formative years. I thus consider forces that are operative at both the micro and macro levels.

The data on which this book is based come from interviews with mothers and daughters in 2000, both of whom attended the same women's college a generation apart. The mothers attended college in the mid- to late 1970s, a period during which the women's movement was in its ascendancy and its goal, equal rights for women, had a novel appeal. Their socialization experience occurred at a time when gender norms were being strenuously questioned.

Their daughters have come of age in a very different time. The women's movement is far less visible, even though a majority of Americans have embraced its message of equality. The revolutionary panache of resisting traditional gender roles has largely disappeared, although, as I find in this research, this does not mean that women are finding it easy to avoid living up to gendered expectations. Women who aspire to such professions as law and medicine are no longer seen as outliers, and Title IX has opened the doors for women to cultivate athletic skills that rival those of men. Although still prohibited from serving in certain combat positions, women are enlisting in the military in great numbers and sacrificing their lives in places as far away as Iraq and Afghanistan. They have achieved notable inroads in the world of politics, and many now rival men as family breadwinners. Indeed, times have changed. As a result, this younger generation's socialization took place during a time in which women were encouraged to imagine lives not defined by strict adherence to traditional gender roles.

This book continues Roberta Sigel's legacy. Roberta passed away before this book was written, but the research on which it is based was conducted jointly by Roberta and the author. Roberta's lifelong scholarly commitment to exploring the ways in which gender influences the processes by which individuals come to understand their place in politics and society can be seen here as well as in her previous work, including *Ambition and Accommodation: How Women View Gender Relations* (1996). There she explores the perceptions of women, and, to a lesser extent, men, regarding the position of the American women in the years following the contemporary women's movement. Her interviews with focus group and survey participants led her to conclude that despite widespread acceptance of the belief that the men and women are essentially equal and should be treated as such, egalitarianism does not always prevail. Women are bothered by this dichotomy, men less so. When faced with unequal treatment, women turn to a variety of coping strategies, many of which involve accommodating the offender by working harder, exceeding his capabilities, and simply becoming more competent to prove her unequal status wrong.

In many ways, this book is a continuation of *Ambition and Accommodation*. Its goal is not to revisit how men and women understand gender relations but rather to explore how women today are socialized to accept or reject traditional gender roles that serve to undermine their equality. If Roberta's previous work addresses what women think about gender relations, this book takes a step back and asks how they arrived at their understanding. It unfolds in the following manner.

Chapter 1 addresses the gendered aspect of political socialization. Although scholars frequently describe the socialization process using non-gender-

specific language, I argue that political socialization has historically relied upon a system of patriarchy and gender discrimination to ensure that political outcomes remain reflective of male interests. When women are socialized to accept their role in the polity as tethered to the private sphere, it becomes easier for a gendered hierarchy to prevail in public life. The contemporary women's movement has offered a direct and sustained critique to the role that traditional gender norms play in sustaining gender discrimination. However, given the movement's greater acceptance and transformation from being marked by its visibility and novelty to its present, its role as a direct agent of political socialization has likely declined. In its place, I contend, are the influences of mothers and the generational effects. This chapter concludes by detailing the study design that followed from the research questions and describing the study participants.

Chapter 2 takes up the issue of the women's movement and respondents' attitudes toward its goals and tactics. How women perceive the movement today speaks to their understanding of how traditional gender roles sustain gender discrimination. I examine how the mothers recall their attitudes toward the movement during their college years, how—if at all—their opinions have changed, and the reasons behind those changes. I also look retrospectively at data collected in 1975 for evidence of continuity or change in regard to the mothers' cohort attitudes toward the movement. Attention then turns to the daughters and whether their attitudes toward the movement are reflective of a maternal or generational influence, or both. I find that in many ways, the daughters are like their mothers, although in some important aspects they, as a group, differ from the mothers. Among both groups of women I find evidence to suggest that their attitudes toward the importance of challenging traditional roles may not be as robust as their overall support for the movement would suggest.

Chapter 3 takes up the issue of plans for the future, both retrospectively among the mothers and prospectively from the daughters. The mothers are asked whether their lives turned out as planned or whether life (in the form of a spouse's job change, childbirth, etc.) intervened, causing them to abandon career plans or other significant endeavors. More importantly, my inquiry seeks to understand how they perceive diversions from their plans and how they have managed gendered expectations in their private lives. I then compare the mothers' experiences to the daughters' plans for life after college both in the aggregate and in the dyads. I find intergenerational consistencies in regard to the dominant role that caretaking has played and is likely to play among both groups of women. However, the daughters evaluate the premium that they place on domestic responsibilities differently from the mothers: The daughters are more likely to see adherence to traditional gender roles as an

individual choice, whereas the mothers are more likely to see it as a concession necessary to maintain harmony within the family. Among both groups of women, however, strong evidence demonstrates the continued pull of traditional gender roles on their life plans.

Chapter 4 addresses gendered expectations in the workplace and beyond. Respondents answer queries about their feelings and responses to harassment, discrimination, and any other display of unequal treatment that arises from being a woman. A pattern of intergenerational consistency prevails despite some aggregate differences due to the daughters' more optimistic outlook on sex discrimination's eventual demise. What is striking among both groups of women is the pattern of responding to sexism by rising above it or taking steps to prove that one is undeserving of unequal treatment. Mothers and daughters alike seem to accept the inevitable discriminatory treatment that comes with challenging traditional gender roles in public life.

Chapter 5 rounds out the analysis by focusing attention on political attitudes and behavior. Because the women's movement is often synonymous with political empowerment, I look for signs of this connection in the respondents and assess the extent to which they recognize the importance of women's political activism for gender equality. The dyads are consistently disengaged, although in ways that vary from mother to daughter. But they are also aware of gender's importance for politics, and both groups demonstrate traits that appear consistent with a nascent feminist identity. What is lacking is an appreciation for how their voices can be used to ensure political outcomes that are more reflective of their interests.

Chapter 6, building on previous insights, discusses what these findings mean for continued progress toward gender equality. My research regarding the effects of maternal and generational influences leads me to conclude that the daughters represent a consolidating generation, or a generation that is content with the status quo and not interested in building on past feminist gains. Their approach toward managing gendered expectations in their life reflects a belief that the context has changed drastically and that women no longer need to worry about the importance of traditional gender roles for gender inequality.

One last note about Roberta: I recently found myself in a local coffee house, where a younger woman and an older man sat at an adjacent table. My proximity to them made it impossible to not overhear their conversation. Clearly she was interviewing him for a managerial position with a local pharmaceutical company. Or, to put things more succinctly, the woman had the upper hand in a world that not long ago was perceived as male-dominated. She embodied the challenge to gender roles that has been so central to the goal of ending gender discrimination.

This episode, coupled with Roberta's recollections of being among the very few women in her discipline when she began her career, speaks to the nature of this research. The difficulty that she and others like her faced in challenging traditional gender roles is often assumed to be a thing of the past. The woman who sat adjacent to me could be seen as testament to this "fact." However, as women have transitioned from housewife to worker, or, more likely, housewife *and* worker, what remains unexplored is the extent to which gendered expectations are continually challenged by women today, and whether and how one comes to understand the importance of doing so. It is to these questions that I now turn.