Female Status and the Life Cycle:
A Cross-Cultural Perspective
from Native North America

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Introduction

The question of female status in egalitarian society is the central concern of this paper. Although female status varies in particular societies because of a variety of factors including universal cultural determinants (e.g., male strength and aggressiveness), female reproduction and childbirth, children's socialization, economics and production relations and post-marital residence, this paper will explore the relationship between female status and the life cycle.

A variety of ethnohistorical evidence illustrates that in many Native societies females gained increased status with age. Brown (1982:143) has noted that "women's lives appear to improve with the onset of middle age. In some societies this change is dramatic and in others moderate."

A positive change in female status is clearly related to the onset of menopause which occurs during the social age-grade of middle age. Once a woman enters this stage, a variety of important changes take place in her social standing as the result of the biological phenomenon of menopause. Once a woman is past her childbearing years, the menstrual customs no longer apply to her, thus she receives freedom from male authority and also achieves a greater freedom of movement.

Older women exert authority over kinsmen and Brown (1982:144) has noted that "they have the right to extract labor from them or exercise decision making power over them." Older women also have a good deal of influence in the marriage arrangements in many societies.

Bart (1969) has pointed out that the "institutionalization of the mother-in-law and or grandmother role tends to be associated with higher status for middle-aged women."
There is ample evidence in the ethnohistorical and ethnographic literature that illustrates that “as women age beyond the childbearing years, they are provided with new opportunities for achievement and for recognition beyond the household” (Brown 1982). The anthropological literature discusses a variety of roles for older women including: serving as midwives (Hayes 1975; Paul and Paul 1975), holy women (Kolanda 1978; Hungry Wolf 1980), matchmakers (Wolf 1974), medicine women (Wright 1979a), curers (Spring 1976), and matrons (Brown 1970, 1982). All of these positions in which middle-aged women served provided them with increased status and public influence which went beyond the household.

I will now discuss a variety of roles for older females that are recorded in the ethnohistorical literature for several societies in Native North America including the Wabanaki, the Coastal Algonquians including the Delaware, Powhatan Confederacy tribes and Southern New England groups and the Iroquois.

The Wabanaki

Chamberlain provides several accounts that illustrate that females who had passed middle-age and entered the “grandame” rank had considerable status. Once a woman became a grandame she had a variety of privileges and duties that younger females did not have, including the ability to speak in councils and a much greater freedom from restraint (Chamberlain 1902:81, 85, 86; Morrison 1983:126, 127). Chamberlain also notes that older females were highly valued for their knowledge of herbs and roots used to cure the sick. The grandames also counseled both young and old in Wabanki society and Chamberlain notes that “The young people looked to her for guidance, the elders sought her counsel, and all dread her displeasure.”

From Chamberlain’s account it is clear the females in Wabankia had duties and privileges that were based on an age grading system. All females had some collective influence in the society but only older women, those who were grandames had individual influence in both religious and socio-political affairs.

The ethnohistorical record also supplies fragmentary evidence of Wabanki females who attained formal leadership positions. According to a Wabanki myth, Angel Queen was a female Wabanki sagamore or shaman who lived in the 16th century. A better account of formal female leadership in Wabanki society is provided by Christopher Levett. His account discusses the Queene of Quacke, who was a formal leader who obtained a leadership position by succession from her father (Levett 1983:104, 105). Another female who inherited a formal position was Jacataqua of Swan Island, who inherited the role of sagamore from her mother. This stands in direct opposition to the stereotypical male-oriented hunting societies of the
Dawnland (Griffiths 1976).

Eckstorm (1980) provides an account of a very important Penobscot Shaman named Molly Molasses. Molly Molasses was a very influential female Penobscot shaman in the 19th century. Thus older females or grandames among the Wabanki had a variety of roles in the society including serving as both political and religious leaders. Older females in Wabankia clearly had individual influence in the public domain.

**Coastal Algonquian Groups**

Females in several Coastal Algonquian groups served as paramount sachems, spoke in councils, influenced war captains and marriages and functioned as shamans and traders.

John Smith mentioned the “Queene of Appamatuck” in his reports (1907:101). Smith said that the Queene was a “paramount sachem” of the Powhatan confedracy. He further recorded her presence in several confederacy councils, including the one that mediated his death (Grumet 1980:49). George Fox (1952:653) also noted the presence of female leaders in councils. He said “The Old Empress [of Accomack] . . . sat in council” during his visit to their town in Maryland on March 24, 1673.

Robert Beverley (1947:232) mentioned that a female served as the political leader for the Pungoteque. He said the Pungoteque was governed by a Queen and although this was a small nation, of less than 20 families “she hath all the Nations of this shore under Tribute.”

Female leadership was also present in the Esopus tribe, a Delawaran group that inhabited the western portion of the mid-Hudson valley in New York State. Grumet (1980:52) states that a group of both women and young men called “barebacks” forced the Esopus war captains to seek peace with the Dutch in 1664. Heckewelder (1876:161) noted that Delaware women had power over young men. He also reported that mothers had great influence in marriage arrangements and that they also served as marriage arbitrators.

Women were also important as Shamans in the Coastal Algonquian groups. Simmons (1976:223) described a woman powwow in the Southern New England area. Elliot (1834:19), Gookin (1792:154) and Roger Williams (1866:149) also mention the importance and influence of female shamans. Tantaquidgeon (1972) and Heckewelder also stated that females served as shamans. Tantaquidegeon noted that females functioned as herbalists and love doctors whose supernatural power enabled them to communicate with the dead, to locate lost persons, and objects, and to foretell coming events. Heckewelder (1876:229) wrote that “there are physicians of both sexes who take considerable pains to acquire a correct knowledge of the properties and medical virtues of plants, roots, and barks.”
Elder shamans were believed to be especially powerful. Zeisberger noted that older male and female shamans had special medicine which gave them magical power (1910:83). He also stated that old women were often considered to be witches and were either feared, propitiated or burned. Snow (1976:283) also reported that female shamans were thought to be particularly powerful.

Females had an important function as traders in the Coastal Algonquian groups. Trading was a very important part of the economy in these societies and there are a number of reports in the ethnohistorical literature that discuss the importance of females as traders. An Englishmen who visisted the village of the Massachusetts Squaw sachem observed “almost all the women . . . sold their coats from their backs . . . [the English] promised them to come again to them, and they us to keep their skins” (Grumet 1980:56, 57). Heckewelder also remarked that females worked as traders (Heckewelder 1876:158).

John Juet (Henry Hudson’s first mate), also mentioned that women served as traders: “there came eight and twentie Canoes full of men, women and children to betray us: but we saw their intent, and suffered none of them to come abord us . . . They brought with them Oysters and Beanes, wherof we bought some” (Grumet 1980:57). A trader at Albany, New York stated that about 20% of his transactions “between 1695 and 1726 were made with women” (Norton 1974:28).

Thus all of this ethnohistorical evidence illustrates females served important political, economic and religious functions in the Coastal Algonquian societies. It is clear that females gained status with increasing age and here again the relationship between status and age (life-cycle) is illustrated.

The Iroquois

The relationship between increased status and age is also very clear for the Iroquois matrons. The status and influence of the Iroquois females rested in the hands of the matrons of the elderly heads of households (Brown 1970). Randle (1951) has noted that any Iroquois female could aspire to become a matron. The Iroquois matrons had a variety of powers including influencing war parties, speaking in council, conferring titles and electing officials, removing officials, and serving as ambassadors, and determining issues of war and peace in times of crisis (Fenton 1986:36–38).

Marie de l’Incarnation stated that Iroquois matrons were “women of quality who had a deliberative voice in council, made decisions like men, and it was they who delegated top ambassadors to treat peace” (Fenton 1986:36).

Goldenweiser (1912:468) provided a brief statement that discusses the power of the Iroquoian matrons to elect and depose ruling elders:
When a chief died, the women of his tribe and clan held a meeting at which a candidate for the vacant place was decided upon. A women delegate carried the news to the chiefs of the clans which belonged to the “side” of the deceased chief’s clan. They had the power to veto the selection, in which case another women’s meeting was called and another candidate selected . . .

The ethnohistorical record shows that Iroquois women had control over the land, agricultural tools and the means of production and distribution of the goods. Women also controlled the distribution of surplus agricultural production. This surplus food was exchanged intertribally and therefore allowed the women to become more involved in political decision making (Parker 1912:234–236; Rothenberg 1981:69). Women also had significant influence on Iroquois war parties since they controlled the provisions that supplied these expeditions. The Iroquoian matrilocal residence pattern and the domestic arrangements of the longhouse reinforced a position of independence for Iroquois women (Ezzo 1988:54).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion the ethnohistorical record supplies ample evidence of a variety of role for females in Native North America. Females achieved positions of leadership in both religious and political spheres and in all of these societies females gained increased status once they reached middle-age. Thus clearly the life cycle is an important factor that must be considered in any cross-cultural study of female status.

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