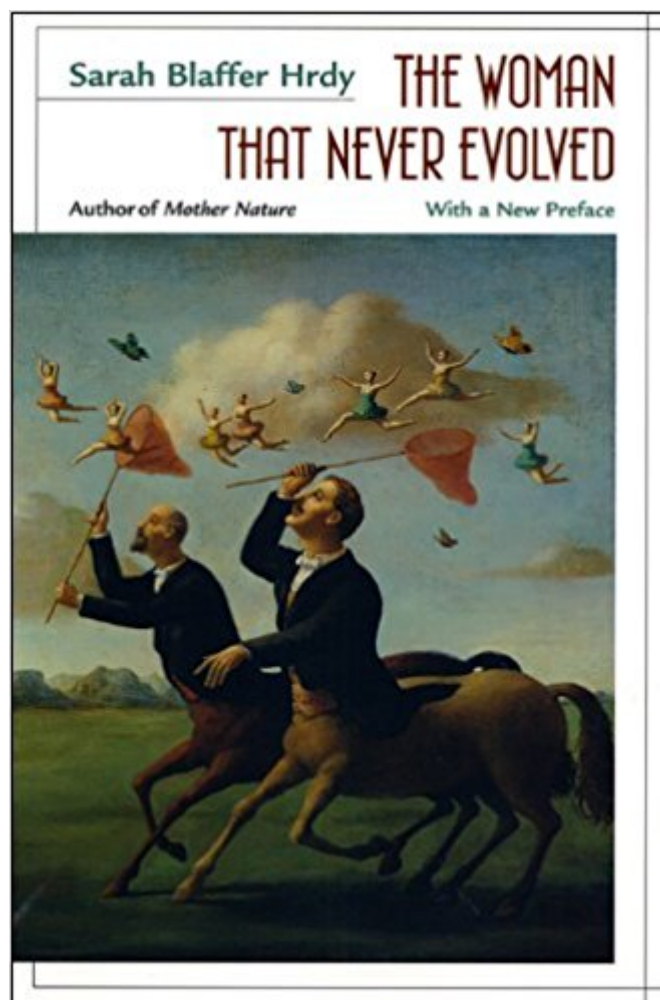




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The Woman That Never Evolved: With A New Preface And Bibliographical Updates, Revised Edition



Synopsis

What does it mean to be female? Sarah Blaffer Hrdy--a sociobiologist and a feminist--believes that evolutionary biology can provide some surprising answers. Surprising to those feminists who mistakenly think that biology can only work against women. And surprising to those biologists who incorrectly believe that natural selection operates only on males. In *The Woman That Never Evolved* we are introduced to our nearest female relatives competitive, independent, sexually assertive primates who have every bit as much at stake in the evolutionary game as their male counterparts do. These females compete among themselves for rank and resources, but will bond together for mutual defense. They risk their lives to protect their young, yet consort with the very male who murdered their offspring when successful reproduction depends upon it. They tolerate other breeding females if food is plentiful, but chase them away when monogamy is the optimal strategy. When "promiscuity" is an advantage, female primates--like their human cousins--exhibit a sexual appetite that ensures a range of breeding partners. From case after case we are led to the conclusion that the sexually passive, noncompetitive, all-nurturing woman of prevailing myth never could have evolved within the primate order. Yet males are almost universally dominant over females in primate species, and *Homo sapiens* is no exception. As we see from this book, women are in some ways the most oppressed of all female primates. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy is convinced that to redress sexual inequality in human societies, we must first understand its evolutionary origins. We cannot travel back in time to meet our own remote ancestors, but we can study those surrogates we have--the other living primates. If women --and not biology--are to control their own destiny, they must understand the past and, as this book shows us, the biological legacy they have inherited.

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Customer Reviews

This is a splendid book. It is a scientific treatise on primate sex and status, successfully masquerading as a good read. (Alison Jolly American Scientist)The bulk of the book represents an attempt to create a perspective on the evolutionary biology of women by evaluating their female primate heritage. These chapters are original, high quality formulations presenting and explaining the behavior of female primates using a combination of sociobiological and socioecological principles of analysis...The book is written toward a borderline between the scientific and the popular audience--not an easy thing to do--but, by and large, Hrdy does just that. For this reason, the book has a place in both research and teaching. (Jane B. Lancaster American Journal of Physical Anthropology)It is an understatement to say that this is a provocative essay. Although the book is written for a general audience, it will compel specialists to reconsider many of their assumptions about the evolution of primate females. Those interested in evolutionary influences upon human social behavior will be stimulated and challenged. Undoubtedly, many of the hypotheses will be controversial, and some may be disturbing. (Joan B. Silk Ethnology and Sociology)In its treatment of primate behavior, Hrdy's book has no peers...[It is] a fascinating account of the selective pressures that have shaped the behavior of males and females. (Dorothy Cheney Science)[A] breakthrough book...A primatologist by training and feminist by predilection, Hrdy asked the basic and in my mind perfectly sensible question: How do women compare to other female primates? What can we understand about our urges, desires, and fears, our sexuality, our relationships with men and with other women, and the near universality of women's second-class status, by examining the lives and loves of our closest nonhuman kin? Among Hrdy's many bracing conclusions: Far from being coy and sexually tepid, as the stereotype has it, women may well have evolved for a restless sort of promiscuity, the better to confuse issues of paternity and thus heighten their children's chances of survival in the hazardous, half-cocked company of men. (Natalie Angier O Magazine 2007-06-01)

This is a splendid book. It is a scientific treatise on primate sex and status, successfully masquerading as a good read. (Alison Jolly, American Scientist)

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (born 1946) is an American anthropologist and primatologist, and is Professor

Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of California at Davis, where she remains involved with the Animal Behavior Graduate Group. She has also written books such as *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species* and *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*. (NOTE: Page references below refer to the 256-page 1981 paperback edition.) She states early on, "Myths about women ruling the world usually come linked with a theory about the true nature of women. The prototypical matriarchs, the *s*, were believed to be on the whole aggressive and warlike---masculine spirits in drag... Valerie Solanis revived the *ian* ethos in her 1967 *Scum Manifesto*... while Elizabeth Gould Davis [in *The First Sex* The Book That Proves That Woman's Contribution to Civilization Has Been Greater Than Man's]... averred that there once was a 'golden age of queendoms, when peace and justice prevailed on earth and the gods of war had not been born.'" (Pg. 11) She notes, "by and large the reproductive strategy of the female is what determines how much the father must provide... we should not ignore those ways in which monogamy is imposed on males by females." (Pg. 55) She observes, "The basic dynamics of the mating system depend not so much on male predilections as on the degree to which one female tolerates another... if male breeding strategies are determined by how females space themselves, and if that, in turn, is determined by the availability and utilization of resources, food becomes, quite literally, the consuming question." (Pg. 95) She adds, "competition among females is central to primate social organization." (Pg. 96) She suggests, "The vision of assertive, dominance-oriented females differs radically from existing stereotypes of female primates as nonstop mothers whose perennial preoccupation with nurturing offspring keeps them out of politics." (Pg. 127) She argues, "Yet the problems are more than scientific ones, because whether or not we can document the natural competitiveness of women, we are still going to have to deal with the fairly well documented problem that unrelated women have working together over a long period of time---even when they share a common goal." (Pg. 130) She asserts, "Whole chapters of human history could be read as an effort to contain the promiscuity of women and thus to establish, from circumstantial evidence, the paternity that could never be proved directly... Whatever the biological component may be, the behavioral component is readily demonstrated." (Pg. 179) This an interesting and challenging book, that (along with her other, more recent books) provides another perspective on human social origins.

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brilliant

Can't answer all the questions yet....Still in progress with the book....Finding it slow reading due to its technical nature, but fascinating.

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy is supposedly a feminist sociobiologist. In reality, she is more sociobiological than feminist. Reading her book was a real disappointment. Despite its feminist veneer, "The Woman That Never Evolved" is essentially just another sociobiological book preaching that biology is destiny, patriarchy is natural and women complicit in their own oppression (no less!). The only difference with the regular androcentric literature is that Hrdy wants to believe that equality between the sexes is at least a possibility. However, her belief in sociobiology is so strong that this possibility seems very remote indeed. She clearly thinks that only the contemporary Western world has achieved something close to equality, and that this is a unique situation that might never be repeated again. The reason? Our evolutionary heritage, which apparently favours the males, after all. Naturally, Hrdy attacks the idea that there ever was equality between the sexes: "The female with 'equal rights' never evolved; she was invented, and fought for consciously with intelligence, stubbornness, and courage. (...) To assume that women today are regaining a natural pre-eminence, or reinstating some original social equality, belittles the real accomplishments and underestimates its fragility. However well-intentioned, these myths pose grave dangers to the actual progress of women's rights. They devalue the unique advances made by women in the last few hundred years and tempt us to a false security". This, of course, simply isn't true. There is ample anthropological evidence that non-patriarchal societies have existed: the Iroquois are a classical example, another are the Montagnais-Naskapi. Other examples could be mentioned, too. Women have wielded considerable power even in hierarchic societies, for instance in Africa. Nor is it true that patriarchy was the norm in prehistoric times. How does Hrdy explain the Neolithic cultures, which were often peaceful, egalitarian and were centred on worship of female deities? Pointing out the enormous variation between human cultures is hardly a "grave danger" to the fight for women's rights. Quite the contrary, it bolsters it. Besides, the activists who believe in these supposed "myths" hardly "underestimate" remaining patriarchal structures. Chances are, it's exactly these people who most sharply criticize, say, androcentric sociobiology... Another problem with this book is that it mentions the bonobo only in passing. This may have been understandable in 1981, when the book was first published. It's less understandable in a new (almost unrevised) edition from 1999. Bonobos are "matriarchal", since the females dominate the males. Leaving this out in a book about our evolutionary history smacks of an ideological blind spot. Bonobos, after all, are just as closely

related to humans as are chimpanzees. Interestingly, bonobos are peaceful and bisexual, in marked contrast to the murderous chimps, infanticidal langurs and harem-herding Hamadryas baboons so beloved by sociobiologists (all dutifully included in this book). The bonobo also undermines Hrdy's idea that australopithecines must have been polygynous and (presumably) patriarchal since they had sexual dimorphism, with the males being larger. Bonobo males are larger than the females and have canines. Despite this, the females are dominant! True, humans aren't bonobos. But then, we aren't chimpanzees, langurs or baboons either. If comparisons should be made between humans and other primates, great care should be exercised, otherwise we might simply project a behaviour typical of our own culture onto a suitable animal, and then use this projection as "proof" that our own culture is "natural". Since human cultures are variable, and primate species differ in their behaviour, anything can be proven with such a method. Supporters of women's emancipation will find little of use in this book. It's a pity that Sarah Blaffer Hrdy haven't transcended her role as the house feminist of sociobiology.

This book deals mostly with primates. Despite the layperson style title, the book itself is quite scientific and detailed. This can be great for those educated in anthropology and sociobiology as it is very thorough, giving exact names and evolutionary history on the primates discussed, yet can seem a little dry to the layperson, especially if read for long stretches. However, layperson, do not despair. Hrdy will often use humour to lighten or better explain an idea and when she occasionally uses jargon it is usually tongue-in-cheek and always explained. Many of you will be attracted by the feminist-sounding title, but do not be fooled. Only rarely does the author tie in her observations with human behaviour. In fact, any feminism does not appear until the final 2% of the book and seems to simply be angry raving against the oppression of women, and is not linked as well as it could be to the previous 150 or so pages. Generally, however, I enjoyed the book, even though it contained more detail than I, as a layperson, actually needed. To anyone unhappy with the stereotype of the strong male in charge of his passive harem of females or with the aggressive male just using the females as a vessel for his genes, then this can shed new light on the way primates behave and are shaped by their biology. Tying in the information with the woman in the title is left up to the reader.

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