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FEMINIST STANDPOINT
EPISTEMOLOGY*Building Knowledge and Empowerment
Through Women's Lived Experience*

Abigail Brooks

I have . . . striven faithfully to give a true and just account of my own life in Slavery . . . to come to you just as I am a poor Slave Mother—not to tell you what I have heard but what I have seen—and what I have suffered.¹

—Jacobs (1861/1987, p. 242)

These are the words of Harriet Jacobs, who, after escaping and eventually winning her freedom, took it upon herself to document her years spent as a slave in the American South during the first half of the 19th century. Speaking from a position of direct experience, Jacobs's words filled the widespread silence and ignorance about the condition of female slaves and challenged many of the misconceptions about slave women that were predominant at the time. Jacobs's goal, to educate Northerners about the cruelty and injustice of slavery and the particular suffering of female slaves within it, provided

her with the courage, strength, and motivation to tell her story. She dared hope that by sharing her own life story as a female slave, by drawing on what she herself had witnessed and experienced, she would stand a chance of convincing Northerners about the brutal truths of slavery. As Jacobs (1861/1987) puts it,

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort on behalf of my persecuted people! (pp. 1–2)

By revealing the acute exploitation, physical pain, and mental anguish she was forced to endure as a slave, including years of sexual harassment perpetrated by her owner, Dr. Flint, Jacobs succeeded in raising awareness among Northern women. Ultimately, the heightened awareness engendered by Jacobs's words about the horrors of slavery, and about the psychic and physical violence endured by female slaves in particular, inspired Northern white women to speak out against slavery and contributed to the growth of the Northern antislavery resistance movement.

Harriet Jacobs lived and wrote nearly 150 years ago, yet we look to her for guidance as we begin our discussion of contemporary feminist approaches to research and knowledge building. Why? Because Harriet Jacobs's life story—the strategies she applied and the goals she hoped to achieve in telling it—resonates strongly with the ongoing project of feminist research. Through sharing her own experiences as a slave girl, Harriet Jacobs opened people's eyes to what had been heretofore silenced and unknown—what life was like for slave women. As a firsthand account of slavery from the female perspective, Jacobs's story offered new insight into the brutality of the institution of slavery and helped to galvanize public critique and resistance against it. Similarly, much of contemporary feminist scholarship and research strive to give voice to women's lives that have been silenced and ignored, uncover hidden knowledge contained within women's experiences, and bring about

women-centered solidarity and social change. This chapter focuses on a branch of feminist scholarship and research that was explicitly founded on these goals and that maintains an ongoing commitment to achieving them—namely, feminist standpoint epistemology.

Feminist standpoint epistemology is a unique philosophy of knowledge building that challenges us to (1) see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and (2) apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change. Feminist standpoint epistemology requires the fusion of knowledge and practice. It is both a theory of knowledge building and a method of doing research—an approach to knowledge construction and a call to political action.

- But how do we actually go about integrating a feminist standpoint framework into our research practices?
- What are some of the new insights and perspectives that women's life experiences reveal about the larger social world?
- How do we translate what we learn from women's everyday lives, and from the different oppressed positions women inhabit in society, into political and social action?

These questions will prove useful guides as we trace the evolution of feminist standpoint epistemology, from its origins to its ongoing development, below.

BUILDING NEW KNOWLEDGE FROM WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

While many thousands of men's lives have been recognized and recorded for centuries and across cultures, women's life stories have been documented far less often, even forgotten. As Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) puts it, women's culture, history, and lives have remained "underground and invisible," relegated to the "underside" of men's culture, history, and lives (p. 10). Beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s, however, and as a result of feminist consciousness-raising efforts both inside and outside of academia, women began to draw attention to the omission and exclusion of their voices and experiences in multiple arenas—politics; public policy; the professions of law, medicine, and

business; and the disciplines of science, social science, and the humanities, to name a few. In sociology classrooms, for example, female students began to express frustration with the fact that the predominantly male-centered theories and concepts they were learning about failed to take their own experiences as women into account. In the words of feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987), the sociological theories and methods being taught did not apply to “what was happening” as the female students “experienced it” (p. 86). Women’s growing awareness of the contradiction between their own life experiences and the research studies and theoretical frameworks they were learning about—the failure of these studies and frameworks to accurately reflect their lives—inspired them to construct new models of knowledge building. These new models, or “alternative ways of thinking,” would be developed by women for women, with the goal of granting authentic expression and representation to women’s lives. One such alternative model of knowledge building came to be known as feminist standpoint epistemology.

Feminist standpoint epistemology requires us to place women at the center of the research process: Women’s *concrete experiences* provide the starting point from which to build knowledge. Just as the reality about what life was like for slave women could come to light only through Harriet Jacobs’s actual lived experience of it, feminist standpoint scholars emphasize the need to begin with women’s lives, *as they themselves experience them*, in order to achieve an accurate and authentic understanding of what life is like for women today. Building knowledge from women’s actual, or concrete, life experiences is acutely important, feminist standpoint scholars argue, if we hope to repair the historical trend of women’s misrepresentation and exclusion from the dominant knowledge canons. And only by making women’s concrete, life experiences the primary source of our investigations can we succeed in constructing knowledge that accurately reflects and represents women. As feminist standpoint scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1990) puts it, when making knowledge claims about women, we must always remember that it is women’s “concrete experience” that provides the ultimate “criterion for credibility” of these knowledge claims (p. 209). But what exactly do we mean by women’s concrete experience? How do feminist researchers go about uncovering women’s concrete experiences? And what can we learn from these experiences? Let’s turn now to some examples.

Women’s concrete experiences consist of *what women do*. They are the wide and diverse range of activities that women engage in as part of their

everyday lives. Just one aspect of women's lives, previously understudied and undervalued, that feminist researchers continue to shed light on is the myriad nurturing tasks that many women perform on a daily basis. These nurturing tasks, from cooking, cleaning, and taking care of their families (DeVault, 1991), to caring for the children of others (Collins, 1990), to caring for their own children from afar (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997), are examples of women's concrete experiences. Further, from each of these concrete experiences, women have cultivated particular knowledge and unique sets of skills.

To shed light on the lives and experiences of oppressed women, and to uncover women's knowledge and skills that are hidden and/or undervalued, feminist scholars often make innovative use of research methods, develop alternative research strategies, and even construct new methodological techniques altogether.² For example, in her research on women's experiences of shopping, planning, preparing, and cooking food for their families, Marjorie DeVault (1990, 1991) found that simply asking questions and listening to her respondents' answers was not working. Many women had not often had the opportunity to talk about their daily activities with an interested party and struggled with how to put their thoughts and feelings about their daily activities into words. DeVault (1990, 1991) moved beyond the traditional interview format to adopt what Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack (1991) call the "interactive approach." She worked in collaboration with her respondents to "co-construct" new words that accurately reflected their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Marjorie DeVault's (1991) research documents the organizational and coordinating skills that women have developed from their work in planning, preparing, and cooking food for family members. The feminist standpoint scholar Alison Jaggar (1997) argues that through their ongoing practice as caretakers and nurturers, women have become especially skilled at expressing and reading emotion. Women's skill at expressing and reading emotion is important, because emotion serves several instrumental functions: "Emotion is necessary for human survival. Emotions prompt us to act appropriately, to approach some people and situations and to avoid others, to caress or cuddle, flight or flee. Without emotion, human life would be unthinkable" (Jaggar, 1997, pp. 190, 192).

Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) research reveals African American women's skill in community building, a skill derived from their unique role of caring for the children of extended family, friends, and neighbors. By performing a care-taking role that Collins calls "other mothering"—helping to fill in the gaps left

by unaffordable child care, economic hardship, and overworked parents by caring for children other than their own—these “other mothers,” known and trusted by many, may come to play an instrumental part in bringing different members of the community together and leading the community forward. In addition to other mothering, another innovative form of mothering called “transnational mothering” reflects women’s cultivation of particular skills. Through Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila’s (1997) research, we learn about Latin American mothers who, separated from their children back home and often at great risk to themselves, live and work in the United States to provide financial support for their children. They send the bulk of their earnings home to ensure their children’s well-being. Their earnings pay for their children’s food, clothing, medical bills, and schooling. In this respect, these mothers have developed nurturing skills that lie outside of the traditional mother role of emotional support; although they do provide emotional support for their children through phone calls and letters, their primary method of nurturance becomes a financial one, a method traditionally reserved for fathers.

By making women’s concrete experiences the “point of entry” for research and scholarship and exposing the rich array of new knowledge contained within women’s experiences, feminist standpoint scholars begin to fill in the gaps on the subject of women in many disciplines. However, granting authentic expression to women’s experiences, and to the knowledge that women have cultivated from these experiences, is not the only goal of feminist standpoint epistemology. Feminist standpoint epistemology also challenges us to critically examine society through women’s eyes.

- What do women’s experiences teach us about how society functions as a whole?
- Do women’s experiences, and the knowledge gleaned from these experiences, offer us unique perspectives and insights into the world around us? If so, how?

UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES

Like Harriet Jacobs, who pushed her readers to evaluate the institution of slavery through her eyes as a slave girl, feminist standpoint scholars encourage

us to use women's experiences as a lens through which to examine society as a whole. Let's return to Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) research on African American mothering to illustrate this point. Collins exposes us to an important, and previously understudied, aspect of the everyday lives of African American women called other mothering, a practice in which women care for children of friends, neighbors, and family members whose biological mothers are working outside of the home. Collins illuminates the practice of other mothering as an indicator of the resourcefulness of African American women; it is a unique and useful skill developed for and by women. At the same time, however, and as Collins points out, African American women's daily experience of other mothering, and their reliance on it, throws light on larger social and economic issues—namely, the lack of quality, affordable child care in the United States and the difficulties faced by many poor mothers as a result.

Alison Jaggar's (1997) scholarship provides us with another example of how women's everyday experience, and the knowledge that accompanies that experience, can serve as a helpful tool for understanding the larger social world. When women engage in daily household activities, and comply with socially dictated roles such as that of caretaker, they cultivate a unique set of expertise that coincides with these activities and roles. Jaggar (1997) identifies "emotional acumen"—a unique, intuitive ability to read and interpret pain and hidden emotions and understand the genesis of those emotions—as one such unique set of expertise (p. 192). But the utility of women's emotional acumen is not limited to the realm of home and family. Instead, Jaggar argues, if extended outward and applied to the social world, emotional acumen can have many vital functions. Women's emotional acumen can help to "stimulate new insights" in the disciplines of sociology and philosophy and generate a new set of "psychotherapeutic tools" in the field of psychiatry (Jaggar, 1997, p. 192). Probably the most profound potential application of emotional acumen, however, is one of political analysis and accountability. Because emotional acumen enables women to tune in more quickly to situations of "cruelty, injustice, or danger," it can become a powerful vehicle for exposing political and social injustices. By providing the "first indication that something is wrong with the way alleged facts have been constructed, with the accepted understanding of how things are," emotional acumen can empower women to make "subversive observations that challenge dominant conceptions of the status quo" (Jaggar, 1997, p. 191).

Alison Jaggar (1997) and Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) research demonstrates that women's experiences, and the knowledge garnered from these experiences, can be used as a means to draw attention to the inequalities and injustices in society as a whole. In fact, as we come to understand society through the lens of women's experiences—let's say, for example, through the eyes of African American other mothers—we take the first step toward constructing a feminist standpoint. A feminist standpoint is a way of understanding the world, a point of view of social reality, that begins with, and is developed directly from, women's experiences. The next step is to draw on what have learned from women's experiences, to *apply* that feminist standpoint, toward bettering the condition of women and creating social change. Women's experiences not only point to us flaws in larger economic and political systems but also offer potential solutions to these flaws. As Alison Jaggar (1997) explains, because women's experiences, and the feminist standpoints that evolve from them, offer us a deep understanding of the "mechanisms of domination," they also help us "envision freer ways to live" (p. 193).

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AS A MAP FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Harriet Jacobs's (1861/1987) personal account of the sexual abuse and exploitation she was forced to endure as a female slave energized antislavery activism in the North. On learning about Jacobs's experience, people came to understand the institution of slavery as a whole through the eyes of slave women—from slave women's *standpoint*. The standpoint of slave women—with the knowledge and understanding of slavery it revealed—served as a powerful starting point, or position, from which to fight against the brutal institution. Similarly, by granting honest expression to women's contemporary experiences of oppression, feminist standpoint scholars and researchers seek to agitate resistance against these experiences of oppression and implement solutions to overcome them. African American women's experiences of other mothering teach us that the capitalist system as a whole fails to provide adequate support for poor working mothers. Further, as we come to view the capitalist system from the standpoint of African American other mothers, we are exposed not only to shortcomings in the system but also to the need for change and new solutions—solutions such as universally affordable, quality

child care. In fact, often the very process of enabling women to articulate their own experiences of oppression raises awareness, among women and others, about the particular difficulties diverse women face and inspires movement toward change. Let's turn now to some more examples.

In her book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan (1963) wrote about what it was like to live as a middle-class (white) housewife in mid-century America. Drawing directly from her own experience, and the experiences of many other middle-class women, Friedan challenged the dominant conceptions about American housewives at the time. Behind the cheerful media and magazine images of housewives pushing vacuum cleaners, doing laundry, and exclaiming over their new refrigerators with delight, Friedan uncovered widespread feelings of discontent. Many women, Friedan found, suffered from boredom and loneliness and encountered frustration with their everyday lives. And when women sought help to try to overcome these unhappy feelings, they would often blame themselves: "When a woman went to a psychiatrist for help, as many women did, she would say 'I'm so ashamed' or 'I must be hopelessly neurotic'" (p. 389). Women had been taught to aspire to the role of housewife: Compliance with the role of housewife was to bring them ultimate contentment and fulfillment. Therefore, women who didn't feel this way were left to worry: "Is there something wrong with me?"

But eventually, even the male psychiatric industry began to doubt that women's unhappiness could be attributed to individual or psychological factors alone. The problem was too widespread. "I don't know what's wrong with women today," a suburban psychiatrist said uneasily. "I only know something is wrong because most of my patients happen to be women" (Friedan, 1963, p. 390). Betty Friedan granted a name to this "strange stirring, dissatisfaction and yearning" felt by so many women. She called it, aptly, "the problem that has no name" (p. 387). By articulating the unhappiness experienced by many American housewives, Friedan helped women realize that they didn't have to struggle with these feelings alone. Moreover, by publicly naming the problem, Friedan *inspired women to take action to overcome it*.

As women came together and shared their stories of unhappiness and dissatisfaction, they stopped blaming themselves for failing to comply with the happy housewife image. Instead, they began to critically examine society through the lens of their own experiences and to challenge the social norms and expectations of the woman-as-housewife model. From their shared knowledge of what life was really like for American housewives, women developed

a feminist standpoint—a critical perspective on reality and a position of political consciousness—that seriously questioned the legitimacy of the dominant worldview that women’s natural and biological destiny was limited to the role of wife and mother. As Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) explains, “Without the conscious effort to reinterpret reality from one’s own lived experience—that is, without political consciousness—the disadvantaged [women] are likely to accept their society’s dominant world view” (p. 11). By drawing on their feminist standpoint, women were able to evaluate their experiences as housewives and mothers from a fresh perspective. They came to understand their experiences in the home not as an inescapable biological and natural destiny but instead as a role constructed and imposed on them by patriarchal society. This heightened awareness enabled women to resist dominant social perceptions that linked them exclusively to the roles of wife and mother and empowered them to pursue life and career paths outside of these roles.

Anita Hill’s 1991 testimony about the sexual harassment she suffered from then judicial nominee Clarence Thomas, and the heightened awareness and legal protections against sexual harassment in the workforce that followed, provides another striking example of the vital relationship between granting voice to women’s experiences of oppression and activating movement toward social change. In 1991, Hill articulated her experience of sexual harassment in a public hearing before the Senate judiciary committee. Humble and soft-spoken, Hill was a reluctant public witness. Yet her descriptions of the harassment she endured resonated with countless American women. On hearing Hill’s story, thousands of American women came forward and told similar stories of abuse they had endured in the workplace. Women who had previously suffered in silence on the job filed a record number of sexual harassment complaints. Sexual harassment laws were rewritten or tightened in business and in government. The year following Hill’s testimony, 1992, was hailed “the year of the woman,” as a record number of women were elected to Congress, attributed largely to the “Anita Hill effect” (George-Graves, 2003, p. 16).

Anita Hill’s testimony provided women with the courage and strength to build a critique of sexual harassment and to fight against it. As women came together and shared their stories, they stopped suffering alone and blaming themselves for the harassment they encountered. They stopped perceiving sexual harassment as a personal problem that they had to endure in private and questioning whether such harassment was a result of their own shortcomings.

Instead, drawing from their own experiences of sexual harassment, women developed a new point of view and position—a feminist standpoint—on the culture of the workplace as a whole. As women examined the workplace through the lens of their own experiences, they started to unpack connections between the harassment they suffered and several aspects of workplace structure—namely, widespread power imbalances based on gender and a blatant lack of laws prohibiting the sexual harassment of women and providing any serious recourse for women to fight against it. Thus, out of the process of sharing and articulating their experiences of harassment, women acquired a heightened level of consciousness about the issue and began to interpret their own experiences from a new perspective. This new perspective—or feminist standpoint—enabled women to locate the true root cause of sexual harassment and empowered them to do something to change it.

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AND DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

Feminist standpoint scholarship and research teach us that women's experiences of oppression provide a powerful lens through which to evaluate society and a base from which to change it. In this section, we explore one aspect of the lens created from women's experiences of oppression in greater detail, an aspect feminist standpoint scholars call "double vision" or "double consciousness."

We now turn to the following questions:

- What is double consciousness?
- How does it develop out of women's experiences of oppression?
- Does it offer women unique insights into society as a whole?
- What about its utility for social change?

Feminist standpoint scholars argue that women, as members of an oppressed group, have cultivated a double consciousness—a heightened awareness not only of their own lives but of the lives of the dominant group (men) as well. Often, women's daily lives and labor remain invisible to the dominant group (men). Women, on the other hand, are tuned in to the "dominant worldview of the society *and* their own minority perspective" (Nielsen, 1990, p. 10). Put differently, women have a "working, active consciousness" of both perspectives (Smith, 1990, p. 19). In some cases, women's capacity for

double consciousness grows out of their compliance with socially dictated roles, such as those of wife and mother. In other cases, women develop a double consciousness to ensure their own, and their family's, physical and economic survival.

Men do not necessarily recognize, nor are they always conscious of, the daily labor many women perform in the home and their dependence on it. But many women must attend to the everyday tasks of cooking, laundry, and child care, *and* learn to navigate, or at least become functionally familiar with, the (male-dominated) public sphere of the capitalist marketplace. In this respect, women mediate between two worlds, the world of "localized activities oriented toward particular others, keeping things clean, managing somehow the house and household and the children" and the male world of the marketplace, a world of abstraction and rationality (Smith, 1990, p. 20). Susan Ostrander's (1984) research shows, for example, that in addition to managing the household, women are often expected to be conversant in, and acquire a working knowledge of, their husbands' work activities. Familiarity with the names of coworkers and the daily goings on in their husbands' workplaces enables women to provide emotional support to their husbands, support that ultimately maintains their husbands' ongoing participation and success in the public sphere (Ostrander, 1984; Smith, 1999).

While some women develop a double consciousness as they attempt to conform to particular social roles and expectations, other women rely on their capacity for double consciousness to protect themselves and to ensure survival. As Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) explains, if a woman is in an oppressed position, it is often to her advantage to be "attuned and attentive" to the male perspective as well as to her own. To survive "socially and sometimes even physically," women must familiarize themselves with how "men view the world" and to be able to "read, predict, and understand the interests, motivations, expectations, and attitudes of men" (p. 10). Harriet Jacobs's (1861/1987) survival story serves as a striking case in point. To protect herself against the sexual abuse of her master as best she could, Jacobs had to become an expert knower of his mind and moods. As she explains, "He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes"—sometimes he had "stormy, terrific ways, that made his victims tremble; sometimes he assumed a gentleness that he thought must surely subdue" (p. 27). Upon familiarizing herself with her master's psychology, Jacobs determined that his "quiet moods" were the most dangerous—"of the two, I preferred his stormy moods,

although they left me trembling” (p. 27)—and found creative and skillful ways to avoid such moods.

bell hooks’s (2004) account of growing up poor and black in Southern Kentucky provides another example of how double consciousness can develop as individuals fight to maintain survival, in particular material survival. Every day, hooks and her neighbors would cross the tracks to the white section of town where, working as maids, janitors, and prostitutes, they earned just enough money to obtain food, clothing, and shelter for themselves and their families. They were permitted to work in the white section of town, with its “paved streets, stores we were not allowed to enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face,” as long as it was in the “service capacity” (p. 156). However, they were not allowed to live there. At the end of each day of work, hooks and her neighbors would cross the tracks to “shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town.” “There were laws to ensure our return. Not to return was to risk being punished” (p. 156). By crossing the tracks to work everyday, hooks and her neighbors developed a “working consciousness” of the white world as well as their own. Whites however, seldom crossed the tracks in the other direction.

hooks’s (2004) account focuses more on African Americans as an oppressed group versus whites as a dominant group rather than women versus men. However, hooks’s explanation of how double consciousness develops as individuals fight for material survival can be applied specifically to women as well. It is probable that some of the African American individuals that hooks describes were women who worked for white men and who depended on white men for their material survival. In fact, some feminist standpoint scholars draw parallels between women’s capacity for double consciousness and the capacity for double consciousness among other oppressed groups, such as African Americans. Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) states:

Given that blacks in our culture are exposed to dominant white culture in school and through mass media as well as in interaction with whites, we can see how it is possible that blacks could know both white and black culture while whites know only their own. The same might be said for women vis-à-vis men. (p. 10)³

It should be clear now that women’s capacity for double consciousness grants them a unique perspective, or lens, through which to evaluate society as a whole. Out of their experiences of oppression and exploitation, and their

enactment of gender specific (subordinate) roles, women have developed, in hooks's (2004) language, a "mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors" (p. 156). Women are tuned in to men's activities, attitudes, and behaviors *and* to their own. But men, as members of the dominant group, are not necessarily tuned in to women's activities and behaviors; instead men's mode of seeing reality is more likely to be rooted exclusively in their own experiences. Women's capacity for double consciousness enables them to see and understand "certain features of reality . . . from which others [men] are obscured" (Jaggar, 2004, p. 60). This unique "mode of seeing," this ability to know and understand the dominant group's attitudes and behaviors as well as their own, places women in an advantageous position from which to change society for the better. To improve a given society, it is necessary to comprehend how that society functions as a whole, become familiar with the everyday lives of the dominant groups and the oppressed groups, and understand the interrelations between them. Thus, the knowledge gleaned from women's double consciousness can be applied to diagnose social inequalities and injustices and to construct and implement solutions. bell hooks (2004) sums it up best when she says that double consciousness serves both as a powerful "space of resistance" and a "site of radical possibility" (p. 156).

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AND STRONG OBJECTIVITY

Some feminist standpoint scholars argue that women's subordinate status in society, and their capacity for double consciousness that evolves from it, places them in a privileged position from which to generate knowledge about the world. This feminist standpoint concept, sometimes called "strong objectivity,"⁴ teaches us that women are more capable of producing an *accurate, comprehensive, and objective* interpretation of social reality than men are. As Alison Jaggar (2004) explains, women's "distinctive social position" makes possible a "view of the world that is more reliable and less distorted" than that available to the "ruling class" (or men; pp. 56, 57). Furthermore, some feminist standpoint scholars argue that research that begins from women's everyday lives as members of an oppressed group will lead to knowledge claims that are "less partial and distorted" than research that begins "from the lives of men in the dominant groups" (Harding, 1991, p. 185). Why? We turn now to a more detailed explanation, with examples.

In many societies, feminist standpoint scholars argue, knowledge is produced and controlled by the ruling class. Therefore, in a given society, the prevailing interpretation of reality will reflect the interests and values of the ruling class. Because of its commitment to maintaining power, the ruling class seeks to conceal the ways in which it dominates and exploits the rest of the population. The interpretation of reality the ruling class presents will be distorted such that the “suffering of the subordinate classes will be ignored, redescribed as enjoyment or justified as freely chosen, deserved, or inevitable” (Jaggar, 2004, p. 56). The positions of power and privilege that members of the ruling class inhabit allow them to separate and insulate themselves from the suffering of the oppressed, and to be more easily convinced by their own (distorted) ideology. Members of the ruling class experience the “current organization of society as basically satisfactory and so they accept the interpretation of reality that justifies that system of organization. They encounter little in their daily lives that conflicts with that interpretation” (p. 56).

Members of the ruling class are satisfied with the status quo and have no cause to question the prevailing interpretation of reality. The daily suffering faced by members of the oppressed groups, on the other hand, presents a series of “particularly significant *problems to be explained*” (Harding, 1993, p. 54) and demands further investigation. Sometimes the dominant (ruling-class-authored) ideology succeeds in temporarily convincing oppressed groups to accept their pain, to self-blame, or to deny it altogether. But ultimately, the pervasiveness, intensity, and relentlessness of their suffering push oppressed groups toward a

realization that something is wrong with the social order. Their pain provides them with a motivation for finding out what is wrong, for criticizing accepted interpretations of reality, and for developing new and less distorted ways of understanding the world. (Jaggar, 2004, p. 56)⁵

Women, as members of an oppressed group, have no cause or motivation to misconstrue reality. Unlike men, who, as ruling class members, have constructed a distorted interpretation of reality to protect their interests and maintain their power, women’s subordinate status means that they are likely to develop a “clearer and more trustworthy understanding of the world” (Jaggar, 2004, p. 62). Let’s start with the example of Harriet Jacobs. If we

examine the institution of slavery from her standpoint, through her eyes and her own lived experience of it, we obtain an interpretation of the institution that differs greatly from the dominant interpretations at the time. Slave owners constructed a paternalistic discourse about slavery: Slaves were helpless, weak minded, even subhuman, and masters were kindly father figures who took care of them and provided for them. Slave women were often portrayed as animal-like, hypersexualized, and in need of being “tamed” by the Victorian virtues and morals of their white mistresses. From Harriet Jacobs, we learn the truth about the widespread cruel and brutal treatment of slaves by their masters, and we learn about the humanity, suffering, and courage of slave women in particular. By exposing the reality of the sexual violence and exploitation that many slave women were forced to endure, Jacobs succeeded in challenging the (distorted) ideologies about slave women that held sway at the time.

Betty Friedan’s (1963) research on American housewives in the 1950s and 1960s provides another example of how women’s subordinate status in society places them in an advantageous position from which to build knowledge—to construct a more accurate picture of social reality. As we learned about in an earlier section, dominant ideologies and media images of the 1950s portrayed women as happy housewives—women’s true and only calling in life was that of wife and mother. But in reality, many women were feeling unhappy, dissatisfied, and limited by that role. And these feelings of emotional pain and frustration motivated women to come forward and challenge the widespread happy housewife ideology. Women were able to successfully question the validity of an accepted interpretation of reality—that of the happy housewife—based on *their own knowledge and lived experience as housewives*. Finally, by overturning that (distorted) happy housewife ideology, women were free to step outside the boundaries and restrictions of the housewife role, to pursue other goals, interests, and skills—in short, to construct a new reality that more accurately reflected the full range of their potential as human beings.

In sum, the feminist standpoint concept of strong objectivity teaches us that the representation of reality from the standpoint of women is “more objective and unbiased than the prevailing representations that reflect the standpoint of men” (Jaggar, 2004, p. 62). Strong objectivity stems from women’s oppressed position in society and from their capacity for double consciousness that evolves from that position. Because women can know and

understand the dominant groups' behaviors and ideologies as well as their own, starting research from women's lives means that "certain areas or aspects of the world are not excluded" (Jaggar, 2004, p. 62). As Sandra Harding (2004b) puts it, "Starting off research from women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order" (p. 128).

NEW COMPLEXITIES AND MULTIPLE STANDPOINTS

As we have learned above, some feminist standpoint scholars argue that women's subordinate status in society, combined with their capacity for double consciousness, grants them a kind of "epistemological privilege" (Jaggar, 1997; Narayan, 2004) from which new and critical research questions arise. These new and critical questions, if explored, may produce a less "distorted" and more "reliable" understanding of social reality (Harding, 1993; Jaggar, 1997, p. 192). Further, and perhaps most important, because research that starts from women's lives yields a more accurate picture of how a given society functions, it also uncovers the *necessary ingredients for social change*. Only by exposing the intraworkings of society as a whole do we learn about which elements require modification and reconstruction such that a more just, humane, and equitable society can be constructed. As Alison Jaggar (1997) explains, because research that begins with women's lives grants a more accurate and "reliable appraisal" of society, it *also* grants us a "better chance" of "ascertaining the possible beginnings" of a new society, a society in which all members can equally thrive (p. 192).

More recently, however, some feminist standpoint scholars have begun to challenge and rework the claim of women's capacity for a more complete understanding of social reality and the potentiality of producing more "objective" results by beginning research from the lives of women. As Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) puts it, feminist standpoint claims to accuracy and objectivity are both "promising and problematic" (p. 25). On the one hand, feminist standpoint scholars remain committed to the "liberating effect" of these claims and the goals of social justice and social change that accompany them. After all, the main purpose of attaining a more accurate, more complete understanding of society is to be able to change it for the "betterment of all" (p. 25). On the other hand, many object to the very notion, implicit within these feminist

standpoint claims to accuracy and objectivity, that the experiences and perspectives of one group (in this case women's) are more "real (better or more accurate) than another's" (p. 25).

Beyond the difficulties of establishing that women as a group, unlike men as a group, have a unique and exclusive capacity for accurately reading the complexities of social reality, it is equally problematic to reduce all women to a group sharing one experience and a single point of view, or standpoint, based on that experience. This form of essentialism is a double-edged sword. Notions of objectivity, and the "more accurate" or "more reliable" standpoint of women, become increasingly difficult to negotiate as a diverse array of women's experiences are taken into account.

- How is the nature of feminist standpoint epistemology changing as racial, cultural, and class-based differences between women are exposed?
- As feminist standpoint scholars recognize women's multiple social realities, do they lose the capacity to produce truthful and meaningful research findings?
- Do the experiences and standpoints of some women offer a more objective and accurate assessment of social reality than those of others?
- If so, what are the criteria for determining the experiences and standpoints that are the most or the least reliable?

Let's turn to these critical questions in greater detail.

Most feminist standpoint scholars now acknowledge that women "occupy many different standpoints and inhabit many different realities" (Hekman, 2004, p. 227). In short, they take differences between women seriously. However, while the claim that women can be categorized into one group with uniform characteristics and a single standpoint has been discarded, feminist standpoint scholars continue to debate how best to incorporate women's differences into the research process. A range of strategies has been suggested. Sandra Harding (1991, 1993, 2004a) has proposed several, two of which are highlighted here. The first requires the consideration of women's different standpoints but at the same time maintains that some standpoints may generate more truthful, objective knowledge claims than others. Specifically, this tactic suggests that the higher the level of oppression, the more objective the account: The standpoint of the most oppressed group of women will generate the most truthful research findings. As Harding (1991) explains,

It should be clear that if it is beneficial to start research, scholarship and theory in white women's situations, then we should be able to learn even more about the social and natural orders if we start from the situations of women in de-valued and oppressed races, classes and cultures. (pp. 179–180)

In this approach, Harding urges researchers and scholars to engage in a process of “critical evaluation” to determine which social situations “tend to generate the most objective knowledge claims” (Harding, 1991, p. 142).

In a second approach, Harding (1993, 2004a) calls for heightened attention to be paid to the differences and even the conflicts between women's standpoints:

Feminist knowledge has started off from women's lives, but it has started off from many different women's lives; there is no typical or essential woman's life from which feminisms start their thought. Moreover, these different women's lives are in important respects opposed to each other. (Harding, 1993, p. 65)

In this approach, Harding (2004a) emphasizes that it is precisely in the differences, diversity, and even conflict between women's experiences that we can learn the most about society at large. As she explains,

Each oppressed group will have its own critical insights about nature and the larger social order in order to contribute to the collection of human knowledge. Because different groups are oppressed in different ways, each has the possibility (not the certainty) of developing distinctive insights about systems of social relations in general in which their oppression is a feature. (p. 9)

And yet, despite Harding's call to recognize difference—the “subjects/agents of feminist standpoint theory” are “multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory”—she continues to emphasize the fact that the experiences of the oppressed, no matter how diverse, produce more accurate accounts of the social order than the accounts of the dominant groups. She states, “Nevertheless, thought that starts off from each of these different kinds of lives can generate less partial and distorted accounts of nature and social life” (Harding, 1993, p. 65).

In contrast to Harding's concept of a “maximally objective” standpoint, but in resonance with Harding's recent emphasis on difference, other feminist scholars also focus on the *diverse array* of knowledge found within a

multiplicity of standpoints. Instead of attempting to find tactics that reduce all standpoints to the “least distorted one,” or to generate universal knowledge claims from an additive model of multiple standpoints, these feminist scholars question whether it is possible, or even desirable, to “produce a single, unified and complete description of the world” (Longino, 1999, p. 339). Each woman’s standpoint presents a unique lived experience and perspective and *should be valued as such*. According to these feminist standpoint scholars, paying attention to the distinctive characteristics of each woman’s standpoint, and the diversity among and between women’s experiences, does not interfere with our capacity to build knowledge. In fact, it is precisely within the distinctive characteristics of a particular standpoint, or the uniqueness of a particular woman’s experience, that we can hope to find new knowledge.

Donna Haraway (1991) and Helen Longino (1999) argue that knowledge grows out of women’s unique lived experiences, and the specific interpretations of social reality (or standpoints) that accompany those experiences. Instead of attempting to glide over differences between women, Haraway (1991) points to the invaluable insights gleaned from the differences between women’s standpoints and the “elaborate specificity” of each (p. 190). Similarly, Longino (1999) asserts that women’s knowledge is located in “particular places, in particular times” (p. 333). Women have different standpoints, and embody different knowledges, depending on how they are oriented toward, and interact with, their environments. In this way, each woman’s unique experience and standpoint directs our attention to details and features that we might otherwise overlook (p. 335).

By applying the knowledge-building strategies proposed by Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, and Helen Longino to some of the women’s lives that we have become familiar with throughout this chapter, we gain a clearer understanding of how each of their strategies actually work in practice. According to Sandra Harding’s first tactic, for example, the lives and experiences of poor African American women (highlighted by Patricia Hill Collins’s, 1990, research) potentially offer a more accurate and complete picture of social reality than the lives and experiences of white middle- and upper-middle-class housewives (highlighted by Betty Friedan’s, 1963, research). The implication is not to deny any oppression or suffering experienced by white women. However, because the oppression and suffering experienced by African American women as a group tends to be greater than that of white women, it is by starting from the lives and experiences of

African American women that we achieve a more objective standpoint on society as a whole.

According to Donna Haraway (1991) and Helen Longino (1999), we can learn more by paying close attention to the unique perspective, or standpoint, on social reality that the experiences of African American women and white women offer us. Each of these women's experiences teaches us something different and valuable about society. By starting with the everyday lives of poor African American women, we learn about society from the perspective of women who have to work outside the home to make ends meet. We learn about low wages; the lack of quality, affordable child care; and the creative alternative child care strategies that African American women have developed. By starting with the everyday lives of white middle- and upper-middle-class housewives on the other hand, we learn about society from the perspective of women who do not have to work outside the home to make ends meet. We learn about the dissatisfaction and isolation these women experience as they perform their daily housekeeping and nurturing tasks in the home—and about the falseness of the happy housewife imagery and ideology. We also learn about women's desires to expand their lives beyond the roles of wife and mother—to enter the outside world of work.

OVERCOMING RELATIVISM

If, as Donna Haraway (1991), Helen Longino (1999), Sandra Harding (1991, 1993, 2004a, 2004b), and others encourage, we value the unique perspective on reality—or standpoint—produced by each woman's lived experience and respect the diversity of knowledge generated by women's many different experiences, do we also give up the opportunity for political activism?

- Is it possible to value a diverse range of women's perspectives and lived experiences *and* come together and create an organized force for social change?

Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) characterizes this dilemma as follows: "Once one rejects objectivism, the alternative seems to be a kind of relativism that is not very satisfying" (p. 28). It is difficult to combine women's many experiences

into one universal standpoint without risking the repression of differences between women or the reduction of all women to a single group with uniform characteristics. On the other hand, by valuing the diversity of women's experiences and perspectives equally, feminist standpoint scholars must be careful to avoid a kind of paralysis that hinders women from moving forward together and taking a stand on social issues. If all groups produce "specialized thought and each group's thought is equally valid" and no group can claim to have a "better interpretation of 'the truth' than another" (Collins, 1993, p. 625), do we risk a state of apolitical relativism, a state of "being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally" (Haraway, 1991, p. 191)? It seems clear that if women are going to work to influence, change, and create new social policies, it is imperative that they develop some common ground or shared perspectives to meet with success. As Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) explains,

One could argue that there is no need to determine one view as more correct, that plurality of views could prevail. But at some point—such as when important decisions have to be made—some view of social reality must be endorsed. To develop a policy about abortion, for example, one would have to take a stance in an area where there are conflicting, seemingly irreconcilable views. (p. 27)

But how can we facilitate the coming together of women with different lived experiences and unique perspectives and encourage the bridging of standpoints needed to wage a successful battle for social change without also suppressing the diversity and uniqueness of each?

Many feminist standpoint scholars emphasize the need for open dialogue between women and across different perspectives as a first step toward building the kinds of allied networks or solid bases needed to fight from. Helen Longino (1999) encourages the development of sites of "critical discourse" both within and between communities. In these sites, community members freely express their own perspectives *and* engage in dialogue with other communities whose "shared background is different" (p. 343). Similarly, bell hooks (1990) declares the need for "meaningful contestation and constructive confrontation" between different perspectives and urges the creation of safe spaces "where critical dialogues can take place between individuals who have not traditionally been compelled . . . to speak with one another" (p. 133).

The kind of dialogue that feminist standpoint scholars encourage is one in which every woman's unique lived experience and the perspective, or

standpoint, based on her experience gains a hearing. Indeed, some feminist standpoint scholars argue that through the very process of constructing a space that is open to dialogue across women's different experiences and standpoints, a space where a multiplicity of women's voices are granted equal air time, we actually build *community*. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) urges us to hearken back to the African call and response tradition, whereby everyone must learn to speak and to listen to ensure membership in the community: "Everyone has a voice, but everyone must listen and respond to other voices in order to be allowed to remain in the community" (p. 625–626). In the context of such a community, a community that serves as a gathering site on which multiple standpoints converge, and where respectful listening and dialogic interchange is encouraged, we can begin to imagine the potential for increased understanding among and between women from different backgrounds and cultures and from different life experiences.

Patricia Hill Collins (1993) describes the potential for community-driven growth of empathetic understanding between groups who hold different standpoints as follows:

Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives. (p. 626)

In this way, through communal dialogue, a multiplicity of views are shared and listened to. It is precisely because each community member is able to trust that her own unique perspective will be heard and respected that she is able to fully hear and respect the views of others. Such communal dialogue may enable us to reach a point at which, as Elsa Barkley Brown puts it, "all people can learn to center in another's experience, validate it, and judge it by its own standards without need of comparison or need to adopt that framework as their own" (cited in Collins, 1993, p. 625). But beyond facilitating empathetic understanding across women's standpoints *and* respecting the diversity and uniqueness of each, can such communal dialogue enable active alliances between standpoints?

In fact, as feminist standpoint scholars point out, communal dialogue that fosters interaction between women while also maintaining respect for the diversity of women's perspectives sets the stage for intragroup connections

and enables the growth of alliances that are needed to wield power and forge social change. As women's diverse standpoints are shared, respectfully listened to, and validated, connections may be made "where none existed before" (Walker, cited in Collins, 1993, p. 625). As a woman shares her story of being sexually harassed in the workforce or being denied access to a safe and legal abortion, for example, other women who have not experienced these same events but have encountered gender-based exploitation and feelings of powerlessness in other contexts will probably connect to her experience.

These connections do not have to be made at the expense of diversity, nor do they risk the denial of women's different and unique lived experiences. Instead, women can connect with one another through identifying a "common thread," or a "unifying theme through immense diversity" (Walker, cited in Collins, 1993, p. 625). Let's say, for example, that working women from a range of socioeconomic, racial, and cultural backgrounds came together to share and listen to each other's experiences and perspectives on work and family issues. Without denying or disrespecting each other's differences, they could probably unite around some common problems and join together to fight for some common goals, such as equal pay to men, better maternity leave programs, more affordable and quality child care, and better protections against sexual harassment in the workforce. Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) describes this process as a "fusion of horizons": "With communication across and among a diversity of women's standpoints, each standpoint may be enlarged, enriched, or broadened such that a fusion, or synthesis, between standpoints may occur" (p. 29).⁶

By coming together and sharing their unique experiences and perspectives, women can build alliances, develop a common position, and take a stand on a particular issue without compromising their differences. Achieving a shared position, or standpoint, on a particular issue promotes the most promising course of action for social change—a solid base from which to fight. At the same time, we must also remember that women's experiences, perspectives, and the issues they face are constantly evolving and changing across space and time. Therefore, it is important that dialogue between and among women does not *end* with the achievement of a particular alliance, or shared standpoint. Instead, as many feminist standpoint scholars point out, dialogue must be *ongoing*. We must work to find ways to incorporate continuous listening and interchange into our communities of women—or, more simply, to construct *community* in Patricia Hill Collins's sense of the word. Such ongoing dialogue

and debate, if successfully integrated into our communities, also drives, and even guarantees, a built-in process of healthy evaluation, a process Helen Longino (1999) calls “socializing justification.” Maintaining a safe space for ongoing dialogue and debate—and for the creation and re-creation of new alliances and standpoints among and between women—remains acutely important as new issues arise and as women’s struggles for justice take on new shape and form.

In many respects, committing to ongoing dialogic interchange and evaluative processes between and among women’s standpoints is one and the same with committing to the ongoing struggle for women’s empowerment. After all, women’s struggles are not uniform or stagnant but ongoing and subject to change. For example, take the issue of women and work. In the 1960s and 1970s, women fought just to gain entry into the workforce.⁷ Then, there were the struggles for equal pay. Now women are fighting for better maternity leave policies and more affordable quality child care.⁸ The fact that women’s experience, and their standpoint on reality that evolves from that experience, may change and evolve across space and time does not make it any less real or legitimate. As Linda Alcoff (1989) argues, women can achieve a positionality, or standpoint, that is simultaneously “determinate” *and* “mutable” (p. 325). In other words, we can treat women’s standpoints on a particular issue or set of issues as legitimate, as serious, as grounded in social reality while also acknowledging these standpoints’ location within a “moving historical context” (p. 325). Indeed, by highlighting “historical movement and the subject’s ability to alter her context” (p. 325), we take women’s standpoints seriously without reducing all women to a universal group with the same experiences, needs, and characteristics.

CONCLUSION

Feminist standpoint epistemology is an innovative approach to knowledge building that breaks down boundaries between academia and activism, between theory and practice. Feminist standpoint scholars seek to give voice to members of oppressed groups—namely, women—and to uncover the hidden knowledge that women have cultivated from living life “on the margins.” Feminist standpoint epistemology asks not just that we take women seriously as knowers but that we translate women’s knowledge into practice, that we apply what we learn from

women's experiences toward social change and toward the elimination of the oppression not only of women but of all marginalized groups.

Feminist standpoint epistemology has become more complex and multifaceted and continues to evolve over time. Feminist standpoint scholars no longer talk about *the* experience of women or conflate all women into one oppressed group. They recognize instead that women hail from a diverse range of class, cultural, and racial backgrounds, inhabit many different social realities, and endure oppression and exploitation in many different shapes and forms. As a result, the theoretical development of feminist standpoint epistemology is multidimensional and ongoing, and scholars working within the feminist standpoint framework continue to apply new and innovative research methods to capture the diversity of women's lives and experiences. Some of these methods will be explored in other chapters in this volume. Finally, while feminist standpoint scholars understand and recognize differences between and among women—different experiences of oppression and different standpoints, or perspectives, based on those experiences—they also continue to emphasize the importance of dialogue between and among women, the need for empathetic understanding, and the potential for achieving alliances. After all, alliances between and among women are possible—*without risking the repression of difference*—and *necessary*, if we hope to fight for more just societies and to improve women's condition within them.

NOTES

1. This is excerpted from a letter written by Harriet Jacobs to her publisher in 1857. In it, Jacobs describes her motivation for writing her autobiography, titled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*.

2. It is important to note that although feminist research methods are not the explicit focus of this chapter, feminist research methods were employed in many of the studies on women's lives and experiences that are cited throughout. The discussions of women's lives and experiences in this chapter are concerned more with content than with method. However, because many of the women's lives and experiences highlighted here would not be known about except for the application of new and innovative feminist methods, the importance of such methods is implicit. After all, the framework of feminist standpoint epistemology demands that women's lives and experiences, "hitherto denied, repressed, and subordinated" (Smith, 1990, p. 12), break out and gain a hearing. To gain access to and uncover women's lives and experiences, new and innovative feminist methods are often required. Feminist interviewing,

autobiography, oral history techniques, and institutional ethnography are examples of the feminist methods used to acquire the information about women's lives and experiences cited in this chapter. These feminist methods, among others, will be discussed in greater detail and serve as the primary focus of later chapters in this volume.

3. The philosopher G.W. F. Hegel's (1967) concept of the "master-slave dialectic" easily applies here but transferred to the case of women and men. Hegel explains that the master is only able to have an illusion of independence, the illusion of an independent consciousness, precisely because of his dependence upon his slave. Without his slave's emotional and material labor, he would not be free to engage in "independent pursuits." While the slave, to ensure his own survival, must remain aware not only of his own world but the world of his master as well, the master, due to his privileged position, is able to remain unaware of the world of his slave. Indeed, just as many men remain unaware of their dependence upon women's labor (labor which sustains their dominance) so too is the master unaware of his dependence upon the slave.

4. The concept "strong objectivity" was developed and named by feminist standpoint scholar and philosopher Sandra Harding. For more from Harding on strong objectivity, see the first Behind-the-Scenes piece in Chapter 1 of this volume. See also Harding's book *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Harding, 1991) and her chapter "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is 'Strong Objectivity?'" in *Feminist Epistemologies* (Harding, 1993) and, in updated form, in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (Harding, 2004a), edited by Sandra Harding. Please also note that "strong reflexivity," an important aspect of Harding's "strong objectivity" that bears relevance to the method and practice of research, is not the focus of our discussion here. Strong reflexivity demands that researchers actively acknowledge, and reflect on, how their social locations, biographical histories, and worldviews interact with, influence, and are influenced by the research process. For more from Harding on strong reflexivity, see the second Behind-the-Scenes piece in Chapter 1 of this volume. Finally, some manifestations of strong reflexivity—namely, practicing reflexivity about one's own social location, biographical history, and worldview throughout the research process—are discussed in Chapter 5 of this volume.

5. In some instances however, while women's suffering plays a large role, it is not their pain alone that motivates them to begin to critique and challenge the status quo. As we have learned about in the case of American housewives of the 1950s or from the women who suffered from sexual harassment in the early 1990s, sometimes a process of consciousness-raising also needs to occur. As women come together and share their stories and begin to understand that they are not suffering alone, they stop blaming themselves for their own suffering and are empowered to look outward, toward society, and challenge the societal norms and dominant ideologies that are oppressing them. In this way, women's critical point of view—their position of political consciousness—their feminist standpoint—has to be *achieved* (Hartsock, 2004) through a process of consciousness-raising, as opposed to stemming directly and unproblematically from their pain and suffering.

6. Another hypothetical example of Walker's (cited in Collins, 1993) concept of a "unifying theme through immense diversity" and Nielsen's (1990) "fusion of horizons" is as follows: If a group of women get together to discuss abortion rights, each woman's standpoint may be deepened or broadened as she learns about other women's experiences, concerns, and perspectives. A woman who is socioeconomically privileged may focus solely on the legal right to choose to have an abortion. A woman who is from a rural area may also be worried about a literal lack of access to doctors' offices or clinics in her area that perform abortions. Finally, a poor woman may express concern about whether she can afford to pay for a safe and legal abortion. Through sharing and listening to each other's different concerns, these women might formulate a more complex, more developed standpoint on abortion rights—moving from a straightforward pro-choice position to a pro-choice position that demands a certain number of available clinics per region *and* governmental assistance to help ensure that poor women can obtain safe and legal abortions.

7. That is not to deny the many thousands of women who had been tilling the land and working in service, industry, education, and medicine prior to the 1960s and 1970s. After all, for hundreds of years many women across the globe have had to work to maintain their own, and their families', survival.

8. It is also important to note that each of these struggles are ongoing: Women still do not equal men's numbers in the higher-ranking professions, for example, and continue to make less money than men make in equivalent positions.

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