February 27, 1989

Professor Mary Beth Ruskai
Courant Institute, New York University
251 Mercer Street
New York, NY 10012

Dear Professor Ruskai,

Mary Frank Fox sent your paper, "HOW STEREOTYPES ABOUT SCIENCE AFFECT THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN," to me for a preliminary review and for suggestions for revision. Naturally, since it was a talk for a conference, it covers many topics, not all of which you could expand in a paper. The issues of invisibility, encouragement in school settings, the detrimental effects of being the junior partner in a two-career marriage, the effects of a parent in the same field--these topics have all been well researched.

The area that has not, and which would make an interesting paper for GENDER & SOCIETY readers, is doing science, its stereotyping as an abstract, rational, masculine activity, and how science practice styles in actuality vary by individual, by laboratory, by project, by discipline, so that being a woman (whose practice styles also vary in the same way) hardly precludes being a scientist. What seems to be more important is that the individual (and his or her talents) are valued in the setting in which he or she works.

If you are interested in pursuing the topic, I would suggest collecting some data on varieties of practices styles by laboratory, project, and discipline, which would prove your first point—that science is much more heterogeneous than the stereotypes indicate. Then I would look at the biographies and autobiographies of successful and unsuccessful women scientists and the settings in which they worked. I think that would prove my hypothesis that it is congruence of style and setting plus their value in their colleagues' eyes that helps or hinders women scientists.

That may be a larger enterprise than you were thinking of for this paper, but in the event you do want to submit a full-fledged paper, I am enclosing our guidelines for submission and style sheets.

Sincerely,

Judith Lorber
Editor

Official Publication of Sociologists for Women in Society
Dear Professor Lorber,

In view of the fact that your letter of February 27 was not accompanied by the promised guidelines for submission to the journal Gender & Society, I do not know your criteria for judging the suitability of my manuscript for that journal. However, the content of your letter is so orthogonal, and even contradictory, to the themes of my paper that I find it difficult to believe that you actually read the manuscript.

For example, the “detrimental effects of being the junior partner in a two-career marriage” is not an issue that I discuss at all.* While the issue of invisibility within the scientific professions may have been adequately researched, the issue of invisibility outside the professions, particularly the scandalous neglect of women scientists by some gender theorists and women's studies programs, has not. My discussion of education issues is less concerned with “encouragement in school settings” and parental influence than with other issues, particularly stereotypes and misconceptions about science; the role of conformity as distinct from gender stereotyping; gender related consequences of gender neutral problems, such as poor quality education; and the role of research scientists in this arena.

Your suggestion that I collect data on varieties of scientific style vs. stereotypes astonished me. Although my citations were hardly exhaustive, I do regard this area as rather thoroughly overgrazed. That you have a different perception seems to confirm my assertion that the problem is not a need for more data, but wider dissemination of the existing evidence.

In any case, your suggestions for sociological investigation are not so much “a larger enterprise than [I was] thinking of” as antithetical to my main theme. The time commitment required for such studies would, in effect, require women scientists to abandon their scientific careers — a most undesirable consequence. However, I do think that there is much to be gained from collaborations between sociologists and women scientists, in which the primary role of the scientist is to help formulate hypotheses, suggest directions for

* Please see attached postscript on p. 3.
research, and provide commentary on relevant scientific issues. I had, therefore, made a strong plea, in my talk, for more interactions between these groups. I sent my manuscript to Mary Frank Fox, in the hope that your journal could play a role in facilitating such interactions and collaborations; apparently, I was wrong.

A year or so ago, a paper I submitted to a physics journal was initially rejected by the editor as “unsuitable for the journal”. Fortunately, a prestigious member of the editorial board intervened promptly on my behalf, and the paper was duly accepted. Outrageous as the editor was, he did not have the audacity to suggest that, instead of studying multi-particle Hamiltonians, I do a small project in group theory (his pet topic). His treatment of my manuscript pales in comparison to your suggestion that I examine biographies in order to verify one of your hypotheses.

Since there seems to be a serious misunderstanding, let me state that my goal is not to do research designed for publication in your journal, but to find an appropriate forum for wider discussion of the issues in my manuscript. I am not sufficiently familiar with your readers to know what they would consider “an interesting paper”; however, I do know that the informal circulation of my manuscript is tying up Xerox machines across the country. Moreover, there is increasing concern that the disenfranchisement of women scientists from sociology and women’s studies may be as serious a problem today as their disenfranchisement from the scientific community was in the past. Regardless of the suitability of my manuscript for Gender & Society, I had expected a more serious and enlightened reading.

Sincerely,

Mary Beth Ruskai

cc. M.F. Fox
Postscript

My paper mentions issues of marriage and lifestyle only peripherally, as part of the much larger theme of tolerance for diversity. If I were asked to comment further, I would emphasize my concern that most studies tend, inevitably, to focus on the problems of those who make the conventional choice of husband and children. The problems of women who choose single, or unconventional, lifestyles have been sorely neglected.

A comparison of the biographies of Emmy Noether and Maria Goeppert Mayer is most illuminating. Both emigrated from Europe just before WW II. The unmarried Noether, already regarded by her colleagues as one of the best of the world-leading Göttingen mathematicians, could only find a position at Bryn Mawr (or a comparable women's college in Britain.) Mayer, fresh out of graduate school, held a series of irregular positions as she accompanied her husband to various institutions. However, these positions — unsatisfactory though they were — gave her the opportunity to do nobel prize winning research. Had Maria Mayer remained Maria Goeppert, she undoubtedly would have had no alternative to a teaching appointment at a women's college with neither the time, nor the opportunity, for research.

The point I wish to make is not that single women are worse off, but that women in all lifestyles encounter serious problems which merit further study. Unfortunately, attention has focused on the obvious issues, such as child care and dual-career couples, of conventional lifestyles; while the more subtle problems facing single women are neglected. Moreover, the emphasis on problems of traditional lifestyles sometimes comes perilously close to suggesting that an unconventional career choice is acceptable only if it can be combined with a conventional lifestyle.

The example of Beatrice Tinsely was included (as clearly stated in the surrounding paragraphs) as part of a discussion of the question of whether the physics community is fundamentally and pervasively hostile to women, or whether sex discrimination results from a bigoted minority. It was not intended to illustrate the well-known problems of dual-career couples. Indeed, I know of many comparable examples involving single or lesbian women. [In one such case, the women was denied tenure by a senior administrator despite the unanimous positive recommendation of her department whose male members were so supportive that they carried an (unsuccessful) appeal all the way to the Board of Trustees.] I used Tinsely as an example in my talk, not because of her lifestyle, but because the facts are public knowledge and her biography is readily available.
Thank you for thinking of me and the journal, Gender & Society. I have moved to Penn State University (Department of Sociology, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802), but I continue as Associate Editor of the journal.

What I propose to do is send along your working version to Judith Lorber, Chief Editor. I would like to see a version of your commentary as a "point of view" for the journal. I concur that the statements of scientists are all too frequently missing from commentaries on "gender and science." Also, I concur (and with alarm) that the literature on "gender differences" overlooks the greater variation in attainments, performance, or whatever within (compared to between) gender groups.

The decision about whether to pursue your piece will likely depend upon the (level of) crunch for journal-space and whether the piece can possibly be grouped with something along similar lines.

Would you be so kind as to post me copies of your other commentaries on women in math and science, as you referred to in your citations (AWM Newsletter), or from other places or occasions? Also, would you send along anything interesting from your January symposium on Women in Physics? My own work continues to focus upon research productivity (and gender differences in productivity). I am now moving into the area of the impact of disciplinary context.

Regards, Mary Frank Fox

I received the copies of the correspondence with J. Lorber re your commentary. Two things come to mind: one more, and one less, obvious.

First: it is difficult to build these bridges between natural/biological/physical and social scientists re issues of gender and science. But I am going to keep trying. Please, don't you give up either.

Second (less obvious): There are profound disciplinary differences in editorial practices. In the social sciences, good editors (those who take time and take seriously) often suggest topics, leads, and hypotheses for investigation and (believe it or not) authors tend to be gratified. I know that it would be outrageous to do that in physics or mathematics--but sociologists occupy a loosely defined, fragmented, low consensus field. You, of course, are a mathematician, offering a commentary on gender and science, and not someone who would go out and collect data on some suggested "lead." But consider the disciplinary differences in editorial practices, and it explains some of the problem.

Please continue to send me articles from your newsletter, keep me updated on your panels on gender and science, and informed on AAWS activities. Let me hear from you and your colleagues.

Regards, Mary F. F.
Fri, Jan 20, 1989

Dr. Mary Frank Fox  
Survey Research Center  
Univ. of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Dear Dr. Fox:

We met last year at the conference on *Women and the Natural Sciences* at Barnard. At that time you suggested that I consider submitting my remarks as an article for a journal on gender and society which you were editing. Unfortunately, I never found time to write up my talk. However, I recently wrote a related manuscript for a symposium at another conference.

A copy of that manuscript is enclosed; please let me know if you think it would be suitable for your journal. I should emphasize that the enclosed manuscript should not be regarded as a formal submission. If you are interesting in publishing it, I would like to make a few revisions, and possibly expand the section on creativity and intuition to include some more of the comments I made at Barnard. However, I would appreciate receiving a preliminary assessment before I undertake the task of revising my paper.

Until June, you can contact me via electronic mail: ruskai@acf2.nyu.edu or by telephone at: 212-998-3306 and 212-529-4511 (h).

Sincerely,

Mary Beth Ruskai