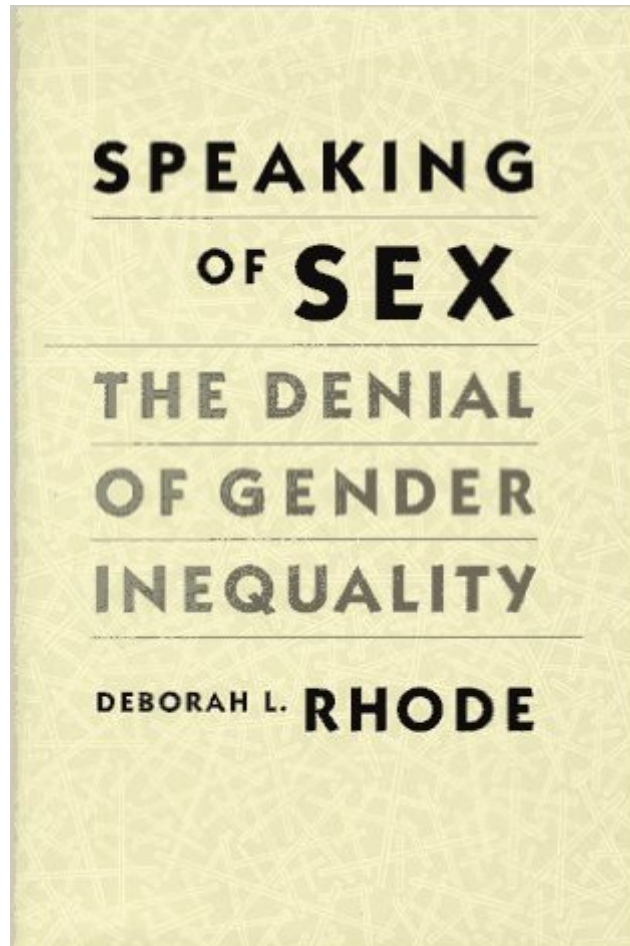


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Speaking Of Sex: The Denial Of Gender Inequality



Synopsis

Speaking of Sex explores a topic that too often drops out of our discussions when we speak about sex: the persistent problem of sex-based inequality and the cultural forces that sustain it. On critical issues affecting women, most Americans deny either that gender inequality is a serious problem or that it is one that they have a personal or political responsibility to address. In tracing this "no problem" problem, Speaking of Sex examines the most fundamental causes of women's disadvantages and the inadequacy of current public policy to combat them. Although in the past quarter-century the United States has made major progress in addressing gender discrimination, women still face substantial obstacles in their private, public, and professional lives. On every significant measure of wealth, power, status, and security, women remain less advantaged than men. Deborah Rhode reveals the ways that the culture denies, discounts, or attempts to justify those inequalities. She shows that only by making inequality more visible can we devise an adequate strategy to confront it. Speaking of Sex examines patterns of gender inequality across a wide array of social, legal, and public policy settings. Challenging conventional biological explanations for gender differences, Rhode explores the media images and childrearing practices that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. On policies involving employment, divorce, custody, rape, pornography, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and reproductive choice, Speaking of Sex reveals how we continually overlook the gap between legal rights and daily experience. All too often, even Americans who condemn gender inequality in principle cannot see it in practice--in their own lives, homes, and work environments. In tracing these patterns, Rhode uncovers the deeply ingrained assumptions that obscure and perpetuate women's disadvantages.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Reading this sensible and intelligent book, and remembering how much I enjoyed Rhode's later book on the reform of the legal profession, I wondered why it is that such an eminently reasonable and articulate woman, who has provided such a thorough and well documented defense of feminism, should be so obscure in the world of public intellectuals. Rhode teaches at Stanford Law School, this book is published by Harvard University Press, and she does not write in a the complex academic jargon that all good journalists are trained to hate. Yet she is never called upon when journals like The New Republic or the New York Review of Books thinks it should have a female contributor. Pity, because this is a good book. Let's start off with "Ideology and Biology." Rhode points out the flaws in biological explanations in sex differences. There are species of primates where the men tend the infants and the women forage for food. Media trumpet studies that point out gender differences, and ignore the many studies that find no difference or are ambiguous (especially on PMS). Over the last thirty years the differences in math scores between boys and girls has dropped dramatically. Those differences that do remain "have not taken account of even obvious influences such as the number of courses taken." "Many studies find no correlation between levels of testosterone and violence, hostility, or aggression." Much of the gender gap on physical strength is clearly related to our aesthetic desire for unhealthily thin women and our desire to encourage boys sports. "Men may be more likely to use speech patterns to establish control because they are more likely to occupy positions where they are in control.

"Rhode breaks little new ground," wrote one critic (Katha Pollitt, for the Atlantic Monthly) about Deborah L. Rhode's 1997 book *Speaking of Sex: The Denial of Gender Inequality*. While she has admirable intentions, her writing has several shortcomings which destroy the effectiveness of her book, even for some of those who may agree with her. Rhode received her B.A. in 1974 and her J.D. in 1977, both from Yale. She has an extensive list of legal and political honors and positions. Currently, Rhode is on the faculty at Stanford University. Several of her books have met with moderate success. Given Rhode's qualifications, it is disappointing that the thesis of *Speaking of Sex* is weak, making for a poor read. Throughout the book, Rhode's arguments are riddled with contradiction. Possibly the most prominent weakness of this book is that it fails to call the reader to action. While the book has some merits, such as its basic intents and its informative value, it falls short of making the world a better place for women. One of the most obvious downfalls of *Speaking*

of Sex is its frequent self-contradiction. At times, Rhode seems to call for complete equality between the sexes, essentially producing a unisex society. At other times, she argues that female qualities should be celebrated in an effort to raise the status of her sex. In other examples, Rhode contradicts herself about the political aims of current feminism. "A way we avoid confronting gender inequality . . . is to individualize the issues," she explains. Only a few pages later, she complains, "We settle for equality in form rather than equality in fact." These clashing aims illustrate the contradictions, or perhaps conflicts, within the feminist movements of the past couple decades.

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