

# THE PALEOLITHIC GLASS CEILING

## Women in human evolution

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### INTRODUCTION

In November 1993, the cover of *Discover* magazine featured a striking diorama from the new permanent exhibit "Human Biology and Evolution" at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Walking alone on the African savanna in the shadow of a vast volcano, a naked couple leave their tracks in the white volcanic ash. When I visited the exhibit, I stood for a long time pondering the evocative and unsettling scene. A deep and disturbing message about gender relations was being telegraphed, but what was it? Finally, I realized that the scene represented a modern – "scientific" – version of Adam and Eve's ejection from the Garden of Eden, with a spouting volcano instead of an angel's fiery sword, driving our ancestors into the unknown. In thinking about this message, I wondered, how far during the last three decades have we really come as a discipline in the ways we depict women (and men), and their roles during human evolution?

In pursuing this question, I begin in the 1950s and continue through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and discuss how women have been portrayed in reconstructions of human evolution in reference to two recurrent themes: (1) the sexual division of labor tied to subsistence and hunting and a rigid assignment of "women's roles;" (2) the reproductive-social unit affiliated with "monogamy" and parental care and its constraints on female sexuality and reproductive behavior. The role of women in evolution has undergone a number of permutations, but paradoxically, in spite of challenges to the contrary, the outcomes have resulted in little change. By the time we arrive at the 1990s, anthropologists reach a wide audience through textbooks, television specials and museum exhibits where women in evolution are rendered either invisible nonparticipants or as the handmaidens to men in prehistory. Whether or not there is a conscious effort to keep women in their place, these pervasive attitudes impose a "glass ceiling" on our female ancestors, much like the "glass ceiling" that limits the upward occupational mobility of contemporary women both within and outside of the academic disciplines.