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DURHAM, N.H. -- Currently, more than 600,000 American women undergo hysterectomy every year, and, eventually, one out of every three American women will have a hysterectomy. In her new book “Am I Still a Woman?: Hysterectomy and Gender Identity,” University of New Hampshire sociologist Jean Elson goes beyond the medical implications of gynecological surgery to explore the subjective meanings of sexual reproductive organs in relation to being female and feminine.

Elson will discuss and sign copies of her book Saturday, Feb. 28, 2004, at 3 p.m. at Barnes and Noble in Newington. Refreshments will be provided.

In her book, Elson offers the testimony of 44 women who have had a hysterectomy for benign conditions. She found their responses to the question “Am I Still a Woman?” as varied as the women themselves.

“Most women were not disappointed to lose their menstrual periods,” she says, “but child bearing was much more complicated. Even some of the women who thought they didn't want more children still felt a loss. For many of them, the crucial issue was that their reproductive potential had been terminated suddenly, involuntarily and prematurely. In contrast, some women were relieved they no longer felt social pressure to reproduce. The women also had diverse reactions to potential changes in sexuality following hysterectomy, and partner support was a key factor.”

Elson said she discovered that women overwhelmingly claimed female identity by referring to cultural and social descriptions, rather than to biological definitions. “The thing that surprised me most was how important feminine identity was to these women. Being a woman was very significant to their sense of self.”

Elson believes that it is vital for women to consider possible gender implications prior to undergoing gynecological surgery. “Although most hysterectomies are considered elective, even women who believed they were making an informed decision felt they had no real options if they were in pain or bleeding profusely, so it is important for medical researchers to develop viable alternatives.”

In addition to providing women with a much-needed resource, Elson hopes her book will encourage physicians to act as educators for their patients who are contemplating gynecological

surgery.

Earlier this month the Eastern Sociological Society held a discussion panel on the topic of Elson's book, and there are plans for a similar panel this summer at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems.