

Opposing Forces: How, Why, and When Will Gender Inequality Disappear?

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What does the future hold for gender inequality? In the United States and many other countries, women's status has improved remarkably over the past two centuries. Will we continue to move ever closer to full gender equality? Or could gender relations stagnate where they are or even move backward?

That gender remains a crucial aspect of social organization is not in question. In all too many parts of the world women are exposed to humiliations ranging from mockery to rape, from small rituals curtailing their freedom to absolute limitations in what they can do, what they can wear, whom they can marry, and where they can go. Gender is a ruling idea in people's lives—even where egalitarian ideology is common, as among young, affluent, educated Americans—that defines different expectations for behavior, dress, orientation to children, sexuality, and obligations to provide income.

To pose meaningful questions about the possible declining significance of gender is not, therefore, to ask whether gender still matters or even how much it matters. Rather, we want to inquire how the implications of gender for social life have changed. In my work I have sought to show how and why gender inequality has declined over the past two centuries. Here I extend that analysis forward: If the past is a guide to the future, what can we reasonably expect will happen to gender inequality in the future?

For millennia, women everywhere were subordinate to men under the most diverse economic, political, and cultural conditions. But in recent centuries, an extraordinary process has emerged, developed, and diffused across the world, eroding gender inequality, elevating women's status, and transforming modern society.

If a young woman from the early nineteenth century could be whisked into our own time, she would surely be stunned by the improvements in women's status.

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Women voting, holding political office, attending college, taking jobs, owning businesses, living on their own, traveling by themselves. Extraordinary! How these images contrast with the society described by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s (1835/1966, 601): "In America, more than anywhere else in the world, care has been taken constantly to trace clearly distinct spheres of action for the two sexes. . . . You will never find American women in charge of the external relations of the family, managing a business, or interfering in politics."

Contemporary young women often see present conditions differently. Why are so few women in positions of power, they ask? Why are women expected to bear the burden of caring for children or others needing care? Why do women earn less money than men? Why should women have to live with the anxiety about sexual harassment in their offices and still fear attack as they walk down the street?

We have two contrasting visions of women's status. Compared to the restrictions that faced women two centuries ago, the degree to which gender inequality has declined seems remarkable. When weighed against an imagined state of full and unimpeded equality, the continued shortcomings in women's status seem inexplicable and remarkably frustrating. These visions are complementary, not inconsistent. The degree of current gender inequality can only be assessed by means of comparison, to the past or to an imagined future. Therefore, before asking if, how, or to what degree the significance of gender inequality will continue to decline, we need to choose a perspective from which we will make our assessments.

The historical perspective I use focuses on long-term social processes that have determined and will continue to determine the trajectory of gender inequality. I argue that the driving force behind gender inequality's decline over the past two centuries—the *why*—is a redistribution of power and interests that has come about as a result of modern economic and political organization interacting with women's continuous resentment of and resistance to subordination. Thus, the *why* is not a shift in moral sentiments or a series of disconnected historical developments (although these were part of the historical unfolding) but a series of structural shifts. The actions that drove gender inequality's decline—the *how*—were widely dispersed, involved both women and men, were executed by both ordinary and powerful people, represented both individual and organizational efforts, and were largely motivated by immediate self-interests, not concerns about gender inequality. *When* women will gain equality is indeterminate. I argue that the eventual eradication of gender inequality is an inevitable outcome of these long-term causal forces, which will not be stopped by countervailing forces. However, the pace of inequality's decline can be speeded or slowed by collective action, political maneuvering, or unforeseeable historical upheaval.

While my theoretical analysis of women's rising status suggests a powerful dynamic of change that will extend into the future, some other theorists have argued that countervailing forces threaten to halt continued movement toward gender equality. I contend that these arguments have serious empirical and theoretical flaws.

While theorists have proposed a variety of countervailing forces could threaten continued improvements in women's status, the logical form of their arguments is similar. First, the past improvement in women's status is generally recognized as

considerable, although significant inequities remain. Second, the reasons for inequality's past decline are usually left relatively undefined but are commonly assumed to involve a group of historically specific and somewhat contingent events and processes, such as women's movements, wars and other crises, and changes in labor needs of business. Third, some facet of gender inequality, such as childcare, is highlighted as being apparently resistant to change. That a condition resists change is usually inferred from the empirical observation that changes in the condition have not kept pace with women's rising status. The conditions that concern theorists are ones that seem to prevent women competing equally with men. Fourth, it is suggested that the resistance to change characterizing these problematic aspects of inequality may be strong enough to withstand the social and historical forces that might otherwise produce greater equality. Fifth, apparently preferring to err on the safe side, theorists conclude that continued progress toward equality is in jeopardy.

In contrast to this chain of logic, which I consider flawed, I argue that we cannot understand and explain the persistence of gender inequality today until we have an adequate theory explaining inequality's dramatic decline over the past two centuries. By posing a causal theoretical-historical argument and stressing the role of dispersed and structurally induced processes in gender inequality's decline, my theory generally discounts the relevance of short-term changes in the explanation of long-term transitions.

Furthermore, my analysis stresses theoretical concerns over empirical ones. Debates over the trajectory of gender inequality have sometimes been hampered by efforts to declare one empirical finding more accurate or important than another and by reliance on simple projections of past trends. The how, why, and when of gender inequality's decline are better understood as theoretical problems. Like most meaningful theoretical problems, they have an empirical basis and empirical implications. To be sure, the facts of the past and present are the material from which we can fashion images of possible futures, yet only through theories showing how those past facts were produced can we accurately imagine what facts can be expected from the future.

Thus, I suggest that an alternative logic is analytically superior to the reasoning commonly used by those who argue that countervailing forces threaten to stop movement toward equality. First, I contend that gender inequality's decline over the past two centuries has resulted from a complex process that is linked to fundamental elements of modern economic and political structures. The movement of power outside families has made women and men equivalent objects of exploitation and control for economic and political organizations while simultaneously making women's enduring resistance to inequality effective and expandable for the first time. These effects are an unavoidable result of multiple characteristics of the modern order and will continue to be operative as long as the economic and political orders retain their general form. Moreover, the breakdown of inequality has its own secondary capacity to become self-propelling, accelerating and institutionalizing the movement toward equality as has occurred over the past several decades.

I argue, further, that to formulate a plausible argument that this complex

process will not continue to move us toward equality would require a theory of countervailing processes with sufficient power to obstruct the engine of change. Such a model must pass both empirical and theoretical tests of sufficiency and plausibility. While some aspects of gender inequality—such as women’s child-rearing responsibilities or the sex segregation of occupations—have changed at a disappointing pace, neither their empirical history nor theoretical models of their impact suggest they have the capacity to block the path to equality.

HOW AND WHY HAS GENDER INEQUALITY DECLINED?

Why has male dominance, after persisting stably through many millennia and enduring varied and dramatic economic, political, and cultural upheavals, undergone a steady, progressive decline for the past two centuries? Answering this question is one of the greatest theoretical challenges facing contemporary social science.

In its most general sense, gender inequality refers to the broad range of conditions by which women have been disadvantaged, including their economic opportunities, political standing, legal status, personal freedom, familial obligations, access to education, and cultural representation. Over the past few decades, we have accumulated innumerable studies of gender inequality’s experience and causes in every walk of life; studies that document the improvements in women’s political, legal, economic, educational, and cultural status; and studies that seek to explain particular aspects of gender inequality’s decline, such as women’s increased employment, the improvement in women’s education, the winning of the vote, or the rise of the modern feminist movement. This research notwithstanding, efforts to discover a general theoretical explanation of the relatively recent broad decline in gender inequality are uncommon.

In my study of gender inequality’s two-century decline in the United States, *Destined for Equality* (Jackson 1998), I sought to meet this challenge. In that book I analyzed diverse changes in gender inequality as they accumulated over two hundred years, to develop a theory explaining why this extraordinary transformation has occurred. This theoretical analysis aims to show that a fundamental, comprehensible process has driven gender inequality’s decline. This process encompasses and clarifies the many specific changes contributing to gender inequality’s decline and the theory incorporates and builds on the existing scholarship about them. Here I will summarize some of the essential points of that theory, provide some illustrative historical contexts that show the theory’s intent, and explain the logic behind the theory.¹

Key Historical Characteristics of Gender Inequality’s Decline

When viewed from a distance, the history of women’s rising status in the United States appears steady and orderly over the past two centuries, across varied

realms of social life. When examined closely, however, this history seems to be woven from an endless variety of broken threads, a multitude of independent events that represent a potpourri of circumstances, actors, motives, strategies, and effects.

The challenge is to connect the continuity of change seen from a distance with the discontinuity seen from close up, to connect the seemingly disparate strands of change and discontinuous events to an enduring set of underlying ultimate causes (see Lieberman and Lynn 2002; Reskin 2003). These enduring causal processes create conditions that induce the proximate causes and outcomes, shaping predispositions, calculations, responses, opportunities, and effects without directly producing or requiring any specific actions or sequence of events. Over time, they create conditions under which diverse actors will pursue strategies consistent with improving the relative status of women although these actors' intentions are to further their self-interests or cope with unavoidable exigencies.

Table 7.1 summarizes the rise in women's status during the past two centuries and some of the areas where inequality still persists. The most important areas of past positive change are legal and political status and economic opportunities, because standings in these arenas largely decide people's opportunities for personal achievements and social status. The legal, political, and economic arenas are also the main loci of power in this society, so that a group's status in these arenas largely decides its treatment. The other categories—higher education, accessibility of divorce, sexuality, and cultural imagery—have a lesser, secondary role in the preservation or erosion of inequality, but they are equally important to the experience of it. Dividing the past two centuries into three broad periods, the table shows how conditions in each of the social arenas became progressively more favorable to women; the final column suggests key remaining unequal conditions that still need considerable change to approach equality.

In the first of the three periods, during the nineteenth century, the state extended to married women legal rights to control income and property. Businesses began hiring young, single women, first from the working class and, later, some from the middle class. Women gained access to secondary education and then some colleges began to admit them. Divorce, while difficult to obtain, became available as an escape from marriage. The ideological denial of women's sexuality was belied by women's increasing interest in obtaining effective contraception. Similarly, women's increasing participation in suffrage activities from the mid-century onward suggests an emergent conception of their identity that was at odds with the idea that men and women should keep to their "separate spheres."

In the first half of the twentieth century, the second period, women gained political status through suffrage. The number of employed women continued to rise, as some white-collar jobs emerged for middle-class, educated women and employers began to hire married women. Women's access to a college education rose steadily throughout the period. Contraception became widely available and middle-class advice manuals gave expression to the increasingly widespread expectation that women could enjoy sex within marriage. While divorce retained considerable stigma, it became much more available and accepted. Depictions of women

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TABLE 7.1 / Women's Changing Status in American Society

	Nineteenth Century	Late-Nineteenth to Mid-Twentieth Century	Mid-Twentieth Century to Present	Future Changes Needed for Equality
Legal and political status	Formal legal equality instituted	Formal political equality instituted	Formal economic equality instituted	Equity in high political offices
Economic opportunity	Working-class jobs appear for single women only	Some jobs for married women and for educated women	All kinds of jobs available to all kinds of women	Equity in high-status jobs
Higher education	A few women enter public universities and new women's colleges	Increasing college; little graduate or professional	Full access at all levels	Equal presence in prestigious fields
Divorce	Almost none; made available for dire circumstances	Increasingly available, but difficult	Freely available and accepted	Equity after divorce
Sexuality and reproductive control	Repressive sexuality; little reproductive control	Positive sexuality but double standard; increasing reproductive control	High sexual freedom and reproductive control	End sexual harassment and fear of rape
Cultural image	Virtuous domesticity and subordination	Educated motherhood, capable for employment and public service	Careers, marital equality	End perception of sexes as inherently different

Source: Author's compilation.

as glamorous, smart, and ambitious emerged in popular culture, particularly the movies.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, women's status has risen significantly as women gained positions in all levels of political life and the government formulated varied policies against discrimination. Women's employment levels, the range of jobs they held, and their wages have continued to converge with those of men. Women's college enrollment surpassed men's and women gained full access to advanced degree and professional programs. The emergence of both divorce and women's sexual freedom knocked down more barriers. Although both men's and women's cultural images remained complex and inconsistent, they continued

to become more similar, and women were increasingly portrayed as powerful, independent, equal participants in all facets of life.

This brief depiction gives a sense of the breadth of changes contributing to gender inequality's decline and the continuity of that decline over the long term. Continuity is crucial to the theoretical argument: gender inequality has decreased gradually over many generations, and under a wide range of changing political, economic, and cultural conditions. This historical continuity suggests the action of enduring processes or conditions, not specific catalyzing events nor even historical periods. Yet many people sense that even though a lot has changed in the past few decades, improvements in women's status before then were sporadic and relatively isolated in their significance. This is not true. What is true is that the changes' overall impact on people's lives was limited in the beginning—in a context of overwhelming inequality, only so much relief was possible. Nevertheless, during each period, significant changes occurred in each of the areas of social life summarized in table 7.1. The consistently broad sweep of changes to women's status over widely varied facets of life, such as employment, laws, and sexuality, suggests that the central causes must be effective across these different facets of life or changes in some facets must induce changes in others.

The underlying, enduring causal process that has driven the events eroding gender inequality must have left some kind of telltale footprint, visible behind the specific historic causes of these concrete events. A review of some highlights from women's rising legal and political status and their increasing assimilation by the economy will help shine some light on this footprint.

Policies affecting women's legal and political status developed in three overlapping phases. In the first phase, in the nineteenth century, state laws and judicial interpretations gradually gave married women basic, formal legal equality by granting them independent control of inherited property and earned income and the right to make contracts. In the second phase, the state enacted formal political equality between the sexes by granting women the right to vote. In the third phase, since World War II, policies, laws, and court decisions have furthered women's formal economic equality by banning discrimination against them.

The initiative to extend property rights to married women, in the first phase, came from state legislators and businessmen seeking to ensure the collection of debts and to rationalize the law. These "married women's property acts" began to appear about the middle of the nineteenth century. The laws of the state of New York were representative. In 1848 New York State passed "an act for the more effectual protection of the property of married women," which held that "the real and personal property of any female who may . . . marry . . . shall continue her sole and separate property" (Rabkin 1980, 183–87). As more and more states passed such laws, the only apparent role played by a concern for women's status derived from the emergent desire of affluent people to transfer property to their daughters. (This probably reflected a shift to divisible wealth derived from a market economy and the increasing likelihood of having only daughters because of a declining birth rate.)

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The second phase, the initiative for woman suffrage, came mainly from middle-class women who made up the suffrage movement, but the process depended greatly on the actions of men, who had complete control of the political apparatus and the votes needed to pass any legislation giving women the vote. In 1848, participants at the Seneca Falls Convention resolved “that it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective vote,” and woman suffrage was a publicly contested issue from this point until 1920, when passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution removed all limits on women’s voting.

Although the length of this struggle reflects resistance to woman suffrage, the historical record also suggests far more acceptance than we might expect by both ordinary men and politicians (Jackson 1998, 33–46). The first bill proposing a national suffrage amendment was considered in 1868; later Congressional committees repeatedly considered and reported favorably on a suffrage amendment in the 1880s, although prejudice and the fear of political risks combined to prevent its passage by Congress. Obviously, legislators considering suffrage bills were all male. Similarly, in suffrage referenda that occurred in many states after 1890, typically between two-fifths and two-thirds of the male voters supported woman suffrage. Indeed, between 1890 and 1919, through the actions of male legislators and male voters, twenty-six states granted women full or partial suffrage. The reasons that men came to accept woman suffrage are complex, but the historical record suggests that a key role was played by the accumulated knowledge that giving women the vote had little immediate impact on either women’s place or the political process.

In the most recent phase, feminist activists seized the initiative to achieve legal and political equality for women. The legislation against discrimination was preceded by a long history of disputes over unequal pay rates for women that stretch back to World War I (U.S. Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau 1951) and intensified during World War II. After many states adopted equal pay laws, Congress adopted equal pay for equal work through the Equal Pay Act in 1963; the following year, women were written into the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Later statutes and policies declared discrimination against women illegal in education expenditures, housing, credit, employment, police protection, and divorce—laws preceding modern feminism that became weapons for women fighting discrimination. Women’s role in politics and government expanded. Although women remain a minority in electoral offices, between 1970 and 2002 the number of women in the U.S. House of Representatives rose from twelve to sixty; the number in the Senate went from one to thirteen; the percentage of representatives serving in state legislatures who were women increased fivefold, to almost 25 percent; and women’s share of the mayoral positions in cities of 30,000 or more went from 1 to 21 percent. These changes reflected the advocacy efforts of the modern women’s movement, the maturing effects of woman suffrage, and the long-term accumulation of organizational power’s disinterest in gender. Feminist advocates, politicians seeking votes, and officials pursuing rationalization all contributed to these changes.

Across the three phases in which women’s legal and political status changed,

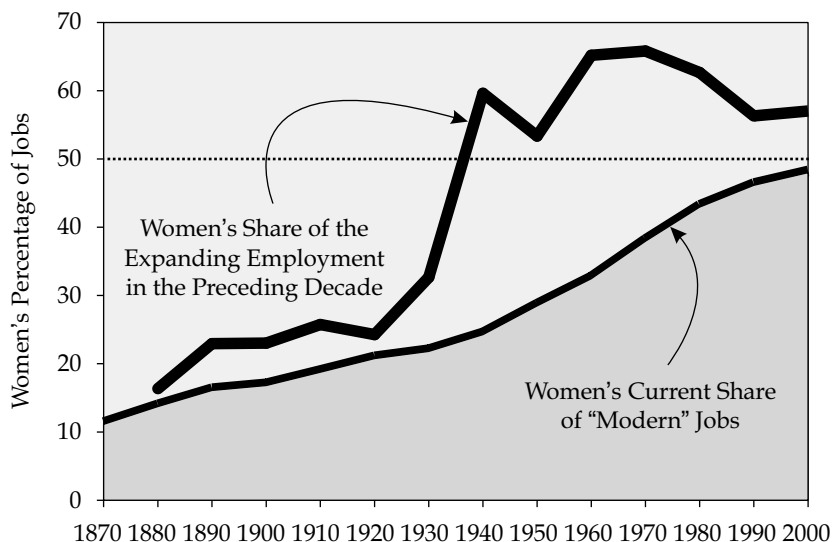
the principal initiative shifted from men in power to women empowered by past improvements. Men of influence largely motivated and directed the extension of legal rights in the nineteenth century. While the woman suffrage movement provided the voice for suffrage, the transition was implemented by men with exclusive and unchallenged power, as politicians looked for competitive advantages and ordinary men increasingly wavered between neutrality and weak support. In the third phase, the modern feminist movement, broadly conceived, has most often and most consistently taken the initiative, although many important changes show independent influences of rationalized government and political competition (such as the equal pay acts), and most reflect the relative absence of coordinated male opposition. Along the way, behavioral changes by ordinary men (as when they supported suffrage) and ordinary women (as when they supported female politicians) was crucial.

The long-term assimilation of women into the economy was a more decentralized process than legal or political changes, involving even more diverse actors (Jackson 1998, 71–124). Over the nineteenth century, employers hired an ever-rising proportion of the nation's unmarried women, until more than one half of all unmarried women between the ages of fifteen and forty-five earned a wage by 1890 (Jackson 1984, 148, n26). Many women also found employment outside industry in such occupations as agricultural labor, domestic service, and teaching (Hooks 1947). This female labor market was created by unmarried working-class women seeking a mixture of wage supplements and independence (Kessler-Harris 1982; Weiner 1985). Whether they had never married or had lost their husbands, these women had neither the restrictions nor the advantages of marriage. They were hired by male employers, both large and small, who sought cheap labor or gender-specific skills.

This pattern of ever more women seeking jobs and ever more employers seeking to hire them continued through the twentieth century. During the first half of the century, new jobs opening in low-level, white-collar occupations and manual service-sector jobs accounted for much of this gain. Employers hired women as secretaries, clerical workers, telephone operators, beauticians, factory operatives, and store clerks. Middle-class women received employment particularly as teachers but also in other positions demanding education, such as nursing and social work. Employers seeking new labor sources found women a good, lower-paid alternative, particularly for jobs that seemed to fit their education or female-identified skills, such as caretaking or communication (Hooks 1947, 42). By the end of the century women held close to one half of all jobs. For over a century, women's share of jobs in the modern economy rose at a much steadier pace than many historical references suggest (see figure 7.1).² The most important change in the pace occurred in the two decades preceding World War II, when employers' dependence on women to fill jobs added by the expanding economy shifted from hiring women for around one-fourth of the new jobs to over one-half, where it remained for the rest of the century.

The long-term continuity of women's rising employment disguises a number of separate underlying causes of this development. In particular, women's move-

FIGURE 7.1 / Women's Rising Share of Paying Jobs, 1870 to 2000



Source: Author's compilation, data from: U.S. Bureau of the Census and Edwards (1943); U.S. Bureau of the Census (1975, 129, 132, 139–40); U.S. Department of Labor (1984, 12, 14, 55, 56); U.S. Bureau of the Census (2004, 391); Hooks (1947, 34, 222, 238).

ment into high-status jobs, to which they previously had little access, from the 1960s forward involved several agents. Whereas most of the preceding rise in women's employment furthered employers' self-interests, to gain high-status jobs women had to fight against resistance ranging from unsympathetic indifference to hostile opposition. The modern feminist movement emerged as a champion of women's rights that could credibly threaten retaliation via effective political mobilization. The government contributed antidiscrimination and affirmative-action policies. Corporate employers responded to these external pressures by rapidly extending the organizational logic of impartial standards. Educational institutions largely did the same.

The Fundamental Sources of Gender Inequality's Decline

As stated earlier, the detailed history of gender inequality's decline is more notable for its irregularity than its continuity: the route to change was composed of extraordinarily diverse, independent, seemingly unpredictable events that were produced by all kinds of actors and conditions for an endless array of reasons. The theoretical challenge is to identify an enduring, pervasive causal process that ac-

counts for the disparate events that constitute the aggregate continuity of gender inequality's decline.

The solution to this historical puzzle concerns the links between the macro-level of social structure—the level at which enduring processes altered the social environment—and the micro-level of decision making and action—the level at which people and organizations responding to concrete historical contexts acted out their interests, opportunities, and beliefs. Arthur Stinchcombe (1968, 188) remarked that “the significance of a value for social life depends on whether it is associated with power or not. . . . To have any appreciable effect on social functioning, the correlation [between commitment to a value and having power] has to be quite high.” The progressive shifting of social power and resources from families to organizations gradually diminished the association between power and gender inequality, leading to an erosion of interest in its preservation. The gradual elaboration of structurally induced indifference, the ever-declining significance of gender as a consideration in decisions at all levels of power, allowed the always-present efforts of women to better themselves to become ever more successful.

Diverse actors who were not linked directly by causal chains have contributed to women's rising status in unpredictable ways, because gender has become increasingly irrelevant to the functional economic and political organization of power and opportunity. Over time, modern economic and political organization resulted in a separation of power from the commitment to preserving gender inequality. Economic and political activities moved out of the household, and power shifted from families to larger, more centralized organizations of businesses and government. These structural changes intrinsic to modern society have transformed interests and redistributed social power in ways such that people and organizations pursuing their individual interests and adapting to ordinary circumstances increasingly choose strategies inconsistent with the preservation of gender inequality.

Complex social processes such as these involve complex causality—not chain-like but, rather, contingent, probabilistic, and often loosely coupled. Specific social events do not bear the stamp of or allow easy attribution to one causal process. Instead, to distinguish the effects of one causal process, one must look selectively for relevant aggregate effects.

The principal engine of change driving the erosion of gender inequality over time involves the interplay of several key factors:

1. The inherent dynamism of a modern economic, political, and social order.
2. The transformation of gender-related interests as a result of the movement of social power and resources from families to organizations.
3. Women's enduring resistance to subordination and the growth of their aspirations for independence and power.
4. The accelerating effects of women's rising status, which increased the effectiveness of women's strivings while reducing the will and capacity to obstruct them.

The Declining Significance of Gender?

The social dynamism of modern history involves continual new generations of individuals, families, businesses, political regimes, and other organizational entities (such as schools) who, possessing varying degrees of freedom in their choices, face new conditions, have to make crucial decisions about the allocations of resources and positions, and often are unable to replicate past strategies or inherited wisdom. The transformation of gender-related interests means that women, men, and organizational entities arrive at decision points with interests that are increasingly indifferent to gender inequality per se (regardless of their prejudices and predispositions) and are increasingly at odds with the choices that would better sustain such inequality. Women's continuous resistance to inequality and their interest in achieving status and success means that they will be a source of constant pressure such that effort is required to sustain a system of inequality. Further, they will take advantage of any opportunities created by the economy, government, education, and other organizations.

These processes combined with the characteristics of modern society mean that new generations of actors will face circumstances requiring gender-relevant decisions, these actors will have diminished interests in actions consistent with preserving gender inequality, and women's efforts at self-improvement will add opportunities and pressures favoring more egalitarian decisions. The result is that a wide range of social actors are increasingly likely to make decisions that erode inequality. The accumulation of these events and their effects, constituting the reduction in gender inequality, furthers the transition in interests and the expansion of opportunities so as to solidify the past pattern of decisions and raise the likelihood of similar decisions in the future.

For example, over time employers offered more jobs to women to solve labor shortage issues and because demand grew rapidly for some female-identified jobs, such as secretaries and clerks. This growing demand for female labor did not fit the argument associated with Gary Becker's *The Economics of Discrimination* (1957), suggesting that competitive markets will expunge the imputed inefficiency of discrimination (Jackson 1998, 104-13). Employers rarely hired women at discriminatorily low wages to avoid being pushed out of business by other firms (Arrow 1973). Even prejudiced businessmen would commonly employ women rather than go out of business or forgo significant profit opportunities, but labor needs loomed much larger than wage savings in their decisions to hire women.

Gender inequality was also subverted by developing individualism: the increasing tendency to make decisions on the basis of what people know or do rather than as a result of their birth origins or group memberships (Jackson 1998, 125-72). As modern economic and political orders absorbed the mechanisms of power, they increasingly treated people as individuals independent of their families. This generates institutional individualism, a phenomenon in which the relations between institutions and people are direct, consensual, and functionally circumscribed. Bureaucratic rationalization, growing out of large organizations' needs for control and predictability, creates interests in impartiality and stimulates indifference to gender. A free labor market, rules governing promotions, grades in schools, standardized entrance exams, and beliefs that jobs should go to the best-

qualified applicants all reflect individualism. Institutional individualism stimulates educational systems that subvert ascribed inequalities by exalting achievements and abstract standards, induces the rise of meritocratic ideals, and transforms families from permanent ties of dependence into voluntary ties of companionship. Individualism diffusely erodes commitments to the discriminatory practices and prejudiced expectations that sustain gender inequality, and thus reinforces the principal factors listed earlier.

With each generation, more people acted inconsistently with past gender expectations as they adapted to the emerging pattern of interests. Women sought education, jobs, promotions, and better life styles. Women, like all subordinated peoples, have always individually challenged their status, but historically, the more gender inequality declined, the more effective their challenges became and their capacity for collective action grew. Powerful men—those wielding influence over other men because they controlled economic or political resources—sought competitive advantages for their organizations or themselves; to these ends, they used women in roles such as students, employees, clients, or voters. Ordinary men begrudgingly conceded women's expanding claims in their own generation, and often encouraged their daughters to claim more. In Stinchcombe's terms, the social value of gender inequality lost its significance as it lost its association with power.

Although prejudices against women still ruled many actions of men with power, their institutional interests repeatedly prompted them to take actions that contradicted gender inequality. To employers, the sex of a potential worker became another characteristic to factor into the calculation of the relative advantages of alternative employment strategies. To politicians, the sex of a voter became one more factor in the calculation of public political acts and the molding of images. Those wielding organizational power may have treated women as pawns, but as pawns women became an increasingly important factor in economic and political strategies. The more organizations followed a rationalized search for profit and efficiency or competed for political advantage, the more indifferent they became toward the sex of those they were exploiting or benefiting. Political and economic leaders discovered, gradually and intermittently, that they might gain more by assimilating women than by preserving policies that kept them subordinated to men. Other institutional contexts such as the family and the modern school system also became less hospitable to gender inequality the more they adopted an institutional form of individualism.

Simultaneously, men gradually withdrew their defense of the barriers limiting women's advance. In part, this probably reflected a loss of will and ability, but even more it showed a lack of motive. Of course, men did resist changes, but we should not overlook the resistance that did not occur. No agitation to restore men's relative monopoly of property rights followed the passage of the married women's property laws. Although men's full electoral approval of woman suffrage grew only gradually, it was surprisingly high in many early referenda, and passage of woman suffrage laws did not arouse backlash efforts to rescind those rights. Although men often resisted women's entry into male occupations, they showed little interest in resisting women's movement into other occupations or

the general growth in women's employment. Although men may have placed a higher priority on educating their sons, they commonly sought education for their daughters as well, and more generally they did not oppose the rising education of women. Finding evidence of men's resistance is easy, but in fact, the increasing halfheartedness of men's resistance is more historically striking than the fact that they resisted in the past. As Theda Skocpol (1979) suggested of successful political revolutions, the disarray of the powerful lays the groundwork for effective revolts.

The state, sometimes depicted as a simple instrument of male privileges, has played a complex role in the long-term decline of gender inequality. Until recently, those in government were not much concerned with raising women's status, for their collective interest in effective government and their competitive interests in expanding political influence made them largely indifferent to gender inequality. In the course of pursuing general state interests, they enacted some policies (such as granting property rights to women) that accidentally benefited women, and as they competed for political advantage they accepted other policy changes in response to pressure (as with woman suffrage).

By themselves, large-scale organizations' relative indifference to gender inequality and men's declining defense of masculine privileges would not have led us toward gender equality at the historical pace we have experienced, for neither major institutions nor men as individuals became committed to creating gender equality. The push needed to overcome reservoirs of prejudice, discrimination, institutional inertia, and indifference came from women's own efforts to gain higher status, both individual and collective. The altered pattern of women's actions represented a change in opportunities more than a change in interests. Despite the restrictive influence of cultural expectations about women's place, most women tested the limits of their social identities and whenever new opportunities appeared, some women were ready to try them. By taking advantage of these opportunities, they widened the space for more women to follow.

Women's collective efforts to improve their circumstances were particularly important for bringing down barriers that could not be surmounted through individual efforts. The suffrage movement gave progressive women a voice that placed women's political rights on the agenda, showed women's potential impact as voters, and nurtured the efforts of its members to forge a new identity. Similarly, modern feminists, by organizing themselves, were able to place women's economic and social rights on the public agenda, catalyze the government and political party responsiveness to women's potential electoral influence, and nourish the development of new ideas about gender and women's place in the world.

To survive, the social edifice of gender inequality had to stand on a sound foundation, provided by the conditions that reproduce inequality. The institutional contradictions induced by economic and political development changed those conditions—eroding the foundation. Once the conditions sustaining inequality weakened sufficiently, women's pressure could pull down the deteriorating edifice, toppling inequality piece by piece.

COUNTERVAILING TENDENCIES

Despite the extraordinary improvements in women's status over the past two centuries, some aspects of gender inequality have seemed exceptionally resistant to erosion in recent decades, leading to arguments that further reductions in gender inequality may be difficult to achieve. Three important issues in the debate over limits to women's progress are women's child-rearing responsibilities, the limits to women's occupational achievements, and the widespread predisposition to judge the sexes differently, to women's disadvantage. We know that women continue to do more child-rearing and household work, that women's average pay remains less than men's, that people still think about women and men differently, and that men still occupy most of the highest positions of political and economic power.

These facts give rise to an important theoretical question: Do these conditions suggest the presence of countervailing causal processes strong enough to obstruct the causal processes that have propelled gender inequality's decline?

To answer this question, I propose three criteria to test the adequacy of claims about countervailing forces. First, a basic empirical question: Has the relevant obstacle really shown the implied immovability over the past several decades? If the imputed obstacles, such as attitudes toward women, are enduring impediments to progress, they must themselves resist change. If they have been changing in an egalitarian direction, their ability to obstruct other changes or to remain unchanged themselves becomes questionable.

Second, a theoretical test: Has anyone devised a credible analysis showing how the purported barrier will sustain itself and have the power to stop the powerful engines of change that have driven the movement toward greater equality? We have seen how conditions and processes endemic to modern society have cleared the way for and stimulated actions improving women's status. A serious barrier to continued movement toward equality must have some means of pushing back against the powerful forces promoting change.

Third, a deep-historical test: If we project the implied obstructive process back in time, is the argument consistent with what we know about gender inequality's decline over the past two hundred years? If an apparently severe obstacle has been troubling egalitarian advances without stopping them for two hundred years, it is unlikely to become a greater brake now.

Proponents of what are here called "countervailing" forces would not normally use the term "countervailing," for they do not begin with a theory of the forces that have driven the decline of gender inequality. Rather than thinking in terms of conditions or processes that must *stall* a social engine pushing change forward, they largely adopt a more static approach, focusing on the possibility that some aspects of gender inequality seem relatively unchangeable. To give these arguments a fair hearing, we must largely infer the theoretical logic that is the concern of our second criterion.

The diverse efforts to understand countervailing forces, conceived as relatively

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intractable dimensions of inequality, reflect larger issues in the explanation of women's status. The difficulty of explaining the continued persistence of gender inequality has increased as the barriers to equality have declined. In the mid-nineteenth century, women's inferior legal status, their exclusion from voting and government, exclusion from good jobs or higher education, and institutionalized subordination to husbands were obvious to all. The differential treatment was a given; what was needed was to show that it was neither necessary nor just. By the middle of the twentieth century, women's status had changed considerably (see table 7.1), but gender inequality was still obvious to those who wished to look. Causes of inequality were easy to identify. Discrimination against women was rampant and obvious in most spheres of life, whatever the formal rules might say. "Give women an equal chance" was a cry shared by the diverse voices released by modern feminism. Nearing the end of the twentieth century, the characterization and explanation of gender inequality became more problematic. Overt discrimination against women, greatly diminished, was rejected by public opinion and was, moreover, illegal. Few doors were closed to women and their success in varied prestigious domains was highly visible. Pinpointing and explaining gender inequality became more difficult.

The theoretical problem (and the political one) was to offer an explanation of gender inequality that was not predicated on the presence of direct discrimination. Each of the three countervailing forces we will consider—women's child-rearing responsibilities and the household divisions of labor, women's employment disadvantages, and the potential influence of culturally determined differential gender expectations—can be produced by discrimination, but recent treatments of these issues aim more to show how they may have the effect of sustaining gender inequality in the absence of discrimination. They are invoked more as causes than as effects and characterized as threats to further movement toward equality.

Here we want to ask whether convincing theoretical accounts show how and why these three countervailing forces will resist egalitarian change and obstruct the general movement toward greater gender equality. Applying our three criteria of viability and credibility, we want to see whether any of these efforts have assembled empirically and theoretically defensible claims. In light of our argument that a powerful engine of change continues to undermine the supports for gender inequality, claims about potential obstacles, to be considered convincing, must meet the following three criteria:

1. Show empirically that the purported obstruction has held its ground in recent decades.
2. Provide theoretical reasons for the belief that the obstruction can hold off the pressures for change in the future.
3. Possess a theoretical logic that is consistent and plausible when applied against the history of changes that have occurred over the past two centuries.

Any obstruction argument that fails to meet all the criteria is a speculative claim at best.

The Household Division of Labor

Most often mentioned among the reasons people give for believing we are not on a path toward gender equality are women's responsibilities for household labor, child rearing, and other home-based work. Two uncontested observations feed this concern: women still do more of this work, and time invested in family and household is time unavailable for careers and other pursuits.

Unfortunately, we know less about changes in the patterns of domestic labor and child-caring responsibilities than we would wish. Both conceptual and methodological difficulties hamper research on these questions. Domestic labor and parenting do not easily translate into clearly identifiable activities. Also, the time and effort that go into relevant activities is hard to measure accurately. Most data concern the time invested, not the effort expended nor the work accomplished. Domestic activities commonly intermingle different tasks and forms of relaxation in ways that confound efforts to measure work through people's self-reports. So we should interpret all findings warily.

Available data indicate that the proportion of household labor and child rearing done by men has increased significantly, partly as a result of their own greater efforts and partly because of a decrease in the amount women do. The research suggests that by the 1990s husbands spent about half as much time as wives doing household work (see Coltrane 2000, for a general review of the relevant literature). Researchers often distinguish between more female-identified tasks and male-identified tasks, the latter being less routine and more likely to be outdoors. Mary C. Noonan (2001, 1141) found that women and men each did about three-quarters of the tasks identified with their own sex.

Information focused on child-rearing activities is also uneven, but a good study of recent behavior (Yeung et al. 2001) using time-diary data from 1997 shows the time that fathers spend with children to be about two-thirds what mothers spend during weekdays and seven-eighths on weekends, or a bit under three-quarters mothers' time over all. Although the data used in earlier studies was often not comparable, we can safely conclude that this is a significantly higher level of father involvement than was the case several decades earlier, a general trend supported by other research (see Pleck 1996 for a review).

In sum, the available data on the United States, despite some unevenness, suggest that men's contribution to domestic labor has increased significantly over the past several decades. Although women still do more, the best research data leaves little doubt that the division of domestic labor has been moving toward greater equality, even if the pace of change is slower than we might like.

Although the apparent empirical decline of women's domestic responsibilities falls short of our first criterion—the obstacle has not held its ground in recent

decades—we still want to see whether the argument meets our second criterion of providing an effective theoretical argument showing how it is likely to obstruct the general movement toward greater gender equality. Ideally, such an argument would show that women's child-rearing responsibilities derail their own egalitarian desires and are robust enough to resist the demands of social forces propelling change.

Those who advance arguments about women's greater domestic responsibilities attribute them to other conditions of gender inequality such as poorer levels of pay, worse job opportunities, and cultural definitions of women as the ones more responsible for children and household. Consistent with these ideas, research has shown that women's contribution to household labor is higher if they are not employed, do not contribute much to family income, have young children, or believe women should be more responsible for the home (see Coltrane 2000; Bianchi 2000). Thus, women's domestic responsibilities are understood to be a reflection of these other conditions, not self-preserving. They could be a steady obstacle to progress if, and only if, some conditions or processes had halted the movement toward better job opportunities, higher pay, and an improved, more egalitarian cultural imagery for women. Unfortunately for the proponents of this argument (but fortunately for women), most analysts agree that improvement of these conditions is likely to continue. If women's disproportionate domestic responsibilities do derive from lower pay, constrained job choices, and cultural imperatives, progress in reducing these differentials will largely dictate the pace at which the domestic division of labor will move toward equality. Thus the logic of these arguments does not show that women's domestic responsibilities can work as a self-sustaining barrier to obstruct further egalitarian changes.

Our third test asks if the idea that household duties obstruct change is consistent with the long-term historical record. In the past, women used to have much more exclusive responsibility for child rearing and other domestic labor than they do now. Moreover, that work demanded more effort and endured over a larger portion of women's lives because people had more children but fewer services and appliances. The farther we go back in time over the past two centuries, the more extreme are the conditions. Yet starting under conditions in which much more demanding domestic responsibilities restrained women, we have made extraordinary movement toward greater equality over a long period. Of course, these domestic responsibilities were a real constraint that restricted women's actions and achievements, plausibly slowing egalitarian changes, but certainly not blocking them. This long-term perspective induces us to ask, how can the domestic responsibilities of modern women act as a more effective barrier to change than did women's much greater domestic responsibilities in the past?

The argument that women's domestic responsibilities will obstruct continued movement toward gender equality therefore does not hold up well when assessed critically. Those responsibilities have been declining (even if at a slow pace), no adequate theoretical logic has been offered to show how these responsibilities can effectively hold off the pressures toward change, and the idea that women's household responsibilities would effectively block women's economic and political

assimilation appears inconsistent with the lessons of the past two hundred years. An uneven burden of domestic responsibilities undoubtedly hampers women's chances for getting ahead, but this does not mean that such responsibilities can or will restrain historical progress.

Lower-Status and Lower-Paying Jobs

Pervasive and seemingly intractable limitations to women's economic achievements form the second threat blocking the path to equality. Women's economic progress over the past several decades has produced a peculiar range of contemporary commentaries that go from celebrating the full arrival of women's economic equality to complaining that women are as bad off as ever. Serious scholars recognize that neither of these exaggerated positions matches reality. Much recent scholarly work on women's economic circumstances investigates why some facets of economic inequality between the sexes have declined greatly and others have not. In this uneven intellectual terrain, ideas about economic obstructions to gender equality crop up in many forms.

The diverse arguments about economic obstructions to equality generally operate on the premise that critical economic disadvantages of women consistently elude egalitarian developments and they limit future progress in other areas. Some arguments focus on the idea that jobs disproportionately employing women pay less and bring fewer status rewards (see England 1999) or that having children has a penalty for women not shared by men (Budig and England 2001). This wage differential is viewed as an obstacle to greater gender equality when it is allied with the empirical observation that the sex segregation of occupations seems to resist change (see Preston 1999 for a review). Another potential economic obstacle to greater equality is represented by the "glass ceiling." This popular image refers to a barrier that stops women's rise through the occupational ranks short of the highest positions. These ideas largely grew from efforts to explain current levels of gender inequality and to debate policies for the immediate future. They have not been developed into systematic, rigorous theoretical arguments about barriers to further progress, although they are important concerns, often invoked when people discuss potential obstacles to further improvements in women's status.

Stripped to their essentials, these arguments rest on a belief that several crucial characteristics of the economy have exceptional inertia. In particular, high-status positions of authority remain disproportionately occupied by men and the wages paid in disproportionately female-identified occupations remain lower than those for comparable male-identified positions.

How well do the empirical data support these arguments? Research on the pay gap between women and men generally shows that it has shrunk considerably over the last several decades. After controlling for characteristics of jobs and employers, recent research finds the remaining earnings gap to be between 5 and 15 percent (Blau and Kahn 1999; Budig 2002; O'Neill 2003). Although occupational segregation between women and men remains high, this persistence appears

largely to reflect women and men holding different jobs at each pay level (see Blackburn, Brooks, and Jarman 2001; Charles and Grusky 2004). Only a small proportion of gender wage differentials seems related to the sex composition of occupations (Budig 2002; Macpherson and Hirsch 1995; O'Neill 2003). On balance, the research suggests that wage differences between the sexes have reduced considerably and continue to decline, and that the reasons men's jobs give them higher average pay are largely independent of their gender composition.

Moreover, as mentioned, women have also taken a steadily increasing proportion of professional and managerial jobs. The gains have been slowest at the very top, but even there the signs are consistent and suggest that the pattern of women breaking into new positions may now be reaching the top corporate tier. Note that on average, top-level managers are in their fifties, suggesting that they would have received their start in business twenty-five to thirty years earlier. In 1970, the percentage of MBAs awarded to women was about 4 percent, but this figure rose to 40 percent in 2000, which would lead to the expectation that, absent obstacles, the proportion of women in high-level management would show a similar rise in the period from about 1995 to 2025 as more women MBAs ascend the job ladder. Women's slowly rising presence in top management over the past decade is consistent with this projection (Bertrand and Hallock 2001). Another revealing piece of information is that over the past two decades of the twentieth century, the fraction of couples in which the wife earned more than the husband increased from about one-sixth to about one-quarter of all dual-earner married couples (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). In short, the empirical pattern of change over the past few decades shows considerable movement toward egalitarian conditions, although some aspects of employment have shown these changes more and others less.

The employment-obstacle arguments also fall short on our second criterion, concerning theoretical logic. The proponents of these arguments largely focus their theoretical efforts on explaining women's economic disadvantages. In the past, discrimination by employers, male workers, and schools provided an easy explanation. Today, most scholars acknowledge that sex discrimination still exists in the economy, but they do not believe direct discrimination causes most of the sex differences in jobs and they expect direct discrimination to continue to decline. The key problem is to supply an argument showing that even without direct discrimination, women will disproportionately end up in lower-paying, lower-status jobs.

The employment-obstacle arguments commonly attribute gender differences in employment to inequality in another social realm. A common argument is that women are systematically excluded from better-paying, higher-authority positions. Here, the issue concerns not why women's occupations have lower pay scales but why fewer women get into higher-status positions. Because of the need to avoid relying on discrimination as an explanation, proponents of the employment-obstacle theory argue either that women cannot compete equally with men because they cannot offer the same returns to employers (owing to other obligations, experience deficits, or the like) or that women are judged differently, so that employers (and others) do not recognize women's comparable assets. This line of

argument pushes the causal issues back a level, to the question: What are the conditions that make women less competitive or induce women to be misjudged. In short, the employment-obstacles argument encompasses concerns with several kinds of gender-related employment disadvantages that are consistently attributed to other components of gender inequality, mainly domestic responsibilities and cultural expectations. However, if women's employment disadvantages are secondary results of conditions outside the economy such as domestic arrangements, then women's continued disadvantaged employment becomes more a result of insufficient progress toward equality elsewhere rather than a barrier to its achievement. This provides no theory showing how employment disadvantages could effectively repel forces of change.

The argument that labor market disadvantages could block the path to greater gender equality is also difficult to reconcile with the long-term history of women's progress. All the economic conditions that work against women's achievements were more severe the further we go back in time over the past two centuries. In the nineteenth century, strong, overt discrimination sustained sharp divisions between women's and men's jobs. Women suffered severely restricted access to schooling and job training. Only low-status jobs were open to women and they paid much less than equivalent male jobs. Women routinely lost their jobs when they married. Yet in the face of all these obstacles in the labor market, women's participation has risen steadily for over a century. A significant part of this egalitarian progress involved the reduction of these economic obstacles.

Thus, while persisting labor-market obstacles still hinder women's achievements, they are considerably less obstructive than conditions in the past and they are under siege by more powerful, institutionalized forces pushing toward egalitarian outcomes. This is true even of the most problematic issue, women's very low presence in the highest levels of corporate power. A continuing source of motives and resources that could counter the ever-increasing pressures toward greater equality would be required for labor-market conditions to persistently block the movement toward equality. No one seems to have a theoretical model that shows such a causal process.

The Shadow of Cultural Expectations

Proponents of the domestic-responsibilities and employment-obstacle arguments typically place great weight on the role of cultural beliefs in maintaining resistance to change. A third line of argument focuses directly on beliefs and cultural expectations.

Ideology has played an important role in many theories about gender inequality, but its role has been narrowed and refined over time. Male prejudice, beliefs about distinctive sex roles, and socialization loomed large in writings about women's condition in the 1960s and 1970s. As direct discrimination against women declined and women's public image rose, an important strain of theoretical work developed a focus on the ways that unrecognized ideas linked

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to gender influence the perceptions and actions of both sexes to give an advantage to men.

In *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, Virginia Valian (1998b) argued that women's slow progress in the professions was due to unrecognized, unconscious "gender schemas," implicit biases that "skew our perceptions and evaluations, causing us to overrate men and underrate women" (Valian 1998a, 52). Bosses, coworkers, and the women themselves all share these biases, for example expecting men to be better leaders and women to be more emotional. Though their effects on any particular assessment are small, their cumulative effects across time, careers, and people produce a significant disadvantage for women.

Barbara Reskin has recently expressed strong doubts about a long-held assumption that strategic self-interest is the key to discrimination, which guided her earlier scholarship. Instead, she states that now, "I and others suspect that most employment discrimination originates in . . . nonconscious cognitive processes" (Reskin 2000, 326) that lead to an unreflective dependence on cultural stereotypes and in-group preferences when people interpret and judge the actions of others. Because of past gender inequality the larger culture contains stereotypes that disadvantage women and because men happen to occupy more positions of control, male in-group preferences and biases have more impact, again to women's disadvantage.

Cecilia Ridgeway has produced the most comprehensive analysis of the ways that cultural expectations could obstruct continued progress toward gender equality. The dynamic she describes has four principal features (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). First, an internalized "presumption of men's greater overall competence" causes women and men to act and to assess the actions of others in a way that privileges men and disadvantages women. This effect may be offset or reinforced by the other conditions affecting people in an interaction, such as their organizational position, their age, the composition of the group, or the purpose of the interaction. Second, gender categorization is always present, although people may not be aware of it. Third, when women interact with men in circumstances where men have, independent of gender identification, greater status, authority, or competence, the interaction process will strengthen the hold of differential gender expectations. Fourth, because of male dominance and the roles allotted to women, "Women seldom meet men in status-equal, role-similar interactions," although women and men "interact frequently and intimately" (Ridgeway and Correll 2000, 110).

Thus, the cultural-expectations approach posits a dynamic whereby people internalize divergent perceptions of women and men, sometimes from the content of culture and sometimes from the structurally directed experience of gender-differentiated behavior. These images affect expectations and cause people to anticipate and evaluate the actions of others in gender-differentiated ways. Internalized conceptions about men and women then have a reciprocally causal, mutually reinforcing relationship with external behavior that maintains the norms of inequality.

It sounds like common sense. How does it stand up to analytic criticism?

All approaches arguing the obstructive potential of cultural beliefs and expecta-

tions assume their relative stability. Does this assumption meet our first criterion? Does the evidence show change or continuity of the obstruction over the past few decades? An extensive overview of public opinion poll trends shows “the American public shifted from opposition to support of the women’s movement in the early 1970s and has continued to support the movement ever since” (Huddy, Neely, and Lafay 2000, 311). Numerous studies of specific populations and age groups have shown that women’s and men’s attitudes have become increasingly similar and more supportive of equal treatment for women over the past several decades (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Brooks and Bolzendahl 2004). The one *notable* exception results from research on college students’ ideas about feminine and masculine personality traits (Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo, and Lueptow 2001) which may reflect poorly understood processes whereby the sexes are seen as different in kind even if judged equal in relevant abilities and rights. Despite this exception, the data available from a wide range of sources suggest a strong shift toward egalitarian attitudes and expectations over the past several decades.

Even advocates of the cultural-obstacles view seem to agree that beliefs about gender have been changing (Ridgeway and Correll 2000, 119), yet if the beliefs claimed to sustain gender inequality are themselves declining, they provide a shaky foundation on which to build a theoretical argument that these very beliefs drive processes that will obstruct continued progress toward equality. Thus, the cultural-expectations-as-obstruction view does not meet the first criterion, stability over time.

Is it possible that the arguments favoring the cultural obstructions approach have provided such a strong theoretical model of its potential impact, our second criterion, that they overcome the initial empirical weakness? To argue that some aspects of culture or ideology block social change, a theory must show the obstructing processes are substantially more self-preserving and influential than the normal cultural resistance that all significant social changes must overcome. If the mere presence of traditional beliefs effectively prevented social change, we would all be hunters and gatherers still. Traditional cultural beliefs everywhere reinforce traditional behaviors, in times of both stability and change, and their presence is thus not a factor distinguishing the circumstances under which change occurs from those when change does not. Every significant social change involves the displacement of resistant beliefs.

The argument that the routine enactment of gender inequality helps sustain cultural expectations consistent with that inequality is unproblematic but does not identify processes or conditions that would make people’s beliefs about the critical gender differences “stickier” or more resistant to change than other cultural beliefs. To get around this, these arguments sometimes try finessing the problem through language, for example calling such beliefs “deeply rooted” or “embedded” in culture, as though these phrases could imbue gender stereotypes with a permanence that need not otherwise be demonstrated or explained. Yet not so long ago, the desirability of female virginity and the undesirability of middle-class women taking jobs seemed to be deep American values. Then young women

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sought sex and jobs. Then the values changed. This is the heart of the problem. In recent centuries, innumerable “traditional” social practices have been transformed or displaced, showing over and over again that long-lasting and seemingly deep beliefs supporting the displaced practices were not successful barriers to change.

The cultural-obstructions approach does not stand up any better to our third criterion: it must be consistent with the long-term historical pattern of gender inequality’s decline. The further we go back in time over the past two hundred years, the greater are the differential expectations about the competence and appropriate roles of the two sexes, the greater the status gap between women and men. According to our criterion, cultural obstructions should have presented even greater obstacles to changes benefiting women’s status than the current ones. Yet despite the prevalence of far more negative stereotypes and expectations, inequality did obviously decline over the past two centuries. To be historically persuasive, the cultural-obstructions proponents need a theoretical argument showing why considerably less restrictive beliefs about gender differences facing much more potent forces of change would have greater obstructive potential. So far, such an argument does not seem to have been developed.

The “Combined-Weight” Thesis

As the three obstacles to equality we have considered are complementary, they could plausibly work together as a “combined-weight” obstacle to the decline of gender inequality. Even if no one of the conditions could stop the progress of women’s status if it were the sole obstacle, they could have a mutually reinforcing impact that is great enough to obstruct progress, and their reciprocal reinforcement of each other might sustain them against opposing causal forces.

This sounds like a strong argument, but is its appeal merely rhetorical? Does it provide a successful theoretical and empirical analysis? Social causes are not like pails of water; they cannot be poured together to fill a bigger pail. Even if they could, the end result would not amount to much if the original pails were nearly empty.

That the three main proposed obstacles to women’s progress are consistent with each other does not by itself make their combined weight a more effective obstacle. In the era before gender inequality began to decline, most aspects of women’s and men’s lives—including the three countervailing tendencies considered here and other conditions such as high numbers of children, women’s lack of legal equality, and the religious support of male dominance—were consistent with a high degree of gender inequality and were mutually reinforcing. These conditions were much more severe than today and did constitute mutually supportive obstacles to gender equality, but they still lost to the engine of change portrayed above. Today, that engine of change continues and the comparable contemporary societal characteristics are mutually supportive facilitators of greater gender equality: a low number of children, women’s legal equality, a secular egalitarian ideology, high levels of women’s employment, and impartial organizational rationality.

Moreover, as the three countervailing conditions each show significant egalitarian movement over the past several decades, their combined capacity to resist change must be reduced. What, then, is the basis for inferring that their combined weight can overwhelm the strong forces of change today? As far as I can see, there is none.

Limits of Countervailing Tendencies

I have examined several arguments to the effect that countervailing forces threaten to prevent continued progress toward gender equality. These arguments appeal to us because they seemingly fit many personal experiences and make sense of gender inequality's current state. Each starts with some clearly problematic aspect of gender inequality: Women still do more domestic labor. Women's aggregate employment circumstances are still inferior to those of men. People still think differently about women and men. Each of these conditions appears resistant to change and creates disadvantages for women.

Nonetheless, the arguments suggesting that these countervailing tendencies represent significant threats to future equality are incomplete, empirically dubious, and theoretically weak. The best empirical data available show that each of the initial factors—the domestic division of labor, employment differentials, and cultural expectations—has moved significantly in an egalitarian direction. When we examine the logic of each argument, we see that none of them contains a compelling causal theory of processes that would effectively reverse this pattern. Rather, they seem to rely on a problematic logic according to which these phenomena can inhibit further movement toward equality because they themselves somehow seem hard to change. Third, none of the arguments solves the theoretical difficulties that arise from the long-term history of change. Each of them refers to conditions that were more severe the further back in time we go over the past two centuries and were facing weaker processes pressing for greater equality, yet they failed then to stop the progress toward equality. By itself, this long-term pattern does not mean that it is abstractly impossible that one of these conditions could stop further movement toward equality, but it does mean that it is unlikely. It would require some condition or effect that had not been present in the past. None of these arguments reveals a mechanism adequate for this requirement.

CONCLUSIONS

To assess the status of gender inequality today we must decide what standards and comparisons to apply. This is an analytical, not an ideological, requirement (although one's politics may influence analytical choices). Much can be learned from a snapshot in time, from the question: What is women's status today? However, we can see another dimension of such snapshots by comparing them with those that precede and follow, asking why and how women's status changes over time.

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The gender inequality we see today is a slice out of a long history of shifting circumstances. To make sense of this slice, I have tried to place gender inequality in the context of a historical trajectory. Complex forces driving us toward greater equality and other forces resisting those changes pushed and pulled continually over the past two centuries, producing this trajectory. Our predictions about the future will be stronger if we see that the trajectory of change from the past to the present has been determined more by the forces of change than by resistance to change.

Using this dynamic perspective, our critical analysis has found flaws in the typical theoretical argument that one or another facet of gender inequality will impede further progress toward equality. First, I suggest that we cannot assess obstacles to change without understanding what propels the changes. The first thing to seek from the history of women's status is not what has held them back but what has moved them forward. Second, I contend that the principal engine of change is a widespread dilution of interests that formerly induced actions preserving gender inequality, particularly in the form of organizational indifference, combined with women's persistent resistance to subordination. This engine of change will continue to erode gender inequality so long as modern economic and political organization retain their essential forms and women continue to resist subordination. Third, I argue that current efforts to show that certain aspects of gender inequality will obstruct further equalization have largely failed to overcome contrary empirical evidence or produce convincing theoretical models. Lacking a theory of what has driven gender inequality's decline, analyses seeking to understand the limits to change in some facets of gender relations have reached conclusions about potential obstructions to future change that are neither empirically nor theoretically defensible.

The long-term causal process that has driven the decline of gender inequality over the past two hundred years will continue, but it is not easily controlled. For those seeking policies to propel us toward gender equality, that is both the good and the bad of it. Unquestionably, government policies can hasten or retard the movement toward equality. However, even when government policies were supportive they have not been the main driving force behind gender inequality's decline and when obstructive they have not been insurmountable obstacles to progress. Because gender inequality is embedded in our institutions and diffused through every nook and corner of our lives, changing it depends unavoidably on the actions and thoughts of people in every social arena. We have every reason to believe that these actions will continue to change toward the conditions favoring gender equality and away from the requirements for sustaining gender inequality. However, the actions that have eroded gender inequality typically have been highly dispersed, decentralized, and often outside public view. Public policies can influence such processes. They cannot control them.

Returning to our starting point, what kinds of answers does this analysis suggest about the why, how, and when of gender inequality's trajectory?

Why will gender inequality disappear? It is fated to end because essential organizational characteristics and consequences of a modern, industrial, market-ori-

ented, electorally governed society are inherently inconsistent with the conditions needed to sustain gender inequality.

How will gender inequality disappear? Since the processes eroding gender inequality are loosely coupled, the causal dynamic does not follow any simple, predictable sequence. Organizational rationalization, political competition, women's individual efforts to advance themselves, men's remoteness from and unwillingness to defend past practices, women's collective efforts to influence policy, the cultural weight of accumulated past changes, and other strands will all continue to push toward greater equality. Their relative contribution and the exact path we will follow over time will depend on unforeseeable historical conditions.

When will we achieve equality? Again, the causal processes do not permit a simple answer. A crude guess, based on the pace and form of past changes and what seems plausible for the future, is that we will largely achieve equality in five generations at the outside and in one to two generations at best. Where we land within that range will depend both on unforeseeable historical conditions (such as the pace of technological progress and the political issues of the future) and on the effort that people put into establishing social policies likely to accelerate (or slow) movement toward equality. In short, if you want your children or grandchildren to see equality, you had better work at it.

Thus, the theoretical argument developed here implies a strong case for both the value of and the need for continued efforts to hasten our movement toward full gender equality. The processes that are decisively moving us toward equality are also inherently indeterminate in the specific path they take and the speed with which they unfold. As a moral and practical objective, we would like to achieve effective gender equality within one generation, not three, or four. To make this happen requires policies that put us on a direct path to equality rather than allowing us to meander toward it. The theoretical model also suggests that such efforts, if well planned and executed, will be successful, because they are working with rather than against the fundamental pressures of modern social organization.

NOTES

1. For a full statement of this theoretical analysis and the evidence that supports it, please consult Jackson (1998).
2. The "modern" economy excludes agriculture and domestic service. Employment in farming and private households is omitted to focus on gender inequities in the modern industrial and service sectors (Jackson 1998, 74-92).

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