DESTINED FOR EQUALITY

THE INEVITABLE RISE OF WOMEN'S STATUS

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higher status. Education at all levels has become equally available to women. Women have gained great control over their reproductive processes, and their sexual freedom has come to resemble that of men. It has become easy and socially acceptable to end unsatisfactory marriages with divorce. Popular culture has come close to portraying women as men's legitimate equal. Television, our most dynamic communication media, regularly portrays discrimination as wrong and male abuse or male dominance as nasty. The prevailing theme of this recent period has been women's assimilation into all the activities and positions once denied them.

This book focuses on the dominant patterns and the groups that had the most decisive and most public roles in the processes that changed women's status: middle-class whites and, secondarily, the white working class. The histories of gender inequality among racial and ethnic minorities are too diverse to address adequately here.[2] Similarly, this analysis neglects other distinctive groups, especially lesbians and heterosexual women who avoided marriage, whose changing circumstances also deserve extended study.

While these minorities all have distinctive histories, the major trends considered here have influenced all groups. Every group had to respond to the same changing political and economic structures that defined the opportunities and constraints for all people in the society. Also, whatever their particular history, the members of each group understood their gender relations against the backdrop of the white, middle-class family's cultural preeminence. Even when people in higher or lower-class positions or people in ethnic communities expressed contempt for these values, they were familiar with the middle-class ideals and thought of them as leading ideas in the society. The focus on the white middle classes is simply an analytical and practical strategy. The history of dominant groups has no greater inherent or moral worth. Still, except in cases of open, successful rebellion, the ideas and actions of dominant groups usually affect history much more than the ideas and actions of subordinate groups. This fact is an inevitable effect of inequality.

THE MEANING OF INEQUALITY AND ITS DECLINE

We will think differently about women's status under two theoretical agendas. Either we can try to evaluate how short from equality women

now fall, or we can try to understand how far they have come from past deprivations.

Looking at women's place in society today from these two vantage points yields remarkably different perspectives. They accentuate different aspects of women's status by altering the background against which we compare it. Temporal and analytical differences separate these two vantage points, not distinctive moral positions, although people sometimes confuse these differences with competing moral positions.

If we want to assess and criticize women's disadvantages today, we usually compare their existing status with an imagined future when complete equality reigns. Using this ideal standard of complete equality, we would find varied shortcomings in women's status today. These shortcomings include women's absence from positions of political or economic power, men's preponderance in the better-paid and higher-status occupations, women's lower average income, women's greater family responsibilities, the higher status commonly attached to male activities, and the dearth of institutions or policies supporting dual-earner couples.

Alternatively, if we want to evaluate how women's social status has improved, we must turn in the other direction and face the past. We look back to a time when women were legal and political outcasts, working only in a few low-status jobs, and always deferring to male authority. From this perspective, women's status today seems much brighter. Compared with the nineteenth century, women now have a nearly equal legal and political status, far more women hold jobs, women can succeed at almost any occupation, women usually get paid as much as men in the same position (in the same firm), women have as much educational opportunity as men, and both sexes normally expect women to pursue jobs and careers.

As we seek to understand the decline of gender inequality, we will necessarily stress the improvements in women's status. We will always want to remember, however, that gender inequality today stands somewhere between extreme inequality and complete equality. To analyze the modern history of gender inequality fully, we must be able to look at this middle ground from both sides. It is seriously deficient when measured against full equality. It is a remarkable improvement when measured against past inequality.

These differences in perception raise an important question. What does inequality mean? To some people, past and present inequality

between women and men seems self-evident; to others, gender inequality has always been questionable. To some people, the improvements in women's status over the past two centuries are obvious; to others, they are illusory. Inequality obviously entails differences among people or their circumstances. But not all difference is a manifestation of inequality.

Gender inequality has depended on the relationship between two distinct types of inequality. Some systems of inequality divide positions or roles within major social institutions, for example, giving managers authority over staff. Other systems of inequality divide groups defined by personal characteristics, for example, benefiting one race to the disadvantage of another. In practice, these two kinds of inequality intermingle; people do not experience them separately. Nonetheless, they have distinctive causes and effects, their relationship is changeable, and the dynamics between them have critically influenced the modern history of gender inequality.3

Positional inequality refers to relationships *between social positions,* defined by their roles and functional identity within some social structure.[4] Positional inequality defines two (or more) structural positions rendered unequal by their integral rights and resources. These characteristics do not depend on the identity of the people who occupy the positions; the structural inequality between positions persists even when the people change. Positional inequality makes people unequal if they occupy unequal positions in some working social structure and the amount of inequality between them reflects the resources and rights characterizing their structural positions. Examples of structures include the economy, the polity, the military, and most organizations. Examples of structurally unequal groups include managers and machine operators, government officials and ordinary citizens, and military officers and enlisted soldiers. Sometimes the structures define a specific relationship between positions, such as authority relationships within an organization. Sometimes the structures define the inequality between positions indirectly, by attaching variable amounts of resources (for example, income, authority, influence, and visibility) to positions. The general inequality between high-status, high-paid occupations and low-status, low-paid occupations is an example.

The defining relationships of positional inequality are always between *positions,* not between people. The characteristic inequality between two positions does not change with the coming and going of

people who temporarily occupy those positions. People become, for example, low status and disadvantaged by occupying low-status, disadvantaged positions in the structure. In contrast, positions do not gain or lose authority (or privileges or status) according to the identity of the person who takes them. Skills, connections, or group identity may cause one person to do better or to do worse than others in the same position. Still, such variations in the performance of duty do not alter the position.

In contrast, *status inequality* refers to relationships *between different types of people,* who distinguish themselves by personal characteristics and exclusionary practices. Like the integral personal characteristics defining these groups, their unequal statuses cling to people through changes or variations in the positions they hold. Status inequality occurs because people use group identities for social solidarity and for social selection, and the amount of status inequality between people reflects the differences in opportunities available to their reference groups. Age, sex, race, and education exemplify the personal characteristics that sometimes mark pervasive inequality. The distinguishing characteristics have no inherent, necessary relationship to functioning social processes. Status inequality reflects the relationship between two groups, not the particular personal characteristics that differentiate them. Under a system of status inequality, these characteristics become selection criteria, rewarding some types of people with status-confirming social positions, consigning other types to demeaning ones. For example, those in higher-status groups have more access to political power, receive preferential treatment by law, and get better education and better jobs. The distinguishing characteristics defining the unequal groups also typically demarcate the boundaries of group solidarity (although that solidarity may be obstructed by other conditions). Those in the high-status group identify themselves as different and better, and their solidarity motivates and sustains their discrimination against others.

The defining relationships of status inequality are always between people, not between positions. The inequality between two groups distinguished by their members' personal characteristics is preserved as people depart and join the groups. The high or low rank produced by status inequality persists even if people move between positions. The structural positions people occupy can sometimes offset the effects of status inequality. For example, although American blacks have

a considerably lower status that whites, a wealthy black woman might enjoy greater influence and respect than a poor white woman. Still, the people with a low status based on personal attributes remain disadvantaged compared to those in the same structural position who have a high status.

Sex inequality is primarily a status differential because it distinguishes two kinds of people, not two kinds of positions. Male and female are not functionally related social positions, like high-status and low-status jobs. Men's and women's characteristic social standings stick to them in all the positions they fill. Occasionally, some people may pass as a member of the opposite sex, just as people occasionally pass as members of different races. Barring successful deceit, however, all biological males are forever associated with the male social category and all biological females with the female social category.

Although the inequality between women and men is defined by their personal characteristics, it becomes manifest largely through the unequal structural positions they occupy. The resulting congruence between gender inequality and positional inequalities makes gender inequality appear positional.

The status inequality dividing women and men depends on two analytically distinguishable factors: how much positional inequality exists in society and the degree to which gender inequality is embedded in positional inequality. Gender inequality has declined mainly through an erosion of the overlap between gender and the major forms of positional inequality. Economic and political processes have gradually reduced the degree to which gender affects the allocation of positions, although general inequality within these systems remains the same. In contrast, reducing gender inequality within households has required moving from a more hierarchical positional structure to a more egalitarian one, which explains why women's childrearing responsibilities have been lingering obstacles to greater gender equality. Restructuring the system of positional inequality within the family has been more difficult than altering the relationship between the economic and political systems of positional inequality and the gender system of status inequality. Still, widespread gender inequality in marriages cannot endure long in the absence of economic and political inequality between the sexes. The link between gender and positional inequality has been the key to women's status.

Historically, concerns about structural or institutional inequality

have emphasized the divergence from three egalitarian ideals: legal equality, political equality, and equality of opportunity.[5] When applied to gender, these ideals define three ways in which women and men could be equal. Legal equality would exist if the laws and the judicial system treated women the same as men, as individuals who are equal objects of state action. Political equality would exist if the political process, which selects and influences members of government, treated women the same as men, as equal members of the polity. Equality of opportunity would exist if institutions treated women and men the same, giving them identical access to valuable resources, both as the objects of policies and aspirants to membership. Gender inequality is greater the more that institutions depart from these egalitarian ideals. It exists to the degree that the state treats women differently from and worse than men, that political processes grant men a greater role than women, and that institutions generally offer better opportunities to men than to women. From the institutionalist perspective, gender inequality is a characteristic of social organization in which key social processes favor men.

Some theorists have approached the problem of inequality differently, referring to three components of inequality experienced and used by individuals: power, privilege, and prestige. People with greater power have resources or social positions that let them command the behavior of others. People with greater privilege have more access to consumption goods and leisure, exhibit a more desirable lifestyle, and spend less effort and less time on drudgery. People with higher prestige have honor, esteem, or high regard that commands the respect and deference of others. Causal processes link these three components of inequality so that people usually rank similarly on all three. Even so, people, and groups, can be high on one and low on the others. From this individualistic perspective, gender inequality exists to the degree that men get more power, more privileges, and more prestige than do women. From the individualistic perspective, inequality is a characteristic of people or groups by which men have more of the things that people value and more of the resources that gain valued things.

The institutional perspective and the individualistic perspective produce complementary visions of gender inequality. The first stresses that organizations or structures controlling opportunities and resources treat men better than women and remain largely in men's hands. The second stresses that most men have more power, more

privileges, and more prestige than most women. Whichever way we look at it, gender inequality means the *net* advantages of being male exceed those of being female.

If we apply these two approaches, we can map the terrain of inequality separating women and men. In modern societies, gender inequality seems normally to have included a wide range of male advantages. The legal framework has assumed that men are dominant in all spheres of life. Men have had preponderant influence over the centralized policies of the society. In modern societies, men exercised this influence through control of the state. Men have controlled most resources owned by institutions, especially those associated with organized economic, political, and military activities. Economic and political organization generally restricted this power to a minority of men. Most men have had more money, more authority, more of other resources than the women in their social milieu. Most women have depended on men to connect them to the public realm and have deferred to men's authority. Few men have similarly depended on or deferred to women. Similarly, men have usually controlled family resources and men have dominated family decision making. Men have applied the techniques of direct power to women—by physically intimidating and assaulting them—more than women have used those techniques against men. Men have had more valued opportunities than women. Men have had more liberty than women. Men and male attributes have been, on balance, more highly regarded than women and female attributes in the prevailing ideals and beliefs. Women have trailed men along each major dimension of inequality. This includes those considered both by the approach stressing institutional activity and the approach stressing the rights and obligations of individuals.

As used here, gender inequality means that men, as a group, enjoyed a net advantage over women, the composite result of their differences along varied dimensions. Gender inequality does not imply that differences between women and men have been universal or absolute in a society. Men did not have an edge in every aspect of life. Instead, inequality has implied that men did better than women in more areas or in more important areas than the reverse. Even in severely unequal societies, men have rarely had an advantage in every facet of life.

Similarly, inequality has not meant that all men have had higher status and better lives than all women (or all women worse lives than all men). On balance, men did better than women. In particular, in

each group defined by class and ethnicity, men usually had clear advantages over women. Nonetheless, men's relative advantages were not universal. Usually, most men have had worse lives than the most privileged women in society (that is, some women have enjoyed more resources and better lives than most men). Some severely disadvantaged men have had worse lives than even average women (that is, even average women have had more resources and better lives than some men). These discontinuities in gender inequality have occurred because other social characteristics also influenced the quality of people's lives, particularly class, race, and ethnicity.

Also, as used here, gender inequality refers to people's social positions, not to their experiences. While we can anticipate that members of dominant groups usually have a better quality of life than people in subordinate groups, this study neither assumes nor tries to show that women's and men's lives have typically followed this prediction. One important corollary of this distinction is that improving a group's social status may not make its members happier or their lives more fulfilling.

The decline of gender inequality has meant that the differences between women's lives and men's lives have diminished. In particular, the difference between women and men has shrunk considerably for every major dimension of inequality defined by the institutional and the resource perspectives. The changes have been uneven, and we cannot reduce them to one simple, precise numeric estimate of gender inequality's overall decline. But the improvements in women's circumstances have been sufficiently widespread and consistent over time that they provide incontrovertible evidence of gender inequality's decline.

Inequality's decline has not required or meant that all aspects of women's lives improved uniformly. Gender inequality's decline has meant that women's net disadvantages (when compared to men) have declined significantly. Theoretically, a decline in inequality need not even mean that women's lives have got better, although they probably have by most people's standards. Some people believe that women's disadvantages have grown worse in some areas, such as the experience of fear in public spaces. Even if such claims were valid (and the evidence for these claims is narrow and disputable), they would not contradict the inference that general gender inequality has declined. The main historical pattern has been for women's relative disadvantages to decline, even if their lot has worsened in some areas.[6]

Further complicating inequality's decline, when women acquired more equal rights, they were not automatically able to exercise those rights. Legal equality did not imply that women had equal means to use or to abuse the judicial system. Political equality did not ensure that women had as much political power as men. Equality of opportunity did not guarantee that women had as many resources or held prestigious positions as often as men. Women were subject to the general rule that people who have lacked equal resources in one realm have usually faced a disadvantage when trying to exercise formal equality in another realm. For example, because women have had less income and property than men, they (like members of other disadvantaged groups) have found it harder to use their legal and political rights. Also, making rights and opportunities equal did not undo the manifest inequality that had accumulated in earlier times. For example, getting the rights to vote and to hold political office did not give women control of a political party, control of existing political offices, or a network of politically influential people. Still, increasing the formal equality between women and men did reduce the *direct* use of gender as part of the mechanisms deciding who gets what. When formal equality between women and men increases significantly, usually it will gradually reduce manifest inequality. Increases in formal equality have improved women's ability to compete for, use, and accumulate resources. Often, this accumulation has been slow at first, and it may become visible only after two or three generations.

Given the inherent difficulties facing any effort to measure the amount of inequality between two groups, no one can say precisely how much gender inequality has declined over the past 150 years. The rights, the opportunities, and outcomes for women and men have become more similar across a wide range of activities. Most important, this change includes women's rising part in status-conferring economic and political activities. The overall impact of these changes implies that inequality has declined significantly, even if we cannot give precise meaning to the amount of that decline.

THE FORCE DRIVING EQUALITY'S GROWTH

The theoretical perspective advanced here will unfold through the historical analyses and appear as a complete structure by the end. To produce an adequate theoretical interpretation of gender inequality's

decline, we have to identify and abstract critical patterns from the endless complexity of history. One reason that good social theories are hard to create is that we have no standardized procedure to discover which patterns matter or how to abstract from them. We must mix art, artifice, and good luck with hard work and experience. In this process, the direction of theoretical development will be guided by some key decisions we make about which aspects of a phenomenon we want to explain and what kind of explanation we seek.

Several characteristics are particularly telling for the theoretical interpretation of gender inequality. Women's unprecedented and apparently irreversible progress toward complete gender equality over the past two centuries suggests that the causes of gender inequality's decline must include conditions and processes unique to modern times, and that it cannot be adequately explained through ahistorical theories meant to explain the variations in degrees of inequality across all cultures and periods.

The decline in gender inequality has been an international phenomenon. Although this study focuses on the United States, a similar pattern of declining gender inequality has appeared in all nations with modern economies and political structures. The timing, rate, and form of specific changes have varied considerably, but the fundamental pattern has been similar. This consistency suggests that the essential causes of gender inequality's decline must be conditions or processes intrinsic to the development of modern institutions. They constitute an engine of social change present in all countries moving toward a modern economic and political order. The distinctive historical events and social conditions occurring in the United States (or any other country) might explain why the path it followed to gender inequality was different from that followed in other countries, but they cannot be components of the general theoretical explanation of women's rising status.

In the United States, women's disadvantages declined in each of the past three half-century periods. The concrete social changes that reduced inequality had extremely varied specific historical antecedents. For example, at various times women's status benefited from laws passed without consideration of their effects on gender status, from self-interested policies installed by employers, from collective actions by movements representing women, and from the side effects of basic organizational dynamics. These patterns suggest that the primary

sis developed here differs with them in some key ways. While accepting many concrete claims of the historically particularistic and multivariate accounts, this analysis stresses that a unified underlying social process caused gender inequality's decline. While it treats women's resistance to inequality as an essential ingredient to change, this analysis emphasizes the reasons that men withdrew from the defense of inequality. While acknowledging the role of changing beliefs, this analysis places much more causal weight on the role of institutional change, the reorganization of interests, and the redistribution of power.

This book advances the theory that a nonlinear but relatively deterministic historical process has significantly eroded gender inequality over the past 150 years and will continue to do so. The transition to modern political and economic structures has driven this process by shifting social power into impersonal organizations and by redefining interests. The inherent logic of organizational interests gradually separates strategies preserving economic and political inequality from those needed to preserve gender inequality. Individuals and organizations reflect these changing circumstances through diverse, seemingly unrelated actions and events that cumulatively reduce gender inequality. Although these processes ensure gender inequality's ultimate decline, they are not tightly linked to the actions that precipitate women's rising status, so that the concrete historical path to equality varies considerably across nations.

Two forces worked against sex inequality. First, women individually contested their lower status and sometimes collectively rebelled against it. Second, the transition to modern institutions slowly depleted the interests supporting gender inequality. While each force was significant, they were most effective together because they complemented each other.

Women rebelled against the constraints that limited their activities and circumscribed their status. While most women did as expected most of the time, all women sometimes balked and some women constantly fought against the fetters confining their sex.

The force of women's resistance, however, was like gravity pulling on a building or tree. The building and tree were fashioned to withstand gravity. The gravitational pull brings them down only when some other process erodes the building's foundations or the tree's roots. Similarly, women's resistance became effective only when social processes eroded crucial structural supports for gender inequality.

These structural supports lost their stability when the interests generated by economic and political power separated from the interests generated by gender inequality. The development of modern economic and political organization produced this separation of interests. Gender inequality gradually dissociated from economic and political inequality. This separation allowed women's resistance to become more effective. Simultaneously, as organizations accumulated ever more social power, their interests and actions became increasingly indifferent to people's gender.

Once the organization of production moved out of the household, the goal of preserving male economic advantages could not be reconciled permanently or consistently with the goal of advancing the economic interests of firms. Once social power drifted from families to firms and organizations, the goal of preserving male political ascendancy could not be reconciled consistently with the goals of winning political offices and advancing the state's power and legitimacy.

The movement of power into economic and political organizations made it increasingly impractical to sustain gender inequality's congruence with positional inequality, rendering it unstable. For most of recorded history, gender inequality was securely embedded in economic and political inequality. This embeddedness coincided with family organization. Families controlled productive resources and were the fundamental units of political organization. The internal politics of family life governed the relations between women and men and were directly linked to the structures of economic and political inequality. Over the past two centuries, the emerging modern economic and political systems ended this easy coexistence. These systems gradually eroded conditions necessary for gender inequality's continuance, because their organizational forms obstructed the fit between status inequality by sex and positional inequality now existing largely through organizations. Initially, men gained control over all the new economic and political positions, but their monopoly proved transitory.

To *be effective, all systems of status inequality, including gender inequality, must be embedded in positional inequality.* A system of status inequality is embedded in a system of positional inequality to the degree that a person's rank or circumstances in the status inequality system gives her or him differential access to locations in the system of positional inequality. When status inequality is embedded in positional inequality, the degree of inequality between status groups is

determined by the resultant aggregate discrepancy between their locations in the systems of positional inequality. For one status group, such as men, to retain a superior social standing over another status group, such as women, the higher-status group must sustain preferential access to high-ranking economic and political positions.

Gender inequality has been embedded in economic and political inequality in several ways. Women have been absent from positions of power and influence within both the political and economic structures. Therefore, they could not bend policy toward their collective interests. The state, directly representing only male interests, has typically also held women to inferior legal and political standing. State power has helped to give ordinary men greater liberty and more opportunities than women and helped to preserve women's dependence on men. In the economy, discriminatory processes have restricted women's job opportunities, denying them positions with high social standing and income. These cumulative disadvantages have manifested, sustained, and reinforced women's dependence on men, keeping the two sexes in structurally unequal positions in society.

Economic and political systems alleviated women's disabilities mainly by improving their access to positions. The positions remained the same,[6] but women's access to those positions gradually came to resemble more closely men's access. To achieve women's assimilation, the men who ran businesses and government had to make their organizations treat women the same as men, both internally (for example, by promoting women and men equally) and externally (for example, by applying the same criteria and giving the same services to women and men). Complex processes caused this transformation, but adaptive organizations did not have to change the structures of inequality among positions. The structures of economic and political positional inequality remained largely unaltered, but gender became progressively disembedded from them.

While the paths by which women gained greater access differed between high-status and low-status positions, in both cases organizations needed to change the hiring, training, evaluation, and promotion processes but they did not need to transform the structure of their organizations. The assimilation of women occurred first and most completely in low-status economic and political positions. High-ranking positions were less responsive to the changing interests promoting women's incremental assimilation. Women gained wide access to most

high-status positions only after political intervention augmented other trends. Still, adaptation through assimilation rather than through restructuring was the rule. At all levels of positional inequality, undoing political and economic inequality between the sexes, once these were organized outside families, has mainly required that organizations treat women the same as men.

Gender inequality also has been embedded in family role differentiation, a unique structure of positional inequality. Gender-identified family roles have helped to sustain women's greater responsibility for childrearing and men's greater opportunities for personal advancement outside the family. Family role differentiation assigns distinctive responsibilities, rights, and activities to husbands and wives. Although these roles have many minor variations, they typically have differentiated a *provider and leader* role from a *childrearer and follower* role. Because these roles create inherently unequal positions (which, in theory, either men or women could occupy), family role differentiation is an instance of positional inequality. However, this form of positional inequality has considerably less durability and influence than economic or political inequality. With a much smaller scale of organization and far fewer resources, modern family role differentiation has only a limited capacity to sustain itself against outside influences.

As gender inequality has become disembedded from political and economic processes, so has family role differentiation. Before modern institutions arose, family role differentiation was directly embedded in economic and political inequality, which were then organized within families. As economic and political power shifted into institutions and processes remote from families, gender inequality became the crucial link between family role differentiation and social power. Women deferred to men and depended on husbands because they had no practical alternatives outside the family. By shouldering the burden of sole economic responsibility, men gained deference and superiority within their families. As the structures of economic and political inequality gradually disengaged from gender inequality, the structure of family role differentiation faced increasing pressures.

Thus, the family role differentiation associated with the so-called *traditional* family of industrial societies was produced interactively by *gender inequality* and the *transition to an industrial economy*. This argument partially reverses some famous ideas associated with the functionalist theories of Talcott Parsons. Parsons suggested that fam-