

## Chapter 4 - The Reproduction of Economic and Political Power

Over the last one hundred fifty years, power has largely remained in male hands and it has only slowly and sparingly been knowingly used in ways that directly counter sex inequality. During this period, however, the concentration of social power in economic and political organizations slowly but surely robbed gender inequality of its means and motives for survival. As we have already seen, positions with power did not smoothly and automatically become subject to the forces of rationalization, legitimation, and market shortages that caused women's assimilation into lower positions. Still, these forces stayed at work as growing economic and political organizations progressively appropriated social power.

What kept women from achieving positions with power until recently, even as women's status has improved? Why would men who held positions of power usually have followed policies that helped sustain inequality and impede the rise of women's status?

Of course, men enjoyed social dominance as the modern era began. How they came to have this power is not our immediate concern. How they kept it is. We will simply accept men's privileged status and control at the start of the nineteenth century. What we want to discover are the social conditions or mechanisms that kept men in power after that.

How and why men retained control of power in society is neither obvious nor simple. No shapeless conspiratorial alliance among men preserved inequality. Men did not hold annual conventions to work out spirited strategies for defending their gender interests. Men did not have some strange motive to dominate others that women did not share. Men were not born with a predisposition to favor other men over women. Power has momentum, but it is not magically self-preserving. Yet, somehow, men remained ascendant.

The persistence of gender inequality, like other forms of systematic social inequality, depended greatly on the way power passed between generations. Men of each generation did not acquire their fathers' power as if it were genetic, like hair color. Yet, somehow in each generation only men moved into positions of power.

Why did women have a more difficult time attaining power? All people came into the world as helpless children. Some became powerful. Most did not. Those who did were invariably male. Why was that true?

What conditions drove many men to seek power and let only a few achieve it? Why couldn't women seize power in the same way?

Thus, rather than asking why men held influence and status in society, we will focus on the reasons that women could not get power. This question forms my opening wedge in explaining gender inequality's persistence in the face of powerful forces pushing for greater equality. We need to discover what conditions drove many men to seek power and let only a few achieve it. Then we can ask why women could not seize power in the same way.

After this, we must ask how men's relative monopoly over positions of power in society caused power to act in the interests of all men. People often assume that men in power will choose policies that favor men just because they share a sex identity. This is not so. Many interests direct the exercise of power. And a correspondence between the interests of powerful men and those of ordinary men has neither been obvious nor assured.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Problem of Reproducing Power**

Power is an elusive idea. Power is not observable or palpable. Instead, power is a theoretical abstraction that refers to the range of circumstances under which the actions of one person or group affect those of others. In some general sense, the greater the range of influence, or the greater the results that can be secured for equal costs, then the more power we attribute to an actor. It is not possible to apply any precise measurements to power, because it has no concrete reference. The subordination of women means that ordinary men commonly have a power advantage over women and that only men occupy the social positions controlling sources of collective power.

The rise of industrial capitalism and parliamentary democracies opened new positions of economic and political power. Factory owners, managers, merchants, professionals, elected politicians, and appointed officials all grasped their portion of power. A monopoly over economic

---

<sup>1</sup>Let me introduce a cautionary note. The argument presented here must at times take the form of considered speculation. I will show what I believe to be a theoretically reasonable analysis of women's exclusion from positions of economic and political power. Occasionally, we must extend ourselves considerably beyond the limits of the research that has yet been done. I hope that the arguments presented here will stimulate more research in these areas.

and political power in pre-industrial societies let men, and men only, move into the new positions as they became available.

Women posed no challenge. Because of their subordinate status, women had less liberty, could make fewer claims on resources, and received little approval or encouragement for pursuing aspirations to power. Moreover, anyone climbing to economic or political power needed resources and support from men at each step in their ascent. Because the circles of power included no women, potential patrons would be correct in believing that women had little chance to succeed. From their perspective, this made women a much riskier investment than the men competing for their acceptance and support. Women's severe competitive disadvantages thwarted any hopes they had for accumulating power. This left only men.

Men with economic or political power assumed and accepted ordinary men's dominance over women. Their policies fortified ordinary men's domination. Because women lacked political influence and economic resources, politically powerful men could not anticipate any rewards for championing policies favoring women's interests. Usually, at least until recently, most people and most policies simply assumed women's stereotypic roles and status, so powerful did not need to think about alternatives. When sex roles and men's advantages became an explicit issue, powerful men normally accommodated ordinary men to protect their own power. Ordinary men would resent policies that reduced their advantages over women. Men with power needed ordinary men's acceptance and therefore they resisted policies that tempted rebellion.

Ordinary men's advantages and men's monopoly of political and economic power together reproduced women's subordination. If ordinary men had not used and protected their advantages, women pursuing their self-interests could have adopted men's opportunities and activities. If powerful men, in combination with ordinary men, had not preserved their sex's monopoly on positions of power, women would not have had to rely so much on individual action in their efforts to improve their circumstances.

The distinction between powerful men and ordinary men is crucial for understanding gender inequality and explaining its history. Many analyses of gender inequality have remarked on the importance of class and race differences among women. The same concern applies to men, but even more so because the range of power inequality among men has been much greater than among women (this distinction has not been as

true for the distribution of status and privileges, but these are not as important). Empirically, the power of positions held by men has ranged over a continuum. To build a process model of gender inequality, I will use the simplifying assumption that male positions are either powerful or ordinary. Powerful men's positions give them influence over some aspect of the political or economic system, and, therefore, over other men. Ordinary men's positions do not. The actions of powerful men determine how political and economic institutions support or challenge gender inequality. The actions of ordinary men have an impact on institutions only when many act in concert or in parallel, but ordinary men all have a power advantage over women.

### **THE GENERAL PROBLEM OF REPRODUCING POWER**

To persist, status inequality must have mechanisms that transfer power reliably from past to future members of the dominant group. The natural cycle of birth and death creates a continuous turnover of people. Each type of status inequality bestows its advantages on the chosen and denies them to all others.

Sex inequality is an instance of status inequality. *Status inequality* separates types of people. For example, racial discrimination preserves whites' advantages over blacks. *Status inequality* concerns people distinguished by their personal attributes, but the amount of inequality separating status groups largely reflects the differences in opportunities available to their members. Status inequality has many faces. The advantaged may be distinguished from the disadvantaged by race, class, age, or even intellectual achievement.

In contrast, *positional inequality*, in its initial form, divides locations within social structures, not people. For example, organizational authority divides managerial positions from staff or wage labor positions. Higher positions have more respect, pay better, and offer authority over those in lower positions. The people occupying these positions are unequal as a direct reflection of the positions they hold. Janitors, assembly line workers, waiters, or clerks never have greater income, respect, or authority than the managers in their firms.

In the relationships between individuals and between groups, the structural resources and rights associated with positions are *transferable* with the positions. For example, organizations repeatedly fill the same position with new personnel; similarly, people transfer personal wealth to their heirs. In contrast, exclusionary *status inequality* organizes around

*nontransferable* personal attributes. A person's sex or race, even a person's educational attainment, cannot be passed on to another person.

In modern, complex societies, persistent system of status inequality are *embedded* in one or more systems of positional inequality. Here, *embedded* means that the inequality systems interact so that those separated by a status inequality are also consistently located unequally in the related systems of positional inequality, giving those in the higher status group the benefits of higher positional standing. People in one status group have preferential access to positions that offer prestige, authority, resources, and rewards. The economic and political orders constitute the most important forms of positional inequality.

In simple terms, a stable system of status inequality must consistently give people resources and motives that match the status of their group identity. These should predispose dominant people toward actions that consistently reinforce inequality. To achieve stability, a system of inequality must deny subordinate people the means to overcome their disadvantages. These are functional necessities for systems of status inequality in a simple logical sense: without them, inequality would wane.

Systems have no general, inherent tendency to meet these needs. If anything, they tend to do just the opposite, making the preservation of inequality universally problematic. In all systems of inequality, subordinate and disadvantaged people have an intrinsic propensity to rebel against their circumstances. This constant pressure will erode inequality unless some group effectively defends it. A system of status inequality preserves itself if, and only if, it gives dominant people the means and will to prevent disadvantaged people from successfully pressing their claims.

The problem of passing power between generations takes different forms for different kinds of status inequality. Consider, first, a rigid racial or caste system. Society divides all people between subordinate and dominant races or castes. Here kinship is paramount. All people are born into a kin group that defines their status. All their ancestors and all their relatives belong to the same subordinate or dominant group. Rules preventing or denying *mixed blood* sustain inequality. Now compare systems of class inequality, abstractly defined, where those holding broadly similar locations in the systems of positional inequality constitute a class. These present continuity and persistence problems differing from those posed by racial systems. Theoretically, in class systems, neither ancestors nor descendants need belong to the same class, although they com-

monly do. Each family's effort to maintain its status across generations is a private project. The preservation of the system of positional inequalities does not depend on the success of these private efforts. Of course, those occupying equivalent locations who experience a common class identity may engage in collective actions to further their common interests. In real world examples, typically the dominant class collectively preserves the structure of class relations, even as its members seek to ensure their children will inherit their class privileges, but to a variable degree opportunities remain for families to rise or fall within that system. In its theoretically pure form, class inequality is mainly an instance of positional inequality. A class comprises those people who occupy a structurally similar position by historical accident. When those sharing a common structural position decide to launch a collective project to change or preserve their economic position, they are transformed into an instance of status inequality. Generational inequality involves a still different pattern in which all people move through the different levels as they age.

Gender inequality has its own special problems inherent in the reproduction of men's advantages. It must contend with special relations between the dominant and subordinate groups--women and men. All children grow up families of intimately linked women and men. As adults they form their own intimate relationship with a member of the other sex and produce descendants of both sexes. For sex inequality to persist, conditions must channel power and the will to use it exclusively to men of each generation.

Always, some women have sought power for themselves and others have tried to escape men's power. While most women accepted their subordination as necessary and just, always a significant minority did not. Some women resented their husbands' authority. Others aspired to independence. Some sought knowledge and education. Some wanted to follow an occupation closed to women. Still others wanted to climb the staircase to power.

Without effective social mechanisms to thwart these women's ambitions, men's social ascendancy could not reproduce itself across generations. Thus, the persistence of male dominance across generations depended on special conditions. These conditions guaranteed that resources and positions of power would consistently go to men.

## **ORGANIZED, REPRODUCIBLE POWER: THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ORDERS**

While many conditions can affect the power relations between two people, the economy and the political order are the most important organized power relations. The economic order ties together property ownership, managerial authority, and job markets. The political order ties together law making, military and police force, the administration of social investment and social services, and setting collective agendas for state policy. The economy and political order organize power into a social structure. Within these social structures, power stems from activities or positions in society rather than individuals' personal characteristics. Organized social power produces the economic and political structures.<sup>2</sup>

Fully organized power is transferable, transitive, and cumulative. Power becomes transferable when one person can get it from another. For example, one man can buy land from another or a woman can replace a previous manager in a firm. Power goes with the land or job. Power becomes transitive when one person's power over a second person also implies power over anyone the second person has power over. A manager, for example, has power not only over those people she commands directly, but also over anyone under the control of her subordinates. Power accumulates if it grows when used strategically. If applied properly, wealth increases itself. Similarly, strategic use of political power will cause it to grow.

Personal qualities and relationship characteristics that affect power cannot become organized. These include, for example, emotional attachments, obligations growing out of a mutual history, personal confidence, and physical strength. These characteristics are not transitive, transferable, or cumulative. Therefore, they cannot become part of the

---

<sup>2</sup> This is an observation, not a definition. The categorization of economic and political power is theoretically difficult. In our society we can usually distinguish government offices from private firms (overlooking the complex contractual and regulatory relations between government and industries). Using people's institutional position, we can classify their actions as representing political or economic power. If, instead, we try to classify the use of power according to the type of resources or the consequences of its use we find ourselves at sea. Many actions within the economy seem political (e.g., the limitation of workers' civil rights on jobs) and many government actions seem primarily economic (e.g., control of the money supply). Apparently, the only inherent distinction between political and economic power is one's site in government and the other in enterprises. (Even that distinction becomes difficult in societies where a large proportion of industry is *owned* by the government.)

structure of organized power. Take emotional power for an example. If one woman has emotional power over another, she cannot transfer that emotional hold to another person. If a woman has emotional power over a man and that man has emotional power over another woman, it does not follow that the first woman has emotional power over the second woman. It is harder to think through the possibility of accumulation, but it seems doubtful. Power founded on personal attributes, like strength and personality, usually eludes organization and extension. It dies with the person who had it (as did Max Weber's *charisma*, authority derived from people's allegiance to a leader with a magnetic personality).

The political and economic systems--which are self-sustaining systems of inequality in their own right--have lent their self-reproducing capacity to gender inequality. They prevented women's collective rebellion by letting men monopolize positions of economic and political power. They prevented women's individual rebellion by sustaining ordinary women's dependence on ordinary men. Thus, sex inequality preserved itself by being embedded in political and economic inequality.

#### **OUTSIDE THE PYRAMID OF POWER**

Women have in the past stood outside the organization of power in society. Social power has linked all men, from the financial magnate and the national politician to the humble bootblack and the factory machine operator. Women lacked power. But, they were not at the bottom of the organization of power so much as they were outside it altogether.

Figure 4.1 presents a diagram that summarizes this pattern of relationships. It shows abstractly the structure of a society that excludes women from positions of power and isolates them from each other. In this diagram vertical lines represent power relationships while horizontal lines represent reciprocal relationships among people of equal power. The diagram shows men (M) organized into a hierarchy of power relationships. Men also associate with each other at the same level. Women (W), in contrast, have connections only to the men in their families. Women, in this abstracted image, have no direct relations with each other. They only take part in men's economic and political hierarchy through their dependent attachments to fathers, husbands, and guardians.<sup>3</sup> This pattern

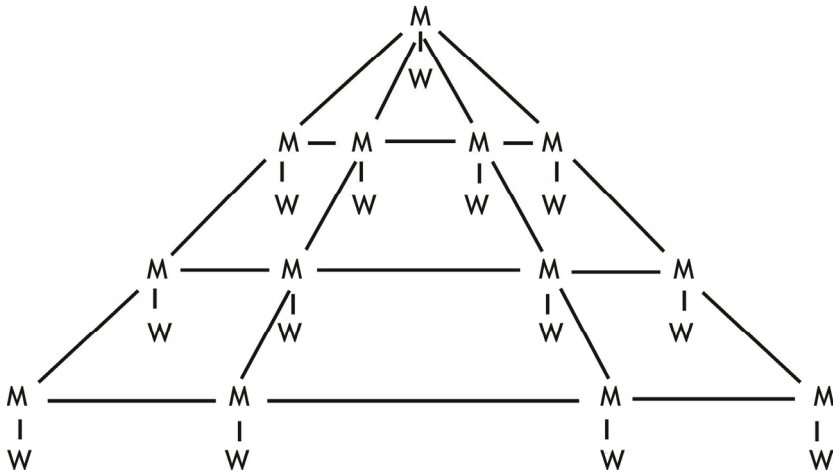
---

<sup>3</sup> A more complete diagram of Figure 4.1 would be three dimensional. It would show a secondary, less important hierarchy among women based on the male hierarchy. It would also show some relationships of privilege between high status women



depicts a condition of severe sexual inequality coexisted with severe political and economic stratification, perhaps best illustrated by feudal societies.

### Power Relations With Extreme Sexual Inequality



[Figure 4.1 about here]

Social power includes the capacity to rule or influence the actions of others because of property ownership, wealth, political office, bureaucratic office, political alliance, or even public prominence. Political theorists make varied distinctions among types of power in society. For example, they consider authority that subordinates accepted as legitimate to be very different from coercive force. These distinctions are critical to some applications of social theory. Here, however, we want to lump together all forms of social power other than those that directly express individual attributes such as strength or dynamic character.

When we think about the distribution of power in a society, our images often emphasize people. We contrast the rich with the poor, the politically influential with the disenfranchised. This imagery envisions

---

and low status men. This is particularly true of the distribution of material advantages. The backbone of domination, however, works only through men.

power as a personal trait. Some people have more, some have less. The analysis we are pursuing takes the opposite tact.

This analysis conceives power as a characteristic of positions rather than persons. People have more or less power because they occupy a position with more or fewer resources or more or less authority. People circulate through these positions. Over time, the people who occupy these positions leave to take other positions (intragenerational mobility) or to exit the system due to age (intergenerational mobility) or personal circumstances. Others take their place. Simultaneously, the distribution of positions also changes, for example when technical change creates a new occupation or organizational changes alter the ratio of management positions to staff positions.

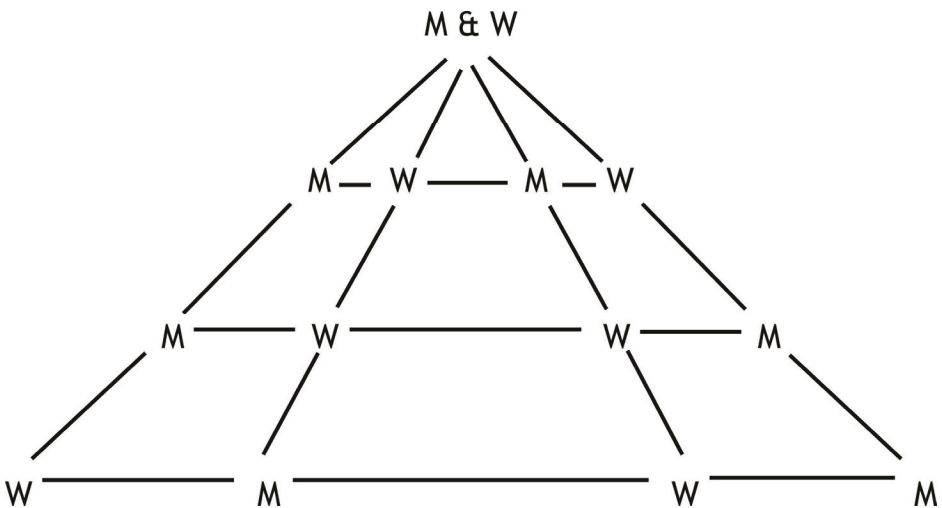
We might illustrate this perspective by using the image of a corporation. This conception of power assumes that everyone in society is employed by large corporations (as so many are). Corporations hire people to fill positions. These jobs range from the presidency, through management, through supervision, down to lowly manual lines. A person's power in the corporation comes mainly from his or her job's place in the firm's organization. Personal networks still matter. One manager who has built up her contacts will have more influence than an isolated manager at the same level. But, each manager will have more power than every machine operator and less power than the president. Here we can extend this imagery to all society. We can, for example, imagine wealth existing autonomously over time, with different people taking the position of owning it. The only power that will not lend itself to this analysis is power that dissolves at its owner's death. Because this perishable personal power accounts for only a small part of all power in modern societies, we can ignore it in this analysis.

By elaborating this image of the corporation, we can clarify what it means to say that women have existed outside the organization of power, as depicted in figure 4.1. Imagine a large, white-collar, financial firm. Let's say the firm hires only men for all its regular staff positions from the lowest financial officer to the president. Let's also say that every member of the staff gets a female secretary. The men in this firm all have a standing in the formal hierarchy of authority and promotions. They also have varied cooperative work relations and alliances with other men at or near their level. The secretaries all owe allegiance to their boss and work only with him. Secretaries with higher status bosses get more prestige and money. No promotion ladders exist for the secretaries. They stay with

their bosses and only move up if their bosses move up. The internal organization of many firms has resembled this sketch. Moreover, if we substitute wives for secretaries, this begins to look like the general distribution of power in society. Men stand somewhere in the male hierarchy of status and influence. Most economic and political activities in society have traditionally gained their form through the organization of links between men. Women have been outside both economic and political structures, tied to them only as dependents of their husbands or fathers.

For comparison, we can diagram a society where the sexes are equal. It would still show the pyramidal pattern but women and men would be scattered equally throughout the pyramid. Figure 4.2 depicts this pattern. The total economic and political inequality in society may not differ, but as many women as men occupy the positions of advantage. When the nation won independence, women's status in the United States resembled Figure 1. Gender relations in the United States have been shifting, and will keep on shifting, from the pattern in Figure 1 to that in Figure 2. This means that we are now in a state between these two extremes. Here we will concentrate on the reasons that the pattern of inequality portrayed in Figure 1 was self-reproducing and why it tended to persist even as historical conditions pushed us toward the egalitarian pattern.

### Power Relations With Equality Between the Sexes



[Figure 4.2 about here]

## Women's Exclusion from Positions of Economic Power

First, let's ask how men monopolized economic power. To answer that, we must consider how a man reached economic power. To have economic power in an industrial society, you needed private wealth or an influential position in a commercial enterprise. How did some men get such power while most did not?

Men generally attained economic power by following one (or more) of three major routes. They rose through the ranks to the top of organizations. They succeeded as entrepreneurs. Or they inherited wealth or opportunities.

Examples of men who followed each route are common. Men who have inherited wealth have always been common among the economically powerful in the United States. Many descendants of men who became wealthy 50 to 200 years ago, like the Duponts and the Rockefellers, play a significant role in the economy.<sup>4</sup> But our society's popular myths honor self-made men over those who have inherited their status (a reversal from the myths prevalent when aristocracies governed our forebears' homelands). We tend to identify the idea of the self-made man with famous entrepreneurs in our past, like Carnegie and Edison. Modern examples of entrepreneurial success include the owners of rising computer companies (like *Apple*) and franchised fast food chains (like *MacDonald's*).

<sup>2</sup>During the 20th century, a managerial elite arose to compete with familial wealth and personal wealth for economic influence. Men who rose to economic power through organizational mobility have abounded in the economy. The top officers of corporations such as Chrysler or IBM often have worked their way up the ranks after starting as low level managers or engineers.

Over time, as the economy's structure changed, the new roads to power have become well traveled while old ones lost their importance. Before capitalism, inheritance was the only well maintained route. During this nation's first century, the exciting, slippery new roads to entrepreneurial success opened a path to economic power for men from the social hinterlands. The corporate economy's rise in the twentieth century paved a new road to economic power. A successful bureaucratic career increasingly became the expressway to business leadership. For a considerable time, entrepreneurial success seemed to become less important

---

<sup>4</sup> G. William Domhoff (1967), *Who Rules America?*

than inheritance.<sup>5</sup> The rise of new technological and financial firms in recent decades appears to reverse that pattern, but highly successful entrepreneurs commonly rise from affluent families and most people still get ahead through educational credentials and climbing organizational ladders.

Merit, brigandage, and caprice all influenced the fate of men who ventured on these paths leading to economic power. If you were bright, your dad had money, you worked hard, luck put you at the right places at the right times, and no one chose to cheat you or trip you up, power would be yours. The fewer of these conditions that were true, the more likely you would lose your way, get stuck in a dead end, or even slip into the gutter.

While only a minority of men achieved economic power through these three routes, women had almost no success through any of them. Despite the family she came from, how smart she was, how hard she worked, or how much luck favored her, a woman could not reach power by any path. Each of these paths to economic power presented special difficulties for women. Why was this so?

### **ORGANIZATIONAL MOBILITY**

Men's opposition was probably enough to preclude women's advancement up organizational ladders in business. Husbands, other workers, and employers pushed women away from responsible jobs. With fewer opportunities for higher education or work experience, not many women could offer a tract record to compete with men for promotions. Under these conditions, few women ever hoped to win organizational advancement and those who did usually met refusal.

In the 1970s, Rosabeth Moss Kanter argued persuasively that corporations hired women exclusively for dead end jobs. These jobs had no links to the promotional ladders that let men climb to higher positions. Moreover, women could not find the mentors or join a network of influence necessary for advancement. Men, who held all power, did not believe it prudent to support women.

Kanter also belittled the idea that women's work habits and personality characteristics prevented their advancement in corporations. In-

---

<sup>5</sup> Reinhard Bendix (1974), *Work and Authority in Industry: Ideologies of Management in the Course of Industrialization*.

stead, she showed that women's dead end jobs produced a pattern of *feminine* behavior in both sexes.

So long as men have monopolized economic power, they found promoting women a practical risk. As was true with political power, women seemed a poorer bet for patrons or for others who would depend on the effectiveness of the person who took a position of authority. A survey of business executives by the *Harvard Business Review* in the mid-1960s illustrates the problem. The *Review* surveyed about 2,000 executives. The sample came from their subscribers and--to get enough women--from professional and trade directories. About half were women, who as a group were less educated, in much smaller companies, and much more concentrated (due to the sampling procedure) in publishing and commerce. As part of this survey, the respondents were asked how a large corporation should handle the risk of promoting a woman to corporate president, given that "the company . . . attributed much of its successful innovation to the thinking of this woman." One-third of the male respondents and one-fifth of the women agreed that "as a president, this woman would not be effective--particularly in terms of commanding respect and confidence--just by reason of being a woman, no matter how capable she is." Two-fifths of the men and one-fifth of the women believed that the risks were so great that her appointment would be unwise. (One-half the men and one-quarter of the women also agreed that women are "temperamentally unfit for management.") If managers were still this concerned about promoting women in 1965, we can only assume that their doubts were overwhelming in earlier decades.<sup>7</sup>

Women faced hurdles at every stage in the organizational hierarchy. Men did not. Thus, in its various forms, men's opposition largely barred women from competing for advancement. If women gained entry, they faced the same opposition at each level of the ladder up.<sup>8</sup> We will take a

---

[<sup>6</sup>expand comments based on Kanter?]

<sup>7</sup>Garda W. Bowman, N. Beatrice Worthy, and Stephen A. Greyser (1965), "Are Women Executives People?", 16, 28.

<sup>8</sup>Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977), *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Kanter neglects a crucial question. She emphasizes that jobs identified with women were dead end. This could mean two different things. Organizations could have hired women only for the jobs that led nowhere. Alternatively, it could be that when jobs became identified with women, the organization cut off the routes to advancement. For women the results were the same. However, the causes differ.

much closer look at men's opposition to women's employment in the next chapter.

### ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS

Superficially, it might seem that women could have a good shot at success as entrepreneurs. We associate entrepreneur's economic power with skills for investing, negotiating, and running enterprises. The entrepreneur does not depend on family wealth. Unlike those rising within organizational hierarchies, the entrepreneur's fate does not depend on a boss's decisions. The impartial market judges the entrepreneurs merit. Shouldn't a person's sex be inconsequential if she can build a better mouse trap or is the first to figure out that people want remedies for *bad breath*?

Perhaps in theory it should, but in reality entrepreneurial success demands much more than intellect and ambition. An entrepreneur needs freedom: freedom to travel, freedom from the obligations of reproduction, and freedom from commitments to other people. An entrepreneur cannot start without investment capital or the social characteristics necessary to attract other investors. An entrepreneur also needs acceptance of established men in business, much as someone in a managerial hierarchy needs acceptance by those in higher positions. A successful entrepreneur must have the cooperation of other firms as suppliers and buyers; this comes only when those firms representatives, mostly men, feel the entrepreneur is a good risk (otherwise they withhold their business or charge more). An entrepreneur also needs dependable subordinates. But, as one female president of a manufacturing firm said in 1965, "A woman has about three times as much trouble as a man in hiring a staff of able men."<sup>9</sup> Besides meeting these tangible necessities, an aspiring entrepreneur needs the will to suffer the hard work, the long hours, the risks of failure, and the unceasing pressures of competition. It is difficult to sustain this will without social approval for the effort and the expectation that success will bring prestige.

Women rarely became entrepreneurial successes because social conditions denied them the needed ingredients. Men usually opposed wom-

---

Several conditions denied most women success. Men often opposed women's advancement. Men dominated business and had no confidence that a woman could be trusted. Few women had the resources to attempt entrepreneurial success. Moreover, cultural norms discouraged women from trying.

<sup>9</sup>Bowman, Worthy, and Greyser, "Are Women Executives People?", 175.

en's advancement. Men dominated business and had no confidence that a woman could be trusted. Few women had the economic resources needed to start a business. And cultural norms discouraged women from trying.<sup>10</sup> The market was supposed to decide entrepreneurial success. In reality, the conditions denying women entrepreneurial power resembled those keeping them from acquiring organizational power.

### **INHERITED WEALTH**

Women could not achieve economic power by inheritance for two reasons. First, women did not inherit as much as men. Fathers left more property, especially business property, to their sons than to their daughters. Still, women came from prosperous families just as often as men and they sometimes inherited significant wealth. Yet, social conditions prevented women from transforming their wealth into economic power.

*Lesser Heirs.* Before industrialization came to Europe, custom and law directed property toward men. In some places only men could legally inherit wealth. Elsewhere men customarily transferred the bulk of their wealth to sons or sons-in-law. If women somehow did inherit (more often as widows than daughters), the law usually granted control to their current or future husbands.<sup>11</sup> The English system was reproduced in the United States during the colonial era.

Because these economies emphasized family enterprises, the transfer of productive property was intimately bound with family formation and family dissolution through marriage, birth, and death.<sup>12</sup> While women worked at many occupations, they generally stayed dependent on men and could not achieve formal status within a craft.<sup>13</sup> When we say that men passed their property to their sons, we really mean that one or more sons succeeded their father in controlling the family enterprise. Property did pass to daughters as a dowry, but their husbands had control of it.

Such societies gave brothers and husbands ample self-interests in preserving the male monopoly over productive property. Born into a system already devoted to male supremacy, they had the resources to reach

---

<sup>10</sup>We need good research on women entrepreneurs, both successes and failures, in the past and present.

<sup>11</sup>Norma Basch (1982), *In the Eyes of the Law: Women, Marriage, and Property in Nineteenth-Century New York*.

<sup>12</sup>Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk, and E. P. Thompson (1976), *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200-1800*.

<sup>13</sup>E.g., Natalie Zemon Davis (1982), "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon".



that goal easily (even if fathers might have wanted to favor their daughters out of sentiment). Because her husband would control a woman's inheritance, any property that went to daughters would pass out of the family enterprise. This made it imperative that families give daughters only liquid and excess wealth that would not jeopardize the family enterprise. If they had no son, the family had to substitute a more distant male relative or try to absorb a son-in-law. Thus, men's monopoly of property reproduced itself because passing property to women was destructive to family enterprises.

*Diminishing Differences.* Since the early 19th century in the United States (and comparable societies), women did increasingly inherit wealth. The industrial market economy and liberal democratic government fostered laws giving women equal legal rights to inherit and control property. Families with more liquid wealth treated daughters and sons more equally. Wives more often outlived their husbands. And in community property states, rising divorce let some women walk away with part of the family's estate.<sup>14</sup>

In the half-century following World War I, an increasing proportion of independently wealthy people in the United States were women. Data on wealth, unlike income, have not been readily available. Researchers have emphasized the information garnered by the Internal Revenue Service as it pursued estate taxes. Throughout most of this century, when someone died who had holdings greater than \$60,000, the estate had to file detailed financial information. Combining this data with mortality rates by sex, age and marital status we can estimate the distribution of wealth in the population. According to this data, between the end of women's suffrage fight after World War I and the rise of the modern feminist movement, women went from one-quarter to two-fifths of those who died affluent.<sup>15</sup> By 1972 44% of the assets left behind by the wealthy dead were from the estates of dying women. Some of this wealth was probably illusory. Even if a woman legally owned the property, her hus-

---

<sup>14</sup> Community property also artificially lowers the apparent size of men's wealth at death. If their wives survive them, as they commonly do, then the wealth claimed by wives as community property is not recorded as part of the men's estates. Robert J. Lampman (1962), *The Share of Top Wealth-Holders in National Wealth, 1922-56*.

<sup>15</sup> Ann R. Tickamyer (1981), "Wealth and Power: A Comparison of Men and Women in the Property Elite"; Lena Edlund and Wojciech Kopczuk (2009), "Women, Wealth, and Mobility".

band often controlled it<sup>16</sup> (half the women dying with estates worth more than \$60,000 in 1970 had living husbands). For other women who received it when their husbands died, it was too late in their lives to use it to gain power. Nonetheless, the data have shown that by the 1970s one of every five persons having more than \$60,000 was an unmarried woman (of whom two-thirds were widows).

*Isn't Wealth Power?* This data raises an especially puzzling analytical problem. Why were women who *did* inherit wealth *not* nearly as likely to acquire economic power as men with similar inheritances? The data show that steadily more women became wealthy through inheritance. Yet, this did not prompt women to move into more positions of economic power.

While some women who inherited wealth used it as a tool to wield economic power, and their numbers have probably increased progressively throughout this century, most have not. Women, like men, who inherited wealth always profited from the income it produced, of course. But they were considerably less likely to use their wealth as a means to become a powerful participant in the economy.

Differences in the form of women's wealth explain some of this. Fathers still favored sons as heirs for business property. When they could, men were more likely to leave control of a business to a son and monetary wealth to a daughter. This gave men a direct path to economic power more often than women. Still, men have regularly used all types of wealth to achieve economic power much more than women. Why?

What *do* wealthy women do if they are not striving for economic success? In the 1980s, Susan Ostrander studied married upper class women, most between the ages of forty and seventy, in one large city. These women, she found, dedicated themselves to supporting their husbands, raising their children, enjoying elite clubs, and doing volunteer work.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Even then, a significant proportion of wealthy husbands' property would be available to women if they were willing to pursue divorce. Although the wives of rich men commonly get considerably less than half of their husband's wealth, they still usually come out affluent. Many people may find it offensive to think of divorce as a rational strategy to gain affluence and independence from which to launch a career. Still, we cannot ignore it. Many wives of wealthy men have known they could seek divorce expecting both legal and financial success. Once this was true, those women were no longer simply bound to economic dependence on their husbands.

<sup>17</sup> Ostrander, *Women of the Upper Class*.

All had some household help, and most did little domestic labor themselves. These women recognized their privileges. Some were explicit. "I have all the worldly goods anyone could want." "[T]his is a little island of tranquility. . . . It's easy to grow up like this. Everything is done for you." "My life is like a storybook." Only one of thirty-six women had a career (as an academic). These women had privileges and status. Nonetheless, they did not challenge men for power. Instead they sustained strict norms about the division of labor between the sexes.

All evidently deferred to their husbands in important decisions, although they commonly preferred to describe their family decision making as egalitarian. One exception stood out from this pattern. Women who had personal wealth or income often exercised separate control over their money. Still, these women did not use their money to propel themselves into public power. At most, the rare woman who enjoyed a hefty wealth advantage over her husband might become ascendant within her marriage. This recent picture of mature upper class women's lives shows that many live much like wealthy women 100 years ago. (Younger women probably would show some significant changes.)

Why have wealthy women deferred to their husbands? Why did they limit their aspirations to fit social expectations? It seems that two considerations were most important. First, the male monopoly over positions of economic power made it hard for women to build the cooperative ties they needed with suppliers, clients, financiers, subordinates, and others. Second, the cultural context did not force wealthy women to prove themselves through public success.

*Wealth Is Not Enough.* Wealthy women could pursue the ambitions of wealthy men only at the price of becoming cultural outlaws. Compared with men, wealthy women have faced some unappealing choices. They could become domestic leaders and moral exemplars. The culture of wealth channeled them toward the prescribed roles of leisurely household administrators and volunteers for cultural and charitable activities. What was the alternative? To act like men? No welcome awaited them in the corridors of economic and political power. No one suggested that wealthy women should pursue the careers open to their husbands. No one was happy if they tried.

To turn an inheritance into power, a woman had to overcome some of the same obstacles that obstructed women's ascent by entrepreneurial or organizational routes. Wealth gives a person some direct coercive economic power, but it takes more than that to turn wealth into effective

economic power. A wealthy man can close a plant he owns or sell his stock or put his money into a different bank. He cannot simply assume authority over a business or grab influence in an industry. To get significant economic power, he must use his wealth to push him into the same positions that other men reach as entrepreneurs or through organizational advancement. Wealthy women had to follow the same path to gain power.

To translate wealth into economic power a woman must take control of either a large or small enterprise. In the first case, she must win acceptance by the men already holding power within the enterprise. Most large enterprises are corporations or partnerships. While each owner has the influence dictated by her or his shares, active power over the enterprise belongs to its officers and directors, who must be appointed or elected. In the second case, she needs acceptance by the men running other enterprises that are her suppliers and buyers.

Men in power were far less likely to support a woman for advancement in a corporation and they were reluctant to make their firms dependent on business with another firm headed by a woman. Because women could not get as much support as men, they suffered a considerable disadvantage. This made it hard to compete successfully for the positions yielding power within large enterprises or to operate profitably in small enterprises. Without powerful men's support, wealthy women found it hard to wield economic power. If a wealthy woman garnered a position giving her economic power, she found it hard to expand it or even hold onto it in the competition against men.

This does not mean that women have never run large enterprises. This has occurred on occasion and is now happening much more than it did before the recent improvements in women's economic status. In the past, and still in most cases today, such women needed to employ men as intermediaries between themselves and both their employees and the men with whom they did business. As a result, women's representation among corporate directorates and top management stayed far below women's property ownership among the wealthy. Even with inherited wealth, to exercise power a person needs the support of others in power.<sup>18</sup>

*Why Bother?* Moreover, women did not usually have the same motives to achieve economic power that men had. Most people might find

---

<sup>18</sup> Stinchcombe, Arthur L. "Social Structure and Organizations." In James G. March, ed., *Handbook of Organizations*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965.

some pleasure exercising economic power. Still, no universal, inherent human drive sends all wealthy people scampering after power and more wealth. A wealthy person could easily prefer a life of leisure and consumption.

Economic historians have long considered wealthy men's commitment to economic activity an outstanding byproduct of capitalism and a significant problem to explain. In some societies, rich people avoid all economic activities, enjoying this distance from work as a culturally approved privilege. Yet, in societies like modern America, a wealthy man without an occupation invites social disapproval. Parallel cultural pressures compelled ordinary men to earn a family income and wealthy men to compete for economic power. Economic organization and gender inequality joined to produce these as cultural imperatives for men.

Cultural expectations exhorted women to avoid the careers and responsibilities pressed onto men. Women did not acquire men's lust for economic power. Society did not offer them approval and rewards if they used inherited wealth to gain *male* positions of influence. Hence, wealthy women not only faced greater obstacles if they sought economic power, they also lacked the motives that compelled men to try.<sup>20</sup>

Some wealthy women still acquired a drive for influence and public activity. These women built a world of voluntary positions to fulfill their needs. Wealth was a passport that guaranteed welcome by organizations hungry for donations. Cultural and philanthropic endeavors such as museums or charities gave wealthy women an outlet in return for their support. These positions could be as time consuming as women wanted, were as inherently interesting as positions in the economy and government, and they carried high cultural esteem.<sup>21</sup>

Wealthy women have been captives of their class identity. They want to enjoy their birthright of privilege and status. To enjoy acceptance they need a proper marriage with a man who is also a member of their class. Their class gives these women security, leisure, and a sense of importance. As one of Ostrander's upper class women said, "we're not sup-

---

[<sup>19</sup>add citation]

<sup>20</sup> This discussion is speculative because we know far too little about the activities of wealthy women.

<sup>21</sup> Arlene Kaplan Daniels, *Invisible Careers: Women Civic Leaders from the Volunteer World*.

posed to have layers in society, but I suppose I do feel superior."<sup>22</sup> They pay for their *gilded cages* through deference to their husbands. Still, we must remember, these families' wealth greatly diminishes the costs of deference. These women live well, have considerable freedom to fulfill their wishes, and savor a high class status.<sup>23</sup>

### WHEN ALL ROADS LEAD NOWHERE

No route used by men to reach economic power offered much hope for women. Organizational advancement, entrepreneurial prosperity, and transforming wealth into economic power all demanded initial resources. Continuing success depended on some acceptance and support by others already in power. Family, schools, and those in power gave far fewer women than men the resources needed to travel these routes. The few women who did get the means to start usually found they could not get acceptance from men whose cooperation or support they needed to advance. Women lacked the culturally induced obsession with economic power that drove men. Women also knew they could not realistically expect social approval if they tried for economic power. With these constraints, women rarely nourished the hope that they might reach economic power by any path. Those who did seek economic power faced enormous disadvantages. Short of initial resources and denied comparable support, how could women hope to compete with men for the same power?<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ostrander, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> This argument should not be seen as negating the reality of these women's subordination to men of their class. We need to recognize that most people stand somewhere within the social hierarchy, above some and below others. Ordinary men, for example, have commanded the subordination of ordinary women while simultaneously being themselves deferent to powerful men. Similarly, it is naive to identify higher social standing with greater pleasure and less work. Positions of higher status may be more competitive or more demanding. Still, social dominance is social dominance. This does not change because many in the dominant group are subject to others or because they find little room for joy in life in their position of dominance.

<sup>24</sup> Why did men in positions of economic power oppose women entering their group? To what degree does the analysis of men's opposition to women's employment apply here? The difference here is that men who have economic power have less to gain from gender inequality than ordinary men. Is general prejudice against women an effective force among powerful men, even if they gain nothing by supporting inequality? I find this doubtful. But we simply do not have enough information about the response of men with economic power to the efforts of women to join their status.

Notably, despite all these obstacles, some women still achieved economic power. Their numbers probably increased progressively over the past century. How these rare women won power can be partially explained by comparing the obstacles women met along the three routes to economic success. This discussion has show that the need for men's acceptance and the reasons for male opposition differed along for the three routes. These obstacles were greatest for advancement within organization hierarchies because this acceptance by superiors was most important in this milieu. They were least, although still usually overwhelming, for transforming inherited wealth into economic power. Consequentially, most women who achieved economic power did so using inherited wealth. Some women were able to succeed as entrepreneurs (particularly in small businesses). Advancement through the ranks of large enterprises proved the most resistant to women.<sup>25</sup>

### **Political Power**

What kept women outside the halls of political power for generation after generation? Recall, the key to sustaining a political monopoly is the transfer of power between generations. By some means and for some reason, men in power have consistently passed their power on to other men, avoiding women. Political inequality in complex societies is commonly economic inequality's child, but it can be a rebellious offspring.<sup>26</sup> This was as true in societies with industrial market economies as it was before. Women's exclusion from economic power left them lacking the resources needed to enter the political arena. As political power separated from the economy and from the family in modern societies, however, the process transferring men's political power between generations changed. It became more competitive and harder to control.

### **MEN'S ASCENT TO POLITICAL POWER**

*Inherited Political Status.* In pre-industrial societies, simple inheritance successfully transferred power from fathers to sons. A son inherited his father's place in the political hierarchy, just as he inherited control

---

<sup>25</sup> This is a theoretical hypothesis. We must await pertinent research on women's acquisition of economic power to support it.

<sup>26</sup> Sometimes the relationship can be reversed, in the sense that political power becomes the source of economic power and policies, as in some authoritarian and communist countries of the twentieth century, but also further back in time under some monarchies and colonial regimes. The ascendance of the political over the economic seems difficult to sustain, however.

over the family land. This process focused power on one chosen son. Political status followed the family line and reposed in the family's male head.

Whether he had high or low status, a man had little room to influence the transmission of power. As head of the family, he might diminish the family's estate through incompetence or treachery. He might enhance it through skillful management or strategic acts of valorous patriotism. He might chose the son (or son-in-law) who would succeed him. Still, it was practically impossible for a man to evade passing his power to a male heir. In some societies a man could choose to divide the family estate among his children, but he could not decide his children's political status.

Women could not penetrate this transmission process. A widow or unmarried daughter might temporarily control the family estate. A married woman might exercise power by dominating her husband. But she had no way to transfer her power to women in the next generation.

*Achieved Political Power.* Modern societies shifted political power from families to offices. Men could no longer inherit political power directly from their fathers. Instead, men moved into political office by election or appointment. What we want to explain, then, are the conditions that allowed only men to win election or appointment.

To solve this problem, we will consider how men achieve political power in the United States and comparable societies. To simplify this analysis, we can equate political power with the policies and actions of government. People exercise political power by holding government offices or by having some control over others who occupy government posts. We are mainly interested in those who become successful politicians.

To wield political influence outside political parties and government office, men needed economic power. We have already seen how difficult it was for women to scale the heights of economic power. The obstacles surrounding economic power also prevented women from reaching political power by using money to manipulate politicians. Thus their only hope was to enter the political fray directly.

Few men won direct political power. Those who did had to pass through a complex, competitive selection process.<sup>27</sup> Men had little likelihood of succeeding unless they had several qualities. They had to have

---

<sup>27</sup> Seligman, L.; Kim, C.; and Smith, R.; *Patterns of Recruitment*; Chicago: Rand McNally, 1974.



the liberty and longing to pursue political power. They have needed the social characteristics that made them acceptable to those who recruit or elect men to power. And they have had to gain the support of, or influence over, other men in political power. Men who got this support have usually been successful in business or law (or, less often, another profession) or they had inherited wealth.<sup>28</sup> Women have been severely disadvantaged at each step in this path to political power.<sup>29</sup>

Without resources to call their own or social support for such ambitions, most women have not had the liberty to begin the quest for political power. If, as Virginia Woolf argued, women's lack of a room to call their own quashed their desire to write, how much more difficult it must have been to find the time and liberty to start a political career. Women's effective efforts to form feminist movements, women active in leftist political parties, and female social reformers all showed that these barriers were not insurmountable. But they were formidable.

### SCALING THE WRONG SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

*Legal Outcasts.* Unquestionably, legal barriers were for a long time the most imposing obstacles to women's political aspirations. As described in earlier chapters, laws once totally excluded women from the political process. Before women's admission to the body politic they were merely the political and legal dependents of their husbands, fathers, or guardians.<sup>30</sup> We should not exaggerate the law's influence, because the law more reflected women's social marginality than caused it. Remember, also, before representative governments arose in association with capitalist economies, most men were politically and legally inferior to an elite of other men. Still, no woman could aim at political office until the state admitted women into the polity. Over time, the formal distinctions

---

<sup>28</sup> Matthews, Donald R.; *U.S. Senators and Their World*; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960; Miliband, Ralph; *The State in Capitalist Society*; New York: Basic Books, 1969.

<sup>29</sup> Unquestionably, some conditions also help certain wealthy or successful men reach political power while others fail. They can be ignored for this general comparison between the sexes. So long as more people compete for political power than there are positions, some must lose out. The question here is why women have largely been absent from the competition.

<sup>30</sup> Basch, Norma; *In the Eyes of the Law: Women, Marriage, and Property in 19th-Century New York*; Ithaca, N.Y.

between women's and men's legal statuses eroded.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the breakdown of legal barriers was not enough. Women still lacked the liberty to pursue a political career.

*Domestic Chains.* Women's child rearing obligations have been one crucial limit on their liberty. Research on modern political behavior has repeatedly shown women's children burdened them so much they could not seek political office. Child rearing robbed women of control over their time.<sup>32</sup> They could not appear to avoid their mothering obligations without facing social criticism.<sup>33</sup> They rarely could expect their husbands to sacrifice their own time or career for their wife's political career.<sup>34</sup> This did not leave women much room for maneuvering. Family obligations can limit men's political careers too, but this is an occasional impediment.<sup>35</sup> Women's domestic obligations are recurring and enduring. If domestic chores have kept women from politics in recent decades, how much worse it must have been during the previous century! When women had more children and more household work, the prospect of committing themselves to a political career must have seemed an extremely remote fantasy.

*You Need a Horse to Become a Knight.* Even the few women with the liberty to follow a political career rarely had the other prerequisites for political success. Before entering public life, most politicians won their spurs elsewhere. They proved themselves in business or law or another profession, or, less commonly, they relied on the aristocratic bouquet of inherited wealth. Only a small minority of men, we must remember, had any hope to achieve political power. A man who stormed politics' ramparts before he commanded resources and respect was inviting a cold dip in the moat.

---

<sup>31</sup> Stacey, M. and Price, M.; *Women, Power and Politics*; London: Tavistock, 1981.

<sup>32</sup> Lee, Marcia M.; "Why Few Women Hold Public Office: Democracy and Sexual Roles"; *Political Science Quarterly* (1976): 297-314.

<sup>33</sup> Lynn, Naomi and Flora, Cornelia Butler; "Societal Punishment and Aspects of Female Political Participation: 1972 National Convention Delegates"; pp. 139-149 in *A Portrait of Marginality*, eds. Marianne Githens and Jewel J Prestage; New York: David McKay, 1977.

<sup>34</sup> Lamson, Peggy; *Few Are Chosen: American Women in Political Life Today*; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

<sup>35</sup> Blair, Diane Kincaid and Henry, Ann; "The Family Factor in State Legislative Turnover"; *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 1 (1981): 55-68.

Largely excluded from these strategic social positions, women could not climb the same ladders of influence that men ascended in the rise to political prominence.<sup>36</sup> As discussed before, women found economic power practically unattainable and admission to the professions generally closed to them.

Only those who were properly equipped could win what they needed to get elected or appointed to office. A well outfitted aspirant had acceptance by political power brokers, economic support, and voters' allegiance. In the nineteenth century, the political process favored the successful representatives of the middle classes--businessmen and independent professionals--and the wealthy. Over time, high posts in the corporate business world or in corporate law firms have become more common routes to political power. Other routes also exist, such as outstanding military careers or success in academic fields devoted to political or economic policy.

Men did not resist women entering positions of power in the economy in order to deny them the means to acquire political power. Men's concerns with economic success generally motivated the processes and decisions that kept women out of the professions and denied them economic power. Nonetheless, the exclusion from economic power largely kept political power outside women's reach.

*No Memberships for Sale.* Wealthy women might have overcome the status and resource barriers that restrained most women, but the men holding political power refused them the acceptance and support needed to enter the halls of power. In the past, the few women who did win political office depended more on their wealth and background than on their own achievements.<sup>37</sup> But such women were rare.

As argued above, women who inherited wealth failed to transform it into economic power. Even wealthy women found themselves judged

---

<sup>36</sup> Kirkpatrick, Jeane J.; *Political Woman*; New York: Basic Books, 1974; Powell, Lynda Watts; Brown, Clifford W.; and Hedges, Roman B.; "Male and Female Differences in Political Participation: An Examination of the Effects of Socio-economic and Familial Variables"; *Western Political Quarterly* 34 (1981): 31-45; Welch, Susan; "Recruitment of Women to Public Office: A Discriminant Analysis"; *Western Political Quarterly* 31 (1978): 372-380.

<sup>37</sup> Gertzog, Irwin N.; "Changing Patterns of Female Recruitment to the U.S. House of Representatives"; *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 4 (1979): 429-445; Jones, Woodrow and Nelson, Albert J.; "Correlates of Women's Representation in Lower State Legislative Chambers"; *Social Behavior and Personality* 1 (1981): 9-15.

unworthy to join the men who monopolized economic power. They did not use their wealth to fight this rejection because cultural conditions had not burdened them with men's compulsive need to prove self worth in the economy and because they would face social disapproval.

Similar circumstances probably explain wealthy women's failure to gain political power. Wealth usually gave women liberty, but it did not put them on the same course that took many wealthy men to political power. Social pressure did not drive wealthy women to gain power nor did society offer them praise if they sought it. More pointedly, not even wealth could buy women political viability.

*You Need a Noble to Become a Vassal.* Political power depended, even more than economic power, on networks of influence and obligation. One or more groups of men always controlled political power. These men occupied strategic positions and were linked together by obligations of mutual support. They held offices in government and political parties or they had resources allowing them to influence these parties and the government. Other men could gain political power only by acceptance into these networks (or by creating an alternative network that could win political power away from the existing networks).<sup>38</sup> The men in these positions probably systematically barred women from entry.

A man with political power would see supporting a woman with political ambitions as a great risk. He could almost always find a man who was a surer bet for the future. Women were a poor bet because their *foreignness* made them unlikely to form effective alliances among men with political (and economic) power. Moreover, the cultural conditions of gender inequality made ordinary men's support unlikely.

The most successful *strategy* women had for getting around the recruitment barriers was to marry a politician. This is why, in the past, most women who reached Congressional office in the United States were widows appointed or elected to the seat formerly held by their husbands.<sup>39</sup>

Women who have won political power usually held the least desirable posts. While studying state elections, Irene Diamond found strong

---

<sup>38</sup> Randall, Vicky; *Women and Politics*; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982; Rule, Wilma; "Why Women Don't Run: The Critical Contextual Factors in Women's Legislative Recruitment"; *Western Political Quarterly* 34 (1981): 60-77.

<sup>39</sup> Kincaid, Diane D.; "Over His Dead Body: A New Perspective and Some Feminist Notes on Widows in the U.S. Congress"; *Western Political Quarterly* 31 (1978): 96-104.

evidence of this pattern. Women's chances for winning elections to state legislatures were highest when they competed for seats that were the least prestigious, worst paid, and least likely to lead to higher political goals.<sup>40</sup> This mirrors women's experience in the economy, of course. Women's movement into elective posts, especially during the past two decades, has been greatest at the local level, less at the state level, and least in the national government.<sup>41</sup>

*Spectators Don't Win.* Although some women undoubtedly have craved power, cultural expectations seem to have produced women with such ambitions much less often than men. Our culture has not promised women social rewards for declaring political ambitions or for pursuing power. Indeed, research over the past several decades has shown that girls' socialization instills considerably less interest in politics than boys upbringing.<sup>42</sup> Research also has shown that women have lower political ambitions than men, even when comparing those women and men involved in political activity.<sup>43</sup> These differences have declined in recent years; analogously, they were, probably even larger in the century before this type of research began.

It would be a mistake to attribute women's political marginality to a sexual difference in political ambitions. Yet, it would be equally mistak-

---

<sup>40</sup> Diamond, Irene. *Sex Roles in the State House*. New Haven: Yale University, 1977.

<sup>41</sup> E.g., Lynn, Naomi B. "Women and Politics." Pp. 402-422 in *Women: A Feminist Perspective* (3rd ed.), ed. Jo Freeman. Palo Alto: Mayfield, 1984.

<sup>42</sup> Easton, David and Dennis, Jack.; *Children in the Political System*; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969; Greenstein, Fred; *Children and Politics*; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965; Hyman, Herbert; *Political Socialization: A Study in the Psychology of Political Behavior*; New York: Free Press, 1959; Kirkpatrick, Jeane J.; *Political Woman*; New York: Basic Books, 1974. But compare criticisms of the literature stressing socialization such as Orum, Anthony M.; Cohen, Roberta S.; Grasmuck, Sherri S.; and Orum, Amy W.; "Sex Socialization and Politics"; pp. 17-37 in *A Portrait of Marginality*, eds. Marianne Githens and Jewel J Prestage; New York: David McKay, 1977; and Welch, Susan; "Recruitment of Women to Public Office: A Discriminant Analysis"; *Western Political Quarterly* 31 (1978): 372-380.

<sup>43</sup> Sapiro, Virginia; *The Political Integration of Women: Roles Socialization, and Politics*; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983; Costantini, Edmond and Bell, Julie Davis; "Women in Political Parties: Gender Differences in Motives among California Party Activists"; pp. 114-138 in *Political Women: Current Roles in State and Local Government*, ed. Janet A. Flammang; Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984.

en to believe this difference had no effects. The competitive pursuit of political power is not a *natural* human trait. Without encouragement as children and support as adults, people are not likely to stalk power.

Still, an absence of ambition also often reflects a known lack of opportunity. Most people know they cannot visit Mars. Accordingly, they show little ambition to try. Once visits to Mars become possible, many more will dream of travelling there. When women know they can ascend to political power many more will want to attempt the climb.

### **ELUSIVE POWER**

Women did not achieve political power for some of the same reasons that they did not gain economic power. Indeed, women's meager economic power generally scratched them from the race for political power before the starting gun sounded. They suffered other social disabilities. Few women had the personal liberty needed to begin a political career. Women could not practice law, the key professional tract for entering politics. Society discouraged any political ambitions women revealed. And politically powerful men held out no helping hands to women. The average man also faced these barriers and had little hope of achieving political power. But these obstacles systematically excluded *all* women.

### **The Relations Between Powerful and Ordinary Men**

Powerful men have augmented women's subordination by the policies they adopted and sustained. These men controlled government and business. They created and enforced the laws, employment practices, and varied social policies that favored men. Through these actions, they reinforced ordinary men's ascendancy over ordinary women.

Oddly enough, despite gender research's tendency to question the obvious, many theorists of gender inequality have taken powerful men's support of gender inequality and men's monopoly of power as completely self-evident. So self-evident that no further examination was needed. Men in power supported male dominance because they were men. Only men had power because men had all the power.

This casual acceptance of male power's homogeneity implies an unstated theory emphasizing assumptions about gender interests and gender bonding. All men, according to this implicit theory, have shared an equal and enduring interest in preserving gender inequality. Men in power, therefore, naturally supported policies favoring men. Equally, all men opposed all women having any power. This was an implied corollary of men's common gender interests that accounted for men's monopoly of

positions with power. All men supported all other men against all women all the time.

These implicit assumptions are mistaken and lead to static and reductionist theories that belie the real complexity of inequality and change. True enough, men in power long defended male ascendancy and women were long absent from positions of power. Yet, as we have seen, the concentration of social power eventually disrupted support for gender inequality. Power migrated from families into economic and political organizations. Organizational interests slowly eroded the use of power to preserve policies that served male superiority. Once we recognize that power eventually became detached from the automatic preservation of male privileges, we can begin to see that this simplistic assumption of overriding common male gender interests is theoretically problematic. We can then begin to ask why powerful men adopted policies that supported the gender interests of ordinary men.

*A Surprisingly Tenuous Alliance.* Why powerful men did this is puzzling. Powerful men's political or economic influence has meant that they did not personally depend on gender inequality for their well-being. Their economic and political resources allowed powerful men to dominate both women and men, no matter what gender relations prevailed in society. While powerful men commonly expressed patriarchal attitudes, these do not supply a compelling set of interests to explain their actions.

Why, then, should powerful men bother to support gender inequality? The men already exercising power had little to fear in their own lives from policies promoting greater sex equality. So, what social conditions account for powerful men pursuing these policies across generations?

Powerful men generally married within their own class, so they *did* have *some* personal interest in preserving women's subordination. Greater gender equality would have made it more difficult to find subordinate women within their class. Greater equality also would have threatened powerful men's dominance over the women they married. Powerful men were divided from the women in their class by the familial differentiation of roles. Recall that individualistic gender inequality has been embedded in structural inequality in two different ways: first, women have had access only to less desirable positions in the economy and political order and second, women have had different obligations and opportunities than men structured through the role differentiation that has organized family life. The activities and social standing of women in the higher classes differed from those of less affluent women, but conflicts between spouses

were as common in the upper classes as in the lower. These conflicts probably predisposed powerful men to support policies that kept women in their place.

Still, commerce and politics were not family relations writ large. Even if powerful men did somehow feel their self worth or public honor depended on preserving proper sex roles in their families, they were unlikely to find these feelings provided a clear or compelling guide to the policy decisions. Men's concerns about their wives' behavior would not prompt employers consistently to forego profits available by playing or promoting women or legislators to displease their supporters by imposing laws against women's gender interests.

The mild self-interests in retaining family authority probably helped bias powerful men against women, but it was too slight to account for their stable support for policies sustaining gender inequality. At the very worst, men in the economically and politically dominant classes could always find women whom they could dominate. Usually, they could keep the upper hand with their wives and other women in their class as well. Because powerful men had economic and political advantages denied all women, including those with roots in the higher classes, these men's power over women was secure.

A comparison to racial inequality helps to clarify the limits of powerful men's direct interests in gender inequality. Under a system of racial inequality, as in the plantation system of the American South, men's economic and political power depended directly on the preservation of racial dominance. Those who owned many slaves had the power. This contrasts with gender inequality in a modern society. Women's subordination does not directly allow some men to accumulate more individual power than other men.<sup>44</sup> Gender inequality gives men direct domination only over women who are kin. Therefore, powerful men do not have the same incentives to support gender inequality as they do to support racial inequality.

If powerful men did not benefit directly, their support for male dominance must have emerged from indirect interests.<sup>45</sup> What could these indirect interests in women's subordination be? Two possibilities deserve

---

<sup>44</sup>Exceptions occur under the special conditions of using cheap female labor or in polygamous societies.

<sup>45</sup>Unless they adopted them for ideological reasons. As discussed above, however, neither evidence nor theoretical logic support the idea that beliefs alone can cause people to reproduce inequality stably across generations.



attention. First, powerful men might have supported gender inequality to gain or keep power over other men. Second, gender inequality might bolster the economic or political systems. It would thereby increase ascendant men's power in these systems.

*Trading Prejudiced Policies for Legitimacy.* It is useful to consider what would have happened if powerful men had not supported gender inequality. The answer will help us judge how important powerful men's support of women's subordination was in protecting their own status. This is a realistic way to approach the problem. For centuries, men acquiring power have found the fundamental political and economic policies sustaining women's subordination already in place. The question for them was whether to continue the policies that reinforced women's subordination or to change them.

Powerful men had many opportunities to enact economic or legal changes favoring women. For example, the state could have improved married women's property rights earlier than it did. Or businessmen could have hired women for high status occupations long before they did. Why did powerful men so long shun policies that would help women?

In the past, powerful men jeopardized their own status if they adopted policies that favored women, because the ordinary men who benefitted from women's low status were too likely to resist losing their advantages. By improving women's circumstances, they also would diminish most men's control or status advantages. Ordinary men wanted to preserve women's subordination. They had no wish to give up the material and psychological advantages it gave them. People altruistic enough to freely surrender advantages to others have always been thin on the ground.

Presumably, the women whose status improved would have supported those men who introduced the changes. Since men controlled most economic and political resources only men's support, or opposition, counted for much.

Powerful men knew that many men would resist losses to women. Unavoidably, to exercise power stably and easily, they depended much more on men's acceptance than on women's. Consequentially, men with power had much to lose and little to gain by adopting policies that would weaken ordinary men's dominance over women.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> The property system also influenced powerful men to oppose policies increasing equality if they conflicted with the accumulation and inheritance of wealth. Before the rise of capitalism, the property system was the fundamental mechanism for transferring power between generations.

*Where Was the Alliance Vulnerable?* What would have induced powerful men to introduce policies benefitting women? While women remained economically and politically marginal, they had no means to influence the men with power. This leaves two possibilities. A surge of moral concern could have moved powerful men to introduce changes benefitting women. Or men in power could have discovered some means by which they could benefit from these changes.

For many centuries, neither of these possibilities amounted to much. Altruism, we know, is a notoriously weak political force when it must oppose self-interests. It has never had much hope as a driving force for change in reducing gender inequality. For a long time, self-interest held no more hope. For the most part, powerful men saw little opportunity to augment their power through policies that would benefit women.

When would enough powerful men venture support for policies favoring women that the effects would become noticeable? It could happen if conditions arose that assured powerful men's independence from ordinary men's anger. Or if powerful men discerned a potential to augment their power. Or if it seemed that ordinary men's opposition had declined. I have shown (in the previous chapters) that industrial capitalism and liberal, parliamentary government produced all these conditions. Powerful men did begin to exploit the new opportunities. Unexpectedly, the strategies they used to exploit these new conditions also accelerated their development.

Until these conditions appeared, however, powerful men would initiate no progressive policies. The most they would do was ratify and extend changes in gender relations that developed from below, proved to be widely accepted, and seemed to contribute to economic strength and political stability.

### **Excluding Women from Power: Self-Interest and Prejudice**

For a long time, no women scaled the social heights to positions of economic or political power. True, only a minority of men achieved these positions, but almost no women did. Why? Several social conditions acting in concert assured women's absence.

Men in power were unwilling to promote women into their ranks, to support women aspiring to power, or to depend on women for their own future. Realistic assessments of individual self interest combined with prejudice to create a unified rejection of women for a long time.

The burden of general discrimination created a cumulative disadvantage for women. Men who ascended to powerful positions usually passed through a series of competitive processes, accumulating experience and resources at each stage. Every step up the hierarchy admitted fewer men. Women had considerably less chance than men to survive each of these trials that halted the upward progress of many. Resistance to their ascent by males above them, male competitors, and their male relatives (especially husbands) left women with serious disadvantages at each step. Simple numbers show what this can mean. If, for example, one-half of all men keep moving up after each cut, but only one-quarter of women do, then after five competitive trials, women's chance of survival would be less than one percent of men's chance.

Women did not aspire to economic and political power as often as men because they were not subject to the same social pressures to prove themselves this way.

Together, these conditions kept women from power. Of them, I have paid the most attention to the resistance of powerful men because it seems most decisive. We will return to the problem of cumulative disadvantages when we consider women's economic marginality in the next chapter.

As we have seen, one decisive characteristic of the ascent to power stands out: those already inside the enchanted circle must give assent before aspirants can join them. Accepting that competitive achievement has been integral to the allocation of positions with power in the United States, we have also observed that acceptance by those in power is critical.

Our images of men climbing to power often overlook this. We think of men who accumulate power either winning a series of competitions or gaining followers. Ascent by winning can happen several ways. Within organizations--economic or political--some rise further than others. Usually this means that some organization process judges those who rise to be better *material* than those who don't. The criteria may vary and the judgments may be inaccurate, but the decision process always aims to elevate better employees over worse ones (it is hard to imagine a process aiming to do the opposite). Entrepreneurs gain power by making their businesses succeed and expand. They win by beating other businesses and gaining adherents in the market for their goods or services. Politi-

cians rise by winning elections. Stated this way, each of these selection processes seems to emphasize the individual capacity to do some tasks or job better than others. The tasks that count most may not be those touted publicly--cheating, lying, bribery, manipulation, and exploiting others might be more decisive than skills at administration, marketing, or policy making. Still, even if the skills are morally repugnant, indeed even if amorality is itself valuable, the selection processes for attaining power seem to turn on the performance of individuals. This perception of selection processes in modern society motivates the theoretical distinction between achieved status, considered characteristic of modern society, and ascribed status, characteristic of premodern societies.

Actually, every step in the ascent to power depends on acceptance by people who already possess power. Moving up requires patrons and resources, such as money and inside information. In organizations you must be promoted by those higher up. In politics, you need nominations, endorsements and allies. As an entrepreneur, you need suppliers, outlets, and financing.

Given a male monopoly of influential positions in the economy, men must make the decisions that will further or impede any individual's effort to achieve power. The decisions that matter are diverse. Who should get promoted to an open position? Who should a man adopt as beneficiary of his mentoring? Who should a banker support as a good risk? [Who should a man in politics support as a future candidate?] Usually, these decisions are recurring and involve a variety of options. In these circumstances, men's unwillingness to support women has been paramount in retarding their progress. Why did this occur?

Gender inequality weighted the self-interests of influential men against supporting or admitting women. In a male dominated hierarchy, women have almost always been poorer bets than men. Think of it this way. In 1947, if you were an executive at General Motors considering who to promote, or if you were a Chase Manhattan banker deciding which loans to grant new business applications, or you were a member of the state Democratic Party caucus deciding who to nominate as a legislative candidate from your district--in every case you would have to face the fact that a woman was considerably less likely to succeed and advance than a man of equal or even lesser abilities. Because the success of any person in power has depended on the acceptance by others in power, women were a bad investment. Thus, powerful men's belief that most men in power would discriminate against a woman who entered their

midst--no matter why they believed it--biased their (objective) self-interests against the support of advancing women.

Powerful men's self-interests were ambiguous enough that prejudice, fear, and custom could tip the balance against the rare woman whose drive and talents seemed enough to win over these men's self-interests even with the disadvantages of her sex. Perhaps this is most obvious in what otherwise seems the most meritocratic environment, the bureaucratic organization. There, an individual's progress depends on the assessments of those higher up the hierarchy. Men at every level of organizations will try to choose able subordinates out of self-interest. Poor subordinates make it impossible to do their own tasks and threaten either the organization or their own advancement. Because all managers' careers depend on the well being of the organization, all have an interest in the promotion of able people throughout the hierarchy. But those in power do not usually believe they need to follow meritocratic conventions *strictly* to meet this goal. As long as two or more people seem *well qualified* to handle a job, the self-interests of making the promotion decision let them safely apply any decision rule they like (and circumstances allow) to choose between the good prospects. Outside bureaucracies, merit is even murkier. While they still stress their self-interests, those with power usually have an even greater range of choices about whom they sponsor or do business with.

Still, powerful men's resistance to women entering positions of power was not rooted in a defense of male privileges so much as the simple pursuit of private self interest. Most powerful men *did* share the dominant cultural prejudices about women's roles. Some powerful men did think in terms of preserving male prerogatives. Yet, this perspective was unlikely to become salient while powerful men made most of the decisions that stymied the ambitions of rising women. Few women rose far enough for further advancement to become a question, so powerful men never contended with the threat of an enduring female encroachment on male power. On the rare occasions that a man with power did have to consider a woman aspiring to gain entry, the question before him was usually whether or not to offer her support, not whether or not to actively resist her progress. (Resistance became more of an issue when women rose above, or threatened to surpass, a man. The more power a man had, the less likely this was ever to occur.) Prejudice against women would have weighed against such support.

Curiously, in the past men were probably more likely to invoke cultural prejudices against women in power to justify decisions based on self interest than to base their decisions on these prejudices. This behavior seems counter intuitive today, because people with power now are more likely to do the opposite: they hide such prejudices when they do guide their actions. Yet, fifty or one hundred years ago, these beliefs were considered legitimate. Then it was often easier for a powerful man to tell everyone he was not choosing to support a woman because it was inappropriate than to say that he was choosing someone else because he was more likely to reap benefits. When the public rhetoric surrounding decisions about promotion or support stressed such values as worth, merit, or talent, the cultural expectations of women were a more legitimate explanation for passing over a woman who would win by these criteria than was self interest.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Reproduction of Subordination<sup>48</sup>**

Women and men's circumstances have differed in many ways that favored men, including their status, income, freedom of movement, and opportunities. Of all these differences, power was most important. The organization of power determines how well a system of inequality can reproduce itself. While power may usually be disguised and only exercised directly occasionally, its presence is necessary to inequality. No subordinate group accepts its circumstances so completely that inequality can persist without power differences. The most important sources of social power are economic and political.

In all societies, economic and political organizations have controlled the fundamental conditions that sustained gender inequality. The severity of gender inequality has varied considerably across societies, and it has been economic and political organization that has decided how oppressive women's subordination becomes. During periods when the econom-

---

<sup>47</sup>This implies that we should exercise caution about inferring from expressions of prejudice that these beliefs motivated the actions against women's interests by employers, politicians, and the like. In recent times, as prejudice against women's advancement has become a defensive ideology with falling popularity, the chances are greater that those claiming to follow such beliefs are strongly influenced by them. However, when people with power voice a popular ideology, we can never infer that these ideas actually guide their actions with considerable supporting evidence. Powerful people always use popular ideas to legitimate their actions.

[<sup>48</sup>revise conclusion!]

ic and political orders transformed substantially, gender inequality has repeatedly survived after being reconstructed in a new form. This has occurred because men's power within the waning system has let them seize comparable power within the new system. Economic and political organization gave men greater resources and opportunities.

In the short term, these organized advantages guaranteed the men of new generations the same privileged status as their fathers. They also allowed men's activities in everyday life to sustain women's subordination. Other aspects of the relations between women and men have reinforced inequality. These include the allocation of child rearing responsibility, the social construction of sexuality, individual violence, and ideology. These factors often loomed larger in women's and men's experience of sex inequality than economic or political status. Yet, economic and political organization--sharing a unique capacity to sustain themselves--had a much larger role in sustaining sex inequality.

While economic and political systems have been the mainstay of gender inequality, gender inequality has not been these systems' sole or even central organizing principle. The economic and political systems were necessary and defining structures in society. They gave order and continuity to production, distribution, and governance, and they ensured conformity to rules of conduct. Each institution adapted its organization to fit its primary purposes and the divisions of interests--economic and political inequality--associated with it.

Building on the history of sex inequality, men occupied most positions of political and economic power. In accommodation with men's ascendancy, economic and political policies guaranteed the conditions that gave all men opportunities and resources surpassing those of women.

The degree of gender inequality these institutions sustained was not consciously controlled and could change unpredictably. Economic and political systems organized production and governance and focused on relations among men. The men who held economic and political power had no intrinsic investment in gender inequality. They would support male dominance so far as the strategy served their interests. Less dependably, they might support it because they believed their actions to be necessary and just. By itself, however, an ideology of male dominance could not long sustain stable policies against the resentment and rebellion stirred by inequality.

To men with economic and political power, the maintenance and expansion of their institutional power has been much more important than

sustaining gender inequality from which they directly gain little. Moreover, those making the decisions about policy rarely understood how economic and political change would affect gender inequality. Also, economic and political systems have had inherent dynamics of development that not even the most powerful people could control or resist.

Thus, economic and political systems have allowed, even conditioned, men to sustain their dominance. Yet, as they developed, these systems only secondarily concerned themselves with gender inequality. Moreover, the continued ascendancy of the minority of men wielding power within them was itself always problematic. These conditions were the openings that allowed women's rise in status to develop.