Chapter 1. Why Is It So Hard to Explain Gender Inequality?

Gender inequality is one of the great puzzles of modern society. We have largely discarded the belief that it is necessary or fair for women to have a lower status than men (as we also have rejected the need or justice of racial inequality). We have tried to extinguish practices that would treat women differently than others. We have created programs meant to help women overcome their historical disadvantages and "catch up" with men who enjoy more privileged identities. Despite all this, gender inequality (like racial inequality) lives on.

This is the puzzle. If no significant inherent differences distinguish women from men and if we are doing our best to get rid of the practices that used to enforce the lower status of women, why doesn't equality bloom?

Some say that we were wrong ever to believe that women and men were inherently the same. We are still reaping the unavoidable results of nature, they conclude.

Others say that we were wrong ever to believe that we had gotten rid of the practices that oppress women. We are still observing the unprincipled effects of oppression, they conclude.

Can both these answers be wrong? Is there another answer?

Behind these questions lies a fundamental problem of social theory: what explains social inequality? Inequality is far harder to explain than most people realize. Over the past century, few social issues have received more attention than inequality. An enormous amount has been written about inequality in many forms: income, political power, class, status, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and more. Social scientists have conducted seemingly endless research aiming to discover how inequality works. Inequality has probably been the most enduring and important issue influencing political conflicts and alliances. Governments have launched numerous policies aimed at ameliorating one or another kind of inequality. Yet, after all this, if you ask the average person to explain why some groups have a higher status and more privileges than others, the answers you get will be disappointingly vague, simplistic, and inconsistent.

Try it yourself. Stop and ask yourself these questions. Why have women had a lower status that men? Why have men had more power and more opportunities?

The problem to be explained is why one kind of people, men, consistently do better than another, women. Gender inequality is a broad, abstract, and often vague idea. In simple terms, it commonly means three things. First, men usually experience better opportunities, more freedom, and higher social regard than women who share the same social characteristics (such as class origins, race, nationality, and age). Second, men usually hold sway in marriages and other direct relationships between women and men. And, third, men occupy a preponderance of the social positions that possess significant political, economic, legal, or cultural power.

While the gender identities assigned to males and females vary enormously across cultures, everywhere women and men have differed in their dress, social responsibilities, typical occupations, imputed natures, and assumed capacities. In all societies men and women have regarded each other as distinctive, often unfathomable creatures. Everywhere men have enjoyed an ascendent position. The severity of domination varies considerably, ranging from near equality to treating women as chattels. Yet, we have never known equality between women and men.

At first look, explaining this inequality may seem easy. At second look, it can begin to seem impossible.

When asked, people favoring equality typically answer that men have denied women the chance to do better, that women's child rearing responsibilities have held them back, that men have exploited women, that the law favored men, that war made men rulers, or other similar explanations. When pushed further, asked why these imputed causal conditions exist, people usually fall back to a catalog of apparent differences between women and men, differences that add up to women being morally superior but vulnerable to the exploitative, dominating nature of men. Those who still believe in distinctive roles for women and men find solace in biological explanations, suggesting that men and women each do what fits their natures.

Traditionalists and feminists have both perceived ample evidence in the world around us to support their visions of women's place. This should not be surprising. While they perceive themselves as presenting opposing causal arguments, these two sides often differ more in their moral judgements than their causal understandings. Both claim the key is found in the differences between women and men. The traditionalists argue women lack the good qualities that put man on top, the feminists counter that women lack the bad qualities that let men take the top.

Is this, ultimately, all we can say? Are women and men simply different? Do men as individuals systematically have a strategic advantage over women because they are stronger, do not bear children, have a greater desire to dominate, are

more prone to violence, and are less constrained by emotional and moral sensibilities characteristic of women?

This seems to be giving up the search for answers. We know that women and men differ biologically and they are socially unequal. Both circumstances will cause women and men to look different. But the chains of causality are complex and illusive.

Or, alternatively, should we join those who seem content to live with a multiplicity of answers, implicitly suggesting that many conditions contribute to gender inequality and we should use whatever explanation happens to fit the specific problem being considered. This approach has its attractions. We can easily believe that many different things contribute to gender inequality. And it is comforting to feel that we do not have to muck about trying to figure out the correct theory or become lost in some endless chain of obscure writings about general theory.

Yet, this approach is also unsettling. Gender inequality has occurred in all societies known to history despite their extraordinary variations in culture and structure. The degree and specific form of gender inequality have varied greatly, but everywhere women's status has been secondary to men. It defies logic, theory, and common sense to suggest that we cannot attribute women's universal subordination to some reasonably small number of causes that have operated everywhere. Notice that I did not say *one* cause. While a singular cause is conceptually possible, we have no reason to expect that such a complex outcome as gender inequality will be the result of a solitary cause or that the same causes will be most important in every society. Only that it seems likely that gender inequality reflects a consistent set of causal processes and possibilities.

GENDER INEQUALITY AS A SPECIAL CASE OF STATUS INEQUALITY

To understand gender inequality we want conceptually to divide gender relations into three components. We need to distinguish between gender differences that do not express inequality, aspects of gender inequality that are common to various forms of inequality, and unique facets of gender inequality that operate differently from other types of inequality.

First, some aspects of gender relations need not depend on gender inequality for their existence. The elimination of gender inequality does not necessarily mean that women and men become identical. It certainly does not mean that all relations between women and men become congenial, fair, equal, or asexual. Obviously, the meaning of gender varies considerably across time, space, culture, and subgroups of complex societies. I am not referring to biologically inherent sex characteristics. Rather, just as we can imagine having equal ethnic groups that actively sustain their distinctive character and for whom the relationships

between individual members of the distinct groups will sometimes be unequal, antagonistic, and influenced by prejudice, so too must we imagine the possibilities for relations between women and men under conditions of gender equality. While we do not yet fully understand why societies so emphatically distinguish women from men, we do know that cultures seem invariably to impute to women and men different identities, preferences, and activities, even if they are relatively egalitarian. And we know that relations between individual women and men are often complex, tense, and contested, even if their gender does little to make them unequal.

Second, while gender inequality has many unique characteristics, it also shares some processes and circumstances with other types of inequality. Many effects of inequality and requirements for the preservation of inequality are similar for different types of inequality, particularly different types of status inequality. All forms of status inequality, for example, produce an ideology justifying unequal statuses and have exclusionary mechanisms for keeping members of the subordinate group out of positions controlled by the dominant group. These common elements of systems of inequality will manifest themselves differently in different kinds of inequality, but the underlying causal processes will be similar. The crucial point is that such processes need to be understood in terms of the general dynamics of inequality, not the specific dynamics of gender inequality.

Third, some components of gender inequality will be distinctive, being characteristic neither for gender under conditions of gender equality nor for other types of inequality. For example, consider the patterns of aggression between the sexes. Asymmetric opportunities for violence are common to various forms of status inequality. The superior organization and political standing of the higher status group assures greater penalties will inhibit those in the subordinate group from aggressive acts toward those in the dominant group much more than is true in the reverse. At least a significant portion of the asymmetry of gender aggression is due to this general inequality effect. Also, the often intimate, often sexually charged relations between women and men produce anger, disappointment, and aggression even in the absence of gender inequality. Some portion of the aggression between the sexes–largely symmetric–reflects these sources that are not due to the presence of gender inequality. Finally, we can try to identify those aspects of aggression between the sexes–largely asymmetric–that reflects neither of these more general sources because it is unique to gender inequality. Rape seems a likely candidate. Although rape can occur in the context of gender equality and other forms of inequality may also exhibit extreme instances of aggression, rape seems to function–both practically and symbolically–as a special asymmetric form of aggression that both expresses and reinforces male power.

These distinctions are easier to define than to apply, but they are crucial for developing a sound theory of gender inequality. The strategic emphasis should be on inequality not on gender. We want to focus our explanations of inequality on the clearly unequal circumstances suffered by women, putting aside other gender differences. Perhaps even more important, we want consistently to place the explanation of gender inequality in the context of explaining other forms of inequality. Gender inequality is a special case of status inequality, and we should seek a theory of gender inequality that is explicitly a special case of more general theories of status inequality.

A ROAD LEADING BACKWARDS: MYTHS THAT CELEBRATE WOMEN

If we are to achieve a better theory of gender inequality, we need to confront the obstructions and pitfalls that have limited earlier attempts. Of these, one that seems paramount to me is the powerful temptation to reduce all explanations of gender inequality to some fundamental differences between the sexes.

The cultural impact of gender inequality makes it extremely difficult for any of us to think outside the oppositions between female and male that it enshrines. Perhaps no stronger evidence exists for the pervasiveness of the mythologies about masculine and feminine character than that these myths have reappeared in popular theories meant to explain gender inequality. Sometimes they have appeared in the writings of the same people who criticized them as invidious prejudice. Not self-consciously or in the same form that was criticized, of course. Still, if we forge theories using popular ideology as raw material, we repeat the errors committed by male scholars in earlier generations, even if the errors happen to be in a different direction. This is one of the critical barriers to explaining gender inequality. Saying this is easy enough, and most theorists would agree, but I want to pursue this farther. Because it seems to me that even theorists who explicitly reject sex differences as a limitation on women often stumble back into the mire of theories based on sex differences.

Perhaps we have too often overlooked that gender inequality, like other forms of inequality, produces at least two competing sets of myths. One reflects men's vantage point, the other reflects women's. These two sets of myths make opposing claims about what is true, necessary, or just. Yet, they also share certain assumptions.

These beliefs are common knowledge and we all have seen them in play throughout our lives. Perhaps we see them most starkly when women and men are engaged in discussions with members of their own sex sharing their fears and angers about people of the other sex. We all have strong images of these exchanges. Men have boasted and complained to each other at their jobs or at a bar; women have swapped tales and complaints around kitchen tables or on the

stoop. While doing this, they often referred to their perceptions of men or women as the alien other.

From the nineteenth through the twentieth century, middle-class men's version of these myths (which had the widest influence) depicted varied sex differences that favored men. Here are some ideas about sex differences that have enjoyed wide acceptance.

- Men are practical; women are childish.
- Men are strong; women are weak.
- Men are sexually open; women are sexually manipulative.
- Men are independent and can lead; women are dependent followers.
- Men are smarter and more knowledgeable; women think and know less.
- Men are more rational, analytical, and thoughtful; women are more emotional and lack judgement.
- Men are rule makers; women are ruled by circumstance and emotion.
- Men are outward looking and socially responsible; women are narrowly concerned with families.

This list represents a typical array of beliefs. Depending on their wealth, their religion, the period, and other characteristics, men's specific beliefs have varied, but this is characteristic.

Women, however, also possessed "traditional" myths that claimed sex differences favored them. Because women's myths were not socially dominant, we too often overlook them. These myths assumed sex differences closely resembling those contained in the myths that legitimated male dominance, but they transformed the characterizations and reversed the moral interpretations.

- Men are childish; women are mature.
- Men are brutish; women are gentle.
- Men are sexually uncontrolled; women are sexually refined.
- Men are bullheaded and power-hungry; women are cooperative.
- Men are dense and obsessed with facts; women are intuitively insightful.
- Men are withholding and insensitive; women are sensitive and expressive.
- Men are morally weak; women are virtuous.
- Men are cold and unfeeling; women are nurturing and concerned with others.

As with the male-oriented myths, this is a list of typical beliefs. The specific beliefs held by women varied by period, region, and social characteristics.

Although empirical evidence is limited, it seems to me that the traditional "female" versions of these beliefs about sex difference have been as wide spread and strongly held as the "male" versions. Whatever their source, most people have believed these ideas deeply and sincerely. Both men and women found that

others of their sex continuously reinforced these attitudes. Moreover, and perhaps even more important, these beliefs appeared to correspond to reality. As experienced through the tensions of inequality, the differences in the sexes' opportunities, responsibilities, and experiences appeared to substantiate the stereotypes. Men's version made their dominance seem sensible and just and gave a satisfactory interpretation of women's subordination and resistance. Women's version challenged both the justice and the reality of men's superior position.

Women could not boost most of these beliefs into the dominant ideology, because of their social inferiority. Women's claims about justice and reality remained secondary to men's claims because men controlled the institutions that defined that dominant ideology, such as the state, the church, and the family, so that the ideas favored by men became most prominent in public discourse. Men did not generally favor the ideas exalting women and they did not idealize them in their social commentaries. This did not mean that all of women's preferred ideas disappeared, but if they clashed with men's superiority, women were much less likely to speak them in men's presence. At times, some of women's beliefs even joined the dominant ideology, for example, the idea that men had uncontrollable sexuality and that women had greater virtue. Perhaps these beliefs served men's interests though they formally praised women. Perhaps women's influence over ideology exceeded our expectations for a socially inferior group.

Feminist scholarship established itself in large part by exposing how the disapproving myths about women guided earlier scholarly work by men. Male scholars had explained the sexes' different roles and statuses by appealing to male myths about sex differences. Nature dictated men's authority and opportunities. Feminist scholars challenged these arguments by showing that the sex differences often did not exist, that those that did were largely created by society, and that what differences did exist resulted from rather than caused women's inferior position. While some debate over these issues persists, the thrust of the feminist critique has won, and scholars have largely abandoned these old, ideology-laden, theories.

As scholars were busy clearing academic fields by raking the old arguments steeped in traditional biases into a scientific compost heap, however, something unanticipated occurred. The derision heaped on old theories based on myths of inferior females opened the door for new theories. New scholarship flowered in intellectual soil no longer covered with male myths about differences between the sexes. This allied a triumph of reason with the spread of greater equality. But myths are as difficult to eradicate as weeds. Other strains of myth-laden theories have invaded the field and won many adherents.

These theories have also scrapped the old belittling myths about women. Yet they have resurrected the myths women once preserved as their defense against male superiority. For example, Chodorow contends that women have greater nurturing capacity; Gilligan argues that women possess a greater concern for people (rather than abstract rules) in their moral judgements than men; Rich argues that men oppress women to fulfill their bottomless need to control women sexually; Brownmiller suggests that men's dominance merely reflects their propensity to rape and assault women; Sanday contends that women respond to social crises with conciliation, men with aggression; and numerous writers have claimed that all science and government represent a distorted and perverted masculine attitude.

These works, and many like them, have diverse goals and theoretical roots (which we will examine in later chapters). Still, they also resemble each other. All assume the existence of fundamental differences between the sexes that coincide with the myths applauding women. They imply that women really are more nurturing, more virtuous, less sexually loose, less aggressive, more cooperative, and more intuitive. They affirm that the sexes really are dramatically different. Women, they claim, are better.

These works have enjoyed great popularity and many appear to believe that they hold the key to understanding gender inequality. Indeed, the popular response to these works frequently infers a much stronger argument about inequality than the original authors intended. In the hands of their creators and most intellectually sophisticated proponents, some of these theories are also much more complex and nuanced than mere reinterpretations of myths. Nonetheless, the popular admiration of these works seems to hinge on the ability to understand them through simple characterizations of sex differences.

If pushed to their logical conclusion, these arguments based on female myths lead to a peculiar theory of women's social inferiority: women have been victims of their own moral and emotional superiority. Men's emotional insensitivity, moral underdevelopment, propensity for violence and brutish desires excited them to seek dominance over women. Conversely, women have suffered the abuse and dominance of men because their abundant virtue stopped them from engaging in the same power-hungry, sex-driven, thoughtlessly cruel actions characteristic of men. Instead women nurtured, empathized, and tried to spread good.

This perspective interprets all history as a moral drama, in which evil commands the obedience of virtue. Women appear as a parade of selfless martyrs, nailed one after the other to a cross by male barbarians.

Some of the popularity of these theories probably comes because they leave people's beliefs about sex differences intact. People cling to these beliefs with a great passion. We all know how often we still hear people say "Men are like

that," "She acted like a typical woman," or words to the same effect. Many people who support greater equality for women apparently still find comfort in beliefs about differences between the sexes.

Consider another example showing how beliefs about sex differences cloud people's analytical vision. How often have we heard questions like: will women who enter high-status jobs or political positions end up looking like men or will the result of their entry be a change in the way business and politics is conducted? Implicit in this question are a set of strong assumptions: men have essential personality characteristics and cultural orientations that have shaped the terrain of high status jobs and women have different essential personality characteristics and cultural orientations. The conclusion is that and women's entry into these positions unleashes a conflict between their feminine essence and the dominant masculine essence that has shaped the positions. Either the positions must change to adapt to women's distinctive characteristics or the women must become masculine. (It is perhaps telling that those who raise this issue usually seem concerned only with women entering high-status positions; it is unclear if women becoming factory workers are believed immune or unimportant.) The analytical flaw here is assuming that masculinity has shaped the character of jobs rather than that jobs have shaped masculinity. In her well-known book *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Rosabeth Kanter argued persuasively that the personality characteristics associated with male and female corporate employees really reflected the contours of their positions. The implication is simple and straightforward. Women who enter high-status positions *will* look about the same as the men in those positions, *not* because they are becoming masculine, but because they are adapting to the demands and opportunities of the position, just like the men.

In truth, theories based on female myths of sex differences generally fail for the same reasons that feminists have criticized theories based on male myths of sex differences. Many of the differences simply do not exist. Those that exist represent the effects of inequality, not its causes.

Of itself, the use of an argument that appears to reflect myths of sex differences does not show that a theory is wrong. I am not suggesting that the pattern described here shows arguments of this sort are all wrong. To refute a theory, one must take it on much more directly, as I do with many of these theories later in this book.

I also do not mean to imply that we can escape the issue of sex differences. They appear in every theory about gender inequality. For gender inequality to exist, the sexes must be treated differently or act differently. This implies they must differ or they must be perceived as different. However, theories vary greatly in the ways they approach differences. They disagree about what kinds of

differences matter, for example the desire to discriminate or capacity to bear children. They also attribute the differences to divergent processes and conditions including biological differences in motives or capacities, socially created real differences in motives or capacities, socially created perceptions of differences in capacity that to do not really exist, and group prejudices. (The first three all tend to induce prejudice, but are theoretically effective even without it.)

Accepting these limits, the pattern of theories seemingly reliant on traditional "female" myths of sex differences does suggest something amiss is going on here. If you treat this body of theories critically, as critically as feminists have justifiably treated earlier work legitimating male dominance, you have to peel away their efforts to legitimate female subordination. Underneath are assumptions about sex differences and their effects that differ little from the old pro-male studies these theories seek to displace. Instead of strong, responsible, productive leaders men become cruel, demanding exploiters; instead of irrational, childish dependents women become virtuous, nurturing community builders. Nevertheless, inequality remains the direct product of differences in abilities and moral sensibilities. While the older efforts sought ways to legitimate inequality through their interpretation of these differences and their effects, the newer efforts have followed the same strategy while trying to condemn inequality.

It is not just the moral assessment that was wrong in the first place. The strategy is wrong. The history of gender inequality is not a moral drama and the structure of inequality is not simply an organized reflection of essential differences between the sexes.

ATTRACTIONS AND FLAWS OF COMPETING APPROACHES

Theories of gender inequality have sprung up in a hothouse intellectual environment. A cross-pollination of ideas from heterogenous intellectual fields created new varieties that then faced a sometimes ruthless struggle among competing political viewpoints. Diverse species of theoretical argument survived by establishing themselves in favorable scholastic niches.

When we cast our eye across this theoretical terrain, we can see that scholars setting out to explain gender inequality have been pursuing several quite different agendas. Some seek to discover a common and enduring explanation that would account for gender inequality in all times and places. The starting point, at least implicitly, is an observation that women's subordination seems universal. A foundational theoretical assumption is that decisive conditions or processes must always be operational in all societies, constantly creating inequality. Theories that attribute inequality directly to differences claimed to distinguish the sexes universally, such as male aggression or female child bearing, are examples.

Some others who seek to discover the origins of male dominance make no specific assumptions about the relation between those origins and later manifestations of gender inequality. These efforts assume that the conditions and processes that originally produced gender inequality in pre-modern societies exist no longer or have lost their earlier causal implications. Examples include theories that stress how hunting or warfare demanded a division of labor. Typically, these kinds of theories do not try to explain why gender inequality exists in the absence of the causes they stress.

Others look to explain the variations in the degree or severity of gender inequality across societies. This project assumes that certain conditions or processes existing in all societies determine the concurrent extent of gender inequality, but that the state of these causal conditions is itself determined by other circumstances outside the scope of gender inequality's explanation. These efforts usually do not try to decide if the imputed causes of variation in gender inequality's severity are the full set of causes for inequality, or if instead the causes of variation are interacting with another set of causes for gender inequality that do not vary similarly. To put it differently, it is unclear to what degree the causes of variation actually cause inequality, as opposed to dampening or exaggerating the effects of other causes. Usually these analyses stress several conditions treated as *variables* (e.g., Chafetz), such as the economic significance of women's labor, although they may also focus on forms of social organization (e.g., Collins).

Still others focus on the tensions between men and women, stressing conflict as a *source* of gender inequality. To some degree, this crosscuts the previous categories. Here, gender inequality is understood as a condition imposed by men and the degree of inequality is largely attributed to outcomes of the conflicts between women and men. The problem is to explain the sources and outcomes of the conflict.

Responding to these broad goals, a wide range of competing theories has tried to explain gender inequality. To some degree, the diversity of these theories reflects the range of the goals being pursued. To an even greater degree, this theoretical diversity represents the dissension among scholars about how to explain gender inequality and frequent confusion even about how to conceive the issues.

I would like briefly to discuss some of the more important approaches that theorists have pursued. Of necessity, this is a highly selective list. We will examine others in later chapters. Here my aim is not exhaustive coverage, but a look at some flaws and attractions common to these competing theories.

Socialization models have provided one of the most popular means by which people make sense of gender inequality. The focus is usually on childhood

socialization.[1] Boys are taught to act like men and to expect the typical roles men take in their adult lives. Girls are prepared for the feminine personality traits and roles. When explaining inequality, socialization models can be, and are, loosely linked to a variety of other explanations that stress differences between women and men. In its most general formulation, childhood socialization produces women and men whose skills, feelings, and expectations fit their prescribed gender roles.

This approach has some appealing qualities. It is simple to understand, it reflects a fundamental experience that all people can recognize, and it has an attractive face validity. Girls and boys certainly have been raised differently and the differences have reflected the typical role and status differences dividing women and men. Socialization theories also seem to serve as a bridge for those who want to reject biological explanations but find themselves drawn to sex differences as a fundamental way of understanding gender inequality. It is not surprising that we find socialization processes playing a key role in some prominent, even classic, feminist works such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* or Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. This approach still has a strong role in popular accounts today. On the surface, socialization appears to let us off the hook, giving us a relatively simple explanation of gender inequality that corresponds to experience and that has a ready answer for creating change. Just socialize differently.

Yet, as an explanation of gender inequality, socialization processes begin to look much less convincing when subjected to closer scrutiny. Consider a few key questions. If socialization effectively limits adults to fulfilling the roles they learned as children, how can we explain women's extraordinary movement out of the household into the labor market in recent decades? Not easily. Apparently, either socialization was really not that decisive or socialization changed. The second possibility raises another issue, what decides the content of socialization? If women in "traditional" families did most of the child rearing, and the key socialization experiences occurred during this stage, does this mean that women were responsible for the preservation of sex role differences? This is a curious interpretation of socialization that appeals to some anti-feminists but should make us suspect something is wrong with logic. We know not only that many people today pursue lives quite different from the roles they met during their childhood

[1]Adult socialization is sometimes considered, but with adults the analogous processes are more often considered in such terms as cultural influences and opportunity structures. The source of this difference seems to be the assumption that childhood socialization is more likely to shape permanent alterations in the individual while adult socialization is likely to be effective only so long as it continues.

socialization, they also are socializing their children differently. Even in periods of high social stability, if socialization is truly effective, why would we find so many explicit barriers to prevent adults from violating role definitions? The role of schools and other public institutions makes the socialization processes even more complex and problematic.

Under closer examination, socialization does not survive as a potent explanation of gender inequality. This is not to say that socialization does not matter or is without effect. People find it easy to believe in socialization as an explanation because they know from experience that it matters. Socialization processes acquaint children with sex roles and offer them a gender identity that has influence on their adult lives. In this sense, socialization *adapts* us to the prevailing arrangements, giving us the knowledge, sense of self, and expectations that allow us to conform fairly easily to those arrangements. We must never forget, however, gender socialization can vary widely, with parents sending diverse messages and children responding in distinctive ways. More important, socialization eases conformity, it does not ensure it.[2]

Another popular way of understanding gender inequality is to attribute it to masculine desires to dominate women or to control or to exploit women's sexuality. Let us call this these *male exploitation* models for reference purposes. These models stress the tensions between the sexes and are often perceived as a conflict-oriented alternative to the sex roles approaches (which have received criticism for neglecting conflict).

These ideas have both scholarly and popular variants, but the central premises are consistent. Men have created and sustained gender inequality. Men sustain male power individually by restraining and exploiting women in their personal

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[2]Socialization analyses are usually related to role theories. While socialization processes provide the main approach to explaining how gender roles would be reproduced over time, another approach concerns deviance theories. Since gender roles have a normative standing, deviations from those roles are proscribed and deviants potentially suffer various social punishments, such as belittling, ostracizing, loss of network supports, and the like.

Connell remarks that "we do not speak of 'race roles' or 'class roles' because the exercise of power in these areas of social life is more obvious . . . .With 'sex roles' the underlying biological dichotomy seems to have persuaded many theorists that there is no power relationship here at all." This contrast is actually unfair and we need to be wary of the facile appearance of this critique. While role theories often neglect power they need not. The use of role theory for gender but not race, for example, reflects some real and substantial differences in the way gender is organized, such that people were traditionally prepared for male and female roles in families. Note that roles can be applied to class under some circumstances, such as feudal regimes, where authors can talk about the role of the aristocrat, for example.

environment and collectively by developing laws, norms, political frameworks, and economic institutions that exclude women and treat women as inferior beings.

This approach also has some appealing qualities. While the severity of gender inequality has varied over time and place, men have held a largely exclusive control over economic and political power anywhere that gender inequality has been significant. Men also have held sway over women in their private lives. Inequality necessarily produces divisions of interest and conflict to which this approach pays direct attention. Of course, this formulation has the additional "benefit" that it seems to define guilt, by pointing the finger of responsibility at men.

Again, however, the coherence and validity of the male exploitation perspective become less evident when we look at it more closely. Often this perspective confuses a *description* of gender inequality with an explanation. Status inequality does imply that members of one group retain a relative monopoly over positions of power and that they enjoy greater opportunities and prestige. These circumstances comprise inequality, but do they explain it?

This approach appears to sidestep any need to explain why gender inequality persists over time by attributing inequality to a male impulse that is universal. Still, why is it always men exploiting women? Because men have an exploitive gene and women have a cooperative gene? Similarly, why does the severity of inequality vary so much across societies?

No serious evidence, for example, seems to support a contention that men have a greater propensity to exploit others than do women or that they enjoy domination more. This should not come as a surprise. History has not shown that women in upper class families are less willing than men to exploit people in the lower classes or that women in dominant races are less willing than men to exploit people in subordinated races.

The male exploitation model falls short when it seeks to explain inequality by reference to distinctive male motives, but it holds more promise for analytical insights when it shifts its focus toward *interests*. The idea of interests forces attention on what people get out of gender relations and what costs they incur for their part. Interests can be socially structured, can dominate people's responses to inequality, but, by themselves, have no dependence on biology. We will return to the issue of interests.

Another scholarly strategy has created what we might call the *variables approach*. This approach generally focuses on the variations in the severity of inequality across societies and time. The guiding principles are simple but powerful. Since inequality varies, we can probably discover other social conditions that also vary similarly and infer a causal influence from their

covariation. (Most practitioners of this approach follow an eclectic empiricist search for conditions that vary together, but some, like Collins and Huber, are more theoretically focused.)

This approach is attractive to academic researchers because it readily lends itself to empirical measurement and allows some escape from the mire of historical and theoretical inferences. We can, at least in theory, track such phenomena as proportion of family productivity attributable to women or exposure to attack from external groups. This approach is also explicitly dedicated to social causes–biology does not vary and does not enter the analytical calculus. In the hands of scholars like Joan Huber, Randall Collins, Janet Chafetz, and Rae Blumberg, this approach has led to a productive concern with the ways that gender inequality varies across different forms of economic and political organization.

Unfortunately, at its core the variables approach lacks a theoretical model of how gender inequality works and continues. This might seem, at first reading, an odd charge to make against an approach that generates countless diagrams filled with "causal" arrows linking variable boxes and circles. What populates these diagrams are not people, groups, and actions, however. Instead, they suggest empirical relations between aggregate conditions of the form "when there is more X there is usually more Y." Not only are actions largely absent from these diagrams, but they also confuse the components of inequality with its causes. Saying that gender inequality is lower if women have greater control over what they produce, for example, may sound like a causal statement, but it is really definitional: control over what women produce is an aspect of gender inequality. Of course, if social organization generally grants women more control over what they produce, this will allow each woman greater opportunities compared with men. Still, at the societal level, women's greater control over their produce represents their relatively higher status.

In part the problem here involves taking static cross sections of a society and asking what conditions in a society mean that women will enjoy more or less equality with men. This is a meaningful question. Yet, the question is less aimed at understanding what causes societies to be unequal than at what it is in societies that produces the experience of inequality. The answers to the second set of issues (on which the variables approach focuses) are still things to be explained in the first. The variables approach also suffers from an indeterminacy that is integral to its logical foundations. The variables approach does not incorporate history, only distinct instances, configurations of variables. Nor, in its pure form, do we see the social entities that are the propellants of social causation, such as organization and interests. These appear in the writings that used this approach,

but they are fitted over the analysis of variables, they are not the objects of research.

Still another approach that we may call *schema analysis* appears in recent accounts stressing erroneous judgements of female and male actions, such as those of Virginia Valian (*Why So Slow?: The Advancement of Women*) and Cecilia Ridgeway. This approach aims to explain unintended discrimination. The essential idea is that people unconsciously judge other people's actions as more effective or skilled when they conform to sex role stereotypes. Usually these accounts focus on only one side of this process, arguing that people undervalue women's performance and ability in positions of leadership, responsibility, or skills traditionally held by men, but the logic applies equally to the other side, implying, for example, that people undervalue men's child rearing efforts.

These approaches lean toward neutral concepts such as "schema." Nevertheless, they are really about prejudice, only prejudice buried beneath the surface so that neither its practitioners nor its victims can clearly see it. Even people who, in the abstract, honestly believe women are as able as men, according to this perspective, are likely in their concrete experiences to judge men as more able and effective than women. Women do not advance as readily as the men whose performances they equal, because people believe the women's performances are weaker. Unintended discrimination impedes women's progress at every point in their careers, and the accumulated effects become substantial.

This approach seems to have several attractions. It attributes equal motives and skills to women. It identifies a source of discrimination to explain women's unequal attainments. It does not require overt prejudice. And, it does not require any gender differences.

Unfortunately, it is also not clear what it explains. The schema approach focuses our attention on the possibility that people may judge women and men by different standards without realizing it. It does not do much to explain from where these schemas come, how they are sustained, or how much influence they really have. (In a later chapter, I will argue that these processes probably do not have a major role in sustaining inequality.)

Pervasive Theoretical Obstacles. We have looked only at a selection of the theoretical approaches to gender inequality. Those left out of this discussion include biological explanations, theories focused on the distribution of child rearing responsibilities, theories of masculinity, functionalist role theories, linguistic theories, and others. Most of these will receive consideration in later chapters. The discussion here has not sought to compare, refute, or support any of these theories. Rather, the aim has been to get a first look at some reasons different theories attract adherents and some recurring difficulties that foil these efforts the make sense of inequality.

The ways that various approaches to explaining gender inequality repeatedly fall short suggest some inherent difficulties that face every attempt to explain gender inequality. Let us give some of these a closer look.

The need for a theory to accommodate simultaneously the near-universalism of gender inequality, its variation in degree, and the modern transformation toward equality is an extraordinary challenge with which to start. Male ascendance has appeared in every known society across time and space (with possible exceptions in some "rudimentary" societies, such as some hunting and gathering peoples). This means that any theory must respond to the near universalism of male dominance. This does not mean (as we will see) that any theory must explain that near universalism, but it cannot be inconsistent with or indifferent to it. Further, while women have occupied an inferior gender status almost everywhere, the degree of inequality has varied considerably. So a theory must be adaptable to this variation in intensity. To complicate matters, gender inequality has been undergoing a revolutionary general decline in modern societies, a pattern that we have every reason to believe will conclude in gender equality. This means that any theory of gender inequality must be consistent with this pattern of movement toward equality. While a theory may reasonably concentrate on one or another of these aspects of gender inequality, to be persuasive it must be consistent with an explanation of the others.

As a related problem, it is also baffling how to consider biology realistically. The apparent universality of higher male status suggests that biological differences must play a significant role. The high variation in the severity of gender inequality suggests that biology cannot determine inequality in any simple, direct manner. The perception and wish that equality between the sexes can be attained in the future suggest that the biological differences between the sexes should have no status effects under some forms of social organization. How can a theoretical model of inequality encompass all this?

The very pervasiveness of gender inequality makes it hard to pinpoint causality. Gender inequality operates at all levels of social organization and within every organizational form we know. It involves opportunity structures, ideology, socialization, law, economic practices, and most any other social category one might consider. The circumstances, practices, and ideas that contribute to gender inequality are diverse and diffuse. How can we distinguish between conditions that are constituent parts of inequality, symptoms and experiential facets, and conditions that are properly considered *causes*? For example, if men act more violently toward women than women toward men, should we infer that male violence *causes* inequality or that it *results* from inequality? This question does not seem to allow for any simple answer. Sometimes, of course, we can say *both*, for some circumstances seem equally to

be effects of inequality and to add to inequality. Yet we have to be extremely wary of this response, because it can become a facile evasion. Our primary aim is to discover the conditions and processes that might, in various combinations, be considered necessary and sufficient to cause the persistence of gender inequality. We are trying to explain the persistence of gender inequality, not to explain what enforces women's subordinate status at some point in time. Obviously, these are closely linked, but they are different.

The unique pattern of relationships linking and dividing women and men poses a key problem for explaining inequality. Marriage and kinship, sexuality between spouses, affection linking parents to children and brothers to sisters, the shared fate of households and kinship groups, all these are essential parts of gender relationships. Sometimes women and men have seemed openly hostile and divided even within the intimacy of marriage or kinship. Sometimes affection and commitment between women and men have been widespread in the midst of gender inequality. Shared interests mingle and merge with conflicting interests, bonds of commitment contend with tensions of conflict.

An adequate explanation of gender inequality must contend with each of these issues. It has to accommodate the apparent universality of male dominance, the variation across societies, and the revolutionary modern decline. It must account for the role of biology. It must find a means to distinguish the principal causes of inequality from its components. And it must adapt to the complexity of relationships between women and men.

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING AN EXPLANATION OF GENDER INEQUALITY

Now for a really hard question. How are we to find better answers? We can get some valuable lessons by looking at the mistakes people have made while trying to explain gender inequality and to understand why reasonable people would advocate these flawed theories. This effort, which we pursue throughout this book, will help us see how some ideas can help us explain gender inequality and show us pitfalls we must try to avoid.

Let us admit that providing a satisfactory explanation of gender inequality, one that most knowledgeable people would find sufficient and compelling, is truly hard. After all, if it were not that hard, we would surely all know what that explanation is, given the tremendous amount of work that scholars have done on gender inequality over the past several decades. However, we do not.

Not everyone feels equally befuddled by the problem. Some theorists have claimed to understand why gender inequality exists. Unfortunately, the proposed explanations are extremely diverse and no one has managed to devise a way to judge which is best.

It is telling, I think, that many works on gender, women's place, and the like simply avoid the issue. They may describe certain aspects of gender inequality that concern their own topic, they may discuss related conditions that seem unfavorable to women, they may suggest that the existence of gender inequality is itself a principal influence over the material they investigate, but they do not try to explain the general presence of gender inequality nor even connect their study to the pursuit of that general explanation. They treat gender inequality as a given, a fundamental social condition about which we know many things, but not why it exists.

The trend of books published on gender inequality also reflects the difficulties of the problem. If you scan the titles published in the 1970s, you find writers were trying to engage the general problem of explaining gender inequality. If you scan the titles of the 1990s, you find few comparable works, with these more recent studies focusing on much more restricted and sometimes esoteric issues. To some degree this shift is a natural result of maturing studies in a field, as scholars refine questions and build on the more general explorations of an earlier period. Nevertheless, it is striking how little of the recent scholarship in this area attempts to solve the general theoretical questions about gender inequality, questions that most scholars in this field would agree are central and still unanswered.

Discussing a symptom of this problem, Judith Lorber, in her book *Paradoxes of Gender*, refers to a pattern by which the idea of *patriarchy* has been used as a substitute for theory.

> "Patriarchy" has been used so commonly by feminists of every perspective to stand for "what oppresses women" that it sometimes seems to be the theoretical equivalent of phlogiston–what causes fire to burn–before the discovery of oxygen. [p. 3]

While it would be overreaching for us to aim at a discovery as decisive as oxygen, we should surely try to move beyond the need to invoke a phlogiston.

Although it remains possible that research will uncover some new facts about gender and social organization that will give us a radically new insight into what causes women's subordination, for now a crucial task is devising an effective theoretical model by synthesizing what we already know. Several decades of concentrated research have accumulated an extraordinary amount of empirical data on gender inequality and stimulated considerable theoretical effort. As a result, we know a tremendous amount about the practice and experience of gender inequality under varied conditions.

Nevertheless, we do not have a theoretical model that can adequately explain gender inequality or, to turn the issue inside out, than can effectively answer the fundamental question, "why don't we have gender equality?" Phrasing the issue

as one of explaining what prevents equality rather than what produces inequality has the virtue of realigning our vision. Putting it this way leads to various secondary questions. "Why is it difficult to create gender equality?" "How would a gender egalitarian society differ (other than saying women are equal)?" "Why do people believe gender inequality is fair or unavoidable?" "Why has gender inequality apparently come into existence in all societies?" "Why haven't women been socially dominant in any society?" "What are the principal disadvantages obstructing women in modern societies?" "Why haven't women rebelled more against their subordination?" "Why haven't women's efforts to resist or overcome their subordination been more successful?"

The problem, I am suggesting, is to discover a plausible way to answer these questions using the knowledge now available to us. Let me say again that I do not mean to imply that we have no answers. We do. If anything, we have too many. Some authors (and readers) are confident that they know the answer, of course, and feel that the rest of us are just a bit slow to catch on. Yet their answers vary considerably, and no answer has found evidence and argument in its support so strong that it readily changes the minds of those enchanted with an alternative answer.

Status Inequality and Positional Inequality. Not all inequality works the same. Gender inequality is an instance of status inequality. As such, it must be embedded in systems of positional inequality. Positional inequality and status inequality refer to two different kinds of inequality, one dividing social roles and the other dividing recognizable groups. *Positional inequality* divides locations within social structures. For example, organizational authority divides managerial positions from staff or wage labor positions. Positional inequality distinguishes people by the structural positions they occupy and the amount of inequality between people reflects the resources and rights characterizing their structural positions. In contrast, exclusionary *status inequality* separates types of people. For example, racial discrimination preserves whites' advantages over blacks. Similarly, sex inequality is an instance of status inequality. *Status inequality* distinguishes people by their personal attributes and the degree of inequality between people reflects the differences in opportunities available to the status groups to which they belong. The conditions needed to sustain or to change these two types of inequality differ. In particular, inequality defined by personal characteristics, such as gender, can only persist if it is consistently associated with institutionalized inequality between positions, most importantly economic and political inequality.

The two types of inequality link differently to the present and the past. Positional inequality largely represents the demands and possibilities of current social structures. Status inequality sustains historical relationships more likely to have arisen under earlier, different conditions.

Diverse systems of inequality often have their distinctive identities masked because they have overlapping influence and interpenetrating organization. Varied patterns of positional inequality and status inequality intermingle. When this happens, any specific instance of inequality (for example, economic inequality) may have its form masked by other sources of inequality (for example, political, racial, age, and gender inequalities). All types of inequality in a society must operate concurrently, organizing the same institutions and the same people. In ordinary day-to-day life, every relationship between positions or between people reflects all the impinging forms of inequality. Therefore, the empirical relations of inequality are commonly an undifferentiated amalgam.

Both positional inequality and status inequality motivate people in advantaged positions to defend the system of inequality. Those who occupy a similar location may act in parallel or in concert to protect their advantages. The two types of inequality produce different characteristic strategies. Positional systems of inequality induce strategies to preserve the existing relationships between positions. The key actions sustain the rights and resources attached to positions. Status inequality induces strategies to preserve restrictions on people's access to differentially ranked positions. When the principal systems of positional inequality change significantly, status inequality can also induce strategies to translate exclusionary rights in the old system into equivalent rights in the new system.

Sometimes one system of inequality is *embedded* in another. This embedded relationship happens when unequal standings in the second system produce the inequality that distinguishes groups in the first system. In particular, a system of status inequality is *embedded* in a system of positional inequality if the unequal status relations operate by creating differential access to structural locations in the system of positional inequality.

Status inequality *must* be embedded in positional inequality and this link must be reinforced by the solidarity of the advantaged group. Status inequality cannot exist independently of and apart from positional

inequality. To be unequal, members of two groups must have different relationships to a society's systems of production, distribution, consumption, rule making, and control.

Sex inequality is an instance of status inequality. Like all systems of status inequality, the inequality between women and men has been embedded within positional inequalities. Most important, sex inequality has been embedded in the structures of economic and political inequality. Secondarily, women and men have occupied unequal positions in the structure of the family.

Notice one simplistic inference. As a system of status inequality, the potential for gender inequality is absolutely limited by the amount of positional inequality. To the degree that a society lacks systems of positional inequality, it provides no basis for gender inequality. One needs to look no farther than this to understand why hunting and gathering societies that have no consequential functioning economic or political structure also have no consequential gender inequality.

Once we distinguish clearly between positional inequality and status inequality, we can see that the persistence of status inequality depends on the relationship between the two. Status inequality can continue only insofar as those with the high status characteristics have an advantage in gaining higher structural positions and that the higher structural positions consistently favor members of the higher status group. The key therefore is the link each between positional inequality and status groups.

This leads us to focus on circumstances that impede members of a lower-status group from achieving higher ranks within positional inequality. These include explicitly formal barriers such as directly discriminatory laws; implicit formal barriers such as laws that have a discriminatory impact, but are manifestly impartial; explicit informal barriers, such as self-conscious prejudice; implicit informal barriers; objective competitive disadvantages unrelated to current discrimination, as when the institutional arrangements for childcare have limitations that are much more problematic for women's employment than for that of men; subjective competitive disadvantages as when members of a disadvantaged group lack the motives or confidence to challenge; and relational or network and organizational disadvantages.

A key to explaining gender inequality is recognizing that it is a form of status inequality and seeing to understand its relationship to the systems of positional inequality in which it has been embedded. These are decisive links.

Focusing on the Problem of Persistence. We must seek the explanation of gender inequality in the reasons it continues over time, not in ways it works at a particular point in time. These are not necessarily and not usually the same thing.

Documenting all the ways that women suffer from gender inequality does not explain that inequality. A system of inequality has causes and effects. Some of its effects may also be causes, because some effects may tend to reproduce the inequality over time. It is unlikely that all of inequality's effects will contribute to its preservation and certain that they will not all contribute equally.

The explanation of inequality's persistence lies in the story that did not happen: equality. What stopped equality from happening? Why did women not demand and gain equal opportunities and equal status? Why and how did men keep women from stepping out of their subordinate role?

In a sense, I am suggesting that we look at gender inequality as peculiar. Let us take equality as the natural state. By this I do not mean that people are naturally equal, but that they inevitably resist inequality. Those who have less of whatever carries value in a society--such as status, resources, or opportunities--will try to get more. Given this natural resistance, inequality will only persist over generations if some social mechanisms sustain it.

We need to stress the preservation or reproduction of status group inequality across generations for an important theoretical reason. People die. Others replace them. The persistence of status inequality across generations depends on the existence of social conditions and social processes that ensure valuable resources, privileges, and rewards are allocated differentially to the members of the advantaged status group, men.

The value of posing the problem this way becomes immediately evident because it focuses us on some processes that are obviously important. For any kind of status inequality to become stable, we would expect to discover the following. Because members of high status groups are in high positional locations, they can individually compete better to retain those positions or to get control of new positions or to pass those positions on to their children. Those in the privileged status group will favor others of their kind in decisions about entry and promotions. And the legal and political structure gives institutional recognition to the status group boundaries by treating the groups differently. These are not dimensions unique to gender inequality, of course, but that is to the good.

In short, we want to ask what causes gender inequality to persist across generations, knowing that this will require social mechanisms and effort to hold off equalizing tendencies. The concurrent processes and conditions that obstruct individual women from competing equally with men and those that give women a worse experience of life are relevant as far as their effects transcend the production of ongoing inequality to sustain inequality over time.

Gender Inequality Compared to Other Kinds of Inequality. Whether we think of inequality as one aspect of the experience of gender or, alternatively, think of

gender inequality as representing one kind of social inequality strongly influences our analytic compass. These choices are not mutually exclusive and both are valid. Still, they frame the way we think about questions and problems. Most work on gender inequality, I believe, has implicitly started with gender and viewed gender inequality is something unique, that has to be understood its own right.

I want to take the opposite tack, stressing that gender inequality is one of a variety it of forms of social inequality. Many questions that we want to ask about gender inequality have counterparts in the study of other forms of inequality. We can learn a great deal about gender inequality by asking how it resembles other forms of inequality and how it differs from them.

Let me give a quick example to show what I mean. Many writers have considered the role of violence in gender inequality. The key empirical assumptions are that men act violently toward women far more than women act violently toward men and that women fear male violence while men largely do not fear women. This has led some theorists to infer that greater male strength and greater male prevalence to violence contribute significantly to gender inequality. Consider, however, the role violence plays in other forms of inequality. If we look, for example, at inequality between knights and peasants, between plantation owners and slaves, or between factory owners and workers in early capitalist economies, everywhere we find a pattern in which members of the dominant group commit more violence against members of the subordinate group than the reverse. In none of these cases, however, are we likely to infer that members of the dominant group are stronger or have a greater inherent tendency toward violence. It is the relationship of inequality that produces the pattern of violence, not differences in the capacities for or the tendency toward violence. Thinking in these terms causes us to look differently at the patterns of violence between women and men, to ask how much they reflect the general implications of inequality as opposed to distinctive qualities of gender relations.

As an example of status inequality, gender inequality shares some characteristics with racial and ethnic inequality, caste systems, and the status hierarchies of feudal-type societies. Most important, each must be embedded in the prevailing systems of economic and political inequality to persist. We want to look carefully for the ways in which these systems of inequality reflect similar causal dynamics.

Equally important, gender inequality has some unique characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of inequality. Kinship, intimacy, and sexuality stand out. Every person, female and male, is the biological offspring of a reproductive union between a woman and man, and the social offspring of a kinship network linking both sexes, and frequently connected to siblings of both sexes. Most people of both sexes expect to marry a person of the other sex and

to produce further offspring of both sexes. Unlike most other forms of inequality, the two status groups of women and men cannot easily be divided into two physically separated communities. Analogously, the transmission of gender status across generations through inheritance has to follow quite different rules than operate when sustaining family status through inheritance processes. The structure of kinship and family organization (broadly conceived) largely circumscribes and concentrates inequality, personalizing and individuating it. Through kinship and family ties, members of the two status groups are bound to a shared fate more completely and enduringly than with other types of inequality. Notice, however, while gender inequality is primarily a form of status inequality, the differentiation within families (and in a more generalized way in kinship groups) between a leader-owner-public link role and a subservient-dependent-domestic role is a form of positional inequality. An almost complete empirical convergence between these forms within the family has largely hidden the analytical distinction from theoretical recognition.

The Revolutionary Decline of Gender Inequality in Modern Societies. The problem of explaining gender inequality's persistence in "modern" societies is qualitatively different from explaining its persistence in "earlier" societies. I have already argued that our efforts to formulate a workable theory should stress the need for social mechanisms and effort to preserve inequality. We should not act as if inequality ever has the momentum of a perpetual motion machine, such that it will just keep on going if no concerted effort tries to slow it. This applies to gender inequality in any period. In modern times, however, things go even further.

As I have argued at length in my book, *Destined for Equality*, we have been experiencing an extraordinary transformation of society without anyone having planned it and without anyone apparently responsible for it. Somehow, a fundamental aspect of social organization, men's social dominance, which seemed universal and irreversible for thousands of years, has gone into a fatal decline. Women now vote and hold political office, they get jobs readily, and they have successful careers in most occupations. While we remain well short of full equality between women and men, we are far closer than we were two centuries ago.

This has occurred as the transformation of economic and political institutions gradually redistributed power and interests in society in ways that were inconsistent with gender inequality. From the beginning, modern economic and political organization engineered its own history. The industrial-market economy and the representative-bureaucratic government each had integral structures, processes, and needs that channeled their

growth. These characteristics both propelled them to develop and constrained the directions in which they could develop. As these primary institutions grew and changed according to the inherent logic of their structures, their needs and their effects became increasingly incompatible with the persistence of gender inequality. These contradictions, which we will later explore, repeatedly prompted men in one group or another to act in ways that slowly eroded men's collective gender advantages.

The Transitions Problem. For a social arrangement to occur, it must not only be consistent with social dynamics and personality requirements, but also some plausible historical path of development must lead to that social arrangement. For example, assume that men's biological makeup truly produces a higher average strength and a greater propensity toward violence than does that of women. Because social structure has such an influence on expressions of violence, nurturing, dominance, and alike, we could reasonably imagine a stable society where women's and men's roles are the exact opposite of those in "traditional" society: women govern, make war, and run families while men care for children and domestic tasks. (It is worthwhile to imagine what might have to be different to make this arrangement succeed.) What is more difficult is to imagine the sequence of events that would lead to the emergence of this social order.

The idea here is that social organization always depends on transition issues as well as issues about what types of social organization seem workable. The past partially limits the future by influencing the ease or difficulty of alternate paths of development.

Theoretical Strategies. Several initial strategies for overcoming some of the limits of past theories come out of this discussion. We need to avoid an implicit theoretical dependence on mythical sex differences that reflect our deep cultural commitment to such imputed differences. We want to define the theoretical problem as explaining what preserves inequality across generations. We need to consider carefully how gender inequality both resembles other kinds of inequality and has unique characteristics, remembering that those facets of gender inequality that reflect general issues in inequality are usually caused by equally general processes. We want to treat gender inequality as an instance of status inequality, understanding that this focuses the problem of persistence on sustaining the embedded relationship between gender and the economic and political realms. We need to keep in mind the crucial question of transitions. And we need to recognize that the processes preserving gender inequality in modern times must act in opposition to the fundamental effects of economic and political organization.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

Why are women and men unequal in the modern world? Exploring this problem is the principal agenda of this book. What is modern is often a matter of great conjecture, but here I simply mean after the emergence of industry, markets, and representative government. I do not seek to point a finger of blame nor to depict women's experience nor to attain a moral or philosophical interpretation. Instead, I will focus on efforts to explain why gender inequality exists and persists in modern nations, to identify the objective conditions necessary and sufficient to account for women's continued lower status.

As part of this effort, we will critically examine different ways that people have tried, explicitly and implicitly, to explain gender inequality. We will dissect each approach analytically, probing its assumptions, cutting the rhetorical fat off its concepts so that we can see what lies underneath. We will compare the logical underpinnings with those used for explaining other kinds of inequality. The goal will be to reveal the basic logical structure of each theory and to assess what value it might have.

When our critical examination raises serious questions about an approach to gender inequality, as it often does, we will consider why people might find this approach attractive, indeed so attractive that they overlook its flaws. Although this must sometimes be a speculative venture, I think it is important. Often, the flaws in a theory are readily visible. Usually this means that advocates of the theory must be unable or unwilling to see those flaws as they should, and we want to consider whether their theoretical allegiance is based on some concern other than the theory's validity.

In this chapter I have tried to state the problem before us, to consider some pitfalls and obstacles we want to avoid, and to point out some strategies likely to bring us to a better understanding of gender inequality. Some of the difficulty in explaining inequality is due to its moral weight. A wish to assign blame or a search for a political path to equality can narrow our vision. Some difficulties reflect the ideological weight of gender inequality which still imbues us with biased understandings and expectations. A good part of the difficulty, however, is inherent to the theoretical problem. Gender inequality is a pervasive and enduring aspect of social structure that has no simple source or meaning.

Our goal is to figure out why and how gender inequality has persisted in the modern world. In doing this we want to sidestep any temptations to rely on myths about sex differences. We need to consider how gender inequality's persistence in the modern world relates to its origins, its apparent universality, its variation across societies, and, most important, its revolutionary decline in modern societies. We need explicitly to take into account biological differences, to accommodate the complexity of relationships between women and men, and to

distinguish the main causes of inequality's persistence from its components. To achieve these goals, we want to focus on the ways that gender inequality, as an instance of status inequality, must be embedded in systems of positional inequality to persist, and how this is sustained across generations. We want to investigate gender inequality theoretically first as an instance of the more general status inequality, and take care to distinguish its peculiar characteristics from those it shares with other kinds of inequality.