

CHAPTER ONE

THE EGALITARIAN IMPULSE

Over the past two centuries, women's long, conspicuous struggle for better treatment has masked a surprising condition. Men's social dominance was doomed from the beginning. Gender inequality could not adapt successfully to modern economic and political institutions. No one planned this. Indeed, for a long time, the impending extinction of gender inequality was hidden from all.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, few said that equality between women and men was possible or desirable. The new forms of business, government, schools, and the family seemed to fit nicely with the existing division between women's roles and men's roles. Men controlled them all, and they showed no signs of losing belief in their natural superiority. If anything, women's subordination seemed likely to grow worse as they remained attached to the household while business and politics became a separate, distinctively masculine, realm.

Nonetheless, 150 years later, seemingly against all odds, women are well on the way to becoming men's equals. Now, few say that gender equality is impossible or undesirable. Somehow our expectations have been turned upside down.

Women's rising status is an enigmatic paradox. For millennia women were subordinate to men under the most diverse economic, political, and cultural conditions. Although the specific content of gender-based roles and the degree of inequality between the sexes varied considerably across time and place, men everywhere held power and status over women. Moreover, people believed that men's dominance

was a natural and unchangeable part of life. Yet over the past two centuries, gender inequality has declined across the world.

The driving force behind this transformation has been the migration of economic and political power outside households and its reorganization around business and political interests detached from gender. Women (and their male supporters) have fought against prejudice and discrimination throughout American history, but social conditions governed the intensity and effectiveness of their efforts. Behind the very visible conflicts between women and male-dominated institutions, fundamental processes concerning economic and political organization have been paving the way for women's success. Throughout these years, while many women struggled to improve their status and many men resisted those efforts, institutional changes haltingly, often imperceptibly, but persistently undermined gender inequality. Responding to the emergent imperatives of large-scale, bureaucratic organizations, men with economic or political power intermittently adopted policies that favored greater equality, often without anticipating the implications of their actions. Gradually responding to the changing demands and possibilities of households without economic activity, men acting as individuals reduced their resistance to wives and daughters extending their roles, although men rarely recognized they were doing something different from their fathers' generation.

Social theorists have long taught us that institutions have unanticipated consequences, particularly when the combined effect of many people's actions diverges from their individual aims. Adam Smith, the renowned theorist of early capitalism, proposed that capitalist markets shared a remarkable characteristic. Many people pursuing only their selfish, private interests could further the good of all. Subsequently, Karl Marx, considering the capitalist economy, proposed an equally remarkable but contradictory assessment. Systems of inequality fueled by rational self-interest, he argued, inevitably produce irrational crises that threaten to destroy the social order. Both ideas have suffered many critical blows, but they still capture our imaginations by their extraordinary insight. They teach us how unanticipated effects often ensue when disparate people and organizations each follow their own short-sighted interests.

Through a similar unanticipated and uncontrolled process, the changing actions of men, women, and powerful institutions have gradually but irresistibly reduced gender inequality. Women had al-

ways resisted their constraints and inferior status. Over the past 150 years, however, their individual strivings and organized resistance became increasingly effective. Men long continued to oppose the loss of their privileged status. Nonetheless, although men and male-controlled institutions did not adopt egalitarian values, their actions changed because their interests changed. Men's resistance to women's aspirations diminished, and they found new advantages in strategies that also benefited women.

Modern economic and political organization propelled this transformation by slowly dissociating social power from its allegiance to gender inequality. The power over economic resources, legal rights, the allocation of positions, legitimating values, and setting priorities once present in families shifted into businesses and government organizations. In these organizations, profit, efficiency, political legitimacy, organizational stability, competitiveness, and similar considerations mattered more than male privileges vis-à-vis females. Men who had power because of their positions in these organizations gradually adopted policies ruled more by institutional interests than by personal prejudices. Over the long run, institutional needs and opportunities produced policies that worked against gender inequality. Simultaneously, ordinary men (those without economic or political power) resisted women's advancements less. They had fewer resources to use against the women in their lives, and less to gain from keeping women subordinate. Male politicians seeking more power, businessmen pursuing wealth and success, and ordinary men pursuing their self-interest all contributed to the gradual decline of gender inequality.

Structural developments produced ever more inconsistencies with the requirements for continued gender inequality. Both the economy and the state increasingly treated people as potential workers or voters without reference to their family status. To the disinterested, and often rationalized, authority within these institutions, sex inequality was just one more consideration when calculating strategies for profit and political advantage. For these institutions, men and women embodied similar problems of control, exploitation, and legitimation.

Seeking to further their own interests, powerful men launched institutional changes that eventually reduced the discrimination against women. Politicians passed laws giving married women property rights. Employers hired women in ever-increasing numbers. Educators opened their doors to women. These examples and many others show

powerful men pursuing their interests in preserving and expanding their economic and political power, yet also improving women's social standing.

The economy and state did not systematically oppose inequality. On the contrary, each institution needed and aggressively supported some forms of inequality, such as income differentials and the legal authority of state officials, that gave them strength. Other forms of inequality received neither automatic support nor automatic opposition. Over time, the responses to other kinds of inequality depended on how well they met institutional interests and how contested they became.

When men adopted organizational policies that eventually improved women's status, they consciously sought to increase profits, end labor shortages, get more votes, and increase social order. They imposed concrete solutions to short-term economic and political problems and to conflicts associated with them. These men usually did not envision, and probably did not care, that the cumulative effect of these policies would be to curtail male dominance.

Only when they were responding to explicitly egalitarian demands from women such as suffrage did men with power consistently examine the implications of their actions for gender inequality. Even then, as when responding to women's explicit demands for legal changes, most legislators were concerned more about their political interests than the fate of gender inequality. When legislatures did pass laws responding to public pressure about women's rights, few male legislators expected the laws could dramatically alter gender inequality.

Powerful men adopted various policies that ultimately would undermine gender inequality because such policies seemed to further their private interests and to address inescapable economic, political, and organizational problems. The structure and integral logic of development within modern political and economic institutions shaped the problems, interests, and apparent solutions. Without regard to what either women or men wanted, industrial capitalism and rational legal government eroded gender inequality.

MAPPING GENDER INEQUALITY'S DECLINE

When a band of men committed to revolutionary change self-consciously designed the American institutional framework, they did not imagine or desire that it would lead toward gender equality. In 1776 a

small group of men claimed equality for themselves and similar men by signing the Declaration of Independence. In throwing off British sovereignty, they inaugurated the American ideal of equality. Yet after the success of their revolution, its leaders and like-minded property-owning white men created a nation that subjugated women, enslaved blacks, and withheld suffrage from men without property.

These men understood the egalitarian ideals they espoused through the culture and experiences dictated by their own historical circumstances. Everyone then accepted that women and men were absolutely and inalterably different. Although Abigail Adams admonished her husband that they should "remember the ladies," when these "fathers" of the American nation established its most basic rights and laws, the prospect of fuller citizenship for women was not even credible enough to warrant the effort of rejection. These nation builders could not foresee that their political and economic institutions would eventually erode some forms of inequality much more emphatically than had their revolutionary vision. They could not know that this social structure would eventually extend egalitarian social relations much further than they might ever have thought desirable or possible.

By the 1830s, a half-century after the American Revolution, little had changed. In the era of Jacksonian democracy, women still could not vote or hold political office. They had to cede legal control of their inherited property and their income to their husbands. With few exceptions, they could not make legal contracts or escape a marriage through divorce. They could not enter college. Dependence on men was perpetual and inescapable. Household toil and family welfare monopolized women's time and energies. Civil society recognized women not as individuals but as adjuncts to men. Like the democracy of ancient Athens, the American democracy limited political equality to men.

Today women enjoy independent citizenship; they have the same liberty as men to control their person and property. If they choose or need to do so, women can live without a husband. They can discard an unwanted husband to seek a better alternative. Women vote and occupy political offices. They hold jobs almost as often as men do. Ever more women have managerial and professional positions. Our culture has adopted more affirmative images for women, particularly as models of such values as independence, public advocacy, economic success, and thoughtfulness. Although these changes have not removed all in-

equities, women now have greater resources, more choices in life, and a higher social status than in the past.

In terms of the varied events and processes that have so dramatically changed women's place in society, the past 150 years of American history can be divided into three half-century periods. The *era of separate spheres*, covers roughly 1840–1890, from the era of Jacksonian democracy to the Gilded Age. The *era of egalitarian illusions*, roughly 1890–1940, extends from the Progressive Era to the beginning of World War II. The third period, the *era of assimilation*, covers the time from World War II to the present.

Over the three periods, notable changes altered women's legal, political, and economic status, women's access to higher education and to divorce, women's sexuality, and the cultural images of women and men. Most analysts agree that people's legal, political, and economic status largely define their social status, and we will focus on the changes in these. Of course, like gender, other personal characteristics such as race and age also define an individual's status, because they similarly influence legal, political, and economic rights and resources. Under most circumstances, however, women and men are not systematically differentiated by other kinds of inequality based on personal characteristics, because these other differences, such as race and age, cut across gender lines. Educational institutions have played an ever-larger role in regulating people's access to opportunities over the last century. Changes in access to divorce, women's sexuality, and cultural images of gender will not play a central role in this study. They are important indicators of women's status, but they are derivative rather than formative. They reveal inequality's burden.

The creation of separate spheres for women and men dominated the history of gender inequality during the first period, 1840–1890. The cultural doctrine of separate spheres emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. It declared emphatically that women and men belonged to different worlds. Women were identified with the household and maintenance of family life. Men were associated with income-generating employment and public life. Popular ideas attributed greater religious virtue to women but greater civic virtue to men. Women were hailed as guardians of private morality while men were regarded as the protectors of the public good. These cultural and ideological inventions were responses to a fundamental institutional transition, the movement of economic activity out of households into independent

enterprises. The concept of separate spheres legitimated women's exclusion from the public realm, although it gave them some autonomy and authority within their homes.

Women's status was not stagnant in this period. The cultural wedge driven between women's and men's worlds obscured diverse and significant changes that did erode inequality. The state gave married women the right to control their property and income. Jobs became available for some, mainly single, women, giving them some economic independence and an identity apart from the household. Secondary education similar to that offered to men became available to women, and colleges began to admit some women for higher learning. Divorce became a possible, though still difficult, strategy for the first time and led social commentators to bemoan the increasing rate of marital dissolution. In short, women's opportunities moved slowly forward in diverse ways.

From 1890 to 1940 women's opportunities continued to improve, and many claimed that women had won equality. Still, the opportunities were never enough to enable women to transcend their subordinate position. The passage of the Woman Suffrage Amendment stands out as the high point of changes during this period, yet women could make little headway in government while husbands and male politicians belittled and rejected their political aspirations. Women entered the labor market in ever-increasing numbers, educated women could get white-collar positions for the first time, and employers extended hiring to married women. Still, employers rarely considered women for high-status jobs, and explicit discrimination was an accepted practice. Although women's college opportunities became more like men's, professional and advanced degree programs still excluded women. Married women gained widespread access to effective contraception. Although popular opinion expected women to pursue and enjoy sex within marriage, social mores still denied them sex outside it. While divorce became more socially acceptable and practically available, laws still restricted divorce by demanding that one spouse prove that the other was morally repugnant. Movies portrayed glamorous women as smart, sexually provocative, professionally talented, and ambitious, but even they, if they were good women, were driven by an overwhelming desire to marry, bear children, and dedicate themselves to their homes.

Writing at the end of this period, the sociologist Mirra Komarovsky

Table 1.1. The decline of gender inequality in American society

	1840–1890 The Era of Separate Spheres	1890–1940 The Era of Egalitarian Illusions	1940–1990 The Era of Assimilation	1990–? Residual Inequities
<i>Legal and political status</i>	Formal legal equality instituted	Formal political equality instituted	Formal economic equality instituted	Women rare in high political offices
<i>Economic opportunity</i>	Working-class jobs for single women only	Some jobs for married women and educated women	All kinds of jobs available to all kinds of women	“Glass ceiling” and domestic duties hold women back
<i>Higher education</i>	A few women admitted to public universities and new women’s colleges	Increasing college; little graduate or professional education	Full access at all levels	Some prestigious fields remain largely male domains
<i>Divorce</i>	Almost none, but available for dire circumstances	Increasingly available, but difficult	Freely available and accepted	Women typically suffer greater costs
<i>Sexuality and reproductive control</i>	Repressive sexuality; little reproductive control	Positive sexuality but double standard; increasing reproductive control	High sexual freedom; full reproductive control	Sexual harassment and fear of rape still widespread
<i>Cultural image</i>	Virtuous domesticity and subordination	Educated motherhood, capable for employment & public service	Careers, marital equality	Sexes still perceived as inherently different

captured its implications splendidly. After studying affluent college students during World War II, Komarovsky concluded that young women were beset by “serious contradictions between two roles.” The first was the feminine role, with its expectations of deference to men and a future focused on familial activities. The second was the “modern” role that “partly obliterates the differentiation in sex,” presumably because the emphasis on education made the universal qualities of ability and accomplishment seem the only reasonable limitations on future activities. Women who absorbed the egalitarian implications of modern education felt confused, burdened, and irritated by the contrary expectations that they display a subordinate femininity. The intrinsic contradictions between these two role expectations could only end, Komarovsky declared, when women’s real adult role was redefined to make it “consistent with the socioeconomic and ideological character of modern society.”¹

Since 1940, many of these contradictions have been resolved. At an accelerating pace, women have continually gained greater access to the activities, positions, and statuses formerly reserved to men.

Despite the tremendous gains women have experienced, they have not achieved complete equality, nor is it imminent. The improvement of women’s status has been uneven, seesawing between setbacks and advances. Women still bear the major responsibility for raising children. They suffer from lingering harassment, intimidation, and disguised discrimination. Women in the United States still get poorer jobs and lower income. They have less access to economic or political power. The higher echelons of previously male social hierarchies have assimilated women slowest and least completely. For example, in blue-collar hierarchies they find it hard to get skilled jobs or join craft unions; in white-collar hierarchies they rarely reach top management; and in politics the barriers to women’s entry seem to rise with the power of the office they seek. Yet when we compare the status of American women today with their status in the past, the movement toward greater equality is striking.

While women have not gained full equality, the formal structural barriers holding them back have largely collapsed and those left are crumbling. New government policies have discouraged sex discrimination by most organizations and in most areas of life outside the family. The political and economic systems have accepted ever more women and have promoted them to positions with more influence and

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

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

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

THE MEANING OF INEQUALITY AND ITS DECLINE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Historically, concerns about structural or institutional inequality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FORCE DRIVING EQUALITY'S GROWTH

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

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

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

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

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

causes of gender inequality's decline must have been active over the entire period,⁷ that they must be loosely linked to the specific changes reducing inequality, and that they must have developed gradually. The diversity suggests a highly complex causal process in which many indirect links and contingent processes have mediated between the primary causes and the ultimate outcomes.

To take into account these key patterns of gender inequality's decline, a satisfactory theoretical analysis needs to identify an enduring engine of social change integral to modern societies. It should specify a guiding social mechanism that linked the engine of change to gender inequality and gave direction to its effects. And it should show how these long-term, fundamental processes led to and guided the many varied short-term events that altered the circumstances of women and men.

Two kinds of social conflict fueled the decline of gender inequality. The first kind concerned the antagonisms and struggles between women and men. Bound together through the social order, family obligations, and sexual tensions, divided by unequal statuses and roles, women and men have perpetually vied for advantage and ascendancy. Because mutual antagonism and sporadic strife have always characterized gender inequality, the presence of tension and conflict between the sexes cannot alone account for modern improvements in women's status. In the past, women generally failed to gain much from their struggles, and when they did succeed, their triumphs remained isolated. Their successes were individual victories that failed to spread to others or to accumulate over time.

The perpetual struggle between women and men over their domains and rights resembles the incessant squabbles between two neighboring countries over the extent of their sovereignty. Most of the time, the dispute simmers, and the boundary remains stable. They make demands, negotiate, fight, and reach accommodations every day. Who decides how to spend the family's income? Who controls the children? Which household tasks must the wife do, and which ones should the husband complete? The questions are endless. Most disputes take place along the boundary separating women's rights and duties from men's. In a traditional household, for example, a couple may argue about how much time the husband spends with their children on the weekend. This is a boundary dispute. They do not question if she or he should have major responsibility for the kids. That would be a war for

dominance. As with nations, boundary disputes lead to significant shifts in the terrain women and men control only when the balance of power changes.

Still, this constant conflict between women and men was crucial to the modern decline of gender inequality. It made gender status highly responsive to changes in structural conditions. When any social changes affected either gender's bargaining power or goals, the constant struggle between the sexes translated changed conditions into shifts of social status.

The shift of power outside the household, into organizations with no distinct need or interest in preserving gender inequality, gradually altered the balance of power between the sexes. This allowed the boundary disputes to open into widespread conflict over gender status.

Agitation and collective action by women was particularly influential because it provided an active force to overcome the momentum of established patterns of inequality. The acceleration of women's movement into high-status jobs, upper-level political positions, and postgraduate education beginning in the 1960s owes much to the concerted effort of women vying for change.

A second type of conflict concerned the inconsistency between two sets of social structural imperatives, rather than two groups being at odds over conflicting interests. This conflict, which has been unfolding for 150 years or longer, concerns a rupture between the social conditions needed to sustain sex inequality and the structural conditions produced by social development. The industrial, market economy and the liberal, democratic political order have dominated social conditions in the United States. For male domination to persist, economic and political processes had to respect and bolster the boundaries between women's and men's roles. As modern organization advanced, the economic and political systems have absorbed, centralized, and magnified social power. They have rationalized relations of authority and have eradicated civil and social distinctions among ordinary people. The interests governing economic and political processes began to reward ignoring gender as a distinction in the formation of varied policies. These changes have slowly but unavoidably eroded the conditions that preserved men's advantages across generations.

Gender inequality declined because modern society transferred social power from people committed to preserving men's advantages to

institutions and people whose interests were indifferent to gender distinctions.⁸ *Social power* concerns the capacity to control resources and people and to get things done. Modern economic and political structures shifted power from households into businesses and government organization. Such organizations had no inherent interest in gender inequality. Those who controlled economic and political power became increasingly ruled by those interests that perpetuated and profited the organization giving them power. While prejudices against women still ruled many actions of men with power, their institutional interests repeatedly prompted them to take actions incompatible with preserving gender inequality (often without any recognition that their actions would affect gender inequality). While most men clung to beliefs in male superiority, their individual efforts to restrict women declined as they benefited less from women's subordination and found it harder to hold women back. Lacking interests in gender inequality's persistence, the state and businesses withdrew their power from its defense, causing gender inequality to become disembedded from political inequality and economic inequality. As power and interests were reorganized, women found more and more opportunities to rebel successfully against the residual inequality, and with each improvement in women's status these opportunities increased further.

Unseen processes contributed as much to gender inequality's gradual collapse by eroding its foundations as did the overt pummeling by those seeking to knock it down. Political and economic developments favoring women did not often improve their status directly or simply. Instead, these developments changed the opportunities and interests of people (and organizations) in ways that led to improvements for women.

As opportunities opened and obstructions crumbled, women sought to better themselves, and by raising their aspirations and increasing their resources, their successes induced them to seek even more. Inequality invariably produces resistance and can endure only through continuous effort. Stable, large-scale structures of social inequality persist across generations only if they meet certain conditions. Pervasive, reliable mechanisms must transfer crucial resources exclusively to members of the advantaged group and restrain disadvantaged people's efforts to overcome the limits inequality places on their lives. When these social mechanisms that channel resources and restrain rebellion break down, as they did with gender, inequality becomes increasingly precarious.

Men pursuing their self-interests established the industrial-capitalist economy and the liberal-democratic political order. The men guiding these efforts wanted, above all else, to preserve and expand their economic and political power. These systems served those aims well. Over time these systems also followed an inherent logic of development and repeatedly demanded adaptations to the problems and needs exposed during their growth. Many of these adaptations meshed with existing gender inequality, but some did not. As these institutions' needs increasingly differed from the needs of gender inequality, their adaptations more often hindered gender inequality's persistence. Slowly but inexorably, these adjustments reduced the viability of women's subordination. The organized pursuit of economic and political inequality inadvertently created conditions favorable to gender equality.⁹

This book seeks to show both how and why gender inequality has declined, both to describe and to explain women's rising status. To achieve these goals we will examine and analyze these changes in detail from various vantage points. We will consider how the state extended greater legal and political rights to women; how women became assimilated into the economy; how individualism benefited women as it became institutionalized in education, ideas, and the family; how women have promoted (and sometimes opposed) their rising status; and how men (even as they clung to their advantages) have progressively conceded greater rights, opportunities, and status to women. Together, these analyses will develop what aims to be a general explanation of women's rising status.