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Gender and Politics

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Global Research, August 01, 2023

Theme: [History](#)

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Preface

The text has aim to investigate the situation of female representation in politics in the industrialized contemporary Western democracies. Though women are more and more visible in politics, we can not yet say they have taken an equal position compared to men. Of course, they have had to take a long road and there is certainly a positive evolution, but there are still some mechanisms that lead to different kinds and levels of political discrimination.

The focal goal of this text is then, trying to find out what the factor processes are that lead to these discriminations, and which solutions there can be put forward.

In this text, I will try to explain firstly what gender is. We will see the difference between sex and gender. While sex is about the biological differences between men and women and their consequences, gender is much more of a social phenomenon. It is about how people are socialized based simply on the fact that they are a man or a woman. It is about the differences in treatment and their consequences. We will try to find where those differences in treatment come from, and which things maintain the existence of this different treatment.

Further, I will focus on the gender problems, or the problems with which women have to deal with simply because they are women. My focus will not be on the poor situation of women in the less developed countries of the south – which would also be interesting, but on the problems that women still have today in the industrialized Western democracies, where the history of women's rights already covers a long road.[1]

What Is Gender?

What is it to be a man? What is it to be a woman? You might think that being a man or woman is ultimately associated with the sex of the physical body we are born with. However, the nature of maleness and femaleness is not so easily classified, explained, and understood.

Historically, the study of gender has its roots in the anthropology of women and, therefore, is very often mistaken to be only about women. Gender studies are concerned with the cultural construction of embodied human beings, both women and men. They examine the differences and similarities as experienced and interpreted in various contexts, taking this to mean all relationships whether they involve subjects of the same or different genders. Gender has often implied and/or been contrasted to sex, the biologically defined categories of male and female.[2]

Before explaining what gender is, we need to make some important distinctions, between sex and gender. In general, sociologists use the term sex to refer to the anatomical and physiological differences that define male and female bodies. A person's sex is determined based on primary sex characteristics essential to reproduction. Sex is thus a biological concept for the biological distinction between men and women.

Gender, by contrast, concerns the psychological, social, and cultural differences between males and females. Gender is a social distinction based on culturally conceived and learned ideas about appropriate appearance, behavior, and mental and emotional characteristics for males and females, linked to socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity. It is not necessarily a direct product of an individual's biological sex.

The terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are gender terms that signify the ideal physical, behavioral, mental, and emotional traits believed to be characteristic of males and females. The distinction between sex and gender is a fundamental one since many differences between males and females are not biological in origin. Individuals who are born as biological males or females are usually expected to develop 'masculine' or 'feminine' character traits and behave in ways that are appropriate to their gender.[3]

In general, there are several academic points of view in explaining gender differences.

Some authors hold that aspects of human biology are responsible for initiating differences in behavior between men and women. Thus, they claim that the difference in sex lead to differences in social behavior. These differences, they claim, can be seen in some form across all cultures. They believe that the behavioral differences between males and females are 'hardwired' in our genetic code just as surely and permanently as the differences in reproductive organs. Sociologist Steven Goldberg, for example, argues that some gender characteristics are universal; for example, males are more aggressive and control leadership positions. Goldstein believes this is the result of biological and genetic inheritance, but not of socialization or learning.[4]

Theories of "natural differences" (for example, why men are more aggressive and women are, in general, more gentle and passive) are often grounded in data on animal behavior; critics point out, rather than in anthropological or historical evidence about human behavior, which reveals variation over time and place. Moreover, they add, because a trait is more or less universal, it does not follow that it is biological in origin. Rather, however, there may be cultural factors of a general kind that produce such characteristics. For instance, in the majority of cultures, most women spend a significant part of their lives caring for children and could not readily take part in hunting or war.

Although the hypothesis that biological factors determine behavior patterns in men and women cannot be dismissed out of hand, nearly a century of research to identify the physiological origins of such an influence has been unsuccessful. There is no evidence of the

mechanisms which would link such biological forces with the complex social behaviors exhibited by human men and women.[5]

Nevertheless, all theories which see individuals as complying with some kind of innate predisposition neglect the vital role of social interaction in shaping human behavior.

Most sociologists argue that gender roles are entirely learned. Such an opinion takes us to a second view about gender. Gender can be explained by understanding the origins of gender differences through the study of gender socialization, and the learning of gender roles with the help of social agencies such as the family and the media. Through contact with various agencies of socialization, both primary and secondary, children gradually internalize the social norms and expectations which are seen to correspond with their sex. Gender differences are not biologically determined, they are culturally produced. According to this view, gender inequalities result because men and women are socialized into different roles.[6]

In practice, this socialization goes through the learning of "sex roles" by positive and negative sanctions. For example, a small boy could be positively sanctioned in his behavior (like "What a brave boy you are!"), or by the recipient of negative sanctions (like "Boys don't play with dolls"). These positive and negative reinforcement aid boys and girls in learning and conforming to expected sex roles. Research by child specialist Beverly Fagot and her colleagues showed that this socialization already started very early; grownups who interacted with a group of toddlers did that in a gender-polarized way. They were more likely to respond to girls when the girls communicated in gentle, "feminine" ways and to boys when the boys communicated in assertive, "masculine" ways. As they did not find real sex differences in the interaction styles of 12-month-old boys and girls, the differences in communication styles by the time these toddlers reached two years of age were quite dramatic.[7]

However, critics of this view argue that gender socialization is not an inherently smooth process as different "agencies" such as the family, schools, or peer groups may be at odds with one another. Moreover, socialization theories ignore the ability of individuals to reject, or modify, the social expectations surrounding sex roles. It is important to remember that humans are not passive objects or unquestioning recipients of gender "programming". But while we should be skeptical of any wholesale adoption of the sex roles approach, many studies have shown that to some degree gender identities are a result of social influences.[8]

Clearly, gender socialization is very powerful, and challenges to it can be upsetting. Once gender is "assigned", society expects individuals to act like "females" and "males". It is in the practices of everyday life that these expectations are fulfilled and reproduced.

According to Joseph F. Healey, gender is a source of differentiation, such as race, ethnicity, and class. Like race, gender has both a biological and a social component and can be a highly visible and convenient way of judging and sorting people. J. F. Healey speaks of gender roles, which highly resemble A. Giddens' sex roles. From birth, the biological differences between the sexes form the basis for different gender roles or, in other words, societal expectations about proper behavior, attitudes, personal traits, and proper ethical behavior based on gender background.[9] In virtually all societies, including those at the advanced (post)industrial stage, adult work roles tend to be separated by gender, and boys

and girls are socialized differently in preparation for these adult roles.[10]

There is also a third possible approach to understanding gender differences that combine nature and nurture. In this view, genetic inheritance and socialization experiences work together in a variety of ways, some exquisitely subtle, to produce the commonly observed gender differences in adults. For example, sociologist Robert Udry argues that the biology of sex – in particular, he focuses on the male hormone testosterone – may predispose or sensitize males and females in very different ways and prepare them for differential socialization experiences. R. Udry notes that these findings do not invalidate or refute explanations of gender differences that stress socialization or nurture. They do, however, require the recognition that biology sets some limits on the effects of gender socialization.

According to Joya Misra and Leslie King, gender is mainly about power. Norms, traditions, and values concerning gender have served to maintain a system of inequality in virtually every society. From the moment a child is born, the state is involved in upholding and maintaining gender as an institution. State policies often reflect patriarchal norms and may constrain both men's and women's choices. Yet states may also serve as arenas for challenging traditional gender norms.[11]

General Problems Concerning Gender Inequality

We have seen that gender is a socially created concept that attributes differing social roles and identities to men and women. Yet, gender differences are rarely neutral – in almost all societies, gender is a significant form of social stratification.[12] Gender is a critical factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances individuals and groups face and strongly influences the roles they play within social institutions from the household to the state. Gender roles and relationships vary across time and from society to society, but gender and inequality have usually been closely related, and men typically claim more property, prestige, and power.[13]

Although the roles of men and women vary from culture to culture, there is no known instance of a society in which females are more powerful than males. Men's roles are generally more highly valued and rewarded than woman's roles: in almost every culture, women bear the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work, while men have traditionally borne responsibility for providing the family's livelihood. The prevailing division of labor between the sexes has led to men and women assuming unequal positions in terms of power, prestige, and wealth.[14] Power, prestige, and wealth are scarce values that people seek. Because women tend to be labeled with an inferior status simply on the basis of their gender, however, this reduces their chances of achieving these values in competition with men.[15]

The societies of West Europe and the USA have a strong tradition of patriarchy, or male dominance, throughout the social structure. In a patriarchal society, men have more control over the economy and more access to leadership roles in religion, politics, and other institutions. Nevertheless, despite the advances that women have made in countries around the world, gender differences continue to serve as the basis for social inequalities and men's enduring dominance over women in the realm of economics, politics, the family, and elsewhere.

Women's gender problems are situated in everyday life, in differences in health and aging, in the family, in their lower places in the class structure, in organizations, in the labor

market, in their educational outcomes, and so on. Some theories worked out negatively for the position of women, like a functionalist theory that says it is perfectly logical and desirable to divide the tasks in outside work for men and inside work for women; or the theory of maternal deprivation which says that a child who isn't socialized by its mother, by her absence, would possibly have serious social and psychological difficulties later in life. Such theories have been justly criticized by feminists and other scientists as there is no biological basis to the division of labor and nothing natural or inevitable about the allocation of tasks in society. Rather, humans are socialized into roles that are culturally expected of them. There is a steady stream of evidence, however, to suggest that the maternal deprivation thesis is questionable. There is no basis for the belief that the "expressive" female is necessary for the smooth operation of the family – rather, it is a role that is promoted largely for the convenience of men.[16]

As a matter of very fact, the gender problem is a very complicated one, and in practice, it is very hard to change it as processes of prejudice and stereotyping are playing still a significant role in gender stratification and throughout history are rooted in the social system.

Women face stigmatization on a number of fronts and the practical consequence of an individual being stigmatized can include the reduction of the person's social acceptability, a blocking of important social and economic opportunities, and a diminishing of the overall life chances. This person may come to see even himself as inferior when there is an absence of validation by others and this person is socialized to accept the beliefs and values on which the stigma is grounded. In this way, women even can get caught in a web of self-defeating behavior.[17]

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Notes

[1] See, for instance [Shoemaker R., Vincent M. (eds.), *Gender & History in Western Europe*, London: Arnold, 1998].

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[4] See, for instance [Giddens A., *Sociology*, Cambridge−Oxford: Polity Press, 2004, pp.107−108; Healey J. F., *Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class: The Sociology of Group Conflict and Change*, Thousand Oaks−London−New Delhi: Pine Forge Press, 2006, p. 25].

[5] See more in [Reeser W. T., *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010].

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