



**FRAMED**

by

**GENDER**

**How  
Gender  
Inequality  
Persists  
in the  
Modern World**

**CECILIA L. RIDGEWAY**

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in the Modern World*

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# Acknowledgments

**T**HIS BOOK HAS been on my mind for a long time, but it didn't become a reality through my own efforts alone. I am fond of telling my students that knowledge is a coral reef built out of the accumulated contributions of many. This book is no exception to that.

I started thinking about the arguments behind this book more than a dozen years ago in response to nagging questions students asked in my classes on gender. Exactly how does gender inequality keep reshaping itself for new eras? But it was the Center for the Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences, where I was a Fellow in 2005–2006, that actually pushed me to finally begin writing it. The Center is the kind of place that challenges yet also inspires you to take on the bigger questions and really try to work them through. And it offers a near-magical mix of stimulation, collegial support, and focused time to think and work. I am especially indebted to several of my fellow Fellows at the Center that year who generously gave me their thoughts and encouragement: Jennifer Eberhardt, Lauren Edelman, Paula England, Annette Lareau, Cathrine Mackinnon, Laura Beth Nielsen, Claude Steele, Pamela Walters, and Min Zhou. Stephen Morris and Arne Ohman also helped me with key literatures. And years later, when I finally finished the book manuscript, Annette Lareau helped me again with invaluable advice and connections for contacting publishers.

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## The Puzzle Of Persistence

**G**ENDER HAS MANY implications for people's lives, but one of the most consequential is that it acts as a basis for inequality between persons. How, in the modern world, does gender manage to persist as a basis or principle for inequality? We can think of gender inequality as an ordinal hierarchy between men and women in material resources, power, and status. A system of gender inequality like this has persisted in the United States despite major transformations in the way that gender, at any given time, has been entwined with the economic and social organization of American society. A gender hierarchy that advantages men over women survived the profound social and economic reorganization that accompanied the transition of the United States from an agrarian to an industrialized society. By the end of this major transition, the material base of gender inequality seemed to rest firmly on women's relative absence from the paid labor force, compared with men. Yet as women in the succeeding decades flooded into the labor market, the underlying system of gender inequality nevertheless managed to refashion itself in a way that allowed it to persist. More recently, women have moved not simply into the labor market, but into formerly male jobs and professions, like physician, manager, or lawyer, but again, a pattern of gender hierarchy has remained in which men continue to be advantaged not only in employment but also throughout much of society. What is the dynamic of persistence that allows gender inequality to survive like this?

These social and economic transformations have not left gender untouched. Each brought substantial changes in social expectations about how men and women should live their lives. The degree of inequality between men and women in material dependence, social power, and status has also gone up and down over these transitions (cf. Padavic and Reskin 2002, pp. 17–28). Yet the ordinal hierarchy that advantages men over women has never entirely faded or been reversed. This is a bit of a puzzle.

Gender, like race, is a *categorical* form of inequality in that it is based on a person's membership in a particular social group or category, in this case, the categories of females and males. As we will see, social scientists generally agree that categorical inequalities in a society are created and sustained by embedding membership in a particular category (e.g., being a man or woman) in systems of control over material resources and power (e.g., Jackman 1994; Jackson 1998; Tilly 1998). If, for instance, in an agrarian society, men have greater control over ownership of land or, in an industrial society, men own the factories and occupy better jobs, these sources of wealth and power create and maintain gender inequality. Theoretically, then, when the system of resource control on which gender inequality is based in a given period is upset by technological and socioeconomic transformation, the gender hierarchy itself should be at risk of collapse. Yet this collapse has not happened in American society. How—that is, through what means—has gender inequality managed to persist?

When I ask this question, I am not asking for a story of the specific, contingent historical events through which gender hierarchy has been reestablished in the transitions from one socioeconomic period to another. Instead, I am asking a more abstract and analytical question. Are there any general social processes through which gender inequality manages to reinscribe itself in new forms of social and economic organization as these forms emerge in society?

Notice, too, that I am not asking the ultimate, sweeping question of *why* gender inequality has persisted, but rather the more proximate, means-focused question of *how* it has persisted. The “how” question is essential to any effort to intervene in the perpetuation of gender inequality. Even the how question is a very large one, however. To bring it down to a manageable scale, I will focus on its more specific, modern version. In this book, I ask how gender inequality persists in the contemporary United States in the face of potentially leveling economic and political changes, such as men's and women's increasingly similar labor market experience, antidiscrimination legislation,

and the growing convictions of many that boys and girls should be raised to have equal opportunities in life. This more specific question about contemporary persistence is especially relevant for understanding the current challenges faced by those seeking greater gender egalitarianism.

There can be little doubt that gender inequality still does persist in the United States. Evidence of gender inequality in employment is particularly revealing since in the contemporary United States, paid labor is the major means by which individuals gain access to material resources, authority, and social status. Women's labor force participation rates rose relative to men's throughout the 20th century, but they have leveled off since 1990, when 74% of women in the prime working ages of 25–54 were in the paid labor force. In 2000, that figure was still 74% for women, compared with men's 86% participation rate in the prime working years (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004). Since 2000, the gender gap in labor force participation has held steady rather than substantially narrowed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). Although men and women have similar education levels, women's annual wages for full-time, year-round work were still only 77% of men's in 2008 (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2010). Furthermore, the jobs and occupations that people work in are still quite sex segregated in that most women work in jobs filled predominantly by other women, and most men work in jobs filled predominantly by other men. While the movement of women into men's occupations has significantly reduced sex segregation, the decline has slowed since the 1990s. At present, the elimination of the sex segregation of occupations would still require 40% or more of all women in the workforce to change occupations (Charles and Grusky 2004; Cotter et al. 2004; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006). Women are also less likely to be in managerial or supervisory positions in the workplace, and when they are, their positions carry less authority and power than those occupied by men (Reskin and McBrier 2000; Smith 2002). Only 15% of top executive positions in Fortune 500 companies are filled by women (Catalyst 2008).

Some women, of course, do not choose to participate in the paid labor force, at least for a period of years, choosing instead to devote their time to raising a family. There is evidence, however, that persistent gender inequality continues to taint social judgments of this choice, too. A study of contemporary American stereotypes showed that such “housewives” were perceived to be in the lower half of all social groups in social status, below blue-collar workers and women in

general and well below men in general. Housewives in this study were seen as similar in competence to the elderly and disabled (Fiske et al. 2002). A subsequent study further confirmed that contemporary Americans rate housewives as well below the average for social groups in social status (Cuddy et al. 2007; Cuddy, personal communication).

Gender inequality persists as well in who does the work at home. Whether or not women work in the paid labor force, they continue to do more work in the household than men (Bianchi et al. 2006). Furthermore, women's share of the housework compared with men's is not dramatically changed by increases in the hours they put in on the job (Bianchi et al. 2000; Coltrane 2000). As a result, the burden of juggling the management of household duties with employment continues to fall on women (Bianchi et al. 2006). The weight of this burden, particularly that of caring for dependent children, affects how women fare in the labor force as well. At present, studies show that mothers of dependent children suffer a "wage penalty" in the labor force of about 5% per child compared with similar women without children (Budig and England 2001).

Gender inequality in the contemporary United States, then, continues to be widespread. Evidence from the world of work suggests that progress toward greater equality has actually slowed or stalled since the 1990s (Cotter et al. 2004; Padavic and Reskin 2002). Such evidence suggests that present levels of gender inequality are not merely dead artifacts of the past that have not yet been fully worn away. Instead, it is more reasonable to view present levels of gender inequality as a product of competing forces, some acting to perpetuate inequality in the face of others that act to erode it.

This book is about a set of social processes that, I argue, play a critical part on the perpetuation side of the competing forces that shape gender inequality in contemporary America. The processes I will describe are hardly the only ones that act to maintain inequality, but they are among those that are most central. These processes, I argue, must be understood if we are to achieve greater gender equality in the future.

To address the question of the contemporary persistence of gender inequality, I will outline in this book an analytic perspective on the way that gender acts as an organizing force in everyday social relations. By social relations, I mean any situation in which individuals define themselves *in relation* to others in order to comprehend the situation and act. That is to say, social relations are situations in which people form a sense of who they are in the situation and, therefore, how they should behave, by considering themselves in relation to whom they assume

others are in that situation. In social relational situations, they implicitly say to themselves, for instance, “That is a traffic policeman and I am a driver and therefore...”

Everyday social interactions, either in person or through some other medium like a computer or a telephone, are of course social relations by this definition. However, situations in which individuals act alone—evaluating a resume, for instance, or taking a qualifying test—can also be social relational if the individuals imaginatively consider themselves in relation to others to decide how to act because they feel their behavior or its consequences will be socially evaluated. From the perspective of individuals, social life and society itself are made of up of social relations of this sort, happening over and over again across multiple contexts (Ridgeway 2006b). It is worth keeping in mind that societal patterns of gender inequality are actually enacted through social relations.

Gender inequality’s staying power, I argue, derives from people’s use of *sex* (that is, the physical status of being male or female) and *gender* (shared cultural expectations associated with being male or female) together as a primary frame for organizing that most fundamental of activities: relating to another person. I argue that people use sex/gender as an initial, starting framework for defining “who” self and other are in order to coordinate their behavior and relate, whether they do so face-to-face, on paper, over the Internet, or on a cell phone. The everyday use of sex/gender as a basic cultural tool for organizing social relations accounts, I’ll argue, for why cultural meanings associated with gender do not stay within the bounds of contexts associated with sex and reproduction. Instead, the use of gender as a framing device spreads gendered meanings, including assumptions about inequality embedded in those meanings, to all spheres of social life that are carried out through social relationships. Through gender’s role in organizing social relations, I’ll argue, gender inequality is rewritten into new economic and social arrangements as they emerge, preserving that inequality in modified form over socioeconomic transformations. In a very brief form, that is the argument I am going to make, spelling out its implications as I go along.

As this abbreviated account suggests, some general aspects of my arguments about gender and social relations might be applied in some degree to societies other than the contemporary United States. Caution is required in this regard, however, since, as I have already implied, the social structure of gender is virtually always specific to a particular societal and historical context. Although I will pose some parts of my



argument in general terms, the details address gender in the contemporary United States, and I limit my focus in this book to that context.

Before I turn to my specific analysis of gender as an organizing force in social relations, there are some questions that need to be addressed. It will be useful, first, to inquire more closely into gender as a form of inequality in contemporary society. A more detailed understanding of the nature of gender inequality will help us assess what a plausible explanation for the persistence of gender inequality might entail. This inquiry will also clarify why an approach that focuses on the way people use gender as a framework for organizing social relations might be appropriate to the problem of persistence.

Second, it will be helpful to position the social relational analysis of gender's persistence within a more encompassing picture of gender as a system of social practices in society to better understand what aspects of gender will be the focus of this book. Third, to clarify the premises from which this book proceeds, I need briefly to describe my opinion on the biology question that inevitably arises when people debate the persistence of gender inequality. Debating the complex and difficult questions that are involved in this issue would be the topic of a very different book. Instead, I will make a few simple, evidence-based assumptions about this issue in relation to which I develop my social organizational analysis of the persistence of gender inequality. As we shall see, I understand gender to be a substantial, socially elaborated edifice constructed on a modest biological foundation.

Fourth, although my focus is on the persistence of inequality, discussions of inequality are inevitably entwined in people's minds with assumptions about the nature of gender differences (or "sex differences," as they are often called). For this reason, it also will be useful to outline very briefly the evidence about contemporary sex differences in social behavior. This evidence will provide an empirical foundation with which my subsequent arguments must be consistent. These questions occupy the rest of this chapter. Once we have them in hand, I will turn in the following chapters to my analysis of gender as a primary frame for social relations.

## GENDER AS A FORM OF INEQUALITY

Gender is frequently referred to as a social role that males and females play. If gender is a social role, however, it is unlike other roles as we commonly use the term. In contrast to other roles such as, say, teacher

and student, boss and worker, or leader and follower, gender is not inherently attached to a defined set of positions in specific types of organizations or institutions. Instead, gender is about *types* or categories of people who are defined in relation to one another. We can think of gender as *a system of social practices within society that constitutes distinct, differentiated sex categories, sorts people into these categories, and organizes relations between people on the basis of the differences defined by their sex category* (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). I use the intermediate term, *sex category*, in this definition to refer to the social labeling of people as male or female on the basis of social cues presumed to stand for physical sex (West and Zimmerman 1987). Physical sex itself is more complex than the dichotomous social labels of sex category. However, it is typically the social labeling of someone as male or female rather than direct physical sex that triggers gendered social practices.

### *Distinctive Aspects of Gender*

Although gender is a categorical distinction among people, like race or ethnicity, even in this regard it has some distinctive characteristics that have implications for understanding gender as a form of inequality. Unlike those who differ in race or ethnicity, males and females are born into the same families. People who differ in sex, unlike most who differ in race or ethnicity, also go on to live together in the same households. These mixed-sex households are distributed throughout every economic spectrum so that there are always rich as well as poor women, just as there are rich as well as poor men. Finally, there are roughly equal numbers of men and women in the population so that neither sex constitutes a distinct statistical minority or majority in society.

These distinctive aspects of gender have two implications for inequality that are relevant here. First, in comparison with those who differ on other significant categorical distinctions like race, men and women interact together all the time and often on intimate terms. Consequently, while there is an interpersonal, relational aspect to any form of inequality, including those based on race and social class, the arena of interpersonal relations is likely to be especially important for gender inequality. This means that processes taking place in everyday social relations have the potential to play a powerful role in the persistence or change of gender inequality.

Second, because both men and women are distributed throughout all sectors of society, gender inequality can never be a matter of all men

(or women) being more advantaged than all women (or men). Instead, gender inequality is a state of affairs in which the average member of one sex is advantaged compared with the average member of the other sex. Even when gender inequality favors men on average, there will always be some women who are more privileged than many men. But even rich, powerful, high-status women will not be as rich, powerful, and high in status as the most privileged men.

### *Positional and Status Inequalities*

As I stated at the outset, gender inequality is an ordinal hierarchy between the average man and woman in valued resources, in power, and in status. As the early-20th-century sociologist Max Weber (1946) famously described, resources, power, and status constitute three interrelated but slightly different dimensions of inequality in societies. It is worth unpacking these related dimensions to better understand how gender inequality is constituted in the modern world. How gender inequality is constituted has implications for how it might or might not be undermined by changing social and economic arrangements in society. First, we need some conceptual tools for thinking about resources, power, and status. Next, we need to understand the nature of gender inequality in relation to these interrelated forms of inequality.

The relationship between the resources and power dimensions of inequality is especially close. While the possession of wealth, information, or other valued resources is not the same as power over people and events, it is easy to see how one might lead to the other. In fact, research based on the sociological theory of power dependence has shown that power arises between people from the dependence of one person on another for valued resources (Emerson 1962, 1972; Cook, Cheshire, and Gerbasi 2006). As power dependence theory has also shown, access to valuable resources and power over others develops from the relative positions actors hold in social networks and organizations.

In societies, social organizations of all sorts are the major producers and distributors of the resources most of us seek, from the basics of food and shelter to more abstract resources like money or information (Tilly 1998). Employment organizations are obvious examples, but so are households, government institutions, unions, educational institutions, and so on. Organizations are made up of a structure of related social positions, such as teachers and students in educational institutions

and managers and workers in a business firm. Some of these positions have greater control over the resources that the organization generates and carry more power than other positions. These unequal resources and rights to power are vested in the positions themselves, independent of the individuals that occupy them. The CEO position in a business firm carries resources and power that are a function of the position rather than the person. Because resources and power in the contemporary United States are largely attached to such *positional inequalities* in organizations, inequalities in the organizational positions individuals occupy result in inequalities between them in resources and power (Jackson 1998; Tilly 1998).

The third dimension of inequality, social status, is a bit different from that created by positional inequalities. *Status inequalities* are distinctive in that they are rooted in *shared cultural beliefs* about the respect, social esteem, and honor associated with types or categories of people compared with other types or categories of people. In an achievement-oriented society like the United States, social esteem is represented and expressed by corresponding assumptions about differences in these people's competence at the things that "count most" in society (Berger et al. 1977; Ridgeway 2006d).

Status inequalities, then, are based on cultural presumptions about the traits of people in some social categories compared with others rather than directly on the nature of the positions they occupy in society. Since gender is a categorical distinction based on cultural assumptions about differences between people in one sex category compared with the other, it is at root a status inequality. When cultural beliefs (i.e., stereotypes) about men and women incorporate assumptions about status and competence differences between the sexes, they base gender inequality on categorical membership itself. One is unequal *because* one is a man or woman and not just because one occupies a particular set of organizational positions in society. In fact, contemporary gender stereotypes in the United States do incorporate beliefs that men are worthier of status and more generally competent than women (Fiske et al. 2002; Glick et al. 2004; Rudman et al. 2009). Because such gender status beliefs color our impressions of people, a woman in a certain social position—say, a CEO in a business firm—is not quite equal to an equivalent man in that position, despite the structural equivalence of their positions.

The pattern of gender inequality that we see in American society at any given time is a result of the relationship between these two types of inequality working together (Jackson 1998). It is a joint result of