

Women and men in a changing world

Tracing and eliminating the roots of gender disadvantages

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Gender is one of the most influential social categories in human societies. Whereas sex refers to the fixed biological differences between men and women, gender is a flexible concept: the traits, expressions, roles and behaviors that are perceived and enacted as typical male and female are socio-cultural constructions and thus variable over time and space (Scott, 1986).¹ Although major shifts have occurred in the social positions of men and women during the past decades, it is also clear that discrepancies in life chances between the genders still persist in a wide range of societal domains, even in those countries that perform relatively well in terms of gender equality. For example, in the European Union, women are generally higher educated than men. But women are still overrepresented in lower job positions, whereas men are overrepresented in higher job functions: nearly seven out of ten managers are men. Men hardly work part-time (8%) compared to women (30%), with large differences between EU member states. For example, in the Netherlands, 75% of the women work part-time. Belgium ranks fourth with 41% of the women working part-time. Although these numbers differ significantly from the situation in the early 1960s, progress has been especially slow during the past decade. Moreover, in the family domain, discrepancies have remained very persistent. In 2016, 93% of the European women took care of children on a daily basis compared with 69% of men. Regarding household labor, 78% of women report doing household labor on a daily basis compared with 32% of men (Eurostat, 2020).

1 While we treat gender categories – for the sake of simplicity – rather binary in this essay, we are fully aware of the fluid nature of gender, i.e. certain individuals do not want to be identified as either male or female or that their gender identity might change during the life course.

In honor of Prof. Koen Matthijs, who has displayed throughout his academic career a keen interest in historical and current gender issues (e.g. Matthijs, 2002; Matthijs et al., 2014; Hin, Puschmann & Matthijs, 2020) this essay will explore how gender inequalities have arisen in ancient times and how they have diminished in the contemporary era. We will also analyze what mechanisms are responsible for the continuation of gender inequalities in today's Western world. Lastly, we will present a specific policy suggestion that we believe could alleviate the inequalities that women face today in the labor market due to structural impediments in the life course.

1. The rise and decline of patriarchy

While feminist historians have searched for decades for 'a golden age for women', it has become increasingly clear that such an age has never existed (Bannett, 1993; Hill, 1993). Throughout most of recorded history, women have had subordinate positions vis-à-vis men within so-called patriarchal systems. While in some of these patriarchal systems, men had absolute power over women – like in pre-revolutionary China – in others – like in many Western countries during premodern times – men only slightly overpowered women (Therborn, 2004). Of course, women's power and agency varied not only from one world region to the other, it was over time also subject to change. Moreover, within societies, we observe important differences in the position and power of women according to their race, social class, age and religion (Bannett, 2006). Notwithstanding this significant within-group variation, throughout most of history, women's life chances stood in the shadow of those of men's, and this was being reinforced by the fact that women were primarily engaged with reproductive and caregiving tasks while men first and foremost acted as *producers* and *providers* (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010).²

Large-scale gender inequality took root in the wake of the Neolithic revolution when human beings started to settle down and turned to agriculture. Nomadic hunting and gatherer communities had been relatively peaceful, non-hierarchical communities, marked by gender equality in labor division and decision-making (Cintas-Peñas & García Sanjuán, 2019;

2 This is of course not to say that women have not been engaged in production. Females' productive and service tasks have often been crucial for families' survival, even during the male bread winner age, see Angélique Janssens (1997).

Dyble et al., 2015).³ The introduction of a sedentary agricultural lifestyle was a turning point. To be economically successful, it became necessary to have a lot of helping hands on the land. Consequently, fertility became higher valued and the population started to increase. This fostered women's reproductive success, at the costs of their productive and organizational capacities, and made them more dependent on their male partners' productive qualities (Diamond, 1987; Galor, 2011). Men increasingly started to control economic and political activities from which they rendered status and power. Physical strength became more important as violence and warfare increased and because agricultural labor was physically more demanding than hunting and gathering. A sedentary lifestyle also allowed men to better control the going and doings of women, including their sexuality and reproductive capacity. In the long run, these developments created the basis for patriarchal societies. However, the degree of gender inequality varied depending on the degree to which the state, law and religion endorsed the power of men over women (Lerner, 1986; Therborn, 2004; Wolf, 2005).

It is only centuries later that the industrial revolution and the demographic transition started to undermine patriarchal systems. Mechanization, and more recently, computerization and robotization, have rendered physical strength less important. In addition, fertility decline has made sure that women spend less time on childbearing and rearing, allowing them to engage more with productive and organizational tasks. Simultaneously, the decrease of fertility led to an ever-larger share of families that consisted exclusively of female offspring, undermining the patriarchal system from within through the lack of male heirs (Courbage & Puschmann, 2015). In 19th century Western countries, these developments provided fruitful ground for the first Women's movement – claiming citizenship rights for women and women's right to own property (Timm & Sanborn, 2016, Puschmann, 2020).

Although the first women's movement was highly successful in its aims, it did not overturn the patriarchal system. In some regards – especially regarding the division in productive and reproductive tasks – women initially faced a backlash. While women (and children) had played a central role in the initial phase of the Industrial revolution, women were increasingly banned from the workplace and relegated to the private sphere of the home when industrialization reached cruising speed. The introduction of the male breadwinner model started with men's claim of a family wage, allowing married women to concentrate on childrearing and household

3 The latest evidence shows that in pre-historic times women were also actively involved in big-game hunting, challenging the older idea that women gathered fruits, vegetables and honey, while men did the hunting. Alloparenting even enabled mothers to engage in hunting (Haas et al., 2020).

tasks. This model reached – after two short-term interruptions caused by the World Wars – its height during the 1950s in most Western countries (Janssens, 2020; Seccombe, 1986; Timm & Sanborn, 2016).

In reaction to the breadwinner model and the exclusion of women from the public domain, Western countries witnessed in the 1960s a second wave of feminism. This wave was much broader in scope than the first and focused on gender inequalities in sexuality (e.g. marital rape) and reproduction (e.g. the right of birth control practices and abortion), as well as education, the workplace (equal opportunities and equal payment) and the home (equal distribution of domestic tasks and childrearing; easier access to divorce for women) (Timm & Sanborn, 2016). The second wave has proved to be successful in reaching its aims: differences in opportunities and life chances between women and men have decreased significantly in Western countries, and also in most other parts of the world, we observe similar trends towards gender equity. However, everywhere gender differences still persist, although the magnitude varies from country to country and from one target outcome to the other (e.g. labor force participation vs. household labor). In next sections, we investigate the mechanisms that are at the root of these inequalities.

2. The roots of gender inequality: Sex categorization and status differences

According to Cecilia Ridgeway (2006; 2011; 2013), gender inequality persists because gender plays a pivotal role in organizing our social relations. Remember a time in which you encountered a person of whom you could not immediately say whether (s)he was female or male: social interaction is disrupted. Albeit this experience only lasts for a few seconds, it definitely feels ‘out of the ordinary’. Sex categorization – i.e., labeling someone as male or female – is a deep-rooted cultural and cognitive tool that makes us able to relate to one another. The process of sex categorization is so fundamental and deep-rooted to our way of interacting with one another that we always do it and we do it immediately. Even if someone does not personally endorse traditional gender beliefs, (s)he will label their interaction partner according to their sex. This is true because it is challenging to interact with each other without such ‘shared’ knowledge. Without cognitive schemes about who the other is and who you are in relation to that person, any interaction would be very uncertain and possibly threatening. Hence, we have a

cognitive need to interpret the situation in the same way as our interaction partner does. Shared or common knowledge provides the necessary tools to anticipate the other's reaction and coordinate our actions accordingly because it entails information about how we can categorize and define ourselves and others.

Gender is such a primary categorization category (as is age and race). Categorization is based on contrast and, thus, difference. Someone is old because he or she is not young. In the same vein, someone is categorized as a woman because she is not a man. Of course, difference does not necessarily equate to inequality. However, studies show that difference quickly becomes a steppingstone for inequality because classification as a member of a group is typically associated with the assumption of one's own group being 'better' than the other (cfr. social identity theory; in-group favoritism). Thus, women should assume that women are better than men, whereas men should assume that men are better than women. But this type of competing ideas of whose 'better' comprises the possibility of coordinating joint behavior and is thus difficult to sustain over the long run. This is especially the case for sex because men and women rely on one another for reproduction and sexuality. Moreover, sex cross-cuts family relations (unlike e.g. race or socio-economic status), and hence, the mutual dependence of the sexes permeates virtually everyone's everyday life. A solution to overcome this threat to coordinate joint behavior is to transform competing in-group preferences into shared ideologies that constitute status beliefs (Ridgeway, 2006; 2011).

Status – the inequality based on differences in honor, esteem and respect – acts as an important force in reproducing gender inequality (alongside power and resources). Status matters because inequality based solely on resources and power is unstable and is a constant source for potential struggle and conflict between dominant and dominated groups. Status beliefs, however, consolidate control over power and resources. At their core, status beliefs entail that members of *both* groups come to understand that one group is higher in status, more respected than the other. In theory, this means that female dominance may also be an outcome instead of male dominance. However, in today's societies, status characteristics are generally ascribed to men rather than women (Ridgeway, 2011; 2013). In an achievement-oriented, meritocratic society such as ours, status beliefs are based on evaluations of general competence and instrumental qualities such as rationality, ambition, action competence and decisiveness. Common gender stereotypes – dating centuries back in time – still associate such qualities with men rather than women. Women are believed to be affective, physically attractive, emotional and risk-averse. Consequently, women

are expected to behave in certain ways (e.g. being gentle, understanding, soft and elegant) and perform certain roles (e.g. take care of children, sick, elderly). The higher status associated with male attributes, characteristics and behaviors is translated in various structural inequalities between men and women. For example, caring jobs – traditionally perceived as female and still almost exclusively carried out by women (e.g. nurse, pharmacy assistant, secretary, educational assistant, etc.) – are less well paid than other jobs in the same domain that are more often carried out by men (e.g. physician, pharmacist, medical professor, etc.). Moreover, the literature suggests that once women enter certain jobs, these professions' salary and esteem go down (Murphy & Oesch, 2016).

3. Perpetuating gender inequality: Gender socialization and gender identity

However, the question remains why such male advantage persists, especially since women have a countervailing interest in fighting this privilege, and public opinion has shifted towards equal opportunities. Gender stereotypes hardly change because gender plays such an important role in orientating oneself in the world. Disrupting these stereotypes would not be tolerated by people, men and women alike, because it shapes how we relate to one another socially and it does so in an instant (Ridgeway, 2011). Gender defines 'who' one is. The 'who am I' and related to that 'what is my place in society' question is just as powerful as having economic and political interests. In other words, because gender is a primary identity of both men and women and both sexes have interests in using gender as a way to define themselves, beliefs about gender differences sustain status inequality beliefs.

It is not surprising that gender is one of the most primary identities for an individual. Even before the birth of a child, significant others' (parents but also grandparents, friends, colleagues and so on) first question more likely than not relates to the sex of the child: is it a boy or a girl? Nurseries, clothing, and care equipment are available in specific boy or girl colors. This type of subtle "gendering" continues after the actual birth of the child. Moreover, children internalize and reify these gender differences from a very young age on. Research shows that most children are able to correctly say whether they are a boy or a girl from the age of two (Martin & Ruble, 2010). By age two or three, children also prefer to play with same-gendered peers as well as gendered toys and they perform gender-specific behavior.

In addition, even at that young age, they find it important to be correctly identified by others as a boy or a girl (Gansen & Martin, 2018). According to Cahill (1986), children learn very early on to associate correct gender-specific behavior with being a 'big boy' or a 'big girl'. When they are engaged in non-appropriate and disapproved behavior, they are labeled as 'a baby'. In other words, children learn that they can distinguish themselves by displaying 'correct' and thus gendered social skills. Further on, when they are at the age of five, children have internalized gender stereotypes. For example, they say that a dress is not something for men to wear, that a girl cannot be a police agent, and that mommies are the ones who bake the cake and take care of the baby. Of course, when children grow older, they develop more complex ideas about what it means to be female and male. But it is clear that even in today's society, stereotypical thinking about gender is a core aspect of children's developmental trajectories and gender identity beliefs are internalized from a very young age.

Gender identity socialization is so persistent because the main socialization agents subscribe to existing gender roles, beliefs and stereotypes. Parents, as primary socialization actors, play a major part in developing gender-specific beliefs and behaviors. Even though many contemporary parents claim that they do not raise their children specifically to be a boy or a girl, studies suggest otherwise (Adams, 2018; Gansen & Martin, 2018). Yes, it may be the case that an increasing share of parents does not paint the child's bedroom in typical gendered colors (blue or pink) or that they are aware of possible gender biases in toys. But, looking at parenting practices, gender differences are still present, and boys in particular are more rigidly socialized than girls. When boys break gender conformity, parents are more likely to (subtly) punish them for it. In the same vein, secondary socialization agents such as teachers promote gender-stereotypical thinking and behaving. For example, studies show that boys and girls are asked different types of questions, girls get help more quickly whereas boys are encouraged to find the solution themselves and boys get complimented for taking the initiative while girls get a pat on the back when they are social and caring (Gansen & Martin, 2018).

Lastly, tertiary socialization agents such as mass media, children's books, movies, video games and so on, still portray girls and boys in a stereotypical way. Boys are more often the lead character than girls. Female characters are often portrayed in domestic situations, whereas male characters go on an adventure and play the hero. We recognize that considerable efforts have been made to change these type of gender-stereotypical portrayals during the past decade. For example, in recent children's movies such as *Frozen*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Brave*, girls are more likely to be the main

character. However, it is interesting to see that changes have predominantly been made in the portrayal of female figures and that these changes are more often than not focused on expanding the typical descriptions of girls to include instrumental qualities (e.g. being adventurous, being a leader and so on). For boys though, little seems to have changed. In fact, the social costs for displaying non-gender-conform behavior seem greater for boys than for girls in various socialization contexts. Whereas contemporary girls can be 'tomboys' without being socially punished for it, this is not the case for boys: boys who are 'sissies' are still social dopes. In other words, for boys, gender socialization practices and thus gender identity beliefs have not come to incorporate expressive qualities (Ridgeway, 2011).

That gender identities of men are still more likely to be restricted to typical "male" qualities, has significant repercussions for both men and women later in life, especially when children enter the equation. Whereas women and men are increasingly convinced that women have the same rights and are as qualified to participate in the labor market, the same gender equal beliefs are not mirrored when it concerns tasks typically associated with the family domain such as childcare and household work. For example, in Europe, 44% still believes that a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and family. In addition, 43% believes that a man's most important role is to earn money (European Commission, 2017). So although more and more men may want to take up more household work and childcare responsibilities, significant differences remain in actual hours spent on these tasks and attitudes towards fatherhood.

This so-called 'stalled revolution' perpetuates the motherhood ideology and hampers the development of a culture of fatherhood. We hypothesize that as long as men's gender identity construction does not include expressive qualities, taking up 'female' tasks poses a threat to a male's identity as a man. But as important as the latter, is the role of women in this process. Studies repeatedly show that women at times act as gatekeepers to men's family involvement. Some women, in fact, are reluctant to share the burden of childcare and domestic work (Stevenson et al., 2014). Mothers are much more likely than fathers to experience guilt when they are full-time employed outside the home (the so-called 'guilt gap') (Sutherland, 2010). They are also continuously surrounded by images of 'supermoms' in the media: a caring and involved mother who also strives for an ambitious career. In other words, the gender identity of women is still heavily based upon motherhood. During the past decades, however, it has come to include the 'career woman'. This puts enormous pressure on women, especially due to the natural childbearing constraints that women face.

Identity construction processes do not change rapidly. It took several decades to get to where women are now in the public domain. Without structural changes that will provide men and women with male role models taking up significant roles in the feminine area of nurturance, we believe changes in men's and women's identity construction are unlikely.

4. Structural impediments to gender equality

A considerable share of gender inequalities arises from structural impediments linked to specific statuses and transitions in the life course. Girls perform better in schools and at university.⁴ Even in highly patriarchal societies such as those of the Middle East and North Africa, women are overrepresented in higher education (Courbage & Puschmann, 2015). But once education is completed and the transition to the labor market starts, major gender gaps appear. In patriarchal societies, a considerable share of female graduates does not even apply for jobs because they are not expected to take up paid labor. Still, in more gender-equal countries in the West, men also often start to outperform women. This has a lot to do with the rigidity of today's life course trajectories. Currently, it is still much more complicated for women than men to combine a successful career with family formation (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010; Sullivan, 2019). Men who marry and form a family see their careers getting a boost – e.g. they earn more than single men, which is often referred to as a marriage and fatherhood premium – for women the opposite is the case: they face a marriage penalty. Moreover, women who have children face a motherhood penalty: mothers earn less than women who do not have children, they are less likely to get promoted, and they are less likely to have supervisory authority on the work floor (Glauber, 2018; Koelet et al., 2015). Some of these disadvantages are related to discrimination of mothers in the labor market; others are simply the result of the fact that mothers are overburdened.

A lot of the gender inequalities in the labor market are related to the fact that everywhere in the world, women primarily take care of their infants and remain home for some time, ranging from a few months to several years following the birth of a baby. At the same time, women have to respect stricter timing when it comes to family formation. After all, female fecundity starts to decline quite rapidly in the mid-thirties, while for men, this process starts considerably later and proceeds much slower. Thus, women have less flexi-

4 Girls are less likely to choose study trajectories that lead to high paid jobs.

bility in their twenties and thirties compared to men. This natural constraint puts a lot of (time) pressure on women: if they want to have children of their own, they should not overly wait. Women who do start family formation find themselves quickly in a competitive disadvantage in the labor market, compared to men, as well women who have not (yet) started family formation: young mothers go through a phase in which they can invest less in their career, while it requires considerable efforts to reintegrate into a labour market in which age-peers were continuously present.

5. Tackling structural impediments in the labour market

Women who feel the pressure arising from combining care duties and labor force participation tend to alleviate this stress by employing coping strategies. One reaction of women is to postpone family formation until they have obtained the economic foundation for a family (Balbo, Billari & Mills, 2013), but this basically only defers the challenge until a later stage in the life course. Another reaction of women is to work part-time or to choose (temporarily) a job, which is more compatible with family life (Begall & Mills, 2011). In both cases, this is likely to lead to lower wages in the short run and reduced career opportunities in the medium term, as men continue to invest full-time in their career (Russo & Hassink, 2008). Such decisions by women have, however, also negative long-term implications, such as diminished pension accrual, worsening the economic position and thus the bargaining power of women vis-à-vis men in later life. Finally, some women think that having a career and a family are basically incompatible. They either give up a career altogether (or remain inactive in the labor market for a sustained period) or renounce family formation.

In order to tackle this bottleneck, it is necessary to relieve women from their double duties. Governments and companies can, amongst others, offer (better and cheaper) childcare facilities and stimulate flexible paid paternity leave, and male partners can start to take over more caring duties. On the other side of the spectrum, women quota in male dominated sectors, as well as for top position, can help to give women's career a boost and can thus help to narrow the gender gap in the labor market. While we encourage these and comparable policy actions as they can have significant effects, they are probably insufficient to tackle all impediments that women face in the labor market, as the causes of the problem are structural

in nature. One should therefore consider other, more far-reaching policy options, which lead to a reshuffling of life course trajectories.

The life course has been altered significantly over the previous decades: the age at job entry has increased as a result of extended education, jobs and careers have become more flexible and people live longer and longer. Moreover, family arrangements have become more complex due to, amongst others, a rise in divorces and an increase in patchwork families. However, the early career stages have remained crucial, and they coincide with the most fertile period in women's life. In this context of change and continuity, we observe two groups of unsatisfied people: A group of young people – and especially women – who are struggling, as their days are too short for the number of duties they have, and a group of vital highly experienced people in their late sixties and seventies, who often would prefer to continue their active work life – although usually on a somewhat lower level, but who are forced by law to retire. Would it not be great if the latter could lighten the burden of the former, while they at the same time create more equal opportunities for women in the labor market? We think this would be feasible in several ways, but we would like to suggest one specific solution.

It could be institutionalized that both men and women up until the ages of 35 or even 40 work only half time, for instance, only a maximum of 20 hours a week. This would make it easier for young people to combine a career and family formation, and it would take away unfair competition between men and women, as both sexes would by law only work part-time, taking the competitive advantage of men away, while at the same time giving them plenty of opportunities and incentives to take up (more) domestic and care-taking tasks. Moreover, such general legislation may foster shifts in gender identity construction. If left to individual choice, men who have few other sources for positive identity construction (e.g. low educated men or men with lower status jobs) may not take these opportunities to work part-time because it threatens an important source of their self-esteem and positive self-image: i.e., their male identity and hence, the status that being a man holds in society.

While the calls for a four-day workweek for everybody are getting louder, we suggest reducing the workweek of a specific age group: young people in their years of family formation. Although working less will most likely result in higher work efficiency, some form of compensation will probably be necessary to ensure that companies are not running out of labor. The compensation could come from part-time work by those healthy, energetic and experienced employees in their late sixties and seventies who would prefer to remain active in the labor market instead of retiring full time. This plan would not only foster gender equality and fight age discrimination; it

would also give a positive stimulus to fertility. We do not expect miracles, but we think that countries with the lowest-low fertility could move again in the direction of a Total Fertility Rate of 2, provided that young couples have sufficient financial means. By working less, young individuals will have a lower wage. The government should compensate this lower wage. That will be a costly undertaking, but it should be regarded as an investment for a fairer world, with happy and healthy individuals and families, with sufficient offspring, guaranteeing new tax revenues for the future.

We saw Koen Matthijs – like many other professors, as well employees in other sectors – struggling over the last years with the idea that he was by law forced to retire, while he is still full of energy, in good spirits and full of creative research ideas. Consequently, during the last years of his career, he was no longer allowed to apply for new research grants, while he would have loved to do so, and he would have most likely been as successful as he used to be or even more successful, if he only had been allowed to. At the same time, we see age peers struggling with an overload of duties in the prime of their lives. And it is especially the women who pay the price for this. We have seen very talented women dropping out of academia, as the job and family combination was just a bridge too far. We think that our plan would make everybody happy and would be a big leap forward! At the same time, we believe that Koen will remain active and important for many scholars in the field in his new function of Professor emeritus. Notwithstanding his light opposition against retirement, we would like to congratulate him on reaching this milestone and his successful career.

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