

How gender inequality is explained sociology essay



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How has gender inequality been explained? (Answer with reference to a range of theories and approaches) Critically assess the attempt of one of the feminist groups to overcome gender inequality. Social stratification “ A system by which a society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy’ (Macdonald and Plummer: 2005: 190). Social stratification is common in different aspects throughout society and throughout history some of the most substantial categories affected are class, race, disabilities, sexuality and globally. However this essay shall be investigating the stratification by gender, referred to as gender inequality.

There are many reasons for the disparity of gender “...circumscribed by its underlying social, legal, political, economic, and cultural characteristics” (Rives and Yousefi 1997: 1). Gender stratification categorises people in regard to their ‘ sex’, this can be defined as anatomical differences and physiological differences between male and female for example the difference in chromosomes, sex organs and hormones. The word ‘ gender’ has been socially constructed through the means of a stereotype and ideology of the social role, identity, position and behaviour of male and female through different institutions and aspects like the media, religion, culture and historically.

Up until the era of Suffragettes in the late 19th Century women were always deemed lower than men and inequality was highly significant in society it was fundamentally a patriarchal society. The traditional preconceptions were that men were strong, intellectual beings that were the hunter gatherers and providers for their household. Whereas, women were passive objects that would cook, clean, cater for their husbands wants and desires, and doing

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nothing more than bear and raise children. “ To the woman he (God) said, I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for you husband, and he will rule over you.”

(Genesis 3: 16). This interlinks with religion and reiterates traditional and religious view from The Bible. There are a substantial amount of reasons why there is clear gender inequality in society, this essay will assess and show the many theories into the existence of this.

Biological determinism is a theory that asserts that males and females appearance, mental and general behaviour and position on the social hierarchy is all in relation to their genetic make-up and genes, the differences between male and females socially is dependant on the fact of them being different sexes alone. The Evolution of Sexes written by Geddes and Thompson shows a generalisation of a biological determinist analysis of gender. They claim that social, psychological and behavioural traits were caused by metabolic state. Women supposedly conserve energy (being ‘ anabolic’) and this makes them passive, conservative, sluggish, stable and uninterested in politics. Men expend their surplus energy (being ‘ katabolic’) and this makes them eager, energetic, passionate, variable and, thereby, interested in political and social matters. These biological ‘ facts’ about metabolic states were used not only to explain behavioural differences between women and men but also to justify what our social and political arrangements ought to be. Due to all these factors it is apparent biological determinism theorists that gender stratification is fate, females are meant to be inferior to males and this cannot be fought or changed in society and therefore is highly beneficial.

Functionalists would argue that gender stratification is universal and positive for society. A key functionalist thinker Talcott Parsons explained how the differences in the sexes (gender) have provided complementary roles for both male and female (Instrumental and expressive), and how the difference in roles which are biologically based helped traditionally integrate society. He believes that gender differentiation and the understanding of division of labor means social stability. Women labeled “ expressive” by Parson should typically be in control of the family units be the emotional support, take care of the household chores and the security and well being of the children. Opposed to men, labeled “ instrumental” whose role is to “ connect the family to the larger world primarily by participating in the labour force”(Macionis and Plummer 2008: 381), work and focus on issues outside of the internal family unit. Parson theorises that gender identity is social, formed through numerous means of social control and is needed for both male and female to gain appropriate skills to succeed in life. The knowledge of these specific skills and understanding of the difference of gender identities to the opposite sex (expressive and instrumental)are in a sense indoctrinated so that, for example if a male is not deemed instrumental he is therefore unattractive and is rejected by the expressive women. This clear distinction of the division in the family unit ensures harmony in the family and thus benefits society on a whole Functionalists view the potential for social disorder “ only when all of the aspects of traditional gender stratification are disturbed.” (Schaefer and Lamm 1998).

During the 20th Century there were huge upheavals in the traditional view of women and their roles and the view of a predominately patriarchal society

they were living in. Women now wanted to be able to work and have an education, not deemed less able due to biological determinism and be treated equally, which gave birth to a collection of huge movements in sexism and inequality and also different views within feminism (Liberal, Socialist/Marxist and radical). One point that is evident throughout all the different interpretations of feminism is that women have not been seen as equal throughout the social structure.

Liberal feminists do not see women's oppression as part of large system structure but however believes that biological determinism as a source for inequality within the political and justice realm as completely barbaric. There may be some slight procreative differentiation but that should not be any differences in relation to the law, politics, employment or educational institutes, they believed the only way of reformation was through the reform of these institutes. Liberal feminists believe in the rights for every individual woman in society.

Socialist/Marxist feminism is adopted through two major writings, Firstly in Engels writing in 1884 *The origin of the family, private property and the State* and through Marx's conflict theory evident in the *Communist Manifesto*, which is a struggle between the oppressors (capitalists/bourgeoisie) and the oppressed (working class) to maintain an equal social structure one needs to overthrow capitalism. Beasley wrote that "the base-superstructure model of society, that is, social relations- including those related to sexual inequality- are conceived as crucially shaped by the economic base of society, rather than ideas and attitudes" (Beasley 1999:

61) Marxist Feminists believed the only way to end this patriarchy was <https://assignbuster.com/how-gender-inequality-is-explained-sociology-essay/>

through social revolutions against capitalism for equality. As males dominated the means of production and owned all the property women Engels contended were alienated due to the economic reliance on their husbands. “ Engels links the modern oppression of women to the institution of private property. Correlatively , he argues that the economic system of capitalism draws women into the public workforce and thus sets the conditions for their equality” (Carver and Steger 1999: 254) The only way women would be able to throw the unfair justice of capitalism would be to be free of marriage, laundry, cooking, childcare and childbirth and reforming the structure of the family. So that women can get full-time jobs through revolting equaling out the inequality in gender.

This essay has briefly summarised the main theories and some brief approaches of gender inequality, Radical feminism is similar to that of Marxist feminism but more extreme, it is similar in the aspect of it fundamentally believing that the oppression and control of women is to do with how Capitalism promotes gender exploitation. Women are segregated into a “ sex class” and therefore should stick together. Radical feminists believe that the only way for gender equality is the complete eradication of patriarchal society and any aspect of society that males dominate, this is the only way for female liberation. Radical feminists believe women are oppressed through their ability to reproduce and the sexualisation by men, they should be seen as the enemy. The only way women can free themselves is through any aspect of association with males, this includes not having heterosexual relationships and not producing off spring in order to liberate. Alice Echols and Ellen Willis wrote about radical feminism in their

book *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America* that “ Radical feminism was a political movement dedicated to eliminating the sex-class system”(Echols and Willis 1989: 4) The sex class system also included the sex-role system which sees marriage, family, prostitution, and heterosexuality as repressive. They believed gender inequalities root cause was sexual oppression, women need “ to gain control over their bodies/biology and relatedly to value and celebrate women’s bodies”(Beasley, C 1999: 55) . This interlinks with a psychoanalytic feminist such as Sigmund Freud where he shows that gender is embedded in language and through sexualisation and thought from the earliest state of childhood. This is through the penis envy theory, this is when girls realise they don’t have a penis and from being attached to her mother, finds a stronger attachment to the father. She accepts her inadequacy and subordination in society by accepting her mother’s values and containing her craving for her father. According to many theorists Radical feminism is also about “ generating widespread support for campaigns around issues such as rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment” (Dean 2011) as well as the promotion of contraception, sterilization and abortion.

The word “ radical” in itself holds factors for criticism; this is an extreme view that has many factors that can be deemed incorrect. You cannot categorise all women into a sex class as there is no substantial evidence that supports the idea of this. How is it possible that all women just because of their biological similarities are the same, and can be generalised so flippantly? It doesn’t entail any other aspects such as culture, psychological, class or economic factor in a way of determining gender construction.”

Radical feminism not only ignores important differences among women but also reproduces exactly the stereotypical vision of women and men”

(Beckham and D’Amico 1994: 80) Isn’t this exactly what radical feminism is fighting against, the generalisation? Radical feminism ignores legislations like the Equal Pay Act 1970 and The Sexual Discrimination Act 1975 and how politics are constantly changing in regard to sexism and the maltreatment as women as a class. Radical feminism suggests that society should be matriarchal, this would continue the process of gender inequality but just the other way round. Another limitation of radical feminism is that instead of promoting marriage it does the opposite, that women should be rid of all these stereotypical roles, this in a way promotes promiscuity and even unhealthy relationships. Radicalism is damaging to society as a whole because society cannot reach its maximum potential if one group is more domineering than another.