

Gender inequality from a sociological point of view



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In this essay I will discuss how gender inequality has been explained. In doing so I will explore three broad approaches on gender differences and inequality. Which I will compare and contrast with functionalist approach; who believe that gender roles fit the needs of the social system, and Feminist explanation; who argue women are unequal to men. First I will introduce the biological basis on behavioural difference between men and woman, supported by theorist Tiger and Fox (1972), Functionalist John Bowlby (1953), Jean Elstain (1987). Next I will draw attention to theories placing central importance on socialisation and the learning of gender roles by looking at the works of Liberal Feminist Sue Sharp (1994) and Ann Oakley (1972). However while these theoretical approaches seek to explain the persistence of gender inequalities this essay will then go on to compare two opposing views, that of Functionalist and Marxist Feminist, in order to allow for greater depth in the analysis of these positions. I will do this by considering arguments made by functionalist theorist Talcott Parsons; forms of complementary roles (1942) and Murdock (1949) and furthermore Marxist theorist Friedrich Engels; ideas on capitalism (1902). Finally taking everything into account I will go on to critically assess the attempt of Radical Feminist to overcome gender inequality, where I will argue that radical feminist efforts to defeat gender inequalities has been less victorious than Liberal feminist, however their extreme views hold strong arguments on issues such as domestic violence.

Sex can be seen as ambiguous term, which 'refers to the biological distinction between females and males' (Macdonis, Plummer, 2008: 367).

Many sociologists, who adopt the biological approach, propose that the

functions of the brain and hormones to chromosomes are responsible for natural differences in behaviour between men and woman. They argue that men demonstrate biological based tendencies towards aggression that woman lack. This approach has been supported by theorist Tiger and Fox (1972), who agree that the natural selection has encouraged hormonal differences, which can explain gender differences such as senses, behaviour and emotions; they further claim that nature intended mothers and children to stay together. In contrast, this argument supports functionalist views on maternal deprivation as suggested by John Bowlby (1953) who wrote a psychological account of the ill effects of maternal deprivation on children. However feminist have argued that this has been misrepresented as an ideological argument to keep women at home. In addition many researchers remain unconvinced by the biological approach, such as theorist Elshtain (1987) who suggested that the level of aggression varies for woman in different cultures, therefore the biological approach fails to take cultural factors to account. Furthermore critics point out that this theory ' is grounded upon data, animal behaviour rather than anthropological and historical data' (Giddens, 2009: 613).

Gender ' refers to the social aspects of differences and hierarchies between male and females' (Macionis, Plummer, 2008: 367). Unlike the biological approach, many sociologists argue that there is nothing natural about gender inequality; rather it is socially constructed through socialisation of learning of gender roles. Liberal Feminist Anne Oakley (1972) claimed that gender roles are learnt through social agencies such as family; where manipulation and canalisation takes place, school; where boys are

encouraged to take on sports, and the media; where women are portrayed as housewives in adverts for cleaning products. Ultimately children gradually internalize social norms and values that are expected from them which correspond with their sex. Consequently norms and values are culturally produced along with ideals of masculinity, femininity, which ultimately has led to the sexual division of labour. Oakley has disputed that the process of socialisation of gender roles is guided by manipulation, for example in the home, boys and girls are encouraged to play with gender specific toys. The patriarchal ideology that is through claims that women are more suited to caring roles because of their maternal instinct supports functionalist views. Functionalists have used this ideology to argue that social agencies contribute to maintain social order by overseeing the smooth gender socialisation of new generations. However this has been sharply criticised by feminist who argue that this theory ignores the ability if individuals to reject certain norms and values projected by society.

Theorist Connell (1987) stressed that 'empirical evidence on gender inequality is not simply a 'shapeless heap of data', but reveals the basis of an 'organised field of human practice and social relations' through which woman are kept in subordinate positions to men (Connell, 1987). On a more optimistic note Connell suggested how females are seeking for change, for example school girls are taking interest in competitive sports, calling their own shots, which suggest gender inequality exploited within the family and state is being challenged, the means that have traditionally supported men's power is being weakened. However Despite the changes in society and the economy, such as the Thatcher era, which represented new female role

models in power, did not seem to have had much impact on the girls' attitudes as the study 'Just Like A Girl' by Sue Sharp (1994) concluded, that girls still expected to undertake 'women's work', such as health work, teaching. Nevertheless the study did present some change, such as greater stress on equality with men, which came with a sense of assertiveness and confidence. There was a greater importance of having a job, being able to support themselves, especially in the event of a divorce. Nonetheless the girls in Sharp's findings indicated that the girls "look forward to a future in which they are likely to end up juggling work and domestic life like their mothers before them." (Sharp, 1994).

Functionalists see each aspect of society as interdependent and contributes to society's functioning as a whole, held together by social consensus, which produces order, stability, and productivity. Their sociological interest in gender is relatively recent, their theory proposes that gender differences contribute to social stability and integration and assume they 'fit' the needs of individuals, the family and the social system. In contrast with the roles influenced by biology and learning of gender roles, through socialisation emphasise that the woman's primary responsibility is the home.

Anthropologist Murdock's cross culture study (1949) emphasised the significance of motherhood and concluded that the mother's role and the family are universal, where woman's main concern should be at the home, whereas men's main work should be outside the home. Furthermore a leading functionalist Parsons (1956) emphasised the important functions of the family, mainly as regards the stabilisation and socialisation of children. The female taking on the 'expressive' role providing care and security to

children and offering them emotional support compared with the 'instrumental' male role, where man take on the role of the bread winner in the family, these roles are seen as complementary which Parson believed helped integrate society.

However the functionalist perspective neglects the inequalities in the distribution of labour and power, with the consequential exploitation of women in work and at home. Therefore theorist Oakley argued against Murdock's secondary data, by refuting his claim, that gender roles were universal, though she accepted that sexuality, reproduction and maternal care are influenced by biology. It can be heavily argued that the functionalist approach on gender neglect the negative functions of an event such as divorce. The fact that the approach justifies the status quo and complacency on the part of society's members, critics therefore have argued; even when such social change may benefit society functionalist fail to encourage people to take an active role in changing their social environment. Instead, functionalism sees active social change as a threat to society because the various parts of society will reimburse naturally for any problems that may occur.

Unlike functionalist, the Marxist feminist approach does not focus on the positive aspects of society that contribute to its stability, but takes on a conflict perspective, which is inspired by Karl Marx's writings on class struggles. There approach draws main focus on the conflicted and changing nature of society. Whereas functionalists continue to avoid social change, however Marxist theorists challenge the status quo and encourage social change even when this means social revolution. Marxist feminist strongly

believes gender inequality is down to capitalism, rich and powerful people who force social order on the poor and the weak. Engels (1902) noted that 'capitalism intensifies male domination, first capitalist create more wealth, which confers greater power on men as wage earners, expanding capitalist economy depends on defining people especially woman as customers and consumers and convincing them that personal fulfilment derives from owning and using products.' (Macionis, Plummer, 2008: 382), according to Engels this allowed men to work while society assigned woman the task of maintaining the home. 'The double exploitation of capitalism as Engels saw it paying low wages to male labour, and no wages to for female wok.' (Macionis, Plummer, 2008: 367).

Marxist further suggests companies only employ woman when they really need them, making them more disposable, therefore they argue that women are a 'reserve army of labour'. However critics see their theory as underestimating the particular shortcomings of women, and fail to explain gender inequality in socialist societies. More so, many argue that its overly negative view of society, ultimately attributes the efforts of positive aspects of society such as humanitarian, democracy, civil rights. There theory of 'reverse army of labour', critics argue it fails to explain why there are women's jobs and men's jobs. 'It is seems to overlook the fact that patriarchy can be influential by itself. The Marxist feminists seem to imply that once capitalism is abolished; gender inequality will disappear, which might not actually be the case.' (Weineck, 2007).

Many movements have been successful in their attempts of overcoming gender inequality however some have not been as victorious, yet hold strong

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arguments such as the Radical Feminist. They have sought to tackle gender inequality by extreme protesting of patriarchy, as they believe that men are responsible for the inequality of woman. Early Radical feminist Firestone (1971) argues that 'men control woman's roles in reproduction and childrearing. Because women are biologically able to give birth to children, they become depended materially on men for protection and livelihood.' (Giddens, 2009: 617). She further suggests this 'biological inequality' is socially organized in the nuclear family. Radical feminist have brought to light key arguments, such as free domestic labour, where men exploit woman by relying on the free labour woman provide in the home.

Unlike Radical feminist, liberal feminist have conquered more in overcoming gender inequality. Liberal Feminist are moderate in their methods and aims, who seek to better woman's rights through political and legal reform, they have gone on to achieve legislation such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). Though Radical feminist are seen to pursue a revolutionary agenda, however like liberal feminist, they stress practical political strategies. 'Nevertheless in contrast to liberal feminist frameworks, radical feminist is inclined to be suspicious of government intervention, perceiving the state itself as being intrinsically patriarchal, and also tends to focus on the politics of the private sphere, in particular sexuality, motherhood and bodies.' (Beasley, 1999: 55). However Radical feminist have more in common with Marxist on terms of 'acknowledging that social life is embodied but as will shortly become evident, the inclination of the latter feminist approach is frequently to limit interest in embodiment to the laboring body of the paid.' (Beasley, 1999: 55). However they have criticized

Marxist feminist on their view on capitalism, claiming that abolishing capitalism would not end patriarchy.

Despite the fact that it can be heavily argued that radical feminist efforts have been less successful than liberal feminist, it is important to acknowledge their efforts of making society aware of the severity of domestic violence. Their argument holds much relevance in today's society, as statistics show that women are having a high rate of victimization, '1 in 4 women will be a victim of domestic violence in their lifetime.' (Oxfam, 2011). The woman's aid site stated that 'Between 10 and 69 per cent of women report abuse by their intimate partner in every country where reliable data exist.' (Woman's Aid, 2011). The efforts of radical feminist in overcoming this inequality has been successful in terms of providing shelters for abused women, which did not exist in the 1970s. Furthermore there are now laws mandating the reporting of domestic violence due to the efforts made by the radical feminist.

In conclusion, all the theories I have touched upon provide a variations of explanations on gender inequality, therefore it is clear to say there approaches are not cut from the same cloth. I feel the most convincing explanations are the aspects of socialisation of learning gender roles. I think this is important, as people sometimes without even realising it socialise boys and girls differently from an early age. The functionalist view on gender, I feel is outdated to some extent as social change is constantly taking place however it is important to look at all the argument made when exploring gender inequality. Though many feminist groups share conflicting views with one another such as radical feminist, liberal feminist and Marxist

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feminist, however it is important to appreciate their central aim of striving to help woman have the same equality as men.