

## Chapter 2. Analyzing the Persistence of Gender Inequality: How to Think about the Origins

When people try to understand why women and men are unequal today, they usually find they must contend with the question of gender inequality's origins in the dim corridors of prehistory. The reason is not hard to find. Eventually every explanation offered for gender inequality prompts the rejoinder, "But hasn't it always been like this?" Like it or not, this is a serious question that we cannot avoid.

Anthropologists largely agree that women have never occupied a position of higher status or greater political power than men in any society, anywhere, anytime. Some women in some societies have had an elevated status. Women were sometimes leaders (for example, in hereditary monarchies), women sometimes controlled wealth, and they sometimes served as warriors. In most cases such women were exceptions, however. Even in the strongest interpretations of women's position in the few known societies where they seem to have fared the best, women do not appear to be privileged or dominant over men. Societies led by Amazons appear only in myths. Whatever people esteem in a society, men always seem to have at least as much as women, most of the time they have had more of it, and often they have had much more of it.

This poses an unavoidable issue. It cannot be happenstance that men have had higher status than women in most societies and dominated in *every* society with complex political and political organization for thousands of years. When we look across the complex societies that have existed, we find an endless variety of cultures, histories, ecologies, religions, economies, and ideals. One of the few constants has been women's subordinate status. For this to have occurred, some consistent causal processes must have operated everywhere.

In modern people's minds, socialization, tradition, and biology are often interwoven in a skein of logic that traces the current subordination of women to its prehistorical origins. Women and men today and yesterday think, act, and achieve differently. Why? Socialization. Always treated differently, they acquire divergent identities and expectations. But why do parents socialize their children toward such dissimilar ideals? Tradition. People honor established ideas and teach them to their children. But what is the source of the gender traditions by which women are *everywhere* made subordinate? Biology. Women and men are physically different in ways that make men dominant. These three ideas of socialization, tradition, and biology all refer to the conservation of gender inequality. As such, they all lead back to the problem of the origins of inequality.

The search for the origins of gender inequality is as old as thought. All religious and mythological systems contain fictions to explain and justify the relative positions of men and women. Grand thinkers in the history of ideas, such as Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, commonly attempted a speculative interpretation of gender differences. And nineteenth century evolutionary theorists such as Bachofen (*mother-right*) and Karl Marx considered various possible evolutionary sequences of kinship organization and gender relations. While some such early efforts aimed to justify existing institutions and others to question them, few were sound by contemporary standards.

Most of these precursors became obsolete in the flurry of theoretical speculation and research provoked by modern feminism. The origins of inequality was one of the first intellectual issues that was widely debated after the rise of modern feminism. One agenda behind feminist analyses of origins was a wish to counter the ideological implications of women's apparently universal subordination. The prevalence of superior male status across time, space, and social circumstances is beyond denial. Indeed, the pervasiveness of male dominance is often a principal claim of feminist analyses. How could this apparently universal existence of women's subordination be reconciled with the aim of equality?

Over the years, feminist scholarship has lost much of its interest in the question of inequality's origins. In the midst of professional specialization, postmodernist irritation with generalizing theories, and a political confusion over the need to give equal weight to every type of woman defined by race, class, culture, sexual orientation, and historical period, the analysis of gender inequality's origins lost its attractions.

Still, at first look, the evidence that gender inequality has characterized all complex societies raises questions for efforts to improve women's social status. Common sense suggests that *universal* social arrangements are unavoidable or *necessary*. In everyday moral discourse, people often interpret necessary as *natural* and, by association, they think natural arrangements are appropriate and desirable. This reasoning still leads some people to believe that the advocates of gender equality are either hopeless or destructive. If women's universal inferiority is necessary, feminists are chasing an impossible goal. Or, if universality means an institution must be functional and valuable, then agitators' efforts might succeed, but they would make society worse. Adding considerable confusion to such questions, significant segments of feminist thought have become committed to theories assuming fundamental differences between the sexes (such as divergent moralities).

In response to these issues, anyone advocating gender equality is implicitly making two important claims. First, gender inequality is not the product of

insurmountable processes or sex differences in modern societies. Second, the pervasiveness of gender inequality does not reflect some needs of people or social organization that will be undermined if we establish equality. Both these claims imply that we know what causes gender inequality and that we can assess the limits and the consequences of those causes. And they suggest we can provide a reasonable analysis of biology's role in the origins of gender inequality that does not play havoc with our arguments about equality.

Biological considerations are inescapable. The distinction between women and men is defined by biological conditions. True, the content and expression of masculinity and femininity are social constructs, commonly referred to as gender (in presumed distinction from the biological idea of sex). Some theorists have even questioned the validity of sex as a biological category or gender as a social one (for example, Judith Butler). Still, no amount of theoretical reasoning—however subtle and creative—can successfully challenge the simplest facts: the physiological distinction between male and female universally defines gender membership (esoteric exceptions do not negate this generalization) and reproductive differences are everywhere essential components of gender identity.

The universal dominance of men in complex societies also forces us to consider biological influences. Logic suggests that the consistency of gender inequality must have some relationship to biological differences between the sexes. Somehow, men gained control of the political process, a monopoly of militaristic activity, and control of kinship groups and their economic property everywhere that societies became divided by rank, caste, or class. Since the only constant in the differences between women and men are the biological characteristics that distinguish them, some of these must play a crucial role in the processes leading to women's subordination. This much we can infer without knowing which biological differences matter or how they interact with social processes to produce the consistently unequal outcomes.

In short, no effort to explain gender inequality over time can plausibly deny that it has a fundamental causal relationship to biology. That we must recognize a causal relationship to biological processes does *not* mean, however, that the causal links are simple, it does *not* mean that the causality occurs without mediating social causes, and it does *not* mean that the links to biological processes are equally influential under all social conditions. We must accept a role for biology, but we will find that its role is subtle.

Against the universal subordination of women in complex societies, another crucial set of observations must be considered. These are concern the modern history of gender inequality's decline. The decline of gender inequality in modern societies is every bit as widespread and unavoidable as was its persistence over past centuries. The speed and specific path of that decline has been highly

varied, just as the rise of inequality occurred under diverse circumstances and persisted in extremely uneven ways. Nonetheless, gender inequality has been declining in every modern society and this decline has dramatically altered the circumstances of both women and men in the most advanced transitions (see Jackson's *Destined for Equality*).

This pattern also tells us important things about causality and gender inequality. The transformation of work and family life accompanying women's assimilation into high-status positions shows two things critical to our discussion here. Biological differences between the sexes play no important necessary role in the capacities, aspirations, or outlooks that determine most women's and men's lives today, except that most people remain committed to heterosexual partnerships and that pregnancy is only a female experience. And, while women and men continue to receive different treatment in many contexts and we sustain distinctive conceptions of femininity and masculinity, these conditions have no necessary relationship to biological differences.

How can we reconcile these seemingly inconsistent observations? Our efforts must accept some limits because we can only theoretically predict the future and we can only crudely, and largely theoretically, reconstruct the origins of gender inequality. Still, we now know enough to get a reasonable grasp of the parameters. To begin, we need to have a clear understanding of the ways that status inequality can persist even as its original causes disappear. A system of inequality, like other significant forms of social organization, can become a self-sustaining entity.

### **Confusing the Origins and the Maintenance of Inequality**

Efforts to explain gender inequality sometimes ignore a crucial distinction between explaining the origins of gender inequality and explaining its perpetuation. It is always a grave error to confuse the genesis of an institutional arrangement with its maintenance. For example, to explain why a country originally adopted a communist system of government (generally the circumstances provoking revolution or conquest) requires an analysis based on almost completely different causes from those that would be used to explain why such a country currently maintains a communist system. Institutions create interests, resources, norms, and self-perpetuating structures that become autonomous causes in history. When a theorist mistakenly assumes that explaining the origins of an institution will identify the reasons for its continuance, she or he has fallen prey to the *genetic fallacy*.

Similarly, we cannot assume that historical continuity of institutions implies a constant identity. That the descendant of an institution, like the family or a business firm, continues to bear the name and appearance of its ancestor does not

mean that it is the same institution from an analytical perspective. British capitalism today is not the system that Smith, Ricardo, and Marx sought to understand; the political system of the United States is far removed from that described by de Tocqueville. Social institutions become transformed through time, new causes displace old ones, new patterns of relationships and behavior become dominant, until the accumulation of changes forces us to consider the institution as having a different identity from its ancestor. Similarly, systems of sex and gender linked through time and space by a chain of causes and participants can acquire distinctive identities and require distinctive explanations.

Two historical examples of different kinds of inequality illustrate these points: the history of the European nobility and the history of blacks in the United States. The first concerns a dominant group, the second focuses on the subordinate class. The history of European feudal inequality and American racial inequality show a more obvious disjunction between origins and persistence than does the history of gender.

At the onset of the middle ages, the European nobility arose in the absence of centralized political forces or commerce. The nobility were a warrior class who won control over commoners by promising protection and threatening violence. As a class, they had power because they were armed, organized, and prepared to do battle. They ruled the manors in their possession and through that rule they took control over both the economic and legal systems. Eventually, unanticipated changes in society eroded the conditions that originally allowed the nobility to come into existence. With the rise of centralized nation states, the nobility lost their primary military function. With the rise of capitalist trade, they lost their primary economic function. Thus the original basis of the noble class--its militarism in societies lacking political order--disappeared.

Yet, the nobility remained a privileged and powerful class in most European nations. They became commercial landowners and government officials. These were new positions and activities created by the institutions that were displacing feudalism. As these positions became viable, members of the nobility were able to occupy them, because the nobility's existing power gave them access and flexibility. They used the power and resources derived from their position as a dominant class to adapt to uncontrollable changes in their social environment. Thus, in nineteenth-century European nations, the reasons these noble classes remained ascendant were not the conditions and processes that gave birth to these classes and propelled them to historical dominance. Aristocrats were not powerful because of the role of militarism in disorganized societies, but because

they had accumulated the resources and positions that gave power in modern societies.<sup>3</sup>

While the history of the European nobility shows how the high status of a group can become self-sustaining and independent of its origin, the history of American blacks shows the same process from the perspective of a subordinate group. In the United States, the black population largely began as slaves. Their slave status was due to the military weakness of black African nations compared with European societies (and the political weakness of some Africans compared with others) and the use of politically organized force by the slave holding class. From the first half of the nineteenth century through the present, the relationship of blacks to whites has gone through several stages of development.<sup>4</sup> After the Civil War blacks lost their slave status and became a disenfranchised, degraded caste. In the decades surrounding World War I, industrialism's demand for labor brought blacks into the economy, but only under the conditions of economic discrimination and social segregation. In the context of economic and political change in the mid-twentieth century, blacks gained enfranchisement and legal protection from discrimination. Nonetheless, the accumulated historical disadvantages have left most blacks economically disadvantaged and burdened the black population with low social status and limited political power.

Thus, while the original source of the black population's subordination to whites--direct political and military oppression as a slave race--disappeared, blacks remained in an inferior social position. Through each stage of economic and political development in the United States, the white population used the resources acquired during the previous stage to adapt to the new conditions more successfully than could blacks.

The examples of the European nobility and American blacks illustrate how both collective and individual actions maintain group advantages. Collectively, both the aristocracy and whites used their political power to place legal barriers against challenging groups and, particularly with racial inequality, attempted to use their economic power as well. Individually, members of the dominant group were simply better placed to take advantage of the opportunities offered by social transformations. The collective actions represent the efforts of a class conscious dominant group to preserve its position. The individual actions presume no

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<sup>3</sup>Joseph Schumpeter *Imperialism and Social Classes*, Marc Bloch, *Feudalism*.

<sup>4</sup>William Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race*.

necessary recognition of collective interests or group conflict, rather they require only the pursuit of individual self-interest.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these examples shows how a dominant group can retain its advantaged position, albeit in a new form, even as it survives a series of social transformations that eliminate the previous foundations of the group's dominance. People who discover their group identity gives them social advantages commonly attempt to conserve those advantages. In particular, they try to adapt profitably to threatening (or promising) social changes, both individually and collectively. Neither the resources nor the goals of the nobility had any direct relationship to their original warrior identity when they responded to the rise of industrial capitalism. The same holds for the races in the United States. Of course, it is always possible to trace back through the transformations of a group and its environment to understand the links between origins and later manifestations. This is necessary, for example, to understand why the nobility should even exist as a social group in modern societies. However, to explain the maintenance of a group's status through social transformations, the causal processes must be sought in the current conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Nothing does more to preserve a group's dominance in one period than it amassing advantages by being dominant in the preceding period. This does not mean that dominant groups are eternally irremovable. Still, dominance has a powerful social momentum that does not dissipate unless opposed by equally powerful structural changes.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>It is noteworthy that ultimately the position of the European nobility declined greatly and the position of American blacks has risen significantly. This suggests that the capacity of groups to maintain inequality that is substantially inconsistent with the direction of structural development in society is historically limited. This has applicability to the position of women.

<sup>6</sup>These two examples are also of some interest, because each involved attempts by dominant groups to use biological metaphors to justify and explain their position. Noble classes everywhere claim to be biologically superior to commoners. Blacks in the United States (and slave castes generally) have been considered biologically inferior by the dominant whites. Only the eclipse of the dominant group's power has proven effective in eliminating such myths. It is reasonable to infer that a decline in the use of biological myths purporting inescapable bases to female subordination also depends on the elimination of that subordination.)

<sup>7</sup>Strictly speaking, it is important here to be careful about specifying what is meant by the continuous historical identity of a group. It differs in each case discussed above. Blacks' identity derives from being born into a common race. The nobilities identity appears also to be a fact of birth into a well defined caste, but in the long run the nobility is defined by control of estates and political rights that sometimes pass between families through means

**GENDER INEQUALITY'S PERSISTENCE**

When applied to the explanation of gender, this argument implies that women and men have repeatedly contested and recreated gender inequality in changing societies. These struggles occurred without regard to inequality's original causes or functions. Men's capture of an advantaged position in industrial societies does not result from the continued significance of the conditions that initially caused male dominance in primitive societies. Instead, it is a product of men possessing political and economic dominance in the preindustrial societies immediately preceding industrialization. Because of their power, men could seize opportunities that opened in the new social order and maintain their advantaged position over women.

While the transition to an industrialized capitalist economy and a liberal democratic state was a centuries long, extremely complex process, the means by which male dominance was maintained through this transition can be reasonably represented by a greatly simplified description. In pre-capitalist Europe men possessed great advantages over women. Men had nearly exclusive rights to inheritance, they had almost complete control of any property or income brought into marriage by their wives, men had a near monopoly of legal rights, they had an absolute monopoly of military positions, and they had a complete monopoly of political power. How this gender inequality came to be is irrelevant here. In practice, men's emotional bonds to women and their dependence on women's productive labor may have limited the use of these advantages, but patriarchal authority was deeply embedded, thoroughly protected, and almost unquestioned. The transition to modern economies and states created new resources, new avenues to power. Status became attached to commercial success and the amassing of wealth, political positions achieved by election or appointment, and professional positions requiring expertise and certification. Lacking property, political rights, legal independence, and educational opportunity as a result of their subordination within the old order, women were unable to compete for these opportunities in the new. Therefore, the unequal advantages inherent in the structure of the new society became a relative monopoly of men, thereby maintaining the subordination of women. This disadvantage of women as individuals was compounded by the collective actions of men meant to fortify their advantages: refusal of female suffrage, continued denial of equal legal rights

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other than inheritance. A gender group is defined by the biology of individuals and their incorporation into the social identity of the appropriate gender. The criteria of historically continuous group identity therefore hinge on the mechanisms by which status differentials are reproduced among successive generations.

to wives, denial of female access to most high status occupations, and denial of higher education to women. In summary, the individual and collective resources available to men within precapitalist society caused their attainment of dominance within capitalist society.<sup>8</sup>

Although I have used the persistence of gender inequality through periods of social change to clarify the analysis, the same logic applies to its maintenance during stable periods. The value of examining periods of transition is that they show so sharply how the advantages of a group under one set of conditions leads to new advantages under new conditions. Under stable conditions the advantages of men are embedded in institutions in ways that are quietly and undramatically self-reproducing.

In summary, while gender inequality has been maintained even as the structure of societies changed dramatically, it has long lost any relationship to the causes of its origins. As with other types of inequality, the explanation of the persistence of women's inferior social position in modern societies must be sought not in the continued operation of its original causes, but in the efforts of men to preserve their advantages, as individuals and as a group, and in the ongoing institutionalized supports for these efforts.

Thus the answer to the second problem raised by the universalism of female subordination--its historical persistence through social transformation--is independent of the answer to the first question--the origins of gender inequality. Once gender inequality becomes established, permeating society's institutions, it develops its own momentum. It causes the maintenance and expansion of female subordination under many social conditions, even as the biological differences between the sexes lose all significance for social organization. And this allows the degree of inequality to grow well beyond that evoked as a complex result of biological differences in rudimentary societies.

### **The Origins of Male Ascendancy**

Sometime in the distant future, scientists may find new methods by which to unearth archeological secrets or new means to discover how prehistorical societies evolved and functioned through simulations and extrapolations from experiments with groups. Until such time, however, our knowledge of the prehistorical origins of gender inequality seems inalterably truncated and dependent on informed speculation.

Our knowledge about the distribution of inequality and about variations across know societies allows us to make some inferences that frame an analysis of gender inequality's origins although we cannot get precise about much. We

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<sup>8</sup>Just how this happened requires a long explanation that must await discussion.

can be fairly certain that biological differences between the sexes played a crucial role because we cannot conceive any other way that inequality would have independently arisen so consistently across time, place, and distinctive social circumstances. Reproduction is most likely the critical concern, because it is the only absolute and universal biological distinction between the sexes, it is the only biological differential that is always of fundamental importance to social structure and functioning, and it is one of the few biological differentials which we can clearly link to social organization. Still, we cannot decisively rule out some other possible biological differences such as a possible greater tendency toward overt violence by men. We can largely conclude that whatever biological differences did matter, they exerted their influence indirectly and through complex social processes, not in some simple way that expressed itself directly through all interactions amongst women and men. Theoretical extrapolation from our knowledge of variations in gender inequality suggests it most likely that the reproductive differences lead to inequality through pressures they induce toward a sex division of labor and through their interaction with societal resolutions of problems attending the intergenerational maintenance of organizational integrity and structural continuity (as in inheritance and kinship issues). Yet, we can conceive complex ways that a biological difference such as aggression tendencies could produce distributional behavior differences that result in social formations which in turn reify, exaggerate, and stabilize the behavioral differences. Such dynamics seem less likely as a general cause of gender inequality's origin than reproductive differences, if only because the causal mechanisms appear less dependable, but, on the other hand, such dynamics seem more likely to occur given that some gender inequality and division already exists as a result of other process such as the indirect generalization of reproductive differences.

### **BIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPERATIVES**

Because biology has determined gender placement in all societies, all explanations of the origins of male dominance must begin with biology. This does not mean that biological sex differences explain gender inequality. While this idea remains popular, it reflects crude and erroneous reasoning. It resembles the false inference that racial domination must be caused by biological differences because biological differences define race.

A more compelling reasoning of the issue looks like this. As biology has distinguished the sexes everywhere, and as gender inequality arose in numerous, historically independent societies, *some consistent causal relation must have linked* the biological differences and the origins of inequality. Biological differences need not have directly produced social inequality, but biological

differences must have set up recurring chains of events that would everywhere ultimately lead to inequality.

Thus, we must accept the inescapable inference that biological differences between the sexes, in association with other pervasive characteristics of *primitive* societies, invariably determined conditions that eventually *ensured* the rise of male dominance. All across the world, throughout the species history of humans, rudimentary societies have selectively adopted male dominance. Only universal requirements, capacities, and predicaments of social systems can explain this consistent pattern. And only some biological difference between the sexes can explain how women always came up short in the process.

This abstract reasoning leaves us with the great problem of identifying which biological differences mattered, and ascertaining why and how they had their effects on gender status. Theorists have suggested many possible answers to these questions. Fortunately, these efforts all represent varied combinations of a small number of ideas. Only a few biological differences had potential significance and there are just a few ways that they are likely to become socially relevant. Therefore, rather than reviewing each of the many existing theories of the origins of gender inequality, I will briefly consider the basic ideas that are the building blocks of them all.

#### **PRIMARY THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

A variety of theories attribute the origins of male domination to biological differences between the sexes which are believed to combine with the necessary requirements for collective life in rudimentary societies in ways that give men an advantage or force leadership on them. The differences among theories of the origins of female subordination largely depend on the answers they assume to three questions.

First, these theories make different choices about which biological differences are sufficient and necessary to cause universal inequality. Three imputed biological differences have received the most attention: (1) reproduction, (2) physical capacity (strength, stamina), or (3) a genetic or hormonal predisposition toward violence or domination. Some theorists argue that men gain dominance either because everywhere only women bear children. Others claim it is because men are everywhere stronger than women. And some suggest the key is that men everywhere are more aggressive than women. Often theorists combine these assumptions. Theorists have occasionally proposed that other biological differences have mattered, such as intellectual capacity, leadership ability, or sexual drive. These proposals have not gained lasting support because research did not support the biological assumptions or the causal processes were too far-fetched.

Second, each theory must choose to argue either that biological differences lead directly to inequality or that biological differences only indirectly affect gender status by partially determining a sexual division of labor which lead to status differences.

And, third, each theory must make assumptions about the distribution of motives to dominate and the means by which unequal conditions transform into unequal power. In particular, do the effective biological differences produce dominance aspirations or award effectiveness to existing dominance aspirations or have their effect independently of any aspirations for gender dominance?

The existing theories of the origins of gender inequality are built by combining these ideas in a variety of ways.

### **EVALUATIVE CRITERIA**

While theorists have offered numerous specific accounts whereby one of the three classes of biological differences induce gender inequality, there has been little progress in proving the superiority of one theory over another. To a large degree, this failure is unavoidable. These are largely speculative theories regarding events--the formation of societies--that we cannot witness. We must depend on reconstructions and inferences based on the indirect evidence of biology and the organization of known societies. As a result, theories largely compete for acceptance by formulating persuasive, speculative accounts that could fit the facts we know.

Because any account of the origins of gender inequality is a speculative reconstruction, no certain means exist to discover the truth through research. Still, several criteria allow theorists to provisionally judge the likely validity or relative importance of competing explanations. These criteria include both empirical evidence and theoretical considerations. Some criteria let us dispatch with theories that have no value while others let us rank the merits of possible explanations. We can reject outright some theories because they fail to fit the facts we know or they are too illogical to merit attention. These criteria allow us to ignore theories that depend on causal conditions that we know were absent in some societies (e.g., higher intelligence in men or the universal association of men with highly valued culture and women to lowly valued nature) and theories that they imply causal processes that are theoretically implausible (e.g., the idea that men would achieve greater prestige and power solely because both women and men believe that men's roles are more important). Weeding based on these criteria still leaves a lot of possibilities. Other criteria help rank the importance of the remaining, plausible theories. As male dominance seemingly arose independently in many societies, the differences between the sexes that show greater consistency across societies and individuals are better candidates as

significant causes. Similarly, proposed causal processes that can be shown more likely to be effective given what we know about societies also deserve greater attention.

The universalism of female subordination suggests that extremely dependable and effective causal processes must have existed. We need only to combine a reasonable assessment of the consistency and severity of biological differences between the sexes with a knowledge of the functioning of societies and the bases of power to recognize what these processes probably were. The universalism of female subordination suggests that it was not the peculiar characteristics of unusual societies (sometimes emphasized in anthropologists' accounts) that mattered, but the commonplace circumstances that appeared in all rudimentary societies.

### **WHICH DIFFERENCES MATTERED?**

Among the biological differences commonly used to explain the origins of male domination, reproductive differences seem most significant. They were absolute, consistent, and dramatic. Differences in strength were common enough to matter but less important. Differences in aggressiveness were too small and variable to accept as an important cause. Reproductive differences were absolute and universal. Women everywhere bore children. Therefore, the invariability and the extent of the differences in reproduction between men and women make it the most plausible candidate to explain the universal rise of women's subordination in rudimentary societies.

In comparison to reproduction, differences in the strength of men and women seem less significant because differences in strength varied, differences in strength and stamina were partially social creations rather than biological facts, and differences in strength could give individual men power over women only if subordination made women unable to act in concert. Otherwise, men would always face the threat of collective retribution from women.

The third possible biological difference, a greater predisposition toward violence by men, has even less empirical support or theoretical justification as a cause of inequality. Biological research has shown little inherent difference between the sexes' aggressiveness. True, in many (perhaps most) societies, men have displayed more violent behavior than have women. Yet, in all systems of inequality members of dominant groups have used violence against members of subordinate groups much more freely than happened in the reverse. For example, slave holders used violence against slaves, slaves did not raise their hands against the owners. Differential rates of violent behavior probably reflected socially constructed expectations and opportunities much more than biology.

Thus men's greater aggressiveness is more likely a result than a cause of the rise of gender inequality. Greater strength and preparedness for violence probably reinforce men's dominance. Still, of the three major biological differences used to explain the origins of gender inequality, reproductive differences seem most important and differences in aggression least.

### **SEEKING POWER**

The motive to dominate forms the second major axis of theory building about the origins of sex inequality. The issue is rarely addressed directly, but assumptions about the motives to dominate have considerable influence over the shape of a theory about inequality. Theories about gender inequality that implicitly assume sex differences are crucial but also avoid a direct assessment of the differences that matter tend to seem more likely to imply that a difference in motives--a male predisposition toward control that seems almost a moral difference--had a critical causal impact.

This concern is somewhat of a theoretical peculiarity. Research offers little direct support for assumption that men have possessed a greater inherent drive toward power than did women. Probably every system of social inequality has an inherent tendency to create the impression that members of the dominant strata have a stronger orientation toward domination because only they get to dominate. Yet, if we consider some of these patterns, they rarely lead to the inference of an integral difference in motivation as occurs in the writings on gender. Few would argue that people in slave owning classes have a greater inherent motive to dominate than do people in slave classes or that capitalists enjoy power more than workers could.

Rosabeth Kantor has effectively assessed this misperception in her work *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Many authors have suggested that *feminine* personality characteristics (including a lack of drive) explain women's lack of success in climbing corporate ladders. Kantor has persuasively argued that these characteristics are really a direct result of structural conditions. Men placed in positions with no opportunities for advancement and with no effective power show the same personality and behavior characteristics as women in such positions. In the past, however, all women were condemned to occupy the positions without futures. Only men could realistically aspire to rise. Therefore we have good evidence that inequality produces differential motives to dominate weighed against no evidence of any inherent sexual difference in such motives.

Thus, while dominance may frequently give people skills and expectations that help to preserve and ease their dominance, it appears unlikely that biology or any condition other than inequality itself produces differences between groups in the desire to dominate. If men appear more oriented toward domination than

women as a result of social conditions in some societies, it remains more likely that the motives reflect rather than cause gender inequality.<sup>9</sup>

### **DIRECT OR MEDIATED CAUSES**

Male domination has always been inherently social: it has not depended on individual characteristics. All men have had status, rights, and opportunities unavailable to all women. Gender status has been ascribed. People acquired the advantages or disadvantages of their gender regardless of physical capacity, reproductive functioning, or aggressiveness. Gender status could not be earned or lost. Invariably, gender inequality, like all systematic inequality, has been socially organized.

Thus, biological differences could not readily cause patterns of inequality through their effects on the direct individual relations between women and men. On the face of it, this is hardly surprising. Consider strength. If their strength had empowered men, because they could individually intimidate and punish women, then why wouldn't the same principle have held more generally? Why didn't the physically strong men in society rise regularly to positions of power over the weak? Because we do have not lived in Hobbesian societies where each man fended solely for himself. Everywhere, organized violence has overwhelmed individual violence.<sup>10</sup>

Physical strength, or any other biological quality, could usually win only a little power for an individual. For example, in special conditions a capacity for violence might have brought a person followers. This could happen in urban street gangs and primitive, or warring tribes. But even in such elemental, near-Hobbesian conditions, the physically strong often had to grant sway to others who possessed a greater capacity to lead and attract followers.

Therefore, explanations suggesting that biological differences influenced gender inequality through complex, mediated social processes seem more

<sup>9</sup>While the drive and skill to dominate are thus not a determinant of the origins of gender inequality, their unequal distribution might help maintain male dominance in an already unequal society. This would resemble the effects of other unequal experiences, like education.

<sup>10</sup> As a result of these provisional judgments about the relative importance or likely validity of the essential components to theories of the origins of male dominance, we can assemble an integrated theory based on the most plausible hierarchy of causes. This takes the form of a speculative account of the causal process by which men universally gained. This is a crucial reason analogies with male dominated animal species have no merit. Among animals living in groups, such as gorillas, where male dominance exists, dominance among males is also ordered by relative fighting capacity.

compelling than those that emphasize the direct effects of biological differences. Regardless of the biological difference, its effect on gender inequality was more significant when embedded in social institutions than when it depended on the independent actions of individuals. While biological differences between women and men established the preconditions for gender inequality, those biological differences had to become socially significant for inequality to become an imperative institution.

It seems inescapable to conclude that biological differences wielded their most critical affect on gender by promoting a division of labor. In primitive societies these differences commonly give men a relative monopoly over weapons and political organization while simultaneously establishing distinctive *cultures* for women and men. These cultures nurtured divergent orientations toward organization, aggressiveness, and child rearing that reinforced gender inequality. When private productive property appeared, it commonly came under men's control as a result of their existing power, but then became a major foundation of enhanced male dominance.

#### **THE PROBABLE CAUSES OF THE ORIGINS OF GENDER INEQUALITY**

Women's universal responsibility for childbearing appears to have created such a differentiation between the sexes that it invariably resulted in a gender division of labor in all rudimentary societies. For the simple good of all concerned, this consistently produced a pattern where women received greater responsibility for child rearing and men greater responsibility for hunting, fishing, and war, tasks that required readiness for more distant travel and danger. Nothing about this was universal or necessary in some immediate sense. But, over time and space, in the great variety of people's circumstances and their practical efforts to adapt to needs and opportunities, these were arrangements that most sustained groups were likely to try at some point and to preserve because of they were more generally effective than alternatives.

Because women and men received distinctive responsibilities and because those responsibilities placed them more often in the company of their own gender, gender became a primary division in culture and women and men developed opposing gender identities. This caused women and men to identify themselves as interest groups, not necessarily in a self-conscious or abstract way (although this seems to have happened relatively often), but in the implicit practice of gender identities.

Men's activities in this division of labor were more likely to award them superior political organization and a relative monopoly over weapons. When they were responsible for warfare and their tasks commonly demanded coordination and organization, the division of labor, derived particularly in response to

reproductive differences, pushed men into positions of leadership, albeit with a limited amount of power, while simultaneously giving them superior resources. Because men's lot in this division commonly depended on the development of athletic skills, whatever inherent physical advantages of strength over women could be exaggerated by experience. Wherever men were responsible for war and safety, their aggressiveness was reinforced and developed.

All this really became important and effective when societies started to become stratified by castes or classes, organized around unequal control over finite, contested productive resources (particularly land). How often societies developed significant status distinctions between the sexes in the absence of economic and political stratification is difficult to say. We don't know enough about such societies and very likely never will.

Subsequently, the universal tendency of people to protect and extend advantages made the allocation of responsibilities and rights between the sexes a matter of conflict. This produced, in part, an organized defense of individual men's capacity to exercise advantages over women, thus allowing both biological and social individual differences between the sexes to become reinforcing to group differences in status.

### **The False Dilemma Posed by the Origins of Inequality**

It is not now, and probably never will be, possible to give a definitive explanation of the origins of gender inequality. The data are too sparse to distinguish decisively among the proposed explanations. It is possible, however, to assess the likely relative importance of the processes that the various theories suggest as the source of inequality.

I have used an unusual approach to arbitrate among the theories of the origins of female subordination because it is much more efficient and sensible. Normally, when we wish to weigh competing theories against each other, we summarize the assumptions and arguments of each. Then we compare them to each other and the evidence on a one to one basis. The theories of origins are too numerous and fragmentary for this to be a practical approach. Therefore I have isolated the essential ideas that, taken in different combinations, have produced all these theories (and suggest other possibilities). By evaluating this set of ideas and the appropriate means of combining them, we are implicitly evaluating all the specific theories at once.

It appears that some gender inequality arose in all human societies as a result of the division of labor evoked by women's childbearing responsibilities, possibly reinforced by the less significant effects of men's greater average strength. In most societies, men acquired the responsibility for defense and hunting or fishing.

As a result men gained a relative monopoly over weapons and commonly achieved a much higher degree of political organization. In turn this frequently produced a male *culture* more conducive to violence and it provided an organized defense of individual men's capacity to exercise advantages of strength over individual women. While the *initial* allocation of the division of labor was possibly based on societal needs independent of gender inequality, once inequality existed men became protective of their advantages and maintained them using resources obtained through their ascendancy.

Thus inequality appeared in all societies because it was multi-determined. Biological differences in reproduction and strength gave men an edge in individual relationships; a biologically induced division of labor gave men superior resources as a group; the social ascendance of men as a group gave individual men greater motivation and capacity to display dominance over women. It is the mutually reinforcing quality of these causal processes, rather than the overwhelming force of any one that explains the universal origins of male dominance.

Even given these parallel causes, the degree of gender inequality varies considerably across societies. In particular, gender inequality appears to be least pronounced in the *simplest* societies. This suggests that the original causes of gender inequality do not, by themselves, produce much inequality. Rather, the inequality traceable to the effects of biological differences in simple societies becomes exacerbated through the attempts of men to maintain and extend their initial advantages when societies become more complex.

The dilemma apparently posed to feminist politics by the universality of gender inequality is therefore a false dilemma. There is no need to deny the biological origins of gender inequality nor to worry about the implications of biology for modern gender inequality. The necessity of the rise of female subordination in rudimentary societies has nothing do with its elimination in modern societies. These concerns are based on the genetic fallacy of confusing the origins of a phenomenon with the causes of its continued existence. Gender inequality arose in the *primitive* societies that are the ancestors of all modern societies as a result of social processes dependent on biological differences. The recreation of gender inequality in new, and often more severe, forms as societies transformed and became more complex, however, must be explained through analysis of the opportunities available for men to acquire an advantaged position in the new order based on their ascendancy in the old.

To understand why gender inequality has persisted and why it has changed we must analyze in detail the modern functioning of each of the conditions invoked to explain the origins of women's subordination. So far I have suggested how we can understand the origins of inequality developing out of the biological

differences between the sexes in primitive societies, and I have shown how the persistence of most kinds of inequality is commonly owing to different causes than its origins. I have claimed that this applies to gender inequality. To fully substantiate this claim, it is necessary to analyze each major social condition or process that has maintained women's subordination, showing how it functions independently of biological differences: child rearing, sexuality, violence, societal values, and the division of labor.

### **Appendix: The Influence of Differences between Groups**

Theories about gender inequality commonly argue that one difference between men and women causes some other differences between the sexes or otherwise affects gender relations. All theories refer to the differences between women and men, but they disagree whether the differences apply to all women and men as individuals, or they refer to unequal probabilities of possessing characteristics, or they refer to women and men as groups. For example, the statement that "men are stronger than women" could have several distinct meanings: (1) the average strength of men is greater than the average strength of women, (2) men as a group possess a greater capacity for violence than women, or (3) the strongest people in society will be predominantly male. Without clarity about these distinctions, a clear, rational discourse on the origins of gender inequality is impossible. They imply divergent ideas about how inequality comes into being.

These distinctions will become evident and we can illustrate how theories take different forms depending on this choice if we develop the example further. Consider the assertion that "men can achieve dominance because they possess greater physical strength." For the moment let us suspend any doubt about the validity of this hypothesis and ask where it leads. This assertion allows (at least) three theoretically distinct interpretations dependent on which meaning is given to the assumption of a difference in strength.

First, one could argue that men gain dominance over women through physical strength on a one to one basis. Such an argument would suggest that in most interactions between individual men and women the man would, by chance, be stronger than the woman, and through the threat or use of force could hold sway. This could be reinforced by two straightforward social processes. Through a selection process men and women pair off by relative sizes--so that, for example, small men rarely pair with large women--and therefore ensure that men's relative physical advantage is more consistent than would occur by chance. Simultaneously, the prevalence of male physical superiority and the deference it exacts will be transformed through culture into a normative expectation. As a result men and women will conform to such a pattern in social interactions, that is women will defer to men, without proof of the differences in strength in the specific couple.

Second, one could suggest men can achieve dominance as a group by asserting a threat to women through superior collective physical strength. Group strength, rather than individual strength, is the concern. This would assume that men and women identify their interests by gender sufficiently strongly that men would be willing to band together to keep women in their place. Primarily, this

implies that, as a group, men would collectively help any man who had trouble keeping *his* women in a subordinate position, that men would collectively punish any individual woman who violated rules meant to maintain the privileges and rituals of male dominance, and that the threat of collective male violence would be used to prevent the formation of collective female action in support of individual women.

Third, it could be argued that the relative superior physical strength of men gains dominance for men because in any society where strength contributes to access to power, the positions of influence will be largely monopolized by men. Regardless of whether men possess individual physical advantages over women or whether men collectively possess and use physical advantages, the special advantages of a minority of men will aid all men against women. For this to result in a general superiority of men in the society either (1) men must achieve a gender identity such that the powerful men act to advance the interests of all men, (2) the actions of powerful men to advance their individual interests contribute in an unplanned and unattempted fashion to the collective interests of men against women, or (3) the combination of marriage patterns and political offices result in a hierarchy of political and economic statuses where men at each level can win dominance in the contest among all men and women at that level.

These three interpretations of the hypothesis about the effects of a difference in strength imply different theories. The point here is not that any one interpretation of the effects of differences is consistently preferable, but that they should not be confused. Ambiguity at this level reflects muddled thinking and produces muddled theories.

While this discussion has been phrased using hypothetical arguments about the influence of differences in physical strength, it applies to all differences between men and women used to explain gender inequality. Whenever a theorist argues that some gender difference has causal effects, it is necessary to identify whether they refer to average differences, collective group differences, or distributional differences. In any theory, vagueness about these distinctions is suspect.