

## Gender Inequality

In exploring the essay title, it would seem wise to explain the terms "Gender" and "Inequality". Within this essay, "gender" refers to the socially defined differences between men and women. As the word suggests, "inequality" means unequal rewards/opportunities for different individuals within a group or groups within a society.

Primarily, during this essay, I intend to exam the causes of gender inequality through biological and socially constructed gender theorists, such as Tiger and Fox and Ann Oakley. Secondly, Young and Wilmott and again Ann Oakley's definitions of the family today, will outline the consequences (Effects) that these causes have had upon the family today.

There are numerous Sociological debates about the relationship between the biological and socially constructed views on the causes of gender inequality. To explain gender inequality in Britain today, one might be encouraged to briefly look upon the historical explanations of gender inequality, in order to understand its origin. Engels, the nineteenth-century philosopher, socialist and co-founder of Marxism, attempted to explain the basis of gender inequality in his works "The origin of the Family, Private property and the State" (1884). In his work he attempted to explain the history of women's subordination, "materialistically" in terms of the spheres of private property and monogamy. He linked the emergence of the modern nuclear family and the exploited housewife role to the development of capitalism.

Anthropologist's Tiger and Fox (in 1970's) have taken the theory of genetics and evolution, in an effort to explain the differences between men and women. They go on to explain that human's are 'programmed' by their genetics and their behaviour is an extension of this. They labelled this genetic programming the "Human Biogrammer". Although there are similarities in the biogrammers between the sexes, there are some important differences, said Tiger and Fox. They argue that men are more aggressive than females; characteristics that they maintain are genetically based. These specific characteristics are largely influenced by the different male and female hormones and relate back to a time when man's primate ancestors had to adjust to a hunting way of life. Therefore the male hormone creates aggressive behaviour which suited hunting and the protection of his family. In contrast, Tiger and Fox

maintain that women are programmed by their biogrammers to reproduce and care for children. In Tiger and Fox's words "Nature intended mother and child to be together, the mother is essential to the well being of the child". According to Tiger and Fox, unless this emotional bond is continuous, the child will experience difficulties creating successful relationships in adult life.

Functionalists, Murdock and Parsons, explanations of gender inequality took into consideration cultural flexibility, alongside the biological principals. Anthropologist George Murdock, examined the biological differences between men and women in the sexual division of labour. He proposed that biological differences, such as the greater physical strength of men and the obvious fact that women bear children, commanded gender roles out of pure practicality and convenience. Each sex is biologically best suited to their particular role. To reinforce his claims Murdock, conducted a cross cultural survey of 224 diverse societies. From his findings Murdock concluded that the sexual division of labour is apparent, universally.

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), a Functionalist Sociologist, was more culturally biased in his analysis to the sexual division of labour. He considers that it is functional, in reference to modern industrial society, that women should satisfy the expressive role by providing warmth, security and emotional support for the children and husband. In accordance to Parsons, the woman's expressive role is essential for the effective socialisation of the children. Further more, the expressive role is also easily extended so that the woman may offer psychological support for her husband, after a hard day's work! The man in comparison performs an instrumental role, one that is competitive and acquisitive. From Parsons assumption, a married couple will hold complimentary roles which are not biologically based, but originate in biological differences, promoting family solidarity and efficient functioning and therefore essential for efficient functioning of society.

In contrast feminists would be more critical of the causes of gender inequality. Although acknowledging certain biological differences between men and women, feminists would argue that most differences are socially constructed, by reinforcement through the process of socialisation within the family. Ann Oakley, feminist sociologist, criticises functional theorists Murdock and Parsons. Oakley examined numerous societies whereby biology had little or no effect upon women's roles. For example

the Mbuti Pygmies, a hunting and gathering society whom live in the Congo rain forests, have no clear divisions of labour by sex. As well as examining Murdock's claims of the 'human biogrammer', Oakley attacked the theories of Parsons. She focused on the Kibbutz, to demonstrate that systems other than the family and mother role can effectively socialise the young. The expressive role, in Oakley's eyes, exists solely for the convenience of men. She concludes that gender roles are culturally rather than biologically determined; apart from the obvious role of childbearing there are no exclusive roles performed by females, which is evident in numerous societies.

All strands of Feminism (Marxist, Radical and Liberal) believe women are discriminated against because of their sex. However differ slightly in their beliefs to the causes of gender inequality. Marxist Feminist blame capitalism, which needs to exploit women as low-paid workers and create a 'reserve army of labour', also exploiting the unpaid labour of housewives. Furthermore they see male domination (patriarchy) as a cause/product of capitalism. Radical Feminists see gender as the most important form of social inequality for women. They particularly focus on male domination or 'patriarchy' as a being universal within the structures of social, economic and cultural systems, which enable men to dominate and exploit women and give themselves material rewards and social privileges. The controversial view of Radical Feminist, Shulamith Firestone, in *The Dialect of Sex*, insists that "women must be freed from the tyranny of their biology by any means available"; women need to hold the complete technological control of reproduction. Lastly, Liberal Feminists campaign for the equal rights and opportunities for women by removing economic, political and legal obstacles and replacing them with the freedom of choice.

At first glance, women's position to men has changed for the better in the year 2001. Legal reforms have been set in place and it would appear that a certain level of equality is practised in Britain.

Whilst aware of the gender inequality within the structures of Education, Work and Class, my intention is to focus upon the Family, in an attempt to explain the consequences of gender inequality in Britain today.

In Britain today, the consequences of the biological differences between men and women, are visible within the type of roles men and women play in the family. In regards to Parson's theory of women's 'expressive' role -

one which is caring and nurturing, Marsden and Duncombes (1993) analysis of the roles within the family, clearly shows that the 'biggest part of the emotional work in families is done, unpaid by women'. As well as women's emotional participation to the family, Marsden and Duncombe describe women as performing a 'triple shift', having completed their paid employment, they return home to do most of the housework as well as most of the emotional work as well. They go on state that as women have increasingly gained paid employment, this inequality within the home has further continued. Similarly, Young and Wilmott (1975) analysed women's and men's involvement and contribution to domestic tasks and family life. They suggested that an evolutionary change has occurred in the shape of the 'Symmetrical Family'. In Britain today, men and women have joint conjugal roles. Although the female still has the primary responsibility for housework and childrearing, husbands are becoming more increasingly involved with the domestic chores of the household as well as sharing the responsibility for decisions which affect the family and discussing matters such as the household finances and their children's education. In contrast Ann Oakley, criticises Young and Wilmott's views of the Symmetrical Family. Their data, according to Oakley, lacked validity and in her own research into housework and childcare she reveals a rather different picture. Because Oakley believes that gender inequalities are socially constructed, today the consequences within the family can be explained through the analysis of her study of *The Sociology of Housework*. In only 15% of marriages did men have a high level of participation in housework and in child care 25%, suggesting that socially constructed masculine and feminine roles are still evident in Britain today. To reinforce Oakley's claims *Relate* conducted a survey, in *The Times* (1996) of 5,000 women. The results were staggering, men helped out equally in only one in ten households. Over half of women (53%) have sole responsibility for cleaning the house. Eight in ten of the women said they were expected to perform too many roles. Washing and ironing is done by only 2% of married men. However, within these results there seems to be a clear bias. In Britain 55% of the workforce is male, 45% female. That might seem that there is a near equality of work between the sexes, however close examination reveals that nine out of ten of those men (91%) work full time, in comparison to just over half of the women (55%) *Financial Times* 29 Jan, 1998. Yet men working outside the home are also expected to work harder inside it as well.

In exploring the context of gender inequality in Britain today, one has to consider whether gender inequality really exists within Britain today or is

it simply, gender differences. Post feminists would argue that in Britain today, the primary causes of inequality between the sexes has been resolved, i.e. legal, political and economic battles. However Faludi (1992) believes that feminism has gone too far in condemning men, the family and femininity. A media 'backlash' threatens women's progress; scare mongering stories about feminism, e.g., career women are told that they are missing out on the wonders of motherhood and marriage. In contrast Faludi, in her recently published book 'Stiffed', examines the "masculinity crisis" which appears to be afflicting men today. Faludi focuses upon men as being the victims. The whole issue of men - the point of them, their purpose, their value, and their justification - seems to be a matter for public debate. The problem seems to be to those men who have defined their lives, their identities, the very essence of what it means to be a man, in terms of professional and occupational achievement and have prided themselves on the work that they as men can only do. Previous generations of men prided themselves on being providers - for their family and themselves. Today, providing seems no longer required. Married women are increasingly taking advantage of the benefits of education and generating their own income. One - parent families press for workplace crèches and better childcare facilities, as well as social security payments to compensate for male generated finances. So not only is the role of financial provider under siege, the role of father is threatened. The rise in numbers of single mothers suggests that men are viewed inadequate fathers and partners, as well as becoming redundant. Faludi concludes that it is hardly surprising that men today, are experiencing a masculinity crisis. Power Feminist, like Roiphe; suggest that in this day and age women should take more responsibility for their actions and decisions. Women need to break out of the 'victim mentality'; freely acknowledging and embracing their new -found power and opportunities.

Drawing on the concept of Shulamith Firestone - the need for an advancement in technology whereby women would be freed from their burdens of biology, Naomi Wolf in *The Sunday Times* (Oct 28<sup>th</sup> 2001), outlines some of the startling scientific technology that is on the horizon. In her article, Wolf acknowledges that feminists of late could only dream of freeing themselves from their reproductive chains. Fertility specialist have discovered a method for women to have babies without the involvement of men. These radical advancements involve tricking an egg into conceiving, brought about by a concoction of chemicals, as well as creating the first artificial womb lining. Naomi Wolf asks the question of

whether this movement creates more freedom for women. In her view it "puts women at a turning point at which they could lose something precious, motherhood". Wolf comes from the stance of equality between the sexes and encourages men and women to acknowledge their biological roles and work in harmony with each other.

To conclude, it would seem that the causes of gender inequality in Britain today, would always offer debates between the biological and socially constructed theorists. However the consequences of gender inequality, as outlined above, seems to be more susceptible to change. Changes within legal, social and economic reforms have created a degree of equality, but do men and women want to be equal? The answer to this, probably not. However to end the conflict of inequality between the sexes perhaps men and women need to recognise their differences, in an un-objective manner, and embrace the person they are regardless of their sex or gender.