

Social inequality influences all aspects of our lives. The following essay will look at evidence highlighting inequalities in society today. In particular it will focus upon inequalities found between men and women, referred to as gender inequality. Additionally it will integrate sociological perspectives such as functionalism, radical, Marxist or liberal feminism to explain the causes of inequalities and in particular those found in the areas of education and work.

In every human society there is some form of inequality. In western society the foundations of inequality are power, economic differences and social prestige. Social stratification is the term sociologists use to describe the organisation of these inequalities which can be likened to the geological layers formed in rocks. Moore, (2001:46) defines social stratification as *the "division of people into groups based on how much wealth, power and social prestige they have"*. In Western society the main system of division is referred to as social class and indicates an individual's economic standing in society, which can be dictated by occupation and income (Walsh et al 2000:45). In addition to social class, other divisions within the strata occur through a process called differentiation .

O'Donnell (1987:231) describes differentiation as *"that which makes an individual or group separate and distinct"*. As in all systems of stratification it illustrates the organisation of inequality in society and has historically been the stratification of people on the basis of age, ethnicity, disability, and in particular gender.

In western society there are two terms of reference for men and women ~ 'sex' or 'gender'. Sex, defined by Giddens (1993:762) as the *"biological and anatomical differences distinguishing females from males"*, refers to the visual or physiological differences between men and women, such as genitalia or a women's ability to bear

children. Gender, however, described by Thompson (1993:40) as *“the social aspect of the differentiation of the sexes”*, refers to the socially constructed ideology of the expected behaviour of men and women, a theory some sociologists refer to as social constructionism. For example, boys are expected to be loud and assertive whilst girls are expected to be passive and submissive.

Feminist sociologist Ann Oakley, argues that behaviour displayed by men and women is cultural, can differ according to socially accepted ‘norms’ and arguably is ‘learnt’, a theory supported by the research of anthropologist Margaret Mead. Mead’s study of the Arapesh, Mundugamor and Tchambuli tribes in New Guinea (cited O’Donnell 1987:312), revealed conflicting gender role behaviour. Amongst members of the Arapesh and Mundugamor tribes there was little noticeable difference in gender behaviour, as both sexes were either gentle and nurturing or aggressive and competitive. However, the Tchambuli tribe had gender roles, which in comparison to western society, were reversed. The women here were the principle providers and sexually dominant, whilst the men were more concerned with ‘gossiping’, adorning themselves and wore flowers in their hair. Mead concluded therefore, *“...that there is no universal ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ personality....”* (O’Donnell 1987:312).

Conversely, socio-biologists Tiger & Fox (cited in class handout 2001), argue that the behaviour of men and women occurs ‘naturally’, a consequence of human genetic inheritance from primate ancestors. As a result of men hunting and women rearing children, men have become dominant and aggressive and women passive and gentle, resulting in a ‘natural’ hierarchy of men above women. A theory supported by functionalist Talcott Parsons.

Parsons’ and other functionalists believed that in the same way the human body’s organs function in unison for the benefit of the body, society functions in the same way.

The family is therefore complimentary with women being the 'chosen' bearer of children, and men the providers. Whilst the theory of functionalism has not been proved or disproved Parsons suggests "...that the basic and irreducible functions of the family are two: first the primary socialisation of children so that they can truly become members of the society into which they have been born; second, the stabilisation of the adult personalities of the society..." (www.AZ of Sociologists 24.03.02). Whilst Parsons, acknowledges the existence of gender roles, from a functionalist perspective, it is a balance rather than an imbalance with the needs of society and the family overriding any inequality. This division of labour, between men and women, enables society to function efficiently and without discord. Therefore' "...stratification and inequality are a permanent, necessary and inevitable feature of society" (Bilton et al 1987:48). Whilst these gender roles to some extent are taught within the family, once past the age of five education is largely responsible for the socialisation of individuals and their expected role within wider society.

Education for the 'masses' began when Britain required a literate nation to compete in the industrial revolution. Even during the early stages of teaching, gender differences in subject matter could be seen. Girls, for example, were taught skills such as housewifery and cookery, whilst boys were taught maths and sciences and also took exams; the consensus being, girls did not need a technical education, but required domestic skills to enable them to become good wives and mothers. This attitude was reinforced by the Education Acts of 1902 and 1944 which made it compulsory for girls only to take domestic subjects such as needlecraft and cookery and weighted the results of girls 11+ exams results in an attempt to reduce the gap in attainment between them. A move which merited boys more places than deserved at grammar schools. (Skelton cited Taylor et al 1998:303).

Throughout this time liberal feminists have campaigned for equality in the form of women's rights, seeking change through both legislation and the re-education of attitudes, which successfully led to the introduction of the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act. Under this act it is an offence to ...*"Discriminate on the grounds of sex..."* (Brown 1986:173) and gave girls access to subjects such as woodwork or metal work and boys access to domestic subjects. Nonetheless, although covert, inequality within education continues.

The hidden curriculum is an unspoken language which runs 'alongside' the national curriculum and plays a large part in gender socialisation. It is composed of implicit messages of how society expects men and women to act and the purpose and function of each gender within society.(www.parentingteens.com 24.03.02). It cannot be seen, but can be detected in attitudes and language used in the schooling system. It is a set of rules imparted subliminally and teaches all types of behaviour from *"obedience and punctuality to gender identity..."* (Abercrombie:1995:352)

Research shows that attitudes in the classroom transmit the message to girls that they are viewed as second class citizens. Separate research by Dale Spender (83) and Jane French (86), (cited Taylor et al 1998:306-307), revealed that boys receive over 60% of teachers' attention during class time. Additionally, it was widely accepted that boys would display loud and disruptive behaviour and freely shout answers out, whilst their female counterparts were expected to sit and work quietly or raise their hand and wait for permission to speak. In conclusion French writes *"...simply because their behaviour was problematic, boys received more attention."*

Additionally girls experience covert discrimination through the language used in text books. Scientific textbooks still refer to students as 'he', with the masculinity of these subjects being reinforced by the predominate use of boys in illustrations. (Taylor et al

1998:30). However, research by Tessa Blackstone and Helen Weinrich -Haste (cited O'Donnell 1987:120-2) revealed that in single sex schools girls readily chose and excelled in subjects such as maths and sciences. They therefore concluded that *"...the very presence of boys has a negative effect on girl pupils' (and perhaps teachers) educational expectations..."* Despite these disadvantages girls still outstrip boys during exams, with more than half of the girls in England and Wales obtaining 5 GCSE's at level C or above in comparison to 2/5^{ths} of boys who achieved the same. (Social Trends 2000:55)

This evidence then lends itself to the views of radical feminists who advocate change through separatism and not legislation. From this perspective gender inequality is caused by patriarchy, defined by Bilton et al (1987:149) as *"a structure of subordination and domination..."* predominately of women, but also encompassing *"...other more junior men..."* who are dominated by more senior men. Radical feminist promote separatism on the basis that women should not seek liberation through equality (and in the event become like men), but need to free themselves from patriarchal control and the constraints of the male dominated nuclear family. In relation to education the hidden curriculum and classroom attitudes teach female subordination, a necessary agent for patriarchy to thrive. Additionally education is used by men to *"...exercise control over cultural attitudes and this means they are able to justify their dominance by convincing people...it is 'just the way things are'..."* (Taylor 1998:119).

Black feminists however disagree arguing that the basis of most feminist theories of gender inequality is centred around the presumption of white heterosexuality. With the opposite being true black women are doubly oppressed firstly on the grounds of their colour, an issue which is over looked in most types of feminists and then on the grounds of their sex, Moreover, whilst systems of patriarchy exists within black culture a matrifocal system is more dominant. Matrifocal systems differ from matriarchy as

women are not dominant or 'rule' over men, but rather organise themselves independently of men (Taylor et al 1998:131). Black girls do exceptionally well in education with research showing 42% of them achieving four GCSE's at grades A -C in comparison to 24% of boys who achieved the same. (Social Trends 2000:58). Black feminists also distance themselves from the 'anti -man bias of white feminists preferring to see black men as allies in the common struggle against racism. Further they see white feminists as reinforcing the stereotypes of black men being sexual predators. However, whilst girls do well in education the inequality they experience continues into their working lives regardless of their ethnic origins.

Women in Britain today represent 50% of the work force. 8% of who are mothers with pre-school children and 21% who work part time (Moore 2001:85). Whilst this may appear to be a fair representation women suffer inequality through lower pay, poorer working conditions and less opportunities to progress within the hierarchy of employment referred to as horizontal and vertical segregation

Horizontal segregation is the term sociologists use to describe the concentration of women and men in *different types* of occupations (Taylor et al 1998:135). Traditionally more men than women enter jobs in agriculture, engineering, construction and forestry. Women however, enter occupations concentrated in areas such as education, welfare, health service, clerical work, catering and other service sector related jobs. These jobs, usually found at lower levels of industry attract lower rates of pay even thirty years after the introduction of the Equal Pay Act (1970) which provided that "*women should receive the same pay and benefits as men for similar work...*" (Brown 1986:173). A report by the Equal Opportunities Commission (2001) found not only did levels of pay fall as more women entered a sector, but that the gap between the pay of men and women had widened. Women who work full time can expect to earn 82% of her male counterparts equivalent hourly earnings, with the figure falling to 61% for women working part time

(www.guardian.co.uk 24.03.02). Additionally women experience inequality through restrictions in the opportunities given to progress through the employment hierarchy once in the job market known as vertical segregation.

Vertical segregation refers to the levels at which women can be found within the job market (Taylor et al 1998:135). Women are more likely to be over represented within the lower ranks of hierarchy, predominately occupying supervisory or middle management positions. Moore (2001:84) states that women often experience the 'glass ceiling' effect – that is *“they can see the jobs, but just cannot get the re”*. Senior positions are more elusive with women representing just 12% of senior managers (Moore 2001:84), a figure reflected in a report taken from The Observer (November 2001) which shows women represent 6.43% or just 75 of the 1,166 directors of the companies in the FTSE 100 (Financial Times Stock Exchange).

For Marxist and socialist feminists the existence of inequality is not merely a consequence of patriarchy but, is related to the class structure and the family, seen as a superstructure.

Within a capitalist society, women are viewed as a 'reserve army of labour' to be hired and fired during times of economic up or down turn. Much of the 'visible' work women carry out is within the realms of caring such as nursing. These roles are seen as an innate extension of women-hood and subsequently devalued as being a natural attribute not worthy of high rewards or social prestige. Additionally, the family plays a large role in the oppression of women, with the traditionally male dominated family existing for the benefit of capitalists. With women providing 'invisible free' labour in the form of housework, industry does not have to shoulder the additional costs in higher wages for its male labourers if they had to pay for services such as child -minding cooking, laundry and sex. (Abercrombie 1995:222). More importantly women not only

do women take care of existing workers, but through the process of child birth and motherhood, provide and care for the next generation or labourers. Additionally whilst they are poorly paid women become dependant on men as a means of maintenance. Being responsible for the home and children they are excluded from or restricted to the type of job and the hours they are able to dedicate devaluing their market value. The solution to gender inequality, for Marxist and socialist feminist is the eradication of all types of inequality including those based on class, race and gender. (www.public.iastate.edu 24.03.02)

Following cross cultural studies of 250 societies George Murdock, functionalist and anthropologist is of the opinion that the family defined as a “...*social group characterised by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction...*” is central to the survival of society and describes the family’s roles in four terms called the sexual, reproductive, economic and educational. (Taylor et al 1998:233). The functions these serve are central to survival because the family regulates sexual behaviour, it produces the next generation, acts as a basic economic unit and finally it socialises children into the culture of their society. Whilst the family meets the needs of wider society it also, broadly speaking, meets the needs of most individuals. With this in mind, functionalists see the ‘running’ of a family falling into two definitive divisions economic and domestic. Men being providers naturally take the economic leaving women with the domestic. Within a functionalist perspective women wanting to ‘upset’ the balance by taking some responsibility for the economic part of the family would only result in the demise of society. As summed up by Talcott Parsons “...*Women cannot be allowed to compete on an equal footing for the jobs of men; otherwise this would threaten the stability of the family, and hence of society...*” (www.socsci.mcmaster.ca 24.03.02).

In summary, all societies have some form of inequality. In western society class is the main division of inequality which is then 'gendered' and gives rise to gender inequality experienced predominately by women. A system of patriarchy (male dominance) operates in which men "*seize most of the material rewards and social privileges...*" (Taylor et al 1998:119). The women's movement (collectively known as feminism) challenge cultural attitudes and assumptions which hold women back in both work and education and has four main divisions which are liberal, radical, Marxists/socialist and black feminism. Functionalists, however dispute the challenges of feminists, from the viewpoint that the division of labour is natural and is the 'heart beat' of society.

In conclusion, inequality is sewn into the fabric of society and until attitudes change women will continue to experience inequality. Whilst to a certain extent functionalist are correct in saying the family (bearing in mind the term 'family' has various definitions) is central to human survival the division of labour needs to be flexible. Should women wish to contribute financially then they should and the running of the home be divided between men and women on the basis of a partnership and not on an employee/employer basis which occurs mainly because of the benefits to capitalists. As Ann Oakley eloquently states "*Men and women cannot be equal partners outside the home if they are not equal partners inside it*" (cited O'Donnell 1987:323).

In modern society noticeable change has happened, but even with the tireless campaigns of liberal feminists and the implementation of various laws women still continue to be disadvantaged as society continues to be patriarchal. The solution then is for women to organise themselves to be independent of men but also to be educated enough to confidently compete with men and use the laws available to their advantage.

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