Girls at the Women’s March on Washington wearing pink capes that say, “I am the Future.” How will gender play a role in these girls’ future lives?
Investigating Gender: My Story

Katie Ann Hasson

Living with my sister, mother, and grandmother as a teenager made me very aware of the taken-for-granted, gendered assumptions about who should do what in the home and outside it that I saw playing out in other families. In my first year of college, I discovered sociology and feminism almost simultaneously, and quickly shifted from my planned physics concentration to sociology. When gender studies was added as a new concentration, I became one of the first class of five to receive a gender studies degree from the University of Chicago. After working for a few years as a domestic violence crisis counselor/advocate, I returned to school and earned my doctorate at UC Berkeley, again combining sociology with an emphasis in women, gender, and sexuality. For 5 years, I taught classes in sociology and gender studies at the University of Southern California.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

4.1 Define gender.
4.2 Describe gender inequality and the study of gender as a social problem.
4.3 Identify gender problems on college campuses and beyond.
4.4 Apply the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives to the problem of gender inequality.
4.5 Apply queer theory’s interdisciplinary perspective to gender inequality.
4.6 Identify steps toward social change in gender inequality.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
Questions About Gender from the General Social Survey

1. It is better for men to work and women to tend home.
   - Agree
   - Disagree

2. Most women really want a home and kids.
   - Agree
   - Disagree

3. Women are not suited for politics.
   - Agree
   - Disagree

4. Are you for or against the preferential hiring of women?
   - For
   - Against

5. The mother working doesn’t hurt children.
   - Agree
   - Disagree

SOURCE: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.
WAVES OF PROTEST AND PINK HATS

On January 21, 2017, an estimated 4 million women and men in cities and towns across the United States participated in Women’s Marches to support women’s rights, environmental issues, racial justice, and LGBTQ rights in what has been called the largest single-day protest in U.S. history (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2017; Dow et al., 2017). In doing so, they continued a tradition of feminist and other mass marches and political actions, and potentially signaled a new multi-issue, intersectional approach to mass feminist and social justice activism.

Over the past 100 years, women in the United States have achieved the right to vote (1920), were granted legal access to contraception regardless of marital status (1963) and legal abortion (1973), and gained legal protections against gender discrimination and sexual harassment after the mass entry of (middle-class) women into the labor force in the 1970s. These and other improvements represent dramatic progress toward gender equality. But many would agree that there is still much more to do. Men still earn more than women, hold the majority of political offices, and sit at the top levels of most companies. Many women still lack affordable access to health care and child care and experience high rates of sexual assault and domestic violence. Furthermore, it depends on which women you are considering. Women’s economic success, health, and political participation look vastly different when race, class, sexuality, and immigration are taken into account, which highlights the importance of taking an intersectional approach to examining inequality.

What can we learn by considering gender inequality as a social problem? Is gender itself a social problem, or only the inequality that results from gender? Is it even possible to separate gender from gender inequality, or is inequality the inevitable result of distinguishing people as men and women? These are some of the questions we’ll explore in this chapter, but first we need to understand exactly what we’re talking about when we speak of gender.

DEFINING GENDER INEQUALITY

Define gender.

Do you wake up in the morning and think about your gender as a pressing social problem? Do you think about it much at all? If you live safely within the boundaries of what your particular society defines as “normal” for gender, you probably have the luxury of not thinking a lot about it in general, let alone as a pressing social problem. If you are a person who, in the words of Kate Bornstein (1994), is “let down” by the gender system, you probably do think of gender as a social problem that needs to be solved. In fact, all of us—everyone in society, regardless of where we are in or outside the gender hierarchy—can see gender as a social problem, and we can argue that at some point the gender system has let us down. What exactly does that mean?

First, what is gender? A common definition says gender is the social meaning layered on top of our sex categories. In this way of thinking, there are two discrete sex categories: You can be female or you can be male; you cannot be both. Once we are assigned a sex category, usually at birth, the way we are treated in the world and the way we think about ourselves are shaped by it. Look around a hospital nursery at all the babies with their pink or blue hats and blankets. There’s nothing about the anatomy of a baby boy that requires him to wear a blue hat, but already gender has become important: In our culture at this time it tells us that male babies should wear blue and female babies pink. In other times and other places, male and female babies would wear completely different colors. It is precisely those social variations that make up gender—the social meanings we impose onto biological reality.

Ask Yourself: Can you think of other ways in which we begin to treat infants and young children differently based on sex category?

When we say the colors associated with male and female babies vary across time and culture, we are

Intersectional approach: A sociological approach that examines how gender as a social category intersects with other social statuses such as race, class, and sexuality.

Gender: The social meanings layered on top of sex categories.
acknowledging that gender is socially constructed. That is, like many aspects of social life, gender is a concept created and modified over time and across cultures to produce a certain account of reality. Whether it has an underlying biological reality based on sex is less important than that we believe in that underlying reality. If we believe gender is real, then our beliefs make it real through our actions and assumptions. When a baby is born and placed into the male sex category and a blue hat is put on his head, everyone will treat him in a particular way based on belief in the underlying reality of gender. Because of the way we treat this blue-hatted baby, he probably will, in fact, grow up to be masculine, making our belief in his gender become reality.

Supporting the argument that gender is socially constructed are the many variations in the ways different cultures understand gender. In the United States men generally don’t wear skirts, but in Scotland and India they do. In the United States, once women reach puberty, we expect that certain parts of their bodies be free of hair—usually their legs and armpits, but also their faces—and that their breasts be covered and supported by bras. But in other parts of the world, women don’t shave; nor do they wear bras. These and other variations in the meanings assigned to biological sex categories convince us that gender is socially constructed.

This seems fairly straightforward, but some scholars go further and argue that not only is gender socially constructed, but biological sex is as well. From this perspective, our belief that there are two distinct types of people in the world—males and females—is just a belief, called sexual dimorphism, and does not represent objective reality. As evidence, scholars cite the ways in which sex has been defined differently across times and places. Today in the United States, sex assignment happens at birth based on the infant’s genitals and is largely in the hands of medical professionals. Some infants are born with genitals that cannot easily be categorized as male or female. In the past, doctors have decided where to assign those infants, often performing surgeries to make the genitals match the assigned category. This is what happens to many intersex individuals, those born with anatomical or genetic ambiguity about their biological sex. Their existence is important evidence for the social construction of sex, because it suggests there are not just two kinds of bodies but a continuum of different kinds (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

In ancient Greece, sex was seen as existing along a spectrum, with men at the top and women and other lesser beings, like dwarves and slaves, at the bottom. Females were viewed not as wholly different sorts of persons from males, but rather as inferior versions of males. The ancient Greeks had knowledge of external and internal anatomy, but their beliefs about sex categories led them to understand male and female anatomy differently. While we think of a penis and a vagina as two different sexual organs, the ancient Greeks saw them as the same organ; a vagina was merely an inverted penis. Ovaries and gonads were the same organ in slightly different ways.

Sexual dimorphism: The belief that there are two discrete types of people—male and female—who can be distinguished on the basis of real, objective, biological criteria.

Intersex: Born with some range of biological conditions that make sex category ambiguous.
versions. This is just one of the many ways cultures have made sense of our underlying biological reality. The wide biological variability that exists is too complex to be summarized in just two categories, suggesting that sex categories are socially constructed just as gender is.

People who identify as transgender—whose gender identity differs from the sex category they were assigned at birth—reveal another aspect of gender as socially constructed. The term cisgender describes individuals whose gender identities match the categories they were assigned at birth. Transgender people may make a number of changes in order to live as the gender they identify with, including changing their names and pronouns (he/him, she/her, or even gender-neutral pronouns like they, zie, or hir), appearance (including clothes, hair, binding breasts), or bodies (by taking hormones or having surgery). Depending on the laws in their state, they may also be able to change their legal gender. The experiences of transgender people challenge assumptions that gender is a direct expression of biology that does not change: Not all male infants become men, not all female infants become women.

**Feminism, Men, and the Study of Gender as a Social Problem**

4.2 Describe gender inequality and the study of gender as a social problem.

While gender is certainly not the only social problem we can regard as socially constructed, it is unique in also being an identity to which many of us are deeply attached. What parts of your personality, behaviors, beliefs, and feelings are due to your gender, and what parts exist independent of that identity? For some theorists, as we’ll discover below, every part of us and every interaction we have is touched by gender. They believe ungendering ourselves might be impossible. Would it be at all desirable?

It’s easier to see gender as a social problem if we focus more specifically on gender inequality. Gender is an important source of social identity for many people, meaning it forms an important basis for how we think about ourselves as people. It is also a category that creates and sustains inequality. **Gender inequality** is the way in which the meanings assigned to sex and gender as social categories create disparities in resources such as income, power, and status. In most—if not all—societies, those categorized as female are at a disadvantage relative to those categorized as males. There are many explanations for these inequalities, some of which we explore below. But first we should consider the relationship between gender as a concept and gender inequality.

**Ask Yourself:** Do you think it is possible to ungender ourselves? Would getting rid of gender as a social category be a good thing for society? If you believe that both sex and gender are socially constructed categories, can they take very different forms? John Stoltenberg (2006) imagines a society in which sex hormones become “individuality inducers” and sex organs like the penis and clitoris are seen as different forms of the same basic anatomy. What would gender look like in such a society, or would it exist at all?

**Transgender:** Gender identity differs from the sex category assigned at birth.

**Cisgender:** Gender identity matches the sex category assigned at birth.

**Gender inequality:** The way in which the meanings assigned to sex and gender as social categories create disparities in resources such as income, power, and status.
For some, gender is a social category that makes distinctions between people, but these distinctions do not necessarily have to lead to inequality. Saying that women are more nurturing and men less so is a distinction, but we can keep gender as a social identity and still reduce gender inequality by valuing nurturing as much as we value qualities considered masculine, like rationality and aggressiveness. Women can go on being more nurturing and men more rational; we just have to make sure we place equal value and importance on the qualities seen as masculine and feminine.

On the other hand, some argue that every time we make a distinction, an inequality is already implied. It is not just that women are seen as more nurturing than men; nurturing, if it reflects gender categories, will always be considered inferior to whatever qualities are seen as masculine. From this perspective, the whole point of gender as a social category is to distribute power by creating and sustaining inequality. Getting rid of gender inequality then requires getting rid of gender as a social category and all the distinctions it entails.

These two perspectives lead in different directions when we examine gender as a social problem. The first suggests we can address gender inequality separately from the concept of gender as a whole. Gender is not a social problem in and of itself; rather, gender inequality is. But if gender distinctions always imply gender inequality, as in the second view, then gender itself is the social problem. Gender and inequality go hand in hand, and if we want to reduce inequality, we must attack the problem at its root—the existence of gender. Keep these two perspectives and their implications in mind as we further explore gender as a social problem.

One sure sign that enough people in society consider something to be a social problem is the development of a social movement to solve it. Feminism is both a body of knowledge and a social movement that addresses the problem of gender inequality, seeking to end it through a wide variety of approaches. If women are usually seen as the dis advantaged group, it makes sense they would be motivated to end gender inequality. But feminists are not only motivated to improve the status of women, they highlight the ways that our current gender hierarchy harms everyone.

ASK YOURSELF: Pick one of the perspectives on the relationship between gender and gender inequality described above. Imagine you are engaged in a debate to defend this perspective. What evidence might you use in support of your position? Now imagine what evidence you might use for the opposite perspective.

For example, men in the United States do not live as long on average as women, are more likely to die a violent death, and commit suicide at higher rates than do women. Some men who label themselves feminists point to the ways in which the demands of masculinity damage men, even as it may benefit them in other ways. Masculinity leads men to engage in risk-taking behaviors that can put their lives and health in danger. It can make meaningful and intimate relationships with other men and women difficult by inserting the constant need to demonstrate dominance and control. For these reasons, most scholars and activists who consider gender a social problem see it as a social problem for women and men. The gender system lets all of us down, though often in very different ways.

LOOKING AT GENDER ON CAMPUS AND BEYOND

Can the gender binary itself be a source of inequality? To examine this question, we can think about areas of society in which we make the division of men and women socially important. There are plenty of examples of this on any college campus. We have single-gender dorm rooms and even entire dorms, separate men’s and women’s bathrooms and locker rooms, separate men’s and women’s sports teams. On the other hand, gender-neutral or mixed-gender facilities and teams can be seen as controversial.

Many colleges used to be single-sex. At the turn of the 20th century, 29% of college students were women, and 40% of those women attended all-women colleges (Goldin & Katz, 2010). Those who opposed college education for women argued that women weren’t capable of higher learning and that too much education conflicted with their roles as wives and mothers. Some even claimed that the strains of education would cause infertility! The number of coeducational colleges increased steadily over time, then increased sharply in the 1960s and ’70s. In 1976, the U.S. Military Academy and Naval Academy first admitted women. Columbia University, in part because of its relationship with all-women Barnard College, was the last of the Ivy League universities to admit women as undergraduates—in 1983! Today, there are very few single-sex colleges remaining. Nationwide, 57% of bachelor’s degrees are awarded to women and women have outnumbered men on college campuses for the past few decades. For comparison, in 1970, only 43% of bachelor’s degrees were awarded to women.
for Education Statistics, 2015). While there are more women than men in college, these figures vary greatly by region, type of institution, race, and income level. In what ways do we continue to organize our college campuses according to gender, and what effects does this have? How does the gender binary itself become a social problem in these spaces, particularly for individuals who do not fit expected gender categories?

**Two Teams? The Gender Binary**

For much of the 20th century, women’s participation in athletics was discouraged and very few sports opportunities existed for women. This changed dramatically in the 1970s when, encouraged by the feminist movement and many (white, middle-class) women’s entry into the labor force, there was a surge in women’s interest and participation in sports. The ability of girls and women to participate in sports at school was guaranteed in 1972 by Title IX.

Title IX states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” Issues covered by Title IX include discrimination in admissions, sexual harassment, and students who are pregnant. Title IX has had perhaps its biggest impact on schools in the area of athletics because it requires that all schools that receive federal funding provide parity for women’s and men’s athletic opportunities. In 1970, prior to Title IX, there were a total of 16,000 women intercollegiate athletes. For the 2015–2016 academic year, there were 214,000 women and 278,000 men participating in college sports (NCAA sponsorship and participation study). Forty years after its introduction, nearly two in five women participate in high school sports, compared to just one in 27 in 1972 (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2015).

Do these increased opportunities mean there is no longer gender inequality in school sports? Not really. Sociologists of sport have shown that there are still inequalities in access, media coverage and representation, employment, and pay. While access to athletic opportunities have increased astronomically, girls in middle-class and wealthy communities have far greater access than those in poorer communities, and girls of color participate in sports at much lower rates than whites. At the college level, even though 57% of college students are women, women receive only 43% of collegiate athletic opportunities and 45% of athletic scholarships. Men hold more coaching positions, even in women’s sports, and coaches of men’s teams have median salaries more than twice as much as coaches of women’s teams (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2015). A study of local television news and cable sports coverage from 1989–2014 found that over the past 25 years women’s sports have been almost completely excluded coverage (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015).

This is an example of how unequal treatment can lead to inequalities between men and women. But what about gender itself? In some cases, the very act of dividing by gender can disadvantage people whose bodies or identities don’t match the male/female binary we expect. The division of sports by gender is based on our social beliefs about gender difference as much as any underlying differences in sports abilities. Our assumptions about differences between women and men shape the sports available to each group (baseball vs. softball), the rules of the game (different rules for men’s and women’s basketball, tennis, and lacrosse), and even the equipment used (as in men’s and women’s gymnastics). Training to succeed in these different events, according to different rules, has the result of emphasizing differences between men and women. We then interpret these outcomes as proof that men and women are fundamentally different (Lorber, 1993).

Although we believe that dividing sports by gender is essential because of clear biological differences between men and women, biology does not split into male and female so neatly. Although the numbers are difficult to determine, some scholars estimate that as many as 1 in 100 males is born with external female genitalia, and even more are born with ambiguous genitalia. In 1994, the National Center for Education Statistics found that girls born with ambiguous genitalia are 2.5 times more likely to be excluded from participation in school sports because of their gender than those who were girls at birth (Nations, 1994). This is an example of how unequal treatment can lead to inequalities between men and women. But what about gender itself? In some cases, the very act of dividing by gender can disadvantage people whose bodies or identities don’t match the male/female binary we expect. The division of sports by gender is based on our social beliefs about gender difference as much as any underlying differences in sports abilities. Our assumptions about differences between women and men shape the sports available to each group (baseball vs. softball), the rules of the game (different rules for men’s and women’s basketball, tennis, and lacrosse), and even the equipment used (as in men’s and women’s gymnastics). Training to succeed in these different events, according to different rules, has the result of emphasizing differences between men and women. We then interpret these outcomes as proof that men and women are fundamentally different (Lorber, 1993).

\[\text{Figure 4.1 Participation in High School and College Sports, by Gender}\]

\[\text{SOURCE: Data from Acosta, Vivian and Linda Jean Carpenter. 2012. Women in Intercollegiate Sport: A Longitudinal, National Study, Thirty-five Year Update.}\]
2,000 infants are born with an intersex trait. Intersex refers to being born with some combination of traits, like chromosomes, genitalia, and internal sex organs, that we usually expect to be all male or all female. Thus someone might have XXY chromosomes (instead of XX or XY), ambiguous genitalia, or a vagina and internal testes (Davis, 2015). If someone naturally has some elements of female biology and some elements of male biology, what happens when our institutions require that everyone be sorted into the category of male or female?

Highly publicized cases of female athletes whose gender was challenged, such as South African runner Caster Semenya after her 2009 Junior World Championship win in the 800m or Indian sprinter Dutee Chand in the lead-up to the 2016 Summer Olympics, made public the problematic history of “gender testing” in sports. Since women’s first participation in competitive sports, female athletes—especially very successful ones—have had their femininity called into question. In the Olympics, fears and accusations that some countries were fielding men disguised as women resulted in required medical inspections (dubbed “nude parades”), in which female athletes (but not male athletes) had to allow a doctor to examine their genitalia before they could be certified to compete (Karkazis et al., 2012).

More recently, gender testing of female athletes has focused on testosterone levels. Both men and women naturally produce testosterone, although on average men have higher levels of testosterone than women. In 2011, the International Olympic Committee and the International Association of Athletics Federations implemented new policies stating that female athletes with testosterone levels that were “in the normal male range” could not compete without having surgery or taking medication to reduce their testosterone levels (Karkazis et al., 2012). What kinds of assumptions are built into these policies? Focusing solely on testosterone levels assumes that (1) testosterone is the single factor that differentiates men’s and women’s athletic abilities, and (2) more testosterone directly produces more strength and speed. Critics of this policy point out that there is no clear evidence showing a direct link between higher testosterone and improved ability—and these reactions often vary by gender and context. For example, a female-to-male (FTM) transgender student seeks to enroll in a women’s college or a transgender woman (MTF) chooses to use the locker room that matches her gender identity. As Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt show in their research, trans individuals can experience a range of reactions to their identity—and these reactions often vary by gender and context. For example, Schilt shows how individuals who openly transitioned from female to male in their workplace were accepted as men and incorporated into men’s workplace culture as “one of the guys.” However, by analyzing media accounts of violence against transgender individuals, Westbrook has shown that in private

ASK YOURSELF: Should men and women compete against each other in sports? Does it seem possible that men and women might have more similar skill, speed, or strength if they did?

Another way we can observe gender itself as a social problem would be to consider transgender individuals’ experiences entering single-gender spaces and institutions, such as when a female-to-male (FTM) transgender student seeks to enroll in a women’s college or a transgender woman (MTF) chooses to use the locker room that matches her gender identity. As Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt show in their research, trans individuals can experience a range of reactions to their identity—and these reactions often vary by gender and context. For example, Schilt shows how individuals who openly transitioned from female to male in their workplace were accepted as men and incorporated into men’s workplace culture as “one of the guys.” However, by analyzing media accounts of violence against transgender individuals, Westbrook has shown that in private
relationships and situations defined as sexual, the shape of the genitals is often portrayed as defining the person’s “true gender” (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009).

Westbrook and Schilt describe the process of determining gender as the variety of ways we place someone in a gender category, whether in face-to-face interactions, court cases and policy, or imagined situations (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). They extend their previous research to show that in mixed-gender spaces and situations that are not defined as sexual, people often accept someone as the gender they say they are. However, when considering gender-segregated spaces, like bathrooms or locker rooms, “gender panics” arise. In order to resolve the panic and reaffirm that there is a natural gender binary, biology—usually genital surgery or hormones—becomes the criteria for determining gender. Gender panics reveal a double standard at work in determining gender: Gender is policed in women’s spaces but not in men’s, often on the basis of stereotypes of men as sexually aggressive and women as vulnerable. So-called “bathroom bills”—laws that require individuals to use the bathroom of the sex on their birth certificate, regardless of their current gender—are a good example of this. One such law, H.B. 2, was passed in North Carolina in March 2016 and in 2017, sixteen additional states had considered similar legislation (although none have been signed into law as of September 2017) (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017). Support for these bills is spurred by panics about cisgender men “pretending” to be trans in order to gain access to women’s bathrooms and assault them. However, there is no evidence of this ever happening. In fact, research has shown that trans and gender nonconforming individuals are the ones who experience violence in bathrooms. The exact same arguments about bathrooms have occurred for decades in response to panics about racial integration, women’s rights, and gay rights (Stone, 2012). What does this tell us about when and why we police gender? What about gender’s intersections with race and sexuality?

**ASK YOURSELF:** Why do we police gender more strictly in some situations than in others? Do you think that other identities, like race or class, might affect how someone’s gender is determined?

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**The Gender Gap in STEM**

Certain areas of education and work, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, show significant gender imbalances. Women earn less than 20% of undergraduate degrees in physics, engineering, and computer science, but over 50% of undergraduate degrees in biosciences and social sciences. Women from underrepresented minority groups earn just over 10% of all undergraduate degrees in science and engineering fields, with psychology and social sciences making up roughly one-third of these (National Science Foundation, 2015).

Some argue that this is because men are naturally better at math and science. However, research has shown repeatedly that this is not the case. The differences in test scores or brain scans that have been found are usually quite small and not enough to explain the large gap between men and women in STEM fields. Given how much our brains grow and change throughout our lives in response to the world around us, it is just as likely that observed differences in men’s and women’s brains are actually a result of gender inequality, not a cause (Fausto-Sterling, 2005; Pitts-Taylor, 2016). Furthermore, this imbalance does not look the same in other countries. For example, in Malaysia, computer science is

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**Determining gender:** The process of placing someone in a gender category.
seen as a female-dominated field (Mellstrom, 2009). Overall, gender gaps in science and math testing are fairly small, vary by country, and are not clearly socially significant. In international testing in math, there were 28 countries where boys scored higher; in the remaining 39 countries, girls scored the same or higher than boys. In science testing, boys scored higher in 24 countries, and girls scored the same or higher in 45 countries. In general, test scores like these have not turned out to be a good predictor of who enters or stays in STEM education and careers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016a, b; Xie, Fang, & Shauman, 2015).

At the high school level, the proportion of boys and girls in science courses is evening out. However, the proportion of women earning undergraduate degrees in many fields has stayed the same since the 1980s and women continue to be underrepresented in physical sciences, engineering, math, and computer science. Perhaps the answer is that women choose not to take science classes or work in STEM fields because they are just less interested in science. To some extent, this is true. Studies have shown that girls express less interest in learning math and science and lower confidence and assessments of their skills, even among high achievers. But this doesn’t tell the whole story. We should ask why women are less likely to choose these fields. Social and cultural influences, including stereotypes that math = male; lack of support or encouragement from family, friends, and teachers; and lack of role models or mentors have all been shown to contribute to girls’ lower interest in math and science (Xie, Fang, & Shauman, 2015).

**ASK YOURSELF:** Can you think of examples of media messages that would discourage girls from pursuing science? Have you heard friends, family, or teachers say things that might suggest to girls that science is not for them?

### Gender, Work, and Family

Women in the United States still earn 19% less than men on average (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2016). Another way of thinking about this gender wage gap is to say that for every dollar a man makes, his female counterpart makes about 81 cents. Why do women earn less than men on average? A great deal of research has attempted to answer this question. Some of the explanations are that women and men have different levels of education or different fields of study; that occupations are segregated by sex, meaning that men and women are actually doing different kinds of work; that the work done associated with women is valued less than that associated with men (nurses vs. doctors, or administrative assistant vs. executive); that women accept lower salaries and are less likely to negotiate for higher pay; and that women are penalized for being mothers.

No model has been fully able to explain the gap or its persistence despite women’s many gains. Occupational segregation is one factor that contributes to the pay gap. Male-dominated occupations have higher pay on average than female-dominated occupations at similar skill levels. Out of the top 20 occupations for men and for women, only four overlap (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2016). Looking at the wage gap intersectionally shows that there are significant differences when you take race and gender into account. Black women, for example, make 35% less than white men, while black men make 27% less than white men (Pew Research Center, 2016). Another example of differences within women’s wages is the “motherhood penalty.” Research has found that mothers

**Gender wage gap:** The gap in earnings between women and men, usually expressed as a percentage or proportion of what women are paid relative to their male equivalents.

**“Motherhood penalty”:** Mothers earn less than both men and women without children.
Experiencing Gender

Reproductive Justice

The freedom to choose when and whether to have children has been a main focus of feminist activism. Abortion was made legal throughout the United States in 1973 with the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Since 1973, the fight has been to preserve access to abortion. Violent attacks and legal restrictions have closed numerous clinics. Travel, waiting periods, and the legal ban on the use of federal funds to pay for abortion have made it extremely difficult for poor women, in particular, to access abortion and other reproductive health services. Because the United States is heavily involved in international development and health funding, political campaigns to restrict abortion and other reproductive services can affect women’s reproductive health around the world.

While mainstream feminist activism has focused primarily on the freedom of choice, poor women and women of color have fought for their right to have children. The United States has a long history of forcibly sterilizing large numbers of primarily poor, nonwhite, or immigrant women and men. Sexuality, physical or mental disabilities, number of children, incarceration, and drug addiction have all been used to justify forced sterilization. Women-of-color activists have developed the framework of reproductive justice to address these abuses. Loretta Ross, of the activist group SisterSong, describes reproductive justice as “an intersectional theory emerging from the experiences of women of color whose multiple communities experience a complex set of reproductive oppressions.” Beginning from this context, reproductive justice champions the right of every woman to decide when and if she will have a baby, to choose how she will give birth or end her pregnancy, and to parent her children in healthy communities free from violence (Ross, 2011).

The reproductive justice framework expands on the concept of reproductive rights by centering on the right to have and raise children.

Decisions about reproduction and parenting cannot be considered simply as individual choices, but need to be understood in the context of communities and the resources necessary to support women’s autonomy. A reproductive justice framework can be used to understand and address a range of issues, such as the treatment of pregnant incarcerated women, access to reproductive technologies for poor women and women of color (who have high rates of infertility), and foster care reform (Luna & Luker, 2013; Ross & Solinger, 2017). It also provides insight into complex issues, such as balancing the desire of gay couples to have children by surrogacy or adoption with the needs and rights of impoverished women around the world who work as surrogates or whose children are adopted (Briggs, 2012; Rudrappa, 2015).

THINK ABOUT IT: How does the discussion change when we think in terms of reproductive justice, rather than “choice”?

make less than nonmothers, while fathers are more likely to benefit from a “daddy bonus” (Correll & Paik, 2007; Hodges & Budig, 2010).

Sometimes, the value placed on career success contradicts deeply held beliefs about gender—for example, the expectation that women should take care of children and the home. Sociologists have found that women’s decisions about work and family are shaped by a widely shared set of beliefs that women should be responsible for child care, which is understood to require a great deal of time, attention, and resources, while men should be responsible for supporting the family financially. In this framework, working outside the home conflicts with motherhood; domestic and childrearing activities are not considered a part of fatherhood. We can see these ideas at work behind stories of “mommy wars” between working and stay-at-home mothers, or those about women with high-power, high-paying careers who “opt out” of the workforce because they want to spend more time with their children.

In the United States, 70% of women with children under the age of 18 are in the labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016p). Mothers can use a number of strategies to resolve the conflict between their work and cultural ideals of motherhood. Some choose to emphasize the importance of career over family, or vice versa. Some emphasize the quality of time they spend with children, rather than quantity. And some claim that work
makes them better mothers (Blair-Loy, 2003; Gerson, 1985; Hays, 1996). While ideas about the conflict between work and motherhood are dominant in our culture, they do not apply equally to all mothers. Women of color have historically been culturally, economically, and legally excluded from these dominant ideals of motherhood. African American women, for example, have historically had little choice but to integrate work and motherhood out of economic necessity. The “family wage” paid to middle-class white men that allowed their wives to stay home was not extended to African American men. And African American women were explicitly excluded from government programs supporting widows and single mothers (Glenn, 2002). Based on this history of constraints, women of color have developed ideals of motherhood that do include working outside the home (Dow, 2016).

While we might think that women’s decisions about whether to have children or to pursue a career are individual choices based on personal preferences, these choices are made within a social context that provides support for some and discourages others. Cultural ideals about work and motherhood, national laws and policies, company practices, and negotiations within individual families all influence what choices are available. For example, the United States is one of the only countries in the world that does not guarantee paid maternity leave. If a woman’s employer does not voluntarily offer to pay her salary during maternity leave, she may not be able to afford taking time off to recover from childbirth and care for her newborn. Unlike many other wealthy countries, the United States does not offer state-subsidized child care, and the high cost of child care means that many families cannot afford the child care that would make it possible for both parents to work. How might these policies affect women’s decisions about how to combine work and parenting in ways that are more complex than individual preferences?

In most families, women are responsible for the majority of domestic tasks—cleaning, cooking, shopping, etc.—and many women find that they work a “second shift” of domestic work after their paid workday (Hochschild, 1989). Men are doing more housework and child care than they have in the past, but they still spend far less time than women on these tasks. Women have moved into male domains and work, but men have not made a similar move into the domestic sphere (England, 2010). Middle- and upper-income families often hire domestic workers to take over some portion of this care work. Often these workers are immigrant women, who care for children in wealthier families to make money to send back to their own children (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2005).

In her interviews with 18–32-year-olds, Kathleen Gerson found that most women and men desire egalitarian relationships, in which both partners contribute financially and as caretakers. However, aware of the obstacles to this kind of partnership—such as demanding careers, expectations that men will be the breadwinner, and the devaluation of care work—both men and women had a “fallback position” in mind. However, men’s and women’s “Plan Bs” looked very different: Women wanted to be self-sufficient and able to support children themselves, while men expected they would be able to fall back on a more traditional arrangement and their partner would take care of children while they prioritized their career (Gerson, 2010). One model for more egalitarian arrangements comes from same-sex couples. Without an assumed division of tasks by gender, partners actively negotiate who will do what according to their interests and abilities, often resulting in a more equal

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**Second shift**: Unpaid housework and child care done, primarily by women, in addition to paid work outside the home.
Race and the Glass Escalator: Black Male Nurses

Although 95% of registered nurses are women, they are still paid 5% less than their male counterparts. In her study of men in predominantly female occupations like nursing, Christine Williams (1992) found that these men encounter a glass escalator, or invisible pressure to move up in their professions, sometimes in spite of their intentions. In her own study of black male nurses, Adia Harvey Wingfield (2009) found that the glass escalator may work better for white men than for African American men. Earlier research suggested that white male nurses receive a congenial welcome from their female colleagues and male supervisors; this was not the experience of the black male nurses Wingfield interviewed.

Both Williams’s original study and Wingfield’s research used in-depth interviews that allowed respondents to tell stories about their experiences in the nursing field. In Williams’s study, 90% of the respondents were white, while Wingfield interviewed 17 male nurses who all identified as black or African American. This difference in sampling led to very different research results.

Gendered racism, which grounds racial stereotypes, images, and beliefs in gendered ideals, caused the mostly white colleagues of black male nurses to perceive them as dangerous and threatening in a way white male nurses did not encounter.

Black male nurses also do not benefit from the automatic assumption that they are capable of and qualified for “better” work that white male nurses are granted. Finally, while patients often mistake white male nurses for doctors, a black male nurse is more likely to find himself mistaken for a janitor. Wingfield’s study demonstrates the importance of an intersectional approach to the examination of gender—that is, an approach that takes into consideration the many identities we occupy that overlap with gender and interact in complex ways. Though being a man seems to be a distinct advantage for white men, Wingfield’s findings suggest that masculinity does not similarly privilege black male nurses.

THINK ABOUT IT: How might the intersections of race and gender produce different treatment in other professions?

Gender Inequality in Global Perspective

How does the United States stack up to the rest of the world when it comes to women’s education, employment, and health? In the UN Development Programme’s 2015 Gender Inequality Index, the United States ranked 43rd out of 188 countries—behind Canada, the UK, and most European countries. Although women in the United States have attained high rates of educational achievement and participation in the workforce, they also experience very high maternal mortality rates and hold a low proportion of elected offices compared to similar countries (United Nations Development Programme, 2016).

Women with more education have much lower mortality rates, in part because they marry and have children later. Because of this, increasing women’s education can significantly reduce both maternal and child deaths. If all women in sub-Saharan Africa completed primary education, 50,000...
maternal deaths would be prevented—a 70% reduction. Worldwide, there would be 50% fewer child deaths if all women completed secondary education. And according to USAID, if 1% more girls in India enrolled in secondary school, the country's GDP would increase by 5.5% (United States Agency for International Development, n.d.). Despite such benefits, there are still significant barriers to women's education around the world. UNESCO estimated in 2013 that there are 31 million girls out of school, 4 million more than the number of boys. In Somalia, 95% of the poorest girls have never been to school, and in Pakistan that figure is 62% (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2013). Outbreaks of violence, ongoing conflicts, and war can prevent all children from attending school. In South Sudan in 2015, less than half of school-age boys and one-third of school-age girls were in school (United Nations Population Fund, 2016). The case of Malala Yousafzai—who gained worldwide attention after surviving an assassination attempt by the Taliban and who later won the Nobel Peace Prize—demonstrates the obstacles girls face in Pakistan when they advocate for women’s education.

There are also large global gaps in women’s poverty, labor, and health. Economic inequality can take many forms for women around the world. In both wealthy and low-income countries, women and girls perform much more unpaid labor, like child care and cleaning, than do men and boys (World Economic Forum, 2016). In wealthy Scandinavian countries, progressive laws and government programs, such as paid parental leave for both parents and subsidized child care, support women’s participation in the workforce. However, gender inequality takes different forms in these countries, where women more often work part time or are concentrated in lower-paid, female-dominated occupations (Pettit & Hook, 2009).

Around the world, women live longer than men but are also sicker. In the United States, average life expectancy is 81.6 years for women and 76.9 years for men, and in Canada it is 84.1 years for women and 80.2 for men. In Nigeria, women’s life expectancy is 55.6 years and men’s is 53.4 years—almost 30 years less than in Canada! (World Health Organization, 2016b). However, there can also be large differences within groups, depending on race/ethnicity, income, or education. For example, black men in the United States with a college degree or more live 4 years less than white men with the same education, but 7 years longer than white men with less than a high school education (Olshansky et al., 2012). Maternal mortality rates contribute to the variation in women’s life expectancy around the world. For example, in Nigeria, there are eight maternal deaths for every 1,000 births, compared to seven maternal deaths for every 100,000 births in Canada. The United States has a very high maternal mortality rate compared to similar wealthy countries: 14 in 100,000 (World Health Organization, 2016a). Gender-based violence and sexual assault are problems for women in many parts of the world. WHO estimates that 35% of women worldwide have experienced sexual or intimate partner violence (World Health Organization, 2016b).

### Using Theory to Understand Gender Inequality: The Views from the Functionalist, Symbolic Interactionist, and Conflict Perspectives

Many of the theoretical perspectives through which we can view gender have been influenced by feminist scholarship and activism. Before the 1960s, sociologists reflected the views of their time in assuming that most of the important things about social life happen among and between men. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, however, more women entered the field and began a serious consideration of the role of gender across many areas of social life. The gender theories that feminists and sociologists developed line up with sociology’s three dominant theoretical frameworks—structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and conflict theory. Each focuses attention on particular aspects and dynamics of social life, giving us different views of the same social phenomenon.

#### Structural Functionalism

The macro-level theory of structural functionalism dates from the birth of the discipline, when scholars proposed the metaphor of society as an organism and each of its social institutions as an organ in a body. A social institution is an established pattern of behavior, group, or organization that fulfills a specific need in society. The government is a social institution that we might see as the brain of the organism; government plays a large role in setting the rules for a given society.
Gender Beyond Our Borders

Menstrual Health as a Human Right

Menstruation may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of a social problem that is a global issue. At first thought, it seems like one of the most individual and natural experiences someone could have. However, there are myriad ways that the experience of menstruation is shaped by, for example, our cultural attitudes toward gender, bodies, and sexuality; the ways we organize time and physical space in our homes, schools, and workplaces; or the technologies made available to manage menstruation and their production, advertisement, regulation, and taxation (Fingerson, 2006; Freidenfelds, 2009; Mamo & Fosket, 2009; Vostral, 2008). There are even social movements focused on menstruation! (Bobel, 2010).

Taking a global view makes this even clearer. In recent years, the international development field has begun to focus on the issue of menstrual hygiene management in low-income countries. One researcher describes the problem this way: “Every day, schoolgirls in low-income countries around the world discover blood on their underwear for the first time, feel an uncomfortable cramping in their lower abdomen, and find themselves in a setting without toilets, water, or a supportive female teacher to explain the change happening in their body” (Sommer & Sahin, 2013, p. 1556). Menstrual hygiene management campaigns highlight how cultural taboos, poverty, inadequate knowledge, and lack of infrastructure keep girls and women from being able to manage their menstruation in effective and healthy ways. These campaigns advocate for water and sanitation infrastructure improvements that would benefit all. However, some critics of menstrual hygiene campaigns argue that they perpetuate stereotypes of ignorance and uncleanliness used to justify colonial oppression and replace traditional practices with environmentally unsustainable disposable products (Lahiri-Dutt, 2015; Mythri Speaks, 2016).

THINK ABOUT IT: How does menstruation as a social problem affect both girls and boys?

As applied to gender, structural functionalism takes the specific form of sex role theory. The idea of a sex role begins with the more general idea of a social role, a set of expectations attached to a particular status or position, such as white or black, man or woman, gay or straight. Certain expectations or norms go along with different statuses. A sex role is a set of expectations attached to a particular sex category. An easy way to think about this is to consider what kinds of behaviors might seem strange for a man or woman in your society. For example, in the United States one expectation of straight men is that they not hold hands with or kiss other men, even on the cheek. But in Egypt and India, it is normal to see straight men holding hands with other men, and in France, men kiss other men on the cheek in greeting. Social roles vary by society, but most cultures impose some set of expectations on individuals based on their assignment into a sex category.

Social role: A set of expectations attached to a particular status or position in society.

Sex role: The set of expectations attached to a particular sex category—male or female.

Instrumental: Oriented toward goals and tasks.
### TABLE 4.1 Gender Inequality Index and Related Indicators for Select Countries

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SOURCE: Gender Inequality Index and Related Indicators, United Nations Development Project, Human Development Reports.

*The Gender Inequality Index is calculated based on three dimensions (reproductive health, empowerment, and labor market) and five indicators (maternal mortality, adolescent fertility, parliamentary representation, educational attainment, and labor force participation).
task-oriented, while women are taught to be expressive, or oriented toward their interactions with other people. Theorists see this division of labor as functional for society, because women who work outside the home and men who want to stay home and take care of their children create dysfunction for society.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Sex role theory predicts that men will be more oriented toward the instrumental while women will be more oriented toward the expressive. Can you think of examples that support this assertion? Can you think of exceptions, or situations that contradict this assertion?

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**Policy Implications of Structural Functionalism**

Applied to policy, sex role theory presumes that a functional family unit is one that consists of a man who fulfills an instrumental role and a woman who occupies an expressive role. Policies that support the centrality of the nuclear family—husband, wife, and children—are thus consistent with sex role theory. For example, one of the goals of the welfare reforms passed in the United States in 1996 was to encourage the formation of two-parent families, and a 2002 welfare reform bill in the House of Representatives included $300 million for policies to promote marriage (Hu, 2003).

**Expressive:** Oriented toward interactions with other people.
(TANF), which replaced Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1996, requires that single women work in order to receive welfare, while married women do not have to be employed in order to receive welfare benefits. Some states have included marriage education classes as part of the training single women are required to undergo as a condition for receiving welfare benefits. Paternity establishment and child-support rules included in TANF encourage a woman receiving benefits to form some kind of relationship with the father of her children (Mink, 2001). All these policies support the assumptions of sex role theory that the most functional model of a family is a father who works outside the home to support his family and a mother who takes care of the children (and the father). Feminists have criticized TANF as a policy that violates women’s rights to work, to support themselves financially, and to live independent of men. Yet, acting consistently with sex role theory, many politicians see a family unit composed of a male provider, a female caregiver, and their children as the most beneficial for society.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Whereas structural functionalism and sex role theory are good examples of theories at the macro level in sociology, symbolic interactionism is generally a theory that works at the micro level. It looks at the details of social interaction and group life rather than at the big picture of how larger structures in society fit together.

In the world of symbolic interactionism, everything is a symbol, including the way you wear your hair, the way you sit, your facial expressions, the words you choose, and your inflection, as well as whether you look at me or not while you speak. Crucial to understanding social life from a symbolic interactionist perspective is understanding the meanings we give to all these things, and those meanings vary. The idea of social construction is especially important, then, from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

One specific gender theory that fits within symbolic interactionism is **doing gender theory**. Doing gender draws its legacy from a specific branch of symbolic interactionism in sociology called ethnomethodology. **Ethnomethodology** is essentially the study of folkways and the meaning and operation of what at first appear to be very mundane and taken-for-granted aspects of social life. Harold Garfinkel became interested in what we might assume in relationship to gender. He studied a male-to-female transsexual named Agnes because he reasoned that the aspects of gender the rest of us take for granted would probably be more apparent to someone like Agnes, who was forced to try to pass as a gender different from the one in which she had been socialized (Garfinkel, 1967). Doing gender as a theory builds on Garfinkel’s work to argue that gender is not a set of internalized norms for behavior, as suggested by sex role theory. Rather, gender is an interactive performance we are all constantly staging through our interactions with others. In addition, we are all accountable to our audience—the other people with whom we are interacting.

**Accountability** in doing gender theory refers to whether the audience for our performance understands our actions as we have intended for them to be understood. For example, if I tell a joke, you may not laugh at it, or you may think it’s a particularly bad joke. But either of

**Doing gender theory**: A theory of gender that claims gender is an accountable performance created and reinforced through individuals’ interactions.

**Ethnomethodology**: A sociological approach that seeks to uncover the taken-for-granted assumptions that lie behind the basic stuff of social life and interaction.

**Accountability**: The ways in which people gear their actions to specific circumstances so others will correctly recognize the actions for what they are.
those reactions still implies that the story I just told you is accountable as a joke. I meant it as a joke and you understood it as such. If I tell you a story I intended to be a joke and you stare at me blankly and wonder what the point of it was, I have failed to create an accountable joke. Doing gender as a theory assumes a deeply interactive relationship between the gender performer and the audience, because accountability is decided by both.

While sex role theory argues that gender exists internally to individuals as a set of norms and expectations, one of doing gender theory’s key insights is that it is our constant performance of gender that leads us to believe that gender has some deeper underlying reality. Like a magic act, our accomplishment of gender is powerful enough to convince us there are, in fact, natural divisions of human beings into two types—male and female, masculine and feminine, man and woman. But from the doing gender perspective, sex and gender consist only of our performances.

**ASK YOURSELF:** How does doing gender theory fit within a social constructionist perspective on gender? Based on what you know about doing gender theory, would this approach agree or disagree with sexual dimorphism?

**Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism**

If gender is a performance, how does this explain the existence of gender inequality? Those using the doing gender perspective argue that gender inequality becomes part of our performances of gender, largely through allocation. Allocation is simply the way decisions get made about who does what, who gets what and who does not, who gets to make plans, and who gets to give orders or take them (West & Fenstermaker, 1993). The doing gender perspective assumes a widespread and deeply held belief in our society that women are both different from and inferior to men.

Despite our accomplishments of gender being powerful enough to convince us there are, in fact, natural divisions of human beings into two types—male and female, masculine and feminine, man and woman. But from the doing gender perspective, sex and gender consist only of our performances.

Even those who avoided the adaptive strategy of doing masculinity felt pressured to act like men.

As a solution to gender inequality, asking women to act like men seems inadequate. Though doing gender theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction to the construction of gender, the best solutions from this theoretical perspective still lie at the level of organizations and institutions. The reason why is if one person decides not to perform his or her gender, that decision generally does not call into question the larger institutional arrangement of gender. If as a woman I stop performing an accountable version of femininity, most people will assume something is wrong with me, not with the way gender is structured in my society. Our performances of gender certainly reinforce the larger structural status quo, but we would have to change our interactions on a massive scale to significantly change the larger social structures in regard to gender.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Imagine situations in your own life that seem to demand different performances of gender. Are there situations in which you feel pressured to act in ways more or less consistent with your own gender? Can you identify any trends in the kinds of situations that seem to demand different types of gender performances?

Because of this relationship between social structures and interaction, the locations and contexts in which we stage our performances of gender are important. We can therefore alter our gender performances best by altering those environments. Though many women in criminal justice occupations feel pressure to do masculinity, this pressure is reduced in occupations characterized by an ethic of professionalization. Where women can project themselves as professionals, they can find ways to make

**Allocation:** The way decisions get made about who does what, who gets what and who does not, who gets to make plans, and who gets to give orders or take them.
femininity and competence in their jobs more compatible. Doing gender theory suggests that organizations and institutions should restructure in ways that put less pressure on women and men to perform gender.

**Conflict Theory**

If structural functionalism emphasizes the relatively smooth functioning of society, conflict theory draws our attention to the importance of struggles over power and resources in society. Most theories that fall under the conflict paradigm can trace their origins to Karl Marx and his ideas about social class. Socialist feminism, for instance, translates Marx’s theories about class oppression into a different context, arguing that the best way to understand gender relations is to see women as an oppressed social class.

Gender inequality, however, is different from social class inequality in that almost all women live intimately with their oppressors. The United States exhibits a high level of social class segregation; most people live, work, and socialize alongside people whose social class backgrounds are similar to their own. Social class segregation creates social inequality by concentrating resources geographically; poor neighborhoods have less money for schools, fewer amenities (like grocery stores), and fewer jobs available than do more affluent neighborhoods. Even if women are socially segregated within their own households, as happens in some countries, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, they still live with their male relatives. So though socialist feminists may argue that women are an oppressed social class, they are a unique kind of social class.

Radical feminism borrows from conflict theory the central idea of groups in conflict over power and resources. But rather than locating this conflict in class relationships as socialist feminists do, radical feminists see patriarchy, or male dominance, as the root of the problem. Patriarchal societies are designed in ways that quite explicitly favor men over women. Patriarchy can manifest in many ways, some subtle and some not so subtle. In many societies, parents prefer male children to female children and may abort female children or take other measures to increase their chances of having sons rather than daughters. More subtle forms of patriarchy include uses of language, such as the way the word man is often used to refer to all humanity, as in mankind. In general, patriarchal societies are characterized by androcentrism, the belief that masculinity and what men do are superior to femininity and what women do.

**Liberal feminism** posits that gender inequality is rooted in the ways institutions such as government treat men and women. When these institutions limit women’s opportunities to compete with men in economic and political arenas, they create inequality. Why should women and men be provided with equal rights? Liberal feminists assert that all humans in modern societies are entitled to a set of basic rights. Thus they base their arguments regarding inequality on the similarities between men and women: Because we are all basically the same, we all deserve the same basic rights.

**Policy Implications of Conflict Theory**

From a liberal feminist perspective, the best way to reduce gender inequality is to reduce the barriers that stand in the way of women’s advancement. Because women and men are essentially the same, once these barriers have been removed, gender inequality will gradually disappear. But as we’ve seen, from the radical feminist perspective gender inequality is explained by the prevalence of patriarchy as a defining characteristic of society. Thus merely changing a few laws here and there will not rid us of gender inequality. Instead, any effort to reduce gender inequality must involve a fairly radical restructuring of society—not just government but also educational institutions, religious institutions, the family, the media, work, and so on. (This explains why radical feminism is, in fact, radical compared to liberal feminism.)

**ASK YOURSELF:** From a radical feminist perspective, patriarchy penetrates all areas of social life. Can you think of some examples that seem to support this assertion?

Some radical feminists argue that the first step toward ending gender inequality is for women to form their own separate institutions and organizations free of male domination. For instance, radical feminist Mary Daly famously advocated

**Socialist feminism:** A version of feminist thought that employs Marxist paradigms to view women as an oppressed social class.

**Radical feminism:** A version of feminist thought that suggests gender is a fundamental aspect of the way society functions and serves as an integral tool for distributing power and resources among people and groups.

**Patriarchy:** A society characterized by male dominance.

**Androcentrism:** The belief that masculinity and what men do are superior to femininity and what women do.

**Liberal feminism:** A type of feminism that suggests men and women are essentially the same and gender inequality can be eliminated through the reduction of legal barriers to women’s full participation in society.
leaving Christianity behind as an institution deeply flawed by patriarchy. Other radical feminists have formed music festivals for women, women’s businesses, and collectives where women could live and work apart from men.

This is not to say that radical feminists do not also support changing laws; in the 1970s, many were active in efforts to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have amended the U.S. Constitution to make any discrimination on the basis of sex illegal. But radical feminists often also engage in forms of protest and consciousness-raising activities that target institutions beyond the government. Consciousness-raising is a process intended to help women see the connections between their personal experiences with gender exploitation and the larger structure and politics of society—to see sexual harassment, for instance, as a fundamental and inevitable product of the patriarchal way our society is structured, part of the way men maintain control through fear and intimidation. Consciousness-raising is at the core of the popular feminist slogan “The personal is political.”

Thus laws against sexual harassment and legislation aimed at protecting victims of domestic violence are part of the legacy of radical feminist organizing. It is difficult for many of us to imagine today, but as recently as the 1970s, it was not technically illegal in any U.S. state for a husband to physically assault or abuse his wife or children. This type of violence was considered strictly for a husband to physically assault or abuse his wife or children. This type of violence was considered strictly within the realm of the personal, and therefore not subject to public laws governing behavior. Radical feminists argued that because gender permeates all aspects of society, including the family, what happens inside the family home has very important public implications.

The laws making sexual harassment in the workplace illegal show a similar radical feminist influence because they acknowledge that merely removing legal barriers is not enough to end inequality. Many workplaces are structured in ways that make it difficult for women to occupy certain jobs; if you are the victim of constant harassment at work, just having the job does not guarantee success. Laws against sexual harassment acknowledge that sexism is part of the status quo of some work environments, or that patriarchy is built into the very fabric of our social lives.

Our final theory draws on both the social constructionist aspect of doing gender theory and the society-wide approach of radical feminism. The use of the word queer in the name of this theory is partly political, a way of refusing and rechanneling the negative connotations this word often has. But the word also fits very well with the ideological agenda of the theory. The literal dictionary meanings of queer include “not usual,” “eccentric,” and “suspicious.” A theory that is queer is therefore strange or unusual, different in some important way. It is just this type of rather eccentric and suspicious theory that queer theorists have set about to produce.

Queer theory is a hybrid perspective, and its beginnings can be traced to many different sources. Like many of the global social movements that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, the gay and lesbian rights movement began to face internal problems in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, lesbian feminists were sometimes at odds with gay men, who as men may benefit from systems of gender inequality. Women and men of color argued that the gay movement and its ideology reflected a white middle-class bias (Seidman, 1996). Questions arose about whether it was possible for one movement to represent all lesbians and gays, given the vast differences in the two groups’ experiences. Thus from the gay and lesbian rights movement and feminist movements, queer theory draws its distrust of categories of identity.

From postmodernism, queer theory borrows a distrust of grand narratives, or metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984). A metanarrative is any attempt at a comprehensive and universal explanation of some phenomenon. Science itself is a metanarrative, as it seeks to develop theories that explain the way the universe works. The problem with metanarratives is that they inevitably leave some people at the margins or attempt to force their experiences into the grand story being told. Metanarratives as claims to knowledge have power implications for those who don’t fit. If I define what it means to be a man in a certain way and you don’t fit that definition, you’re not as likely to receive the privileges that go along with being defined as a man.

So what does queer theory do with all these intellectual threads? It seeks to pull the metaphorical rug out from under our feet by pointing out that there was never any clear place to stand to begin with; the rug didn’t really exist anyway, and this is demonstrated in three basic features of queer theory.

First, queer theory is distrustful of categories related to sexuality—gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual,

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**QUEER THEORY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER**

Apply queer theory’s interdisciplinary perspective to gender inequality.

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**Consciousness-raising**: A radical feminist social movement technique designed to help women make connections between the personal and the political in their lives.

**Metanarrative**: An attempted comprehensive and universal explanation of some phenomenon.
and so on—and as a social movement it works to do away with them in their current form. The use of queer as a way of self-identifying among these groups represents an “aggressive impulse of generalization” and an attempt to disrupt conceptions of what is normal (Warner, 1993). Categories of identity, as discussed above, are incomplete and can never successfully encompass all the diversity contained within. For example, is a male-to-female post-operative transsexual who is romantically and sexually attracted to women straight or gay? What about some women in Native American cultures who live socially as men and marry other women? Native Americans don’t consider them lesbians, and whom they have sex with is much less important than the gender they are acting out (Whitehead, 1981). How can a category labeled lesbian possibly hope to take account of all these differences? Queer theory answers that it can’t. It doesn’t stop there, though. Drawing on its feminist lineage, queer theory questions categories of gender as well, because all categories have these same fundamental flaws.

One solution queer theory proposes is to think of these identity categories as always open and fluid. You might think of this second feature of queer theory as suggesting that everyone can be, and in fact already is, queer. At some point all of us—straight, gay, feminine, masculine, intersexual, transgender—fail to live up perfectly to the demands placed on us by gender and are therefore hurt by this system. Heterosexual men in Anglo-European society are not supposed to show affection toward other men except in appropriate ways and venues (the slap on the butt during a sporting event), and many would argue that forbidding expressions of affection among any group of people goes against our basic human tendencies and is a form of oppression. The straight man who hugs his male friend a little too long is likely to be sanctioned in some way for not conforming perfectly to his particular category and in this way is “let down” by the gender system. The ways categories of gender and sexuality are constructed affect all of us, regardless of where we fall within those categories. None of us conform to them perfectly, and this makes all of us “queer” in some way.

**ASK YOURSELF:** Imagine, as queer theory suggests, that categories like gender, race, and sexual orientation are thought of as open and fluid. In what concrete ways would such thinking alter society? How would it matter in your own life and experiences?

This assumption connects to the third feature of queer theory, its ambition to “queer” many features of academic and social life that are generally considered within the bounds of normality. Queer theory aspires to be not just a theory of sexuality, or even of gender and sexuality, but also a broad and far-reaching social theory (Seidman, 1996). Queer theorists believe sexuality is an important way in which knowledge and power are organized in society, and a theory of sexuality is therefore a theory of society in general. They argue that studying only gays and lesbians produces an incomplete picture of how sexuality works to produce identities such as “straight” and “gay.” For that reason, queer theory is just as concerned with studying heterosexuality as it is with studying homosexuality, and with investigating how sexual practices permeate all aspects of society. Queer studies programs look at all types of literature, not just that which focuses on gays and lesbians or is written by them, arguing that sexuality is an integral part of all cultural productions. Rather than focusing strictly on the portrayal of gays and lesbians in the media, queer theory also examines the portrayal of heterosexuality. It studies science for the ways in which it is used to create many categories of difference, rather than solely for how it applies to issues of sexuality. For queer studies, the object of study is society itself, not just sexuality.

**SOCIAL CHANGE: WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

Identify steps toward social change in gender inequality.

Much progress has been made toward reducing gender inequality on many fronts. Sociology emphasizes the structural nature of social life and draws our attention to the ways in which structural forces limit our individual choices. But emphasizing the power of structural forces in our own lives is not the same as saying those social structures cannot be changed. History tells us they do change in fairly radical ways, and all of us as individuals have the choice to either contribute to the status quo or take intentional actions to change the way things are. Change may be slow and difficult, but it is always possible. Here are a few ideas for how you might contribute to social change in the area of gender inequality.
Sylvia Rivera Law Project

“Bathroom bills” have made legal battles over transgender rights newly visible, but transgender activism and advocacy cover a broad range of concerns. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project “works to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine their gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination, or violence.” Its intersectional approach joins transgender rights to immigration and incarceration. On its website (https://srlp.org) you can learn more about its legal services and advocacy, educational programs, and training for campuses and service providers, as well as find information about trans legal rights and health care, and how trans communities of color are disproportionately affected by poverty, homelessness, deportation, and incarceration.

Malala Fund

Malala Yousafzai became a global advocate for girls’ education after she was attacked by the Taliban for speaking out about girls’ rights to attend school in Pakistan. In 2013, 1 year after being attacked, she founded the Malala Fund with her father, a teacher and education advocate. The organization’s goal is to raise awareness of the social, political, and legal issues that prevent girls from going to school; to advocate for and invest in girls’ education; and to encourage girls to speak out for their right to education. Malala Fund’s work includes education advocacy at local, national, and international levels. It also funds programs that provide schooling to girls in crisis situations, such as schools for Syrian refugee girls and radio learning courses during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone. You can learn more about these programs and how to support girls’ education worldwide at the website: www.malala.org.

The National Domestic Workers Alliance

The majority of the 2 million domestic workers—nannies, housekeepers, and home health aides—in the United States are immigrants and women of color. These workers are poorly paid and vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by their employers, even more so because they are explicitly excluded from most of the laws and regulations designed to protect workers. These women have joined together to form the National Domestic Workers Alliance (www.give2ndwa.org), fighting to...
establish and enforce legal protections for domestic work and to obtain better pay and working conditions. Since 2010, they have succeeded in getting domestic worker bill of rights laws passed in seven states.

**Techbridge**

Techbridge is an organization that seeks to help parents, educators, and organizations encourage young girls to pursue interests that might eventually lead them to high-paying STEM jobs. Its website (http://www.techbridgegirls.org) provides a wealth of information about how to encourage girls to get excited about science. Girls Who Code (girlswhocode.com) and Black Girls Code (www.blackgirlscode.com) are organizations that seek to increase the number of girls and women in computer science, by matching girls with mentors and organizing clubs, workshops, and camps to teach computer programming. Visit these sites to start thinking about how you might help create the next generation of women scientists and programmers.

**SisterSong**

SisterSong is a collective of women of color and indigenous activists organizing for reproductive justice. These activists aim to change the institutions and systems that impact the reproductive lives of marginalized communities by training, supporting, and organizing individuals and organizations working on reproductive justice and related issues. Their projects include training new reproductive justice activists, helping organizations integrate the reproductive justice framework into their own work, and advocating for policy changes that would reduce maternal mortality rates by increasing access to health care for low-income women and women of color. Learn more about reproductive justice on sistersong.net and www.trustblackwomen.org.

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**WHAT DOES AMERICA THINK?**

*Questions About Gender From the General Social Survey*

Turn to the beginning of the chapter to compare your answers to those of the total population.

1. It is better for men to work and women to tend home.
   - **Agree:** 27.5%
   - **Disagree:** 72.5%

2. Most women really want a home and kids.
   - **Agree:** 47.4%
   - **Disagree:** 52.6%

3. Women are not suited for politics.
   - **Agree:** 19.5%
   - **Disagree:** 80.5%

4. Are you for or against the preferential hiring of women?
   - **For:** 35.1%
   - **Against:** 64.9%

5. The mother working doesn’t hurt children.
   - **Agree:** 75.4%
   - **Disagree:** 24.6%

**SOURCE:** National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.
CHAPTER SUMMARY

4.1 Define gender.

Gender is the belief that there are two distinct types of people in the world—males and females—and that there are social meanings attached to those categories.

4.2 Describe gender inequality and the study of gender as a social problem.

Gender inequality is the way in which the meanings assigned to sex and gender as social categories create disparities in resources such as income, power, and status. Some argue that to make a distinction on the basis of gender is always to also assume an inequality. Others say we can keep gender as a social category without necessarily seeing women or men as better than the other. Regardless of your perspective, gender, like most social problems, is socially constructed. The particular ways in which various societies understand what gender means and how it relates to inequality vary across times and places. Some gender scholars believe sex is socially constructed as well, and that our culture affects the way we understand biological reality.

4.3 Identify gender problems on college campuses today and beyond.

Feminists and others who study gender argue that gender as a social system hurts both women and men, though often in different ways. Some boys feel pressure not to do well academically because their particular subculture defines schoolwork as feminine. However, the gender wage gap demonstrates that men still make more on average than women do around the world, even if this disparity has decreased over time. Differences between men and women in choices of college majors might be one way to explain the gender wage gap, but research suggests that women are disadvantaged in the job market by more than what they did in their college years. In some cases, the very act of dividing by gender can disadvantage people whose bodies or identities don’t match the male/female binary society expects.

4.4 Apply the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives to the problem of gender inequality.

An example of structural functionalism is sex role theory, which argues that the division of men and women into gender-specific sex roles is functional for society. Doing gender theory, an example of a symbolic interactionist approach, emphasizes how we create gender through our interactional performances. Radical feminism, borrowing from conflict theory, sees patriarchy as the root of the problem of gender inequality; when a society is built on a solid foundation of male domination, the result is that men maintain power over women.

4.5 Apply queer theory’s interdisciplinary perspective to gender inequality.

Queer theory incorporates feminism, concepts based in the gay and lesbian rights movement, and postmodernist mistrust of metanarratives to question the existence and usefulness of categories in our understanding of gender and larger social life.

4.6 Identify steps toward social change in gender inequality.

However we may understand the relationship between gender and inequality, as sociologists we know our actions contribute to and create the larger structural forces that make up society. We can choose to continue to contribute to the status quo of gender inequality and the gender system that, as Kate Bornstein says, lets all of us down at some point. Or we can make a conscious choice to help reduce gender inequality on college campuses and elsewhere around the world by becoming involved with organizations like the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, the Malala Fund, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, Techbridge, and SisterSong.
## Key Terms

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