

Social Inequality and Gender

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Theories on inequality centre around the idea of an equal distribution of goods that are considered socially valuable, and focus on deviations from this principle in the form of social inequalities. Women's disadvantages, in comparison to men's in this respect, belong to the most persistent structural features of traditional – but also of modern – societies. To make a distinction between mere differences between women and men and inequality, it is necessary to present a definition of (gender-based) inequalities which is not restricted by theoretical assumptions: "Social inequalities consist of socially-generated and stable restrictions for social groups to the access of desirable goods and life chances which are accepted in the society. To grasp gender inequalities, a specific aspect of this definition must be accentuated: These life chances include also the chance and ability to define and realise goals and life-projects in an autonomous way irrespective of their general social acceptance" (Cyba 2000, 69).

This definition is the starting point for the sociological analysis of social inequality, and also for feminist theory and research. It also makes it clear that the focus of theories of inequality concerns not only the distribution of resources and goods generally considered valuable (such as education, a good job, upward social mobility, leisure etc.). It is also necessary to investigate the attitudes, wishes and life plans, which can be realised by men and women, but may differ fundamentally between them.

I. Gender inequalities: empirical facts and tendencies

Before dealing with the theoretical explanation of inequalities, it is necessary to refer to the empirical facts and tendencies concerning the distribution of life chances between women and men. Feminist research since the 1970s has collected a vast and comprehensive amount of empirical material about nearly all aspects of discrimination and inequalities. Aspects of gender inequalities that are also relevant for theoretical analysis are summarised below.

1. Inequalities between the genders constitute a separate dimension of inequality and a pervasive principle for distribution of life chances which cannot be attributed to a single cause. Two domains are of outstanding importance: the employment system and family life. The discrimination against women within the labour market is well documented. It includes the concentration of women in lower positions (vertical segregation) and in different areas of work (horizontal segregation) – both contributing to the more or less constant differences in earnings. These inequalities constitute comprehensive tendencies, even if there are differences between countries concerning the significance of women's political organisation (Wright, Baxter, Birkelund 1995). Inequalities not only have to do with the unequal distribution of women in different work places. When they reach the same educational and employment position as men, they are then confronted with gender-specific forms of discrimination, such as barriers for promotion or allocation of activities that do not correspond to their educational background and training.

The other central aspect of inequalities between the genders concerns the role in the household or in the family. Independent from their employed position, women are much more accountable for family and housework than men (Künzler et.al. 2001; Walter, Künzler 2002). The division of labour in the family makes women responsible for children and, despite differences between countries, the role of the mother who cares for her children is still an object of ideological appraisal (Oechsle 1998). Child-care is not the only aspect of discriminatory relations or roles in private life. Daily housework and responsibility for members of the household, when combined with participation in paid work, leads to a total amount of working time which cannot be compared with the time budget of men. The unfavourable positions in employment and in the discriminatory family life are related to disadvantaged situations in other life spheres, above all to the access of leisure activities and participation in public life. The term "patriarchy," made prominent by feminist scientists, refers to the fact that discrimination against women is a pervasive principle active in nearly all spheres of life (Walby 1990).

2. One important reason for the difficulty in uncovering the pervasiveness of this discriminatory principle and the interrelation between its effects on different spheres of life is the fact that varying groups of women are affected in different ways. For example, discrimination in the case of housewives (dependency on husbands) differs from the discrimination against women who are also disadvantaged in their work outside the home. But diversified forms of inequality are also found in the work sphere. There are a multitude of disadvantages affecting women in very different ways. Despite discriminations concerning women in general, women in professional occupations are concerned with forms of inequality unlike those for than unskilled female workers. Married women integrated in a family context have to deal with other kinds of problems resulting from discrimination than single mothers do.

3. Apart from the remarkable stability of some of these inequalities, changes toward more equality can also be observed. The most important change for women took place regarding their participation in educational institutions and in equalisation by law. In the last century, important aspects of disadvantage and discrimination against women in political, legal and social areas were abolished in most of the European countries with comparable political systems, although there are still significant differences between the countries. The right to vote and the access to higher education and to universities are two examples where the women's movement and national policy had already eliminated discrimination at the beginning of the last

century. From the 1970s on, legislation dealt with the law on abortion, reformulation of family law or the ruling on names for married women. Reform in family law institutionalised equality between spouses and the concept of “partnership” as essential principles in contrast to the patriarchal spirit of previous regulations.

In the field of education, gender-specific inequalities have been reduced in a remarkable way (in the younger generations the educational level of women is almost equal with that of men and sometimes higher). This was achieved partly by state policies (for example, by extension of the higher education system, and co-education), but also by other actors (changing attitudes in parents and daughters). But there are still inequalities remaining, e.g. gender segregation in the educational system and the under-representation of women in technical studies, followed by the well-known negative consequences in the labour market.

4. Nevertheless, despite many changes in various areas, the institutionalisation of equal opportunity laws and the emphasis of policies and programmes on the equalisation of gender inequalities persist in many respects (e.g. gender segregation in the labour market, income differences and also the division of labour inside the family and partnership have not changed very much since the 1950s). Despite all differences in this respect, the situation is very similar in most of the Western European (Rubery, Fagan 1999) and Eastern European countries. Therefore, the social situation of women can be seen as determined by ambivalent tendencies: a propensity toward equalisation in many areas of life finds its limitation in the continuation of traditional division of work in families and households, combined with the persistence of traditional stereotypes.

II. Theoretical explanation of inequalities

In sociological theory from the beginning, the explanation of social inequalities was seen as one of the core tasks of class theories. According to this theoretical tradition (the most influential theories are those of Karl Marx and Max Weber), society is composed of several clearly definable major groups which are hierarchically-related to each other. This hierarchy manifests itself in unequal access to life chances in different groups and – perhaps only partially – in the development of common attitudes and social identity within these groups. Because of its importance for access to life chances, class constitutes a reference point for its members’ interpretation of the social situation, the “subjective” aspect of class. Another basic aspect is the assumption that the development of classes (and social strata) depends on the occupational structure. Put more precisely, the criterion for belonging to a certain social class is the position occupied at work, or a given feature of that position, such as control over the work of others. The argument for the centrality of work and employment is the assumption that these domains constitute the core mechanisms and functional prerequisites of society.

From the point of view of class theories, the existence of gender-based inequalities cannot be easily integrated. The discussion about these inequalities and their exclusion from mainstream theories began in the 1970s as a consequence of the women’s movement and the growing integration of feminist scientists into the academic discourse. Because class theories derive the causes of social inequalities from the employment structure (although they state the reasons for the centrality of

this structure in a different way), they cannot become aware of other and different causes of inequalities. Despite knowing the empirical facts of gender inequalities, the situation of women was not discussed in the context of theoretical considerations. From the point of view of class theories, women cannot be seen as a group in their own right, and inequalities concerning women either cannot be acknowledged at all (e.g. discrimination in the family) or they remain located on the fringe of central social processes which deal more with relations between social classes.

The first influential formulation on this to appear in class theory is by Schumpeter (1953, 158), who expressly stated that “the family, not the physical person ... is the true individual in class theory.” This position defined the direction that further sociological theory and research would take: husbands, integrated in the work sphere, determined the class status of their families as their representatives. Theories of social inequality – apparently naturally conceived as theories of class or stratification – were thus distorted from the very beginning regarding the relationship between the two genders. Social inequalities were defined with reference to the male half of the population. Women were a “remainder”, whose social position could not be explained by the central mechanisms governing the distribution of life chances, but could via additional functions (in particular the reproductive one).

Feminist scientists were the ones who made the absence of research into gender-specific discrimination within sociological theory a topic of discussion. They developed various approaches for overcoming the existing unsatisfactory theoretical solutions. The first attempt to comprehend the unequal social situation of men and women concentrated on the concept of “patriarchy”. Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and social practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (1990, 20). This concept descriptively draws attention to ways men discriminate and exploit women. It helps illuminate the unfavourable position of women in relation to men, and it unquestionably also has explanatory power concerning several inequalities, for example in the family or communicative processes.

But patriarchy fails as a general explanatory principle. It does not take into account the multiple causes which influence women’s situation. Explanation by patriarchy supposes intentional acts of suppression and the homogeneity of men. It makes the role women play in reproducing their unfavourable situation invisible. Patriarchy as a universal principle of explanation does not take into consideration the unintentional consequences of human actions or the routines of everyday life. On the other hand, it also does not differentiate between inequalities based on the explicit intention of discriminating against women and those gender-neutral inequalities where women can be replaced by other groups with still lower access to life chances (low positions in the hierarchy of work, now often occupied by foreign workers).

Because of these objections, feminist scientists tried to develop more inclusive and comprehensive approaches, which were similar in one respect: they attempted integrating gender into Marxist theory as a central category by combining the role of women and men in the productive and reproductive spheres and in the division of labour (Hartmann 1983; Beer 1990). Because of this background, they concentrated on specific social phenomena, especially the mutually-reinforcing disadvantages in work and the family. They took it for granted that there is one general explanation for all inequalities: a combination of men’s domination over women and of capitalists over workers (e.g. patriarchy and class in “feminist dualist” theories). The most

important critique of these theories is that this concept of two mutually-reinforcing discriminatory mechanisms cannot explain improvements in the situation for women in specific fields. These are areas which, up to now, have had far-reaching consequences with their participation in social life.

The attempt by some feminist theorists to define women as a class fails because of one-sided emphasis on the “objective” aspect of class, in addition to disregarding the diverse living conditions for different groups of women. The fact that the majority of women hold lower and disadvantaged positions of employment, and at the same time are responsible for house work, does not necessarily result in the formation of a homogeneous group analogous to a class, also not from an “objective” point of view to say nothing of their “subjective” attitudes and interests. Irrespective of these objections, these theories rendered a service by initiating a reorientation in sociological theory dealing with inequalities (in detail, see Gottschall 2000).

From a theoretical point of view, Wright’s work (1989) is representative of the attempt to explain discrimination against women in the context of class theory. He distinguishes between a direct and a mediated class relation. The first refers to direct access to the production sphere via employment, while the second type of relation refers to the distribution of resources resulting from employment. The mediated class relations are the ones which link class members who are not integrated into any employment with the production process via the institution of the family. In this way, gender is recognised as an autonomous influencing factor, which may modify access to life chances; however, extensive areas of gender-specific inequalities remain outside the scope of this theoretical framework. Such inequalities are, for example, hindered access to education, disadvantages regarding social interaction, control over reproductive behaviour and the power structure within the family.

Acker’s explanation (1988) has similarities with Wright’s theory, emphasising the asymmetrical distribution of power in the families from a feminist point of view. Acker identifies two autonomous origins of inequalities which cannot be attributed to each other. The distribution of resources gained through participation in the employment system is the main function of the family. The structure of this institution is determined by the dominance of men.

Work by Kreckel (1992) is a further step in the analysis of gender inequalities, integrating them both with class theory and the analysis of the political system. It proves that any kind of inequality is dependent on the power structure of society. Groups and also domains in life suffer disadvantages when they are at the periphery when it comes to allocation of power and access to dominant groups and institutions. The dominance in the class structure is only one dimension (even if an important one) of the political centre influencing the distribution of social goods. The contrast of periphery and centre makes it possible to also take into consideration the women’s movement which tries to influence unequal distributions. In this model, women are not passive victims of patriarchal power but actors in the political arena.

III. An alternative approach

The development in theory, outlined in the previous section, refers to the necessity of taking more factors into account to explain inequalities between the genders. My own

approach takes into consideration the attempts of explanation discussed so far and tries to avoid their shortcomings (Cyba 2000). The diversity of inequalities constitutes the starting point. The situation of women is not uniform throughout the individual groups of women and is manifested in different social domains. The situation in the family, in paid employment or in politics is not the same concerning the structure of inequalities, the constellation of the actors, their motives and values, and their resources. I do not want to postulate from the beginning that these different forms of inequality are caused by the same factors, but admit empirically valid explanations. The goal is to show that these inequalities have some general structures in common, though they have different causes. The frame of reference refers to this common structure.

Analysing the theories mentioned above, I worked out four criteria which must be fulfilled to explain gender-specific inequalities in particular:

1. The inequalities concerning women are a very complex social phenomenon and therefore, on the basis of theoretical assumption, no aspect of it must be excluded from analysis.
2. Gender-specific inequalities cannot be derived from the beginning from other inequalities. How much these inequalities are closely bound up with other principles of distribution is a question concerning empirical facts.
3. The theoretical explanation should be contingent and not consider only *a priori*-defined factors (e.g. patriarchy, capitalism or their combination).
4. The explanation should also be able to explain the changes in the situation of women.

Because of the open approach concerning factors causing inequalities, I prefer to speak about a frame of reference and not a theory. Its function is the transformation of a specific state of inequality through its reproduction, and therefore in the identification of the relevant groups of actors which are constitutive parts of this process. Also included are the factors influencing their motives and their actions, bringing about results unforeseen by the actors. It should give answers to the following questions: What are the reasons that social inequalities are produced and reproduced? Which groups of social actors are involved in the processes of production and reproduction? What are further conditions that can be identified for the existence of inequalities? In other words, the frame of reference demonstrates the way to get from empirically identified inequalities to the explanation of the causal factors without *a priori* assumptions.

The elements of the frame of reference are as follows:

The group of disadvantaged persons: The main characteristics are the structure of reduced access to social goods plus the structure of the group itself (more isolated individuals or a more integrated group with common identity). Because it cannot be assumed that people voluntarily accept the restriction of their life chances, their motives for accepting and their resources for improving their situation must also be taken into account. Therefore, women (and people discriminated against in general) are not only victims but also social actors; they may contribute in some way or other to their own situation and also struggle for a change in it.

The *group of discriminators*: Social inequalities are not produced and reproduced automatically, but by people who have interests in the maintenance of the situation or gain benefits from it. In addition to the structure of these groups, their specific motives and resources must be considered long with the benefits they attain.

The *social circumstances* are also relevant for the reproduction process. The actions and attitudes of all relevant groups are influenced by a multitude of social factors: shared social values, the power structure, social traditions, as well as divisions between classes and ethnic or religious groups may also influence the relevant actions. The state and government policy play a central role in shaping the conditions concerning the discrimination against social groups.

The different groups have unequal opportunities to influence state policy and realise their interests and state policy itself may be interested in e.g. anti-discrimination laws etc.

This approach ensures that the role of all groups concerned – including the role of women themselves – is taken into consideration. In the first place, it draws attention to the struggle of interests in which the social actors have different resources, life plans and access to political power. But behind this struggle there are structural constraints: the actors' ability to articulate their interests and make claims can be explained based on relatively stable constellations of the reproduction of gender inequalities which determine the position of groups in the distribution process. These constraints can be made visible, if the actions and motivations are analysed in the social context in which they are embedded.

On the basis of these considerations and summarising the empirical findings, six typical *mechanisms* (a specific constellation of actors and circumstances) can be seen which reproduce unequal distributions between the genders in different arenas (see also Reskin 2003). Different inequalities are produced by these mechanisms and the disadvantaged groups differ in many respects. Apart from historical changes they show remarkable elements of stability. In the following section, I will outline their structural characteristics.

Social closure is where inequality is maintained because of the intention of privileged groups (in respect to specific resources, e.g. education) to prevent a new distribution in the interest of the non-privileged. Representative examples are processes of professionalisation (Wetterer 2002). The explanation refers to the (real or imagined) competition between groups with different positions and resources. This mechanism has played an important role till now in in one's employment life, despite the declining differences in education. Women with the same educational background are often not accepted for the same positions as men and legal regulations concerning equal admission to positions are evaded.

Exploitation refers to a situation characterised by a clear causal relationship between the well-being of one group and the disadvantage of the other. Employers and managers are particularly interested in a cheap working force. Therefore, they use the existing hierarchical differentiation for recruiting their low paid employees. A representative example for this constellation in a gender-specific context is the situation of women workers, especially in regions with a lack or shortage of work places.

Public traditionalism concerns the maintenance of traditional boundaries between the genders by state regulations which reduce the life chances of women. Well-known examples are the denial of franchise at the beginning of the century and the denial of access to universities. Further examples are traditional abortion laws, restrictive family law and other regulations shaped by traditional ideas, as well as reducing the life chances and self-determination of women. In modern societies, men are still beneficiaries of these regulations which give them power in relation to women, both in private or in public contexts.

Private traditionalism is the result of traditional orientations which have not been institutionalised in public regulations, but are still valid in norms and dispositions to act, with unfavourable consequences for women. The most important influence concerns the socialisation and especially the educational career of girls (Rodax, Rodax 1996). Even if remarkable steps towards more equality have been made, girls are still confronted in many respects with gender stereotypes.

Asymmetric exchange means unfair criteria and measures bias the exchange system. The division of work within the household is the most important manifestation of this mechanism. Originally, this domain was dominated by traditionalism (partially supported by public regulations in family law). Today this unequal division is not legitimised by tradition but by the evaluation of the different contributions of men and women. The breadwinner model is taken as a justification for the non-participation of men in the housekeeping and allows them to maintain their privileged position in the labour market. Empirical research proves that in this field only very small changes took place compared to other domains.

Devaluation in communications is not only a means used in most of the other constellations (for example, social exclusion), but – as studies on interaction processes prove – is a strategy applied by men which has its end in itself in the feeling of superiority and dominance. This constellation is independent from specific institutional domains and can be of relevance also in situations of intimacy, in employment and in anonymous contexts.

IV. Explaining changes in gender inequalities

Because the mechanisms are based on the actions of all groups concerned, the motives and the resources available to both sides are of central interest. The resources of the discriminators are field-specific and concern financial means or disposition over social and cultural capital. In addition, there are favourable laws and the continuation of traditional customs which guarantee a privileged position for men. Because of their disadvantaged position in the particular areas, women's resources are more restricted for defending themselves against discrimination.

There are *two resources* which are of central importance for all groups of women. *First*, the capability for collective action to develop a common identity, which presupposes the homogeneity of the group. *Second*, social regulations empowering women, accepted standards of equality, and the access to powerful institutions etc. are of particular importance.

It can be shown that the most important change for women took place in "public traditionalism". In this field there has been a mobilisation of women, especially since

the 1970s. The targets were inequalities privileging men which have their roots in pre-modern societies and were maintained by the political system. One of the most important issues is the abolition of the restrictive abortion law. This was not initiated by politicians, but was effected by women voicing their interest. Not only those active in the women's movement, but a majority of women regardless of social status also claimed this right. It was the first time after the Second World War that women as a group had an active role in the political process and were accepted as political actors with their own interests. An important precondition of mobilisation was the homogeneous situation of women with clearly defined interests threatened by criminal law.

This forceful demonstration of women as a politically relevant group has had consequences up until today. From that moment on, women's interests constituted a political issue. Political parties interested in mobilising women as voters committed themselves to equality between women and men. Several studies (Cyba 2000, 234) prove that this strategy was successful: there is a tendency for groups of women to vote for parties which show concern for their interests. Consequently, women's organisations in political parties were established or given more importance in public. For the most part, these initiatives have been successful, even if there have been setbacks and much still remains to be done. Because of women's growing political self-awareness and the institutionalisation of women's policy, several changes have been realised. Prominent examples are equality in family law, promotion of women in politics and state administration.

But there are limits to political action and effects of legislation are often quite restricted. To understand the reasons, it is necessary to refer back to the mechanisms. Differences in income between men and women and the access to employment positions and professions have remained constant issues in public debates during the last twenty years. There are many initiatives to improve this; some of them are supported by state policy. Despite these initiatives, there is no efficient political instrument against the "glass ceiling", a manifestation of social closure, regardless of assorted attempts to promote women's access to higher positions and/or improve things for women in part-time work. In this respect the situation is still unsatisfactory.

An additional point to understand is the labour market and employment. Women are fragmented in several groups with specific interests; from their point of view, it is not easy to be aware of the common interests. (Working-class women deal with precarious work conditions and minimal pay; middle-class women's disadvantage results primarily from the denial of advancement.) This amalgam of interests makes it difficult for women to develop a collective identity oriented towards improvement and equality. Hence, the most important prerequisites for collective action are absent, whereas the interests of the discriminators are well-defined and organised. Company managements are interested in "cheap" labour force and they utilise social differences to attain this. Monopolisation of strategic positions or control over professional domains is in the male interest – hence, the exclusion of women. Trade unions often supported these male workers. There are not only discriminatory groups but also other groups who benefit from the situation. The weakness of women's articulation in this field and the strength of counter interests are also the cause of the half-heartedness and ambiguity of state regulations.

The “isolated” situation of women in their families and the increasingly individualised conditions of life make attempts towards collective organisation very difficult. Doing housework and honouring family duties, reconciling employment and family under disadvantageous circumstances is difficult and time-consuming. On the other hand, women themselves adopt traditionalistic norms and attitudes, thereby contributing to the transmission of gender stereotypes. The changes of traditional attitudes and the spread of universalism have certainly affected behaviour in “private” contexts, but only very modest changes can be identified in the division of housework. As for “private traditionalism”, it cannot be made a political issue in a direct sense, because educational practices in the family cannot be controlled by administrative institutions.

Despite these difficulties, problems and interests belonging to private traditionalism and asymmetric exchange have been formulated as a political agenda. There have not only been demands for state intervention to establish equality of chances in this area, but also initiatives to influence the gender-stereotypes and the employment choices of girls. These attempts have not proven successful considering general limits of political intervention in the private sphere. Apart from some important reforms against male violence in the family and the establishment of refuges for women and victims of battery, the effects of most political action are restricted in this domain, and political discussions and legal innovations are often symbolic.

Inequalities produced by the mechanism “devaluation in communication” were objects of political regulations late in the 1990s. There are now regulations concerning gender-neutral standards of behaviour toward women which have to be realised in the domain of public administration. It seems that these regulations are more or less successful, although they do not change fundamental matters. On the other hand, they especially contribute to working middle-class women’s growing consciousness of self.

Use of clear language concerning their own interests and the willingness to fight for them are necessary conditions for women when attaining access to decision making in the political system and acceptance as an interest group (although they are surely not very powerful participants). Because of the structural weakness of women in the arenas of family and paid work, political intervention is now the most important instrument for influencing the mechanisms that reproduce inequalities between women and men. It depends now to a high degree on women’s power in political institutions (which are influenced by women’s activities outside them) in what direction gender-based social inequalities will change.

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