8.4: Gender Inequality

Learning Objectives

- Understand the extent of and reasons for gender inequality in income and the workplace.
- Understand the extent of and reasons for sexual harassment.
- Explain how and why women of color experience a triple burden.
- Describe how and why sexual orientation is a source of inequality.

We have said that the women's movement changed American life in many ways but that gender inequality persists. Let's look at examples of such inequality, much of it taking the form of institutional discrimination, which, as we saw in Chapter 7 "Race and Ethnicity", can occur even if it is not intended to happen. We start with gender inequality in income and the workplace and then move on to a few other spheres of life.

Income and Workplace Inequality

In the last few decades, women have entered the workplace in increasing numbers, partly, and for many women mostly, out of economic necessity and partly out of desire for the sense of self-worth and other fulfillment that comes with work. This is true not only in the United States but also in other nations, including Japan, where views of women are more traditional than those in the United States (see the “Learning From Other Societies” box). In February 2010, 58.9% of U.S. women age 16 or older were in the labor force, compared to only 43.3% in 1970; comparable figures for men were 71.0% in 2010 and 79.7% in 1970 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Thus while women’s labor force participation continues to lag behind men’s, they have narrowed the gap. The figures just cited include women of retirement age.

When we just look at younger women, labor force participation is even higher. For example, 76.1% of women aged 35–44 were in the labor force in 2008, compared to only 46.8% in 1970.
Learning From Other Societies: Women in Japan and Norway

The United Nations Development Programme ranks nations on a “gender empowerment measure” of women’s involvement in their nation’s economy and political life. Of the 93 nations included in the measure, Norway ranks first, while Japan ranks 54th, the lowest among the world’s industrial nations (Watkins, 2007).


Japan has historically been a nation with very traditional gender expectations. As the image of the woman’s geisha role in Japan illustrates, Japanese women have long been thought to be men’s helpmates and subordinates. As Linda Schneider and Arnold Silverman (2010, p. 39) put it,


The subordination of women is built into Japanese institutions, shaping family life, education, and the economy. Women are seen as fundamentally different from men and inferior to men. Almost everyone assumes that the purpose of a woman’s life is to serve others: her children, her husband, perhaps her in-laws, the men at work.

Many more Japanese women work outside the home now than just a few decades ago and now make up almost half the labor force. However, the percentage of all management jobs held by women was just 10.1% in 2005, up only slightly from its 6.6% level in 1985. Japan’s work culture that demands 15-hour days is partly responsible for this low percentage, as it is difficult for women to meet this expectation and still bear and raise children. Another reason is outright employment discrimination. Although Japan enacted an equal opportunity law for women’s employment in 1985, the law is more symbolic than real because the only penalty it provides for violations is the publication of the names of the violators (Fackler, 2007).


In sharp contrast, Norway has made a concerted effort to boost women’s involvement in the business and political worlds (Sumer, Smithson, Guerreiro, & Granlund, 2008).

Sumer, S., Smithson, J., Guerreiro, M. d. D., & Granlund, L. (2008). Becoming working mothers: Reconciling work and family at three particular workplaces in Norway, the UK, and Portugal. Community, Work & Family, 11(4), 365–384. Like other Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) that also rank at the top of the United Nations gender empowerment measure, Norway is a social democratic welfare state characterized by extensive government programs and other efforts to promote full economic and gender equality. Its government provides day care for children and adult care for older or disabled individuals, and it also provides 44 weeks of paid parental leave after the birth of a child. Parents can also work fewer hours without losing income until their child is 2 years of age. All of these provisions mean that women are much more likely than their American counterparts to have the freedom and economic means to work outside the home, and they have taken advantage of this opportunity. As a recent analysis concluded,

It has been extremely important for women that social rights have been extended to cover such things as the caring of young children and elderly, sick and disabled members of society. In the Nordic countries, women have been more successful than elsewhere in combining their dual role as mothers and workers, and social policy arrangements are an integral part of the gender equality policy. (Kangas & Palme, 2009, p. S65)


https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Sociology_(Barkan)/08%3A_Gender_and_Gender_Inequality…

Updated: Fri, 10 Jul 2020 15:04:25 GMT
Powered by
While the United States ranks much higher than Japan on the UN’s gender empowerment measure, it ranks substantially lower than Norway and the other Nordic nations. An important reason for these nations’ higher ranking is government policy that enables women to work outside the home if they want to do so. The experience of these nations indicates that greater gender equality might be achieved in the United States if it adopted policies similar to those found in these nations that make it easier for women to join and stay in the labor force.

The Gender Gap in Income

Despite the gains women have made, problems persist. Perhaps the major problem is a gender gap in income. Women have earned less money than men ever since records started being kept (Reskin & Padavic, 2002). Reskin, B., & Padavic, I. (2002). Women and men at work (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. In the United States in the early 1800s, full-time women workers in agriculture and manufacturing earned less than 38% of what men earned. By 1885 they were earning about 50% of what men earned in manufacturing jobs. As the 1980s began, full-time women workers’ median weekly earnings were about 65% of men’s. Women have narrowed the gender gap in earnings since then: their weekly earnings now (2010) are 81.2% of men’s among full-time workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2011). Employment and earnings online. Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/opub/ee/home.htm. Still, this means that for every $10,000 men earn, women earn only about $8,120. To turn that around, for every $10,000 women earn, men earn $12,315. This gap amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime of working. Although such practices and requirements are now illegal, they still continue.

As Table 8.2 shows, this gender gap exists for all levels of education and even increases with higher levels of education. On the average, college-educated women (bachelor’s degree and higher) working full-time earn almost $18,600 less per year than their male counterparts.

Table 8.2 Median Annual Earnings of Year-Round, Full-Time Workers Aged 25–64, by Educational Attainment, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High school dropout</th>
<th>High school degree</th>
<th>Some college or associate’s degree</th>
<th>Bachelor’s degree and higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td>25,272</td>
<td>36,920</td>
<td>43,940</td>
<td>69,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td>20,176</td>
<td>28,236</td>
<td>33,176</td>
<td>51,272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Difference</strong></td>
<td>5,096</td>
<td>8,684</td>
<td>10,764</td>
<td>17,888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender gap (%; women/men)</strong></td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>74.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


What accounts for the gender gap in earnings? A major reason is sex segregation in the workplace, which accounts for up to 45% of the gender gap (Reskin & Padavic 2002). Although women have increased their labor force participation, the workplace remains segregated by gender. Almost half of all women work in a few low-paying clerical and service (e.g., waitressing) jobs, while men work in a much greater variety of jobs, including high-paying ones. Table 8.3 "Gender Segregation in the Workplace for Selected Occupations, 2009" shows that many jobs are composed primarily of women or of men. Part of the reason for this segregation is that socialization affects what jobs young men and women choose to pursue, and part of the reason is that women and men do not want to encounter difficulties they may experience if they took a job traditionally assigned to the other sex. A third reason is that sex-segregated jobs discriminate against applicants who are not the “right” sex for that job. Employers may either consciously refuse to hire someone who is the “wrong” sex for the job or have job requirements (e.g., height requirements) and workplace rules (e.g., working at night) that unintentionally make it more difficult for women to qualify for certain jobs.

Table 8.3 Gender Segregation in the Workplace for Selected Occupations, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Female workers (%)</th>
<th>Male workers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool and kindergarten teachers</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretaries and administrative assistants</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Sociology_(Barkan)/08%3A_Gender_and_Gender_Inequality…
Updated: Fri, 10 Jul 2020 15:04:25 GMT
Powered by
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Female workers (%)</th>
<th>Male workers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dental hygienists</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech-language pathologists</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered nurses</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food servers (waiters/waitresses)</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicians</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>67.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentists</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>69.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer software engineers</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>79.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricians</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>97.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenters</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>98.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This fact raises an important question: why do women’s jobs pay less than men’s jobs? Is it because their jobs are not important and require few skills (recalling the functional theory of stratification discussed in Chapter 6 “Social Stratification”)? The evidence indicates otherwise: women’s work is devalued precisely because it is women’s work, and women’s jobs thus pay less than men’s jobs because they are women’s jobs (Magnusson, 2009). Magnusson, C. (2009). Gender, occupational prestige, and wages: A test of devaluation theory. *European Sociological Review, 25*(1), 87–101.

Studies of comparable worth support this argument (Stone & Kuperberg, 2005; Wolford, 2005). Stone, P., & Kuperberg, A. (2005). Anti-discrimination vs. anti-poverty? A comparison of pay equity and living wage reforms. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy, 27*(5), 23–39. doi:10.1300/J501v27n03_3; Wolford, K. M. (2005). Gender discrimination in employment: Wage inequity for professional and doctoral degree holders in the United States and possible remedies. *Journal of Education Finance, 31*(1), 82–100. Retrieved from [http://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/jef.html](http://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/jef.html) Researchers rate various jobs in terms of their requirements and attributes that logically should affect the salaries they offer: the importance of the job, the degree of skill it requires, the level of responsibility it requires, the degree to which the employee must exercise independent judgment, and so forth. They then use these dimensions to determine what salary a job should offer. Some jobs might be “better” on some dimensions and “worse” on others but still end up with the same predicted salary if everything evens out.

When researchers make their calculations, they find that certain women’s jobs pay less than men’s even though their comparable worth is equal to or even higher than the men’s jobs. For example, a social worker may earn less money than a probation officer, even though calculations based on comparable worth would predict that a social worker should earn at least as much. The comparable worth research demonstrates that women’s jobs pay less than men’s jobs of comparable worth and that the average working family would earn several thousand dollars more annually if pay scales
were reevaluated based on comparable worth and women paid more for their work.

Even when women and men work in the same jobs, women often earn less than men (Sherrill, 2009). Sherrill, A. (2009). Women’s pay: Converging characteristics of men and women in the federal workforce help explain the narrowing pay gap. Washington, DC: United States Government Accountability Office. and men are more likely than women to hold leadership positions in these occupations. Census data provide ready evidence of the lower incomes women receive than men even in the same occupations. For example, female marketing and sales managers earn only 68% of what their male counterparts earn; female human resource managers earn only 68% of what their male counterparts earn; female claims adjusters earn only 83%; female accountants earn only 72%; female elementary and middle school teachers earn only 90%; and even female secretaries and clerical workers earn only 86% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2008). Highlights of women’s earnings in 2007. Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. When variables like number of years on the job, number of hours worked per week, and size of firm are taken into account, these disparities diminish but do not disappear altogether, and it is very likely that sex discrimination (conscious or unconscious) by employers accounts for much of the remaining disparity.


Some of the sex discrimination in employment reflects the existence of two related phenomena, the glass ceiling and the glass escalator. Women may be promoted in a job only to find they reach an invisible “glass ceiling” beyond which they cannot get promoted, or they may not get promoted in the first place. In the largest U.S. corporations, women constitute only about 16% of the top executives, and women executives are paid much less than their male counterparts (Jenner & Ferguson, 2009). Jenner, L., & Ferguson, R. (2009). 2008 catalyst census of women corporate officers and top darners of the FP500. New York, NY: Catalyst. Although these disparities stem partly from the fact that women joined the corporate ranks much more recently than men, they also reflect a glass ceiling in the corporate world that prevents qualified women from rising up above a certain level (Hymowitz, 2009). Hymowitz, C. (2009, May 1). For executive women, it can be lonely at the top. Forbes. Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/2009/05/01/exe...r-careers.html Men, on the other hand, can often ride a “glass escalator” to the top, even in female occupations. An example is seen in elementary school teaching, where principals typically rise from the ranks of teachers. Although men constitute only about 20% of all public elementary school teachers, they account for about 44% of all elementary school principals (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). The condition of education. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2007...ndicator34.asp
Figure 8.15: Women constitute only about 16% of the top executives in the largest U.S. corporations, and women executives are paid much less than their male counterparts. These disparities reflect a “glass ceiling” that limits women’s opportunities for promotion.© Thinkstock


The term feminization of poverty refers to the fact that female-headed households are especially likely to be poor. The gendering of poverty in this manner is one of the most significant manifestations of gender inequality in the United States.

### Sexual Harassment

Another workplace problem (including schools) is sexual harassment, which, as defined by federal guidelines and legal rulings and statutes, consists of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or physical conduct of a sexual nature used as a condition of employment or promotion or that interferes with an individual’s job performance and creates an intimidating or hostile environment.

Although men can be, and are, sexually harassed, women are more often the targets of sexual harassment, which is often considered a form of violence against women (discussed a little later in this chapter). This gender difference exists for at least two reasons, one cultural and one structural. The cultural reason centers on the depiction of women and the socialization of men. As our discussion of the mass media and gender socialization indicated, women are still depicted in our culture as sexual objects who exist for men’s pleasure. At the same time, our culture socializes men to be sexually assertive. These two cultural beliefs combine to make men believe that they have the right to make verbal and physical advances to women in the workplace. When these advances fall into the guidelines listed here, they become sexual harassment.

The second reason that most targets of sexual harassment are women is more structural. Reflecting the gendered nature of the workplace and of the educational system, typically the men doing the harassment are in a position of power over the women they harass. A male boss harasses a female employee, or a male professor harasses a female...
student or employee. These men realize that subordinate women may find it difficult to resist their advances for fear of reprisals: a female employee may be fired or not promoted, and a female student may receive a bad grade.


Figure 8.16: Sexual harassment in the workplace is a common experience. In surveys of women employees, up to two-thirds of respondents report being sexually harassed. © Thinkstock

Sexual harassment cases continue to make headlines. In one recent example, the University of Southern Mississippi paid $112,500 in September 2009 to settle a case brought by a women’s tennis graduate assistant against the school’s women’s tennis coach; the coach then resigned for personal reasons (Magee, 2009). Magee, P. (2009, September 22). USM settles with ex-student. *Hattiesburg American*. Retrieved from [http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/hattiesb...866160481.html](http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/hattiesb...866160481.html)? That same month, the CEO of a hospital in Washington State was reprimanded after a claim of sexual harassment was brought against him, and he was also fired for unspecified reasons (Mehaffey, 2009). Mehaffey, K. C. (2009, September 15). Chelan hospital board fires CEO. *The Wenatchee World*. Retrieved from
Women of Color: A Triple Burden

Earlier we mentioned multicultural feminism, which stresses that women of color face difficulties for three reasons: their gender, their race, and, often, their social class, which is frequently near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. They thus face a triple burden that manifests itself in many ways.

For example, women of color experience "extra" income inequality. Earlier we discussed the gender gap in earnings, with women earning 80.2% of what men earn, but women of color face both a gender gap and a racial/ethnic gap. Table 8.4 "The Race/Ethnicity and Gender Gap in Annual Earnings for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers, 2010" depicts this double gap for full-time workers. We see a racial/ethnic gap among both women and men, as African Americans and Latinos of either gender earn less than whites, and we also see a gender gap between men and women, as women earn less than men within any race or ethnicity. These two gaps combine to produce an especially high gap between African American and Latina women and white men: African American women earn only 68.9% of what white men earn, and Latina women earn only 60.2% of what white men earn (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).


Table 8.4 The Race/Ethnicity and Gender Gap in Annual Earnings for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual earnings ($)</th>
<th>Percentage of white male earnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>44,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>32,916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>26,416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>35,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>30,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>26,416</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Median yearly earnings derived from median weekly earnings × 52 weeks.


These differences in income mean that African American and Latina women are poorer than white women. We noted earlier that about 31% of all female-headed families are poor. This figure masks race/ethnic differences among such families: 21.5% of families headed by non-Latina white women are poor, compared to 40.5% of families headed by
African American women and also 40.5% of families headed by Latina women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). While white women are poorer than white men, African American and Latina women are clearly poorer than white women.

Sexual Orientation and Inequality

A recent report by a task force of the American Psychological Association stated that “same-sex sexual and romantic attractions, feelings, and behaviors are normal and positive variations of human sexuality” (Glassgold et al., 2009, p. v). Glassgold, J. M., Beckstead, L., Drescher, J., Greene, B., Miller, R. L., & Worthington, R. L. (2009). Report of the American Psychological Association task force on appropriate therapeutic responses to sexual orientation. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. A majority of Americans do not share this opinion. In the 2008 General Social Survey, 52% of respondents said that “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” is “always wrong.” Although this figure represents a substantial decline from the survey’s 1973 finding of 74%, it is clear that many Americans remain sharply opposed to homosexuality. Not surprisingly, then, sexual orientation continues to be the source of much controversy and no small amount of abuse and discrimination directed toward members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community.

These individuals experience various forms of abuse, mistreatment, and discrimination that their heterosexual counterparts do not experience. In this respect, their sexuality is the source of a good deal of inequality. For example, gay teenagers are very often the targets of taunting, bullying, physical assault, and other abuse in schools and elsewhere that sometimes drives them to suicide or at least to experience severe emotional distress (Denizet-Lewis, 2009). Denizet-Lewis, B. (2009, September 27). Coming out in middle school. The New York Times Magazine, p. MM36ff. In 38 states, individuals can be denied employment or fired from a job because of their sexual orientation, even though federal and state laws prohibit employment discrimination for reasons related to race and ethnicity, gender, age, religious belief, and national origin. And in 45 states as of April 2010, same-sex couples are legally prohibited from marrying. In most of these states, this prohibition means that same-sex couples lack hundreds of rights, responsibilities, and benefits that spouses enjoy, including certain income tax and inheritance benefits, spousal insurance coverage, and the right to make medical decisions for a partner who can no longer communicate because of disease or traumatic injury (Gerstmann, 2008). Gerstmann, E. (2008). Same-sex marriage and the Constitution (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Household Inequality

We will talk more about the family in Chapter 11 "The Family", but for now the discussion will center on housework. Someone has to do housework, and that someone is usually a woman. It takes many hours a week to clean the bathrooms, cook, shop in the grocery store, vacuum, and do everything else that needs to be done. The best evidence indicates that women married to or living with men spend two to three times as many hours per work on housework as men spend (Gupta & Ash, 2008). Gupta, S., & Ash, M. (2008). Whose money, whose time? A nonparametric approach to modeling time spent on housework in the United States. Feminist Economics, 14(1), 93–120. This disparity holds true even when women work outside the home, leading sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1989) Hochschild, A. (1989). The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home. New York, NY: Viking. to observe in a widely cited book that women engage in a “second shift” of unpaid work when they come home from their paying job.
The good news is that gender differences in housework time are smaller than a generation ago. The bad news is that a large gender difference remains. As one study summarized the evidence on this issue, “women invest significantly more hours in household labor than do men despite the narrowing of gender differences in recent years” (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000, p. 196). Bianchi, S. M., Milkie, M. A., Sayer, L. C., & Robinson, J. P. (2000). Is anyone doing the Housework? Trends in the gender division of household labor. Social Forces, 79(1), 191–228. In the realm of household work, then, gender inequality persists.

Conclusion

- Among full-time workers, women earn about 79.4% of men’s earnings. This gender gap in earnings stems from several factors, including sex segregation in the workplace and the lower wages and salaries found in occupations that involve mostly women.
- Sexual harassment results partly from women’s subordinate status in the workplace and may involve up to two-thirds of women employees.
- Women of color may face a “triple burden” of difficulties based on their gender, their race and ethnicity, and their social class.
- Sexual orientation continues to be another source of inequality in today’s world. Among other examples of this inequality, gays and lesbians are prohibited from marrying in most states in the nation.

For Your Review

1. Do you think it is fair for occupations dominated by women to have lower wages and salaries than those dominated by men? Explain your answer.
2. If you know a woman who works in a male-dominated occupation, interview her about any difficulties she might be experiencing as a result of being in this sort of situation.
3. Write a short essay in which you indicate whether you think same-sex marriage should be legal and provide the reasoning for the position you hold on this issue.