8.S: Gender and Gender Inequality (Summary)

Summary

1. Sex is a concept that refers to biological differences between females and males, while gender is a concept that refers to a society’s expectations of how females and males should think and behave. To the extent that women and men and girls and boys are different, it’s essential to determine how much of these differences stems from the biological differences between the sexes.

2. In understanding gender differences, scholars continue to debate the value of biological explanations. Biological explanations centering on evolution, natural selection, and hormonal differences are provocative but ultimately imply that gender differences are inevitable and that the status quo must be maintained. In contrast, cultural and socialization explanations imply some hope for changing gender roles and for reducing gender inequality. Anthropologists find gender similarities across cultures that probably reflect the biological differences between the sexes, but they also find much cultural variation in gender roles that underscores the importance of culture and socialization for understanding gender.

3. Many studies emphasize that socialization leads children in the United States to adopt the gender roles associated with femininity and masculinity. Parents view and interact with their daughters and sons differently, and children continue to learn their gender roles from their peers, schools, the mass media, and religion.

4. Feminism refers to the belief that women should be equal to men. With feminism defined in this way, many more people hold feminist beliefs than might be willing to admit to it. The feminist movement began during the pre-Civil War abolitionist period and eventually won women the right to vote. Its reemergence in the late 1960s has changed many aspects of American life. Since then support for traditional gender roles has declined dramatically in national surveys. Several variables, including education, are associated with a feminist outlook, but, surprisingly, women are not consistently more likely than men to support feminist beliefs.

5. Gender inequality in the workplace is manifested through the gender gap in earnings and through sexual harassment. Women earn less than 75% of what men earn. Several reasons account for this gap, including sex segregation in the workplace, the devaluing of women’s work, and outright sex discrimination by employers. Sexual harassment against women is quite common and stems from cultural beliefs about women’s and men’s
roles and structural differences in the workplace in power between women and men.

6. Gender inequality also exists in the household in the extent to which women and men perform housework. Women perform much more housework than men, even when they also work outside the home. Although some studies show that men perform more housework than they used to, recent evidence suggests that men are merely exaggerating the amount of housework they now perform by giving socially desirable responses to questions about their housework.

7. Although women have made great gains in the world of politics in the United States, they still lag behind men in the extent to which they occupy legislative seats. This extent is higher in the United States than in many other countries, but lower than in many nations in Europe and elsewhere.

8. Women of color experience a triple burden based on their gender, race and ethnicity, and social class. Even though white women earn less money and are poorer than white men, women of color earn less money and are poorer than white women.

9. Violence against women is another manifestation of gender inequality. Research shows that up to one-third of U.S. women will be raped or sexually assaulted and that about 70%–80% of their assailants will be men they know. Cultural beliefs and structural differences in power explain why rape occurs. Pornography is often considered another type of violence against women, but questions continue over the definition of pornography and over whether it does indeed promote rape and other forms of antiwoman violence. Efforts to combat pornography may run afoul of First Amendment protections for freedom of speech.

10. In a patriarchal society men enjoy privileges just for being male, whether or not they recognize these privileges. At the same time, men also experience disadvantages, including violent behavior and victimization and higher rates of certain emotional problems than those experienced by women.

Using Sociology

You are helping to organize a Take Back the Night march similar to the one mentioned in the news story about the University of Missouri-Columbia that began this chapter. Naturally you tell all your friends about it and urge them to participate in the march. But two of them, one woman and one man, say they don’t really think there is a need for the march. When you ask them why, they say that many women who claim to have been raped were dressed too provocatively or really wanted to have sex but then changed their minds. How do you respond to your friends?