



## How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World

Cecilia L. Ridgeway, Stanford University

In the United States as in many other societies, gender relationships are changing and inequalities between men and women are questioned in virtually every sphere – at work, in the home, and in public affairs. Yet the cold, hard facts show that gender gaps and inequalities persist, even in the face of startling social and economic transformations and concerted movements to challenge women’s subordination.

How can this be? Especially in advanced industrial nations, why are gender inequalities proving so difficult to surpass? My research shows that the answers lie, above all, in how people think about gender as they relate to one another. Day by day people use gender as taken-for-granted common sense to manage their relationships with others. Interpersonal negotiations are constantly influenced by gender stereotypes – and that, in turn, causes older ways of thinking about men and women and their relationships to be carried into all spheres of life and even into very new kinds of tasks and social settings.

### Continuing Gender Inequalities in the United States

There can be little doubt that gender inequality does still persist in the United States, as some striking facts make clear:

- Women still make only about 80% of what men earn for full time work.
- Women are less likely to hold managerial or supervisory positions, and when they do, their positions carry less authority.
- “Housewives” are perceived as in the lower half of all groups in social status, below “blue collar workers.”
- Even when both partners earn wages, women do twice as much housework and child care.
- To be sure, American women have made substantial gains since 1970. But gains have leveled off since the 1990s, suggesting that the gender revolution may be stalling – or at least slowing down.

### Making Sense of Persistent Gender Inequality

The persistence of gender inequality in the face of modern legal, economic, and political processes that work against it suggests that there must also be on-going social processes that continually recreate gender inequality. I have pulled together evidence from sociology, psychology, and the study of social cognition – how people perceive the social world – to develop an explanation of *how* gender differences and hierarchies

function and end up being recreated again and again.

Research shows that widely shared gender stereotypes act as a “common knowledge” cultural frame that people use to begin the process of relating to one another and coordinating their interaction. That might seem obvious – and harmless. So what if people start out by classifying each other by gender and shaping their mutual contacts accordingly? As it turns out, the use of gender as an initial framing device in personal interactions has many unintended consequences, because gendered meanings get carried far beyond areas of life having directly to do with sex or reproduction. Social scientists and other observers have amassed lots of evidence showing that stereotypes and assumptions about men and women shape everyday personal interactions and shape gender inequalities in jobs, wages, authority, and family responsibilities.

Men, for example, tend to be seen as more authoritative and women more communal in orientation. In workplaces, this can readily lead people to expect and defer to men in charge – and to look to women to carry on routine group maintenance efforts. Studies show that in job interviews where men and women have the same qualifications, one gender gets more offers according to traditional assumptions about gender proclivities.

## How People Approach New Situations

Similar social-psychological and interpersonal processes help explain how past gender relationships live on into the future, as older ideas and assumptions about men, women, and their relationships end up being used by everyone to shape new economic and social arrangements as they emerge. As research shows, “common knowledge” gender stereotypes change more slowly than do material arrangements between men and women, even though social beliefs do eventually respond to material changes. As a result of this cultural lag, people confront new, uncertain circumstances with traditional gender beliefs, especially because sites of innovation tend to be small and located outside established organizations. Ironically, both the uncertainty and the personal closeness of such innovative settings increase the likelihood that participants will draw on the convenient cultural frames to organize new ways of doing things.

In high-tech startups in Silicon Valley, for example, female scientists and engineers have been shown to be at a special disadvantage in small firms launched with a non-bureaucratic organizational culture. Small groups of men working flexibly and collegially often launch such ventures, which end up prospering in the marketplace. Without anyone consciously intending it, even very highly qualified women can be left to the side – and they are unlikely to make up ground as long as its original “boys’ club” atmosphere and assumptions about the kinds of people most likely to be innovative and high-achieving persist in the organization’s outlook and ways of attracting and promoting people. High-tech is not only innovative but male-dominated.

## Are Gender Inequities Impossible to Overcome?

Once we understand how powerful everyday gender assumptions can be in shaping ongoing social relationships in all spheres, we better understand why gender inequalities are so difficult to overcome. Gender equality is not impossible to attain – but the struggle is constant and is sure to have ups and downs. My research also suggests that the fight for gender equality will have to be waged at the level of how people think, even as laws and institutional policies open new doors. Our assumptions about what women and men can and should do have a long way to catch up with the new possibilities created by education, economic innovation, and equal legal rights.

Read more in Cecilia L. Ridgeway, *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2011).