

Chapter 42

Gender Equality and Inequality: From the Foundations of Feminism to the Modern #MeToo Movement

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality remains a significant issue for social justice activists across the globe. It affects people of all ages at home, in school, and in the workplace—in micro-level interactions and through macro-level social structures. The purpose of this chapter is to familiarize readers with the terms and concepts necessary to understand the causes and consequences of gender inequality. The chapter begins by outlining key terms related to gender equality and inequality. It then goes on to provide a historical and theoretical overview of the main frameworks utilized by feminist scholars and activists in the struggle for equal rights before offering suggestions for the utility of a feminist lens in any social justice toolbox.

INTRODUCTION

Quick—off the top of your head—generate a list of the five most significant, influential, or important people in world history. Ready? Go. Do you have your list? Who made the cut? Who did not? If you are like most people, the majority of the names on your list are men. Why? Where are the women?

Scholars have a word for this phenomenon: *androcentrism*. Androcentrism posits men as the gender-neutral standard, centering male practices and the masculine perspective and treating women's practices and perspectives as deviations from the norm, thereby relegating them to the periphery (Bailey, LaFrance, & Davidio, 2018; Gilman, 1911; Hegarty & Buechel, 2006).

Androcentrism is a symptom of *gender inequality*, a social problem that occurs in societies that privilege the contributions, experiences, and perspectives of one group of people on the basis of gender, while ignoring or minimizing the contributions, experiences, and perspectives of others. It affects people at home and at school, in relationships and in the workplace. It is reflected in statistics on campus sexual assault, disturbing disparities in pay, and attempts at limiting access to health care (Glauber, 2018; Khan,

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Hirsch, Wamboldt, & Mellins, 2018; Manuel, 2018). These unequal processes are created by—and in turn perpetuate—larger cultural, economic, and political structures. While there is a long history of gender inequality in the United States (U.S.), there is also a corresponding history of social movements that have challenged—and continue to challenge—these limiting structures.

In the U.S., the field of *women's studies* emerged as a discipline during the 1970s as the academic arm of second wave feminism (Luebke & Reilly, 1995). Students and scholars across disparate fields of study began to ask questions about the role of women writers, musicians, artists, and activists, and about the social, cultural, economic, and political structures that shaped women's lives (Tobias, 1978). Drawing from a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, women's studies thus emerged as an intentionally interdisciplinary academic domain, drawing on the work of scholars in a broad range of fields.

Women's studies courses were the first to focus principally on women's experiences, perspectives, and contributions. A basic premise of women's studies as an academic discipline was and is that any explanation about the world is incomplete if it does not include an adequate understanding of women's lives and a full recognition of their contributions (Kesselman, McNair, & Schniedewind, 2012). While scholarship is traditionally thought of as an individual practice focused on publishing research, women's studies emphasizes the interconnection and overlap of scholarship, activism, and teaching (Maynard, 2017; Nash & Owens, 2015). This holistic paradigm challenges many traditional assumptions and theories about women that have excluded them from positions of power. It also challenges the dominant assumption that human experience equals male experience.

The closely related field of gender studies emerged in response to overwhelming trends in the U.S. and across the globe addressing the construction of masculinity, the realities of gender fluidity, and the recognition and inclusion of people across the gender spectrum (Kesselman et al., 2012). It examines the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, connecting our politics and culture to fixed and restrictive binaries and the institutions and structures that foster them.

Understanding gender equality and inequality necessitates studying the world through a feminist lens. While popular media has often vilified what has been labeled the “other ‘f’ word,” feminism is not a dirty word (Bauer, 1990). It is simultaneously a political philosophy; a theoretical framework; and a historical and contemporary social justice movement (Kesselman et al., 2012). This chapter will provide a brief overview of the history of feminisms (yes, there is more than one kind of feminism!) and outline some of the ways in which that history has contributed to national and global efforts at eliminating gender inequality and creating a more just and egalitarian world. Upon completion of this chapter, readers should be able to:

1. Define feminism and distinguish between different feminist approaches.
2. Explain how gender intersects with other identities.
3. Describe current issues affecting gender equality and inequality.

Sex, Gender, and Feminism

For a long time, people believed that differences between men and women were natural, rooted in biology, and fixed, but in the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. scholars began paying attention to the difference between sex and gender, arguing that anatomical and physiologic differences between males and females had unfairly been used to justify men's and women's unequal social roles (Ferber, Holcomb, & Wentling, 2017). The

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