The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior

Gender Bias

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior

Chapter Title: "Gender Bias"

Pub. Date: 2017

Access Date: June 6, 2017

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781483391168

Online ISBN: 9781483391144

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n147>

Print pages: 319-322

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Gender bias is a social preference for, and positive behavior toward, people of one gender over another. Gender bias can appear as subtle or obvious, conscious or unconscious. It is visible in individual actions, thoughts, and beliefs, but not limited to the individual. Gender bias must be understood as embedded in social life and institutions, such as the family, workplaces, schools, and political institutions. This entry provides an overview of gender bias, with a particular focus on how it materializes in economic, educational, and political institutions and changes over time.

Overview

Gender bias most often involves giving preference to men over women. It can be subtle or explicit. For instance, an individual may hold the biased belief that women are not suited to senior government positions because women “intrinsically” lack the political leadership skills men are assumed to have. A person holding this belief may never voice this opinion explicitly, but he or she may consistently perceive and reward the actions of men more favorably than women.

Gender bias can be written very explicitly into laws governing property, work, family relations, reproductive rights, and more. It took the better part of the 20th century for feminist movements to secure full voting rights in most of the world’s nations. Legal barriers preventing women from political participation and realizing the same opportunities and careers as men appear to be diminishing; however, inequalities persist in practice.

Men hold more than three quarters of seats in parliaments across the world. When political parties do promote women to ministerial positions, most often women take up portfolios like social services and education—arenas traditionally understood as “feminine” and less senior than portfolios like defense or finance. Unpaid household labor is still more frequently performed by women than men. In every national labor force, women’s wages are considerably lower than men’s. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates the gender wage gap in the United States is 36%, 32% in Russia, and 19% across Europe. But there are some countries with lower gaps, such as Germany (7%), Slovenia (6%), and Sweden (8%).

Because gender bias is associated with the social production of gender inequalities, it is important to understand how gender bias materializes in practice.

Gender Relations

The term *gender* is undefined in many discussions of gender bias; however, it is important to consider its meaning before investigating how bias manifests. The commonsense definition of *women* and *men* is part of the meaning of gender, but these social categories must be understood in terms of social relationships. Gender is not a simple reflection of natural sex difference. Becoming a woman or a man is the product of a social process, and huge amounts of energy go into shaping gendered behavior in families, schools, sports fields, workplaces, and other contexts.

In the 1970s, the term *sex role* (later, *gender role*) came into common use to describe the social norms defining appropriate behavior for women and men. Social role theories and other socialization models of gender assume a one-dimensional transfer of normative ideals to gender development. However, developing a gender identity can involve a number of different

trajectories, often ambiguities and contradictions over one's lifetime. In addition, there are important differences *within* the categories of men and women. During the 1980s and 1990s, social researchers found multiple forms of masculinity and showed that gender hierarchies exist among men, as well as between men and women. The term *intersectionality* was also developed to describe how gender is coconstituted with inequalities of class, race, sexuality, disability, age, and so on, establishing that multiple gendered social positions exist.

Raewyn Connell defines *gender* as a multidimensional structure of relations that organizes individual and collective action. Through these relations, reproductive bodies (male and female) become part of social life, as the "men" and "women" of our everyday experience. Gender relations are enacted in everyday life, in individual habits, conduct, and speech; they also form a large-scale structure that organizes economies, states, and communication. Gender is both symbolic and material; it is revealed in the uneven division of labor and resources between women and men and in the normative representations ascribing difference in ability, desires, behavior, and traits to men and women.

Gender Bias and Discrimination

Gender bias and gender discrimination are overlapping, but distinct, concepts. Both terms refer to behavior that involves the unfavorable treatment of women or men because of their gender. The conceptual focus of gender discrimination is barriers to women's full participation in social, economic, and political activity. Gender bias extends more widely and is often used to describe the motivational, normative, and cultural dimensions of gender inequalities of all kinds.

Gender discrimination takes many forms including sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination, and unequal pay for women and men doing the same work. The concept of gender discrimination has been enacted as a political and legal principle. In response to the international feminist movement, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a new convention in 1979. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) defines discrimination against women as

any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

CEDAW and national equal opportunity laws have been successfully achieved in many countries across the world. Feminists working in a liberal political framework pushed for these reforms, arguing that gender discrimination was motivated by "false beliefs" that women are less capable than men. Feminists commonly argued that it was irrational to exclude women from senior roles in economic and political organizations; it simply didn't make sense to underutilize half of the population. Organizational measures are intended to remove barriers to women's advancement.

This interpretation of gender discrimination does not fully capture the problem. Gender discrimination is not simply a matter of irrationality or false beliefs. Rather, there are multiple dimensions to gender relations and the exclusion of women from the opportunities afforded to men. *Gender bias*, as a more general term than gender discrimination, must be understood as embedded in social practice and organizations.

Gender Bias, Organizations, and Change

Gender bias is not purely a psychological state; it is a social and political phenomenon expressed through relationships. Following Connell's approach to gender, we can identify gender bias in four key dimensions of life:

1. Gendered divisions of labor—for example, gendering of occupations, paid and unpaid work
2. Gendered relations of power—for example, forms of authority, control, and force
3. Emotions and human relations—for example, gendered attachments and conflicts
4. Gender culture and symbolism—for example, in language and symbols of gender difference

To illustrate gender bias in practice, the following sections present evidence from studies of work and political life.

Workplaces

Gender bias influences the recruitment of workers, interpersonal relations in workplaces, wage levels, and career trajectories. Women are more likely than men to be concentrated in the informal sectors of the global economy, where their work is precarious, poorly paid, and often dangerous. Globally, racial hierarchies and class distinctions coconstitute the gendered organization of work, shaping workplace masculinities and femininities.

Gender bias is visible in many aspects of work life. Joan Acker famously argued that organizations are inherently, not accidentally, gendered. Workplaces involve gendered divisions of labor (e.g., women disproportionately represented in administrative roles), symbols and images that confirm or express gender divisions (e.g., dresses and suits), and interactions between men and women that enact dominance and subordination (e.g., setting agendas, frequent interruptions).

Importantly, gender bias is often subtle and difficult to pinpoint. Patricia Yancey Martin found that unintentional gendering goes on in workplaces; for instance, unsolicited help given by men to women reflects a paternalistic masculinity and stereotype that women “need rescuing.” Cultural and symbolical practices produce and reproduce gender bias in organizations, but they do change over time. Gender difference at work is dynamic and created through what Silvia Gherardi and Barbara Poggio call a kind of “dance” of alignment, based on power relations involving men and women. As women enter management roles, there is a process of adjustment and compromise over change to the gender order, which included women avoiding competition with men.

Changing economic dynamics have produced gender biases in favor of women's employment in some arenas. In many parts of the world, economic restructuring has destroyed male-dominated heavy industry or public sector employment, leading to greater workforce participation for women and changed family dynamics. In developing nations, women have been recruited as industrial workers in large numbers, targeted by factory recruiters because of their “traditional” sewing skills and assumed timidity. Economic change can have contrasting effects on different groups of women. For instance, Sonia Montecino found that economic liberalization in Chile favored middle- and upper-class women entering professional employment; however, this shift is enabled through the growth of poorly paid and precarious

feminized domestic work performed by much poorer women.

Education Institutions

Education in general, and schools in particular, have become both sites of persistent gender bias and crucial sources of gender equality in recent generations. Schools and universities reflect gendered social divisions. For instance, men tend to do most of the teaching of trades, computer technology, and sciences, and women tend to work teaching early childhood education and humanities. Course materials tend to reflect gender biases and normative assumptions about men and women, girls and boys.

The gender biases producing inequalities in education, however, have relaxed markedly in recent decades. There has been a worldwide increase in school participation, literacy, and access to advanced education for women and girls. Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi and Valentine Moghadam found this to be the case in North Africa and the Middle East, though gender inequality continues. In their in-depth study of education in postwar England, Madeleine Arnot, Miriam David, and Gaby Weiner found unprecedented shifts such as the near elimination of gender differences in school participation and retention.

The 2003 UNESCO report *Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality* demonstrated the strong global shift toward numerical parity in schooling for girls and boys, especially in primary education. However, numerical parity is not the same as gender equality in curricular and teaching practices, education outcomes, and relations within educational institutions. Gender bias that reinforces inequality can be found in multiple social phenomena, including social expectations about education and employment, family decisions that privilege the interests of boys over girls in education, girls' household labor and care obligations, pregnancy or early marriage, violence in society and in schools, sexism in the curriculum, prohibitive costs, limited access to education, and more.

Governments and Political Life

Women's absence from the most important political institutions (parliaments, Congress in the United States) is a strong signal of gender bias in political life. In no country do women hold 50% of seats in a parliament or congress. However, there is change afoot. The world average number of women in parliaments has increased from 10% in 1995 to 21% in 2014. Since Sri Lanka elected Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1960, more than 70 women have been elected as prime ministers or presidents. Developing countries have led the way with first women heads of state in elected governments.

Bias toward masculine political culture persists even with women's greater participation in political life. Commonsense understandings of politics and standards for evaluating performance tend to reflect masculine norms and values. For instance, *political success* continues to be defined as a competition to define "winners and losers," not collaboration. The intensity and working hours demanded of politicians is biased toward individuals without caring responsibilities, which works against women who still do the majority of care work at home.

Removing barriers to political life is important because state policies reinforce gender inequalities, for instance through biased laws governing families, divorce, reproductive rights, and property rights. In practice, campaigns for reform take a long time, with uneven results. For instance, across the 1980s and 1990s, it was the Brazilian military that legalized divorce,

and Pinochet's government in Chile that gave married women full civil rights for the first time, but no improvements to abortion rights were made. Democratization and economic wealth do not always predict gender equality reforms. Multiple dynamics shape policy outcomes, including religious traditions and political ideologies.

Positive reforms in end gender discrimination have clearly made differences in women's lives, but change is highly uneven. Feminists have focused on gender discrimination and equal opportunity legislation to foster organizational change. Importantly, reducing the widespread incidence of gender bias is not simply a matter of correcting false beliefs and policy. Gender bias materializes in many aspects of life. Change is multidimensional, and gender equality is not easily realized.

See also [Discrimination](#); [Equality of Opportunity](#); [Feminism](#); [Women's Liberation Movement](#)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n147>

10.4135/9781483391144.n147

Further Readings

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