

## **COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON THE HISTORY OF GENDER INEQUALITY**

Gender inequality has been one of the world's oldest exhibits of prioritizing a group of people over another. Ever since human societies started to develop, the gap between genders also began to shape and grow. Despite the fact that nowadays this topic has been put forward more radically, it has always been subject of writings, marches and protests, it is not therefore a mere "modern" problem. Little has been done throughout history to fix this mismatch between human genders and sexes and to this day the world is still a patriarchal world, societies are still mostly run by men and rights are still unequal. Some may say that recently this has started to change, which is sort of true, especially that feminist movements and right's activists have been actively pushing this topic for the past few years and have been somewhat successful in some societies even though we are still far from true equality.

Like any other societal problem, nothing is impossible to resolve, we just have to take the correct steps to adjust the course of human rights when it comes to gender and sex. In order to determine what the appropriate solutions would be, fully understanding the issue at hand seems to be the most reasonable first step. To this regard, I will be going through a somewhat historical progression of the issues of gender and sex in human societies, delving into the gender gap and how it came to be, as well as how it the developed to where we are nowadays. I will be doing that in terms of some theoretical pieces of writing that were put forward by various authors, philosophers and activists, providing my own analysis and deductions and trying to draw conclusions from observations and analysis. The study will be divided in chronological order, I will start by looking at the genesis of the gender gap, how and why it evolved to what it is today, to then discuss where we stand today and how this historic is translating in modern societies, to finally put forward some deduced steps that should be taken going into the future. I would like to

reemphasize that what will follow are my own interpretations that will be as objective and example based as humanly possible.

## **PART I – PAST**

Why did gender inequality come to be in the first place? This is an intuitive question that someone would ask. One may think why would this even come to be when people were living in caves and in more primitive societies, why were some tasks assigned to males and others to females? It seems a rather logical thing to say that people could have simply done the same things early in human history and we would not be where we are today, men and women would have historically been equal in terms of work, economy and politics and all of this discussion would be irrelevant. However, things were not as simple as that, Shulamith Firestone, feminist author, discussed this origin of gender inequality in her writing *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case of Feminist Revolution* (Firestone).

In her book, Firestone discusses Marx and Engels perceptions of economical classes and how they interact. In particular, she adds to their analysis a particularly insightful idea which is the class divide between sexes. She then goes to analyze the root of this latter divide, which is worthy to analyze here. In the first chapter of the book she discusses how biology was the origin of the gender divide. The very biology of men and women is different, not only in terms of genitalia but also in terms of natural privileges. Simply put, humans biologically have an unequal distribution which can be seen in most animal species, where males are often the leaders of the pack, or constantly fighting for reproductive rights with the females. In addition, the nuclear family dynamic naturally binds the female body and entity to her children. Mothers in nature are bound to care for their children at least they are able to be independent, which in the case of human beings is much longer than for other animals. This dependency of the child on the mother as well as the

biology of women in terms of general physical strength, menstruation and psychology were according to Firestone the most basic cause of gender divide (Firestone 8-9). This leads as well to a dependency on the male counterpart to provide and ensure subsistence of the family in terms of economy, bodily needs and protection.

So one may argue that people were naturally created unequal and thus this division of labor and gap between sexes is a product of biology. However, even though this may be true in nature, humans, as sentient, rational beings are not animals. Far from that, we pride ourselves with the fact that we are the farthest creatures on Earth in terms of intelligence, reasoning and development, therefore rising above the natural and instincts seems to be the most rational thing to do in all aspects of life. Evolving from caves to skyscrapers, while stagnating and even regressing in terms of gender divide seems to be unintuitive and regressive. Therefore, the fact that we could not outgrow the natural and used it to justified outdated thinking and behavior seems to be a sign that we are still far from an evolved society.

So basically, we can see here how initially the gender inequality that exists nowadays, stemmed from an unequal evolution of humans from primitive societies to modern. Unequal here means that while we came a long way in terms of technology, politics, economy and philosophy we deliberately chose to neglect the wellbeing and evolution of half of Earth's population, to maintain a status quo in terms of power and control. Men under the pretext of nature took away a bunch of women's rights and used them as a means of power and control over them. Now that we went as far back as the natural, it is sensible to look into the transition from nature to society. One of the most acknowledged models of this transition is the Social Contract discussed by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (Hobbes).

In his writings, Hobbes discusses the transition from what he calls the “state of nature” to a civilized state. In the former, human beings live in a state of constant war amongst themselves, where there is no permanent property or rights, the stronger may conquer the weaker and take his/her belongings. It is a state of chaos, where every individual can do as he/she pleases without any consequences. The transition from this state to society according to Hobbes, is to have all members of the society agree to specific rules and regulations in what he calls a “social contract”. The entity or being in charge of monitoring and enforcing these rules is also chosen by the whole and handed part of the whole’s freedoms to ensure safety and prosperity (Hobbes). This model of society creation is widely acknowledge and studied as a basis for anthropological and political studies. However, a major loophole in this theory is revealed when the gender component is tested and studied in this scope. This is discussed by Carole Pateman in *The Sexual Contract* (Pateman).

Pateman revisits the social contract theory under the light of feminist theory. What’s interesting in her writings is her discussion of what she calls the “sexual contract” or how society was built and “agreed upon” between sexes. Pateman argues that the social contract as translated in the real world was built to care for men’s rights exclusively leaving women only their natural rights, and not acknowledging their civil rights. However, as discussed earlier with Firestone, women are not born free naturally, therefore their rights come from the civil state. Unfortunately, the social or sexual contract was built as a tool for the subjection of women and rather than ensuring every human’s rights equally it catered only to half of the population’s interests who in turn ensured the contract only served their own rights and adding to that control over the other half’s (women) beings and rights. Women therefore were “the subject” of the contract and not part of it (Pateman 6). The creation of society therefore was what created the patriarchy, using women’s

nature to subject them to a male ruled world and excluding them from the security of civil freedom that men as “individuals” agreed to.

## **PART II – PRESENT**

We have then looked into how at the origin, human societies were built on patriarchal grounds that led to the gender inequality we see today. We will now be analyzing the present status and how it still is feeding into the patriarchy. However, by present I do not only mean the past few years but rather societies that were comparatively more evolved than primitive ones.

So we now realize that patriarchy came to exist as early as societies were starting to appear. It was a means of power and control in all aspects of life: politics, economy, society and personal. Throughout history, men used this patriarchal foundation and kept feeding into it further increasing the gap. Separation of labor has existed forever, women were bound to household related tasks: childcare, homecare, and spousal care. The husband or male guardian was the one who would do other societal and economical activities, be it in politics, economy or society. To better understand how this translated we will be looking at some examples.

In the United States of America, considered by many to be one of the models of democracy and freedom, women’s right to vote was only granted in 1920 (National Archives). Basically what this tells us, is that for a long time women were not considered as individuals within the United States’ society despite the fact that they were bound to the contract or in this case Constitution and regulations that ruled this society. Men were the ones that did all the decision making in terms of politics, rights and decisions, women were just the subjects of these decisions. Any law that would be passed or discussed would therefore not take into account women’s interests or concerns and

this was used to further drive the patriarchy and increase the power and control of men over women.

In addition, another concept was women's access to education. Examples of this are numerous, the American University of Beirut's first woman graduate outside of nursing was in 1925 more than 50 years after the university's inception (American University of Beirut). This means that until the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lebanese women had no access to higher education that would be key to them breaking the chains of patriarchal control and be able to have control of their lives and rights. With no education and knowledge, a human is not able to lead an independent productive life and contribute to society and economy in a sustainable and efficient manner. Therefore, depriving women from being educated, from learning and developing analytical and personal skills, the patriarchy was forcing women into being dependent on their male guardian to provide their most basic needs. Unable to provide for herself she will then be forced to be at the mercy of the individual that provides her everything.

This fight for education was always one of the most opposed issues by the patriarchy. Under religious pretexts, women that were educated in the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century were accused of witchcraft and burnt at the stake by the Church (Ben-Yehuda). If she was found to be able to read, write, understand mathematics and science, they would consider her a witch and be executed horrifically. In addition, other religious texts such as Islamic translations of prophesized texts were done by men. Patriarchal traditions were behind the early translation of the Qur'an and were used to deprive women from their rights on the personal, educational, societal, political and economical levels (Kharroub). Religion was therefore also a tool used by the patriarchy to justify why women should be treated differently and be deprived of access to certain things that their male counterparts had and therefore incapacitated them from having productive independent lives.

Throughout the ages, women were objectified and subjects to their male guardians. This idea was further developed by Gayle Rubin in her essay *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex*. Rubin discusses how women are exchanged by men as gifts or objects. So not only those human beings were deprived of being independent but they are also treated as gifts that are exchanged and used by one man then passed on to another. This was done as peace offerings, lineage names insurance and status. A woman was gifted to another man by a man to ensure the best interests of the two men involved (Rubin). This act goes to show how a men's world made by men justified such acts on women and criminalized it if it were the other way around. A woman cannot be detached from her husband or father and force him to do something against his will. This act even though less upfront nowadays, takes place in more hidden and subtle fashions. An example of that is the civil status laws and records in Lebanon. Discussed by Nadine Moawad in *The Bigger Struggle for Women in Municipalities*, Lebanon's civil status laws do exactly what Rubin talks about. When a little girl is born she is bound to her father's name and his record. Later on when she gets married she is moved under her husband's name and record, basically exchanged by her father to her husband. If she were to get divorced, she's oved back to her father's record. To the eyes of the state, a women only exists as subject to a man and has no rights unless bound to a man's name and record.

### **PART III – FUTURE**

So far, we have established that societies were born patriarchal and their evolution was driven by patriarchal rules, translations and doctrine that created a self-justifying construct of inequality and oppression. Realizing how far down we've gone as human societies in terms of gender equality is therefore a first step to fixing this issue. However, radically fixing the problem is not going to be an easy and quick process. Just think that we are trying to reshape a system that's

been instilled since the dawn of humanity. So what would be the best way to go from here in the right direction to reach an equal world for all genders. The following approach is my own perception based on the study and ideas I mentioned throughout this paper so far.

First and foremost, women's access to education should be cleared of any obstacles in all aspects of life. Women should be able to learn about their bodies, their reproductive rights, the society they live in and the dynamics that govern it. They should also have access to conventional education in terms of school and higher education which would allow them to be able to accomplish the goals and independence that they seek without the need for a third party provider. In addition, this would open the door to contribution in the politics of society. Any contributor has a say in what goes on, and therefore sexist and patriarchal regulation would start to fade away as the oppressed party previously would now have a say in breaking the chains that were imposed on them. A team is only as strong as the weakest link within it, so having this access open to everyone is essential. Education will provide the tools and knowledge to all to do what they want with their lives and be independent, it will also allow women to understand how to better govern their own rights and find the adequate adjustments and improvements. A saying that I try to pitch is "You are the product of what you learn", if you learn to be a subject this is what you will become for lack of alternative, while if you learn to be your full human self, you will have the choice to be a do what you want within the realms of society.

Another thing that would facilitate the previous idea, is to raise awareness about these issues and how they came to be and survive. This would pave the way to reforms, at the very least it would allow people to understand how things happened behind the scenes, and how we are here today. Understanding how deep the problem is rooted is rather a difficult task, but we have to start somewhere. Also, teaching people that for example there is no such thing as a "man's job", or that



a nurse can equally be a man, or even that a woman's job is not only to care for home and children, would be a way to break stereotypes and norms especially in younger generations not yet poisoned by patriarchy. Rising generations would be better prepared than their predecessors to understand and adjust gender inequalities since older generations are going to be harder to bend and work with.

However, it is important to realize that even though the steps I mentioned previously would be "easy" in terms of logistics, it is still a whole other job to make them happen. Indeed, giving rights and opportunities would certainly mean that men will have to concede some power, control and opportunities to their women counterparts, and even though putting it this way may seem like a competition, it really is not. Nonetheless, convincing someone in control to relinquish some power is of course one of the hardest tasks as we have seen throughout history.

It is never too late to do the right thing and start doing the right adjustments. For now, every individual must start by doing his or her part in breaking and stop propagating stereotypes and misconceptions, treating every human equally regardless of their gender and finally fight for the rights of all. Evolving as human societies cannot be done any further without equality. Despite the fact that patriarchy started with primitive human societies, part of evolving is to realize the mistakes that were done and fixing them even though results may not happen during our lifetime.

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