

# A World of Difference: International Trends in Women's Economic Status

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Annu. Rev. Sociol. 2011. 37:355–71

First published online as a Review in Advance on  
March 31, 2011

The *Annual Review of Sociology* is online at  
soc.annualreviews.org

This article's doi:  
10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102548

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0360-0572/11/0811-0355\$20.00

## Keywords

gender, occupation, work, degendering, discrimination, segregation, labor market, employment, education, equality, stratification, egalitarianism, postmaterialism, modernization, comparative, global

## Abstract

Around the globe and starting in the affluent West, women have made major, even revolutionary, strides toward equality with men. However, while access to major social institutions has equalized dramatically, expanded participation in labor markets and educational systems often comes in the form of gender-differentiated roles within these institutions. This article reviews international trends on different indicators of women's economic status and considers explanations for observed patterns. The forms of equality that tend to persist in advanced industrial societies are those that are readily interpreted as outcomes of free choices by formally equal but innately different men and women.

## INTRODUCTION

To many people, complete equality between men and women represents a sort of developmental end state: Gender differences in schools, workplaces, and households will decline continuously as discrimination is rooted out of modern social institutions. This view reflects a widespread understanding of societal change as a series of incremental adaptations—as an evolutionary process, in other words. Two presumptions commonly follow from this conventional wisdom. One is that gender equality has been increasing steadily; the second is that equality has increased more in affluent, culturally progressive countries than in poor, traditional ones.

In sociology, comparative and historical analyses of women's status often reflect such an evolutionary sensibility, depicting either a steady progression toward full gender equality (degendering) or a world in which such progress has stalled (see Blau et al. 2006 for diverse perspectives). Although much support for evolutionary change can be found in women's dramatically increased presence in higher education, labor markets, and political systems, more detailed analyses suggest qualifications to this general account. Specifically, they reveal that some types of gender inequality have eroded much more than others and that equality is sometimes found in surprising places.

This article reviews theories and evidence concerning international trends in women's economic status. It goes on to offer diverse explanations for uneven trends across indicators and for some counterintuitive patterns of international variability. A concluding section takes stock of what we know and recommends directions for future research.

## THEORIES OF EVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

Grounds for expecting a continuous decline in gender inequality can be found in two lines of social theory. The oldest and most established links egalitarian trends to requirements for economic efficiency (Goode 1963, Parsons

1970, Bell 1973, Inglehart & Norris 2003, Giele 2006, Jackson 2006). According to these modernization accounts, discrimination becomes increasingly costly as economies develop and are exposed to greater market competition. To survive and thrive in modern, knowledge-based economies, employers and organizations must disregard ascribed traits, such as gender, race/ethnicity, and class, unless these are directly relevant to task performance. As a result of these economic pressures, cultural values gradually shift in an egalitarian direction and gender inequality decreases in all economic, political, and social domains. In his 1998 book *Destined for Equality*, sociologist Robert Max Jackson offers a contemporary formulation of this classic sociological account:

Full equality is women's destiny because gender inequality is inherently inconsistent with modern economic and political organization . . . . In modern society, the processes sustaining gender inequality have become increasingly fragile and vulnerable. (p. 242)

A second view of evolutionary change treats culture as an independent causal force. By neoinstitutionalist accounts, modern egalitarian norms are grounded in Western ideals of progress and individualism. Regardless of their actual economic efficiency, these values are spreading globally through international organizations, social movements, and professional associations (Meyer et al. 1997, Ramirez et al. 1997, Boyle 2002). Modernization accounts are unpersuasive to neoinstitutionalist scholars because dramatic equalizing trends are observed in countries with widely divergent economic and social structures. Countries converge on a standard set of gender-egalitarian policies and institutions in part because their standing in the global community is enhanced by practices that extend rights to historically subordinated groups. Whereas formal laws and policies may be only loosely coupled with on-the-ground practices in the short term, legal equality and access to labor markets and educational systems can have longer-term culture-altering effects (Berkovitch 1999, Ramirez & Wotipka 2001,

Meyer 2004). Baker & Letendre (2005, p. 28) describe this cultural spillover as follows:

Gender as an institution has been transformed and weakened through the strengthening institutions of the nation and education . . . . By the very act of educating students as students regardless of their gender in public schools, a powerful meaning about the irrelevance of gender in academic matters arises.

International trends lend considerable credence to evolutionary arguments. Public tolerance for discriminatory policies has declined sharply since World War II, and principles of procedural equality and nondiscrimination have garnered near-universal affirmation in national and international forums. As most of the world's governments have formally recognized the human and civil rights of women, legal barriers to female employment, education, voting, and property ownership have been largely eliminated.

Despite the spectacular scope and speed of these egalitarian trends, it is well known that certain forms of gender inequality remain firmly entrenched. In labor markets, educational systems, and households around the world, women concentrate in female-typed occupations and fields of study and perform much more than an equal share of unpaid work. It is becoming increasingly evident that changes in women's status occur not through the sort of across-the-board degendering of social institutions that is implied by evolutionary accounts, but rather through processes of partial, domain-specific equalization. In light of this, many gender scholars today are calling for multidimensional conceptualizations of women's status (Bradley & Khor 1993, Charles & Grusky 2004, Walby 2004, Mandel & Semyonov 2006, Charles & Bradley 2009).

## INTERNATIONAL TRENDS IN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC STATUS

For present purposes, I conceptualize gender inequality as dissimilarity in women's and men's economic outcomes and degendering as

a narrowing of the gap between women's and men's outcomes over time. Although a gender-convergence standard allows clear evaluation of evolutionary claims, this standard liberal yardstick will not be acceptable to all feminists, particularly not to those who favor an equal-but-different approach to improving women's economic status. However, degendering does not require that women behave more like men. Gender gaps can also be closed if both men and women adopt new gender-neutral practices or if men behave more like women. The latter is arguably the least common form of gender convergence, probably due to persistent status deficits associated with female-typed activities (England 2010).

Based on primary and secondary sources, the following presents an assessment of international trends, focusing first on female participation in major social institutions (access) and second on gender distributions within these institutions (sex segregation). Because of data constraints, trends on some indicators are presented for developed countries only.

### The Degendering of Access

Worldwide increases in women's educational attainment and labor force participation are important markers of movement toward gender equality. Growing female access to these institutions is attributable to changes in women's qualifications and aspirations (e.g., the rise of feminist movements, delayed marriage and childbirth, educational expansion), increasing demand for female labor (e.g., service-sector growth, proliferation of part-time jobs, rising female wages), and global cultural and legal processes of the sort described above (changing attitudes, the spread of antidiscrimination laws). In the following paragraphs, I discuss historical trends and cross-national differences in female educational attainment, female labor force participation, and the gender wage gap. Although I restrict attention to key economic domains, it should be noted that overt discrimination has diminished and access has equalized with respect to a wide array of other social

institutions, including marriage (through proliferation of gender-neutral marriage, divorce, and property laws), political systems, sports, and religion.

**Educational attainment.** Male-female differences in enrollment at the primary, secondary, and tertiary (higher) educational levels have narrowed worldwide and in virtually all regions since World War II. These changes have been spurred by growing demand for educated workers and by concerted governmental and non-governmental policy initiatives to promote educational expansion and democratization, such as the Framework for Action developed in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. These initiatives have been supported by globally ascendant ideals that define education as a catalyst for economic prosperity and development, a universal human right, and a symbol of national modernity (Schultz 1961, Frank & Meyer 2007).

Female rates of primary and secondary enrollment at the global level were approximately 95% of male rates in 2006. Gender parity at both levels was documented in 59 of 176 reporting countries, up from 39 countries in 1999 (UNESCO 2008). Women's share of tertiary enrollments has increased in all world regions since 1965, and a surprising trend toward female advantage has become manifest in many industrial countries (Bradley & Ramirez 1996, Schofer & Meyer 2005). After increasing from 27% to 40% between 1965 and 1985, women's share of the world's higher education students passed the 50% mark around 1990. The global female-to-male enrollment ratio for higher education was 1.06 in 2006 (UNESCO 2008, table 9A). It is too early to know whether this current enrollment advantage represents the beginning of a secular trend or is simply the result of shorter-term fluctuation in demand for male and female labor.

Despite striking general trends toward equality, much cross-national variability in contemporary enrollment rates remains, most notably between more and less developed

societies. In countries with developed or transitional economies, approximate gender parity prevails at the primary and secondary levels, and women hold a significant enrollment advantage in higher education (Shavit et al. 2007, UNESCO 2008). In less economically developed societies, boys and men predominate at all three levels. Some of the largest gender disparities are found in the poorest countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia. But large gaps are also found in higher-income Arab countries, where cultural and legal restrictions on female public-sphere participation remain firmly in place. Gender differences are relatively small in Latin America and East Asia, where female enrollment closely approximates and sometimes exceeds male enrollment (UNICEF 2003; see also Baker & Wiseman 2009 on variability across developing countries).

**Labor force participation.** A second well-known example of global equalization concerns employment. Women's share of the labor force has increased in all of the world's major geographic regions, reflecting both rising participation rates among women and declining rates among men.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1** shows upward trends in female employment between 1970 and 2007 in nearly all the developed and transitional countries that comprise the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). Not surprisingly, female employment has increased more in countries where it was low in the 1970s (southern Europe, New Zealand, Netherlands) than in countries where it was high (Scandinavia, United States, Canada, Japan). Where the female share of the total labor force approaches

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<sup>1</sup>Total male employment has been declining since about 1980. This is attributable to the worldwide expansion of secondary and higher education, as well as to the contraction of traditional manufacturing sectors in industrial countries. Although educational expansion has resulted in later labor force entry of both men and women, women's overall employment-to-population ratios generally did not decline because these totals also reflect unrelated increases in female labor force participation.

the 50% mark, employment represents a sort of default position for women. Those who remain outside of the paid labor force in these contexts are likely to have strong reasons for doing so (e.g., poor labor market chances or a negative disposition toward employment for personal or family reasons). Such ceiling effects contribute to the observed convergence of national rates over time. Upward trajectories have slowed in recent years, with women's total share of developed-country workers increasing by only one percentage point, from 42% to 43%, between 1995 and 2007 (author's calculations, from OECD 2009).

In the United States, participation of married women with infants appears to have declined slightly since the mid-1990s, even for some groups of college-educated professionals. Analysts disagree about whether these trends reflect an increased tendency for relatively affluent young women to opt out of paid employment, a downturn in labor demand, or something else (for diverse perspectives, see Belkin 2003, Goldin 2006, Cohany & Sok 2007, Stone 2007, Percheski 2008).

Despite international convergence in women's employment rates over time, substantial differences in current levels still exist among OECD countries. **Figure 1** shows that women today make up a somewhat larger share of the labor force in the United States and Canada than in the European Union and Japan. Among the countries of the European Union, female employment rates are lowest in the familialist welfare states of Greece, Italy, and Spain, and they are highest in social democratic Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, where the state actively fosters female employment through its tax and family policies. The gender gap in formal employment is somewhat smaller in the Scandinavian countries than in the United States, but many more Scandinavian than American women work part-time. Although participation rates in eastern Europe have declined for both men and women since the fall of communism, women's share of the labor force is still larger in eastern than western Europe (Van der Lippe

& van Dijk 2001, OECD 2009). Scholars have attributed variability among industrial societies to differences in tax and family policies, labor market structures, family demographics, and norms of motherhood (Esping-Andersen 1999, Estévez-Abe et al. 2003, Gornick & Meyers 2003, Bird & Gottschall 2004, Pettit & Hook 2009, Charles & Cech 2010).

Statistics on labor force participation rates are less reliable for developing societies, partly because so many people work in the informal sectors of these economies. Available estimates show the highest rates of female employment in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty pushes nearly all men and women into some sort of market activity, and in East Asia, which includes the booming Chinese economy. In much of the North African and West Asian regions, by contrast, cultural values call for strict separation of male and female domains, and official male rates exceed female rates by more than 45 percentage points. The largest percentage increases in women's employment have occurred in South America and North Africa, where current rates are 58% and 28%, respectively (ILO 2009; see Van der Lippe & van Dijk 2002 on measurement issues).

Although gender gaps in employment activity are on average smaller in developed than in developing countries (ILO 2009, OECD 2009), the correlation between economic development and women's share of the labor force is weak and belies any simple linear association between modernization and female employment.<sup>2</sup> This weak correlation is probably because, in some contexts, extreme poverty necessitates labor force participation of nearly all adults. Consistent with modernization arguments, however, some of the world's highest levels of female employment are found in affluent and reputedly gender-progressive Scandinavian societies.

<sup>2</sup>Based on data assembled by UNDP (2009) for 169 countries, I find a small positive correlation between female labor force participation and per capita GDP ( $r = 0.14$ ). The correlation is near zero ( $-0.03$ ) when GDP is transformed logarithmically ( $\ln$ ) to reduce upward skew.

**Wages.** Increases in women's educational attainment, growing market demand for female-labeled service work, and declining legitimacy (and legality) of overt pay discrimination have contributed to contraction of the gender pay gap in most industrial societies since the 1970s. In the United States, female earnings increased from 60 cents on the male dollar in 1959 to 78 cents on the male dollar in 2007 for full-time, year-round workers (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). This increase is attributable to modest female wage gains, as well as to stagnation of male wages in the wake of industrial restructuring. Gender differences in distributions across jobs (i.e., establishments, occupations, and occupational specialties) likely account for much of the remaining wage gap in industrial countries (Petersen et al. 1997). Scholars continue to debate reasons for pay differences between male- and female-dominated jobs.

In the developed world, countries have again become more similar because female wages increased more in countries where they were low in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., United States, Norway) than in countries where they were high (e.g., Sweden, Australia). One exception to this pattern is Japan, which started the period with a large gap and has shown relatively little change over time (Blau & Kahn 1995, Peracchi 2001, UNDP 2009). Factors influencing variability in the gender wage gap—and variability in female poverty rates—include national wage structures, labor market policies, and patterns of occupational sex segregation (Rosenfeld & Kalleberg 1990, Casper et al. 1994, Esping-Andersen 1999, Gornick & Meyers 2003, Mandel & Semyonov 2005).

Because of unreliable or missing historical data for developing countries, most comparative analyses of long-term trends in the gender wage gap have focused on advanced industrial societies or have been limited to a small number of case studies. Estimates of current female-to-male earned income ratios in 165 countries are available, however, through the statistical database of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP 2009). These estimates show an across-the-board male income advantage but

much variability with respect to the size of this advantage. Modest support for modernization theories can be found by comparing group averages, which reveals a larger female-to-male income ratio in advanced industrial than other societies (0.62 and 0.51, respectively).<sup>3</sup>

## The Resilience of Sex Segregation

Equalization of access has been accompanied by persistence and, in some cases, strengthening of sex segregation within labor markets and educational systems. Divisions of domestic labor also remain strongly gender differentiated in societies at all levels of economic development.

**Sex segregation within households.** Steep increases in female educational attainment and labor force participation have not produced comparable changes with respect to the division of labor at home. Although formal family and marriage laws have become more gender-egalitarian in most countries, women everywhere continue to do most of the core household and child care work, while men specialize in more time-flexible home-repair and maintenance tasks (Van der Lippe & van Dijk 2001, Gornick & Meyers 2003, Breen & Cooke 2005, Geist 2005). Recent data show modest equalizing trends in gender divisions of household labor in developed countries.<sup>4</sup> The distribution of cooking and cleaning tasks appears to be more gender-equal in more economically developed and culturally egalitarian contexts and in

<sup>3</sup>For this purpose, I define advanced industrial societies as 1973 OECD member states, excluding Turkey ( $N = 23$ ). Minimum and maximum values for this group were recorded for Japan (0.45) and Sweden (0.81), respectively. For the non-OECD group, the minimum and maximum values were for Saudi Arabia (0.16) and Kenya (0.83). Again, the linear association of women's relative earnings with national levels of economic development is weak ( $r = 0.15$ , author's calculation). It remains weak even when high-income Arab states are excluded. On estimation of female and male earned income, see UNDP (2007, table 28).

<sup>4</sup>Equalization is only partly attributable to increases in men's housework hours; it also reflects declines in women's domestic work time and in the total volume of work done within households (Gershuny & Sullivan 2003, Hook 2010, Treas & Drobnič 2010).

countries where men's work hours are shorter (Fuwa 2004; Hook 2006, 2010; UNDP 2007, table 32). But even in the most gender-progressive cultural contexts, housework and child care are among the most gender-specialized of work activities, and the domestic sphere remains a central front on which norms of masculinity and femininity are affirmed and contested (Bittman et al. 2003, Charles & Cech 2010, Treas & Drobnič 2010).

**Sex segregation within labor markets.** In advanced industrial countries, indices of occupational sex segregation declined substantially during the 1970s and 1980s and then stabilized (Nermo 1996, Weeden 1998, Chang 2000, Cotter et al. 2004). Similar trends have been documented for less developed countries, although declines during the 1970s and 1980s appear to have been a bit more modest than in the industrial West (Jacobs & Lim 1992, Anker 1998).

While segregation indices are useful for summarizing trends in overall levels of distributional inequality, they convey no information about which occupations became more integrated or segregated over time or about how these patterns have differed across countries. In fact, analyses of occupation-specific trends reveal much unevenness across occupations in tendencies for integration. While many elite professional and managerial occupations have become less gender-typed since the 1970s, sex segregation of service, clerical, and skilled manual occupations has persisted and, in some cases, intensified in advanced industrial societies (Charles & Grusky 2004).<sup>5</sup> Ironically, women have been partially buffered from the adverse employment effects of the recent economic crisis because strong female labeling makes some service-sector occupations unattractive to men (ILO 2009).

Patterns of cross-national variability also defy any simple evolutionary logic. Overall

<sup>5</sup>Little is known about the occupation-specific trends that produced declines in segregation-index scores in developing and transitional economies.

levels of occupational sex segregation are only weakly predicted by economic development, and cultural modernity (e.g., gender-progressive attitudes, policies, and social practices) often coincides with more, not less, sex segregation overall (Roos 1985, Charles 1992, Jacobs & Lim 1992, Blackburn et al. 2000). In fact, some of the highest levels of occupational sex segregation are found in reputedly egalitarian Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden.

It is possible, however, to discern some systematic patterns of cross-national variation if we distinguish between two dimensions of distributional inequality: (a) vertical segregation, which in this context refers to underrepresentation of women in elite professional and managerial occupations, and (b) horizontal segregation, which refers to uneven distributions across divides that are less explicitly status-graded such as, for example, between manual and nonmanual occupations. Data for developed-country samples support modernization arguments with respect to vertical, but not horizontal, inequalities. For example, women are better represented in professional occupations (and sometimes in management) in countries with more gender-egalitarian ideological climates or more employment-conducive family policy regimes.<sup>6</sup> But these same national features often coincide with strong segregation of nonelite occupations, in particular a sharp separation between female service and male manufacturing and craft work (Charles 1998, 2003; Charles & Grusky 2004). Below, I describe some causal mechanisms that may underlie divergent trends in vertical and horizontal sex segregation.

<sup>6</sup>When countries spanning the full range of economic development are considered, no linear relationship between economic development and female representation in high-status occupations is evident. In fact, pooled data for 97 developing and industrial countries show a near-zero correlation between GDP and women's share of legislators and managers (0.07; author's calculation, from UNDP 2009). Moreover, women's share of professional positions is very high in some transitional and developing countries, including Brazil, Venezuela, the Philippines, and several eastern and central European countries (ILO 2004). In these contexts, class and educational divisions may trump gender in the status attainment process.

### Sex segregation within higher education.

Sex segregation by field of study is one of the most conspicuous features of modern educational systems. Women now make up 70% of the world's education majors and 56% of the world's humanities majors, compared with only 29% and 16% for science and engineering, respectively (UNESCO 2008, table 9B). This strong gender differentiation has been linked to postwar efforts by governmental and non-governmental organizations to increase female enrollment in higher education. As discussed below, expanded female access has been accomplished in part through development of institutions and curricular programs thought to align with women's innately feminine dispositions and career aspirations (Bradley & Charles 2004).

Although some degree programs—most notably business, law, and medicine—have integrated over time, gender distributions across fields have changed rather little since the 1980s in the United States and other industrial countries (Bradley 2000; Jacobs 1995, 2003; Xie & Shauman 2003, England & Li 2006). Moreover, cross-national analyses reveal weak, sometimes negative relationships between socioeconomic modernization and female representation in the mathematical and technical fields that are so strongly male-typed in the industrial West today (Charles & Bradley 2002, 2009; Charles 2011). For instance, women are about as well represented in computer science programs in Turkey as in Sweden (Charles & Bradley 2006; see also Lagesen 2008 on Malaysia). And in engineering programs, women's presence is, in fact, stronger in developing than in advanced industrial societies. **Figure 2** depicts this relationship for a sample of 44 countries. It shows a negative correlation ( $-0.48$ ) between GDP per capita and female representation in engineering.

Functional and institutional accounts of evolutionary social change are again better supported with respect to vertical than horizontal sex segregation. Whereas segregation across hierarchically organized sectors (between elite universities and lower-status vocational institutions) has declined in industrial societies, in-

equalities across dimensions that are less explicitly hierarchical, such as fields of study, appear more resistant to change (Goldin 2006, Shavit et al. 2007). Vertical—but not horizontal—segregation is weaker, moreover, in more economically developed countries and in countries where attitudes toward gender roles are more egalitarian (Charles & Bradley 2002; UNESCO 2008, table 9A).

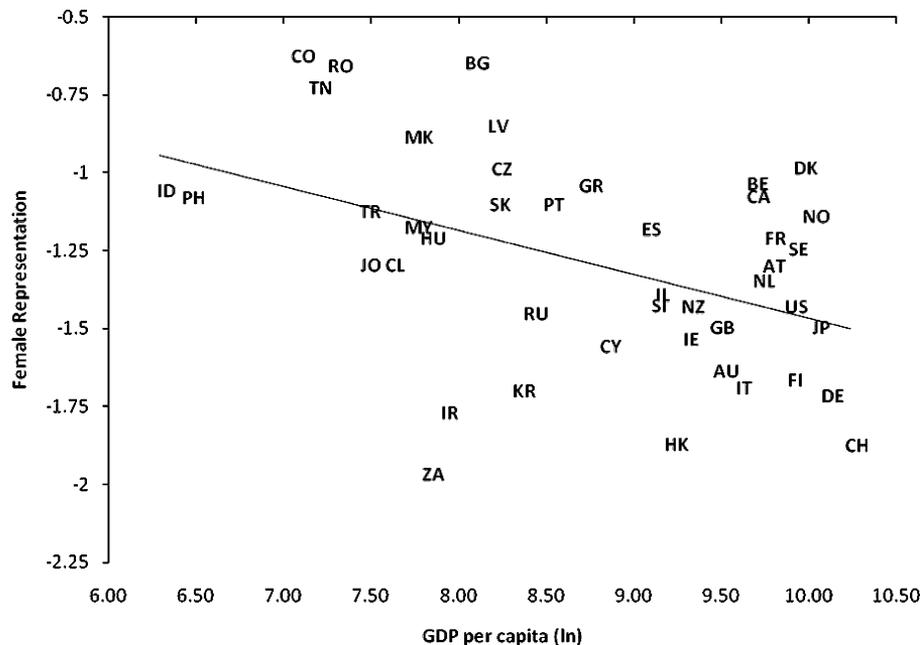
The patterns described above beg two questions, which are considered in the following sections: Why do we see equalization on some indicators but not others? And why are some curricular and career outcomes more gender-typed in advanced industrial countries?

### WHY DO WE SEE EQUALIZATION ON SOME INDICATORS BUT NOT OTHERS?

One explanation for the uneven historical trajectories is that the forces for egalitarian change described by modernization and neoinstitutionalist scholars have different effects on different types of gender inequality. Evidence is growing, in fact, that some of the same structural and cultural forces that have facilitated female access to labor markets and educational systems have also contributed to sex segregation within these institutions.

In higher education, simultaneous historical pressures toward increased female participation and sex segregation are clearly evident in policy agendas and official discourse. Since the middle of the twentieth century, national governments and international organizations have endeavored to increase female enrollment in colleges and universities by implementing programmatic changes designed around prevailing gender stereotypes (Charles & Bradley 2002, Bradley & Charles 2004). In 1953, the following resolution was directed toward national ministries of education by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. UNESCO (1953, p. 263) resolved

that to facilitate women's access to higher education and the use of their abilities for



**Figure 2**

Female representation in engineering programs in 44 countries. Note: Negative values on “female representation” indicate underrepresentation relative to the average field of study in the respective country. A value of zero would indicate perfect integration. Values are taken from Charles & Bradley (2009). Country codes: AU, Australia; AT, Austria; BE, Belgium; BG, Bulgaria; CA, Canada; CL, Chile; CO, Colombia; CY, Cyprus; CZ, Czech Republic; DK, Denmark; FI, Finland; FR, France; DE, Germany; GR, Greece; HK, Hong Kong; HU, Hungary; ID, Indonesia; IR, Iran; IE, Ireland; IL, Israel; IT, Italy; JP, Japan; JO, Jordan; KR, Korea; LV, Latvia; MK, Macedonia; MY, Malaysia; NL, Netherlands; NZ, New Zealand; NO, Norway; PH, Philippines; PT, Portugal; RO, Romania; RU, Russia; SK, Slovakia; SI, Slovenia; ZA, South Africa; ES, Spain; SE, Sweden; CH, Switzerland; TN, Tunisia; TR, Turkey; GB, United Kingdom; US, United States.

the greatest good of society, university studies permit women to specialize in fields particularly suited to feminine aptitudes and assure them more adequate training for the new careers now being opened up to them.

During ensuing decades, “feminine aptitudes” were accommodated through establishment of new higher education programs and institution types, some granting two-year degrees. These included many programs in home economics, health care, business administration, tourism, and hospitality.

In labor markets, similarly divergent trends emerged out of economic restructuring and social policy initiatives that aimed to facilitate female employment. It is well established that

service-sector expansion and rationalization of the economy promote substantial expansion of the female labor force and growing concentration of women in sales, service, and clerical occupations (Oppenheimer 1973, Charles 1992, Charles & Grusky 2004). Likewise, some family-friendly policies long coveted by feminists and progressive activists (e.g., generous parental leaves) appear to increase gender inequality with respect to occupational distributions and wages at the same time that they decrease it with respect to labor force participation rates (Pettit & Hook 2009; Mandel & Semyonov 2005, 2006).

Uneven trends may also reflect differences in the cultural legitimacy accorded to different types of gender inequality. By both

modernization and neoinstitutionalist accounts of social change, liberal egalitarian ideals have become more prominent as world markets have spread and transnational bodies and conventions have proliferated. Normative principles that define women as full citizens with the same fundamental civil and human rights as men provide social movement activists, national policy makers, and international development advocates with powerful ideological leverage. This leverage has been used effectively for resisting policies and practices that blatantly discriminate against women or restrict their access to educational, economic, and political institutions.<sup>7</sup> Today, female suffrage and high rates of female educational attainment and employment commonly serve as signifiers of modernity and even of countries' relative deservedness for development aid (Ramirez et al. 1997, Meyer 2004).

Not all forms of gender inequality are inconsistent with liberal egalitarian values, however. Many gender scholars attribute the resilience of sex segregation within major social institutions to the enduring cultural force of stereotypes about gender difference. These gender essentialist stereotypes define women and men as innately different, with women represented as nurturing and emotional and men as physically strong and aggressive. Such gender stereotypes, which may or may not be deeply internalized in individuals, continue to shape welfare states, households, labor markets, and educational systems around the world. Although the origins of core gender stereotypes are still debated, their power, persistence, and ubiquity are recognized by scholars of many stripes (Williams & Best 1990, Orloff 1993, Lueptow et al. 2001,

Fenstermaker & West 2002, Epstein 2007, Ridgeway 2009, England 2010).

The sociological literature suggests at least two ways in which stereotypes about gender difference support sex segregation in modern institutions: by biasing evaluations of self and others and by creating standards of femininity and masculinity to which people feel accountable. Even in societies where gender discrimination is normatively proscribed, deeply held beliefs regarding the intrinsic qualities of men and women (cultural gender beliefs) may influence performance evaluations and life opportunities of job applicants, workers, and students (Ridgeway 2006, Correll et al. 2007). Biased evaluations and discrimination of this sort are documented in a study by Goldin & Rouse (2000), which revealed higher call-back rates for female musicians when auditions were carried out behind a screen than when candidates' gender identity could be seen by jury members. But cultural gender beliefs influence more than evaluations by others. Perhaps more important are their effects on individuals' understandings of their *own* competencies, likes, and dislikes. A recent series of studies documents powerful effects of biased self-assessments. In one laboratory experiment by Correll (2004), questions purporting to test "contrast sensitivity" were administered to American undergraduates. Before the test, subjects were exposed to one of two beliefs: that men on average do better, or that men and women perform equally well. Among those exposed to the first belief, male students rated their performance more highly than did female students, and male students were more likely to report aspiring to work in a job requiring "contrast sensitivity." No gender differences were observed among subjects in the second (control) group. This is part of a growing body of evidence that cultural gender beliefs can influence occupational aspirations and performance in stereotype-consistent ways (Pronin et al. 2002).

Stereotypes also reinforce sex segregation because people feel accountable to (and may internalize) the definitions of femininity and masculinity that they propagate (Fenstermaker

<sup>7</sup>The liberal feminist agenda of expanded labor force participation does not appeal to all of its intended beneficiaries. Some "difference feminists" seek to improve women's status by increasing the social recognition and economic security associated with domestic care work, for example. But when barriers to access have been eliminated, most of the world's women have opted against an exclusively domestic role—either because they cannot afford to forgo market earnings or because they otherwise choose to engage in extrafamilial activity.

& West 2002, Nosek et al. 2002, Faulkner 2007, Ridgeway 2009). For example, in contexts where mathematics and science are defined as male pursuits, avowing a dislike for these fields may be a way for girls to affirm their femininity to themselves or others. The resultant math avoidance can have multiplier effects because adolescents are likely to mimic behaviors of same-sex peers (Gaskell 1985, Riegle-Crumb et al. 2006, Frank et al. 2008). Taking fewer mathematics classes will likely affect achievement in and attitudes toward mathematics and science, creating a powerful, self-fulfilling prophesy.

The above discussion has focused on why sex segregation within labor markets and educational systems has remained strong, while overall access to these institutions has equalized so dramatically. Trends have also diverged with respect to different forms of sex segregation. In advanced industrial societies, vertical inequality forms have generally decreased more than horizontal forms (Charles & Bradley 2002, Charles & Grusky 2004). My colleagues and I have argued that distinctions seen as hierarchical are viewed as less legitimate and face closer legal and public scrutiny. Gatekeepers to visible, high-status positions therefore tend to hold themselves to higher standards of compliance with principles of procedural equality, including meritocratic, credential-based recruitment (Brinton & Kariya 1998). Moreover, the cultural and social capital possessed by elite and highly educated women sharpens rights claims and facilitates breaching of traditional boundaries. Such women have more to gain from asserting rights to enter high-status professional positions than to male-dominated blue-collar jobs (see also England 2010).

### **WHY ARE CAREER OUTCOMES MORE GENDER-TYPED IN ADVANCED INDUSTRIAL CONTEXTS?**

One obvious response to this question is that people who live in affluent societies can more easily absorb the material costs associated with

pursuit of female-typed occupational and educational careers. In other words, the economic capacity to indulge stereotypically female preferences is greater in advanced industrial contexts.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars object to explanations of sex segregation that reference women's preferences and choices because this line of inquiry seems to divert attention away from the structural and cultural causes of inequality. But acknowledging gender-differentiated aspirations does not blame the victim unless preferences are considered in isolation from the social contexts in which they emerge. This explanation does not require that gendered dispositions be innate or even deeply internalized. As discussed above, educational and career aspirations are shaped by beliefs about one's own competencies and affinities, beliefs about the masculine or feminine task content of specific social positions, and beliefs about the categories of persons who are appropriate incumbents for such positions. These beliefs constitute the cultural environment in which life choices are made, and they may be a consequence, not only a cause, of sex segregation.

Aspirations are also shaped by more general beliefs about the nature and purpose of educational and occupational pursuits. In advanced industrial societies, parents and educators commonly exhort young people, and perhaps girls in particular, to "follow their passions" and to study and work in fields that will allow them to realize their "true selves." Although these so-called postmaterialist values are spreading globally, they are today most clearly evident in affluent, late-modern societies (Inglehart 1997, Inglehart & Baker 2000, Meyer & Jepperson 2000, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Curricular and career choices become more than practical economic decisions in these contexts; they also represent acts of identity construction and self-affirmation. Because gender remains such a fundamental axis of human identity, individual

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<sup>8</sup>This interpretation is consistent with findings from individual-level research in the United States. For example, American girls who come from high-income families are less likely to study math and science in college (Ma 2009).

self-expression often results in “expression of gendered selves” (Charles & Bradley 2009).

Normative mandates for self expression intensify sex segregation by supporting the development and realization of culturally masculine or feminine aspirations. In the process, stereotypes and gender identities are entrenched, gender labeling of educational and occupational fields is reinforced, and sex segregation is legitimized. For example, American girls who aim to “study what they love” are unlikely to consider male-labeled science, engineering, or technical fields, despite the relative material security provided by such degrees. The nonalignment of mathematics and science with female gender identities may even generate attitudinal aversion in these postmaterialist contexts. New evidence suggests that boys’ and girls’ attitudes toward mathematics indeed diverge more in developed than in developing and transitional societies (Charles & Bradley 2009).

High levels of sex segregation in advanced industrial countries are also supported by structural features of labor markets and educational systems, as discussed above. Such features include large service sectors and diversified systems of higher education. These have appeared worldwide, but the transformations began earlier and have so far been most pronounced in affluent European and North American countries (Benavot 2006).

## CONCLUSION

The past half-century has seen a remarkable worldwide movement toward gender equality on many key economic and social indicators. But trends have not been uniform. Unevenness has taken two forms. First, some types of inequality have eroded much more than others. Access to labor markets and educational systems has equalized dramatically in nearly all countries, while sex segregation within these institutions remains strong. Second, equality does not always appear in the expected places. Some of the most sex-segregated labor markets and educational systems are found in precisely those countries reputed to be the most

gender-progressive in their cultural values and social policy provisions.

The striking improvements in women’s formal legal status that have occurred over the past century provide general support for both modernization and neoinstitutionalist theories. But these two theoretical accounts imply different patterns of evolutionary change because they emphasize different causal mechanisms. Traditional modernization theory suggests that gender equality should be greater in advanced industrial societies, where exigencies of modern economic production render discrimination against women and other historically subordinated groups prohibitively costly. Neoinstitutionalists understand egalitarian change as a global phenomenon that is driven by changing world-cultural norms, the rules and standards established by international institutions, and efforts by poor countries to gain legitimacy by mimicking hegemonic powers. By this account, trends should be at most loosely coupled with on-the-ground economic conditions.

What can comparative research tell us about the relative merits of these two theoretical frameworks for understanding trends in women’s status? With respect to *current* levels of employment, educational attainment, and wages, evidence that gender gaps are modestly smaller in developed than in developing countries provides some support for modernization arguments. With respect to *trends* on these indicators, however, the evidence seems to favor neoinstitutionalist accounts. Dramatic changes in formal laws and organizational practices have occurred in nearly all societies, regardless of local economic structures or cultural traditions. The near universality of these egalitarian shifts is difficult to explain without reference to top-down processes of institutional diffusion and global cultural change.

But neither evolutionary account is useful for understanding the strong persistence, even intensification, of sex segregation in advanced industrial societies. The strength of sex segregation in these contexts is partly due to the structural modernization of educational systems and labor markets, which has frequently

involved the creation and expansion of female-labeled niches in the social services and other human-centered fields. Sex segregation also persists because it is widely viewed as legitimate. In contrast to inequality forms that arise out of blatant female subordination and discrimination, most forms of sex segregation are readily interpreted as the product of free choices by equal-but-different men and women. They are therefore easily reconciled with the liberal egalitarian principles cited by modernization and neoinstitutionalist scholars (Charles & Grusky 2004, Charles & Bradley 2009).

International trends also provide mixed evidence regarding the role of the state in promoting gender equality. On the one hand, states have been important equalizing forces through their adoption and enforcement of antidiscrimination laws and regulations. Responding to pressures at national and international levels, most of the world's governments have purged their books of laws that sanction different treatment of men and women in employment, education, politics, marriage, and property rights. On the other hand, governments differ in their social policy agendas. Although nearly all states today reject laws that formally discriminate, some conservative governments seek to promote traditional male-breadwinner divisions of labor through their tax, employment, and family policies; other governments (especially in social democratic Scandinavian countries) actively promote dual-earner families; and still others (especially in the United States) take a hands-off approach to allow for market solutions. These distinct policy regimes are both cause and consequence of differential rates of female labor force participation in advanced industrial societies (Orloff 1993, Esping-Andersen 1999, Gauthier 1999, Gornick & Meyers 2003, Charles & Cech 2010). Policies advanced by these diverse governments also appear to have unanticipated consequences. In some cases, measures to equalize male and female access to labor markets and systems of higher education have resulted in increased gender inequalities with respect to pay or distributions across

educational and occupational fields (Bradley & Charles 2004; Pettit & Hook 2009; Mandel & Semyonov 2005, 2006).

What does the future hold? Findings point to at least two possibilities: One is for strengthening and consolidating advanced-industrial (i.e., equal-but-different) gender regimes in developing and transitional societies. This may occur as economic capacities for indulging gender-specific career aspirations grow or as notions about the masculine or feminine nature of particular fields (such as computer science or business administration) disseminate through global markets. A second possible development, suggested by evolutionary theories, is that the cultural and structural processes that support sex segregation will gradually weaken. Stereotypes about innate gender difference do appear to meet with growing resistance, at least in elite international policy circles. This is evidenced in the decreased legitimacy of explicitly male- or female-targeted educational programs (e.g., within the UNESCO or World Bank). It can also be seen in the public furor that followed a 2005 suggestion by former Harvard president Lawrence Summers that women's underrepresentation in high-level math and science may have biological roots. Movement toward degendering of labor markets and educational systems also may be accelerated by economic pressures such as worldwide shortages of science and technology workers.

The research reviewed here suggests that distinguishing among different types of gender inequality is critical to the understanding of international trends in women's status. Most importantly, sociologists should distinguish between access and segregation and between vertical and horizontal forms of sex segregation. Scholars should also attend to the differential legitimacy of different inequality forms. In affluent postmaterialist societies, the gender inequalities that are most resilient are those that are not explicitly hierarchical and appear to reflect naturally distinct preferences of autonomous men and women. Sex segregation of college majors, caring occupations, and domestic work is widely presumed to

reflect self-selection—and self-expression—by formally equal but innately different men and women. Such inequalities retain broad legitimacy in cultures that celebrate choice and understand individuals as primordial to the societies in which they live.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Karen Bradley, Erin Cech, Lynn Prince Cooke, Paula England, Karin Gottschall, Bridget Harr, and John Meyer for helpful comments.

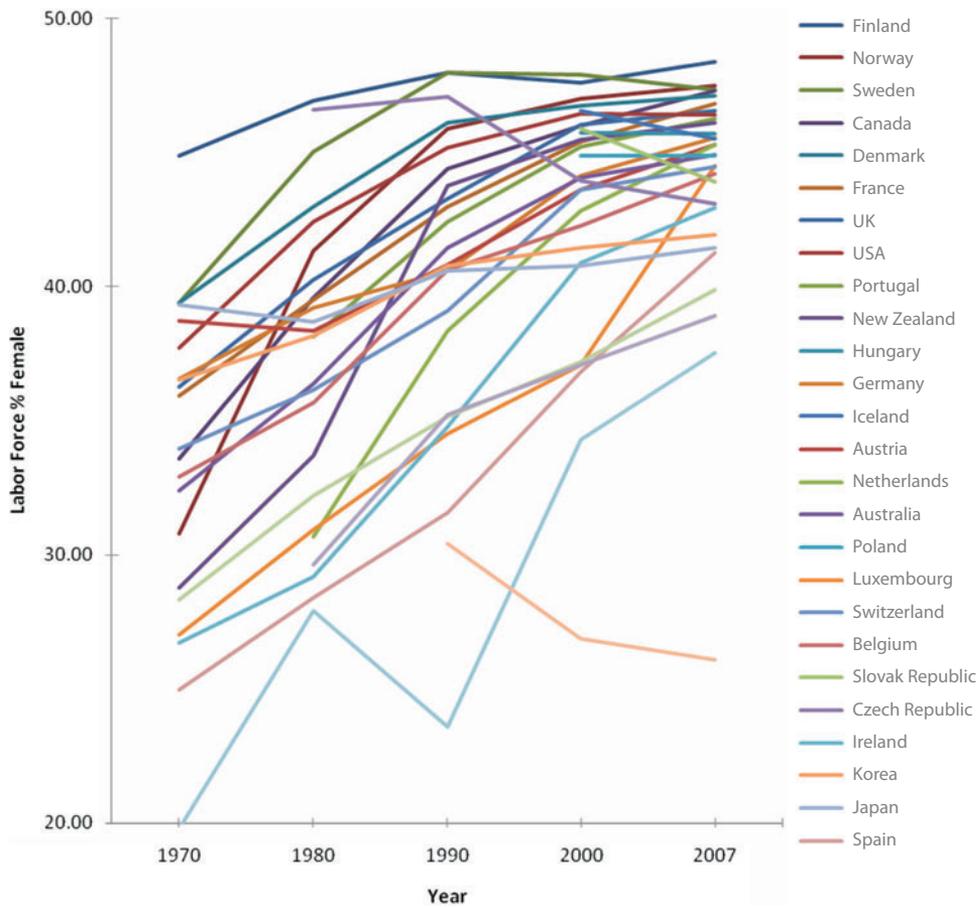
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**Figure 1**

Women's share of the labor force in developed countries, 1970–2007. Note: Data are taken from OECD (2009).