

(ii) Inequalities relating to gender

Pause for thought

- Are any social roles more suited to men than to women?
- Do you think that men or women face more disadvantages in the contemporary UK?

Gender is considered a main site of social inequality in the contemporary UK. In both public and private domains there are social differences between men and women, many of which become social inequalities. The extent and causes of inequalities form the focus of this section, which will begin by considering data relating to the extent of inequality between men and women. It will then consider a range of theoretical explanations, focusing on feminism.

Workplace

One of the main sites of inequality is the workplace, yet significant pieces of legislation are in place to protect people from sexual

discrimination and to try to bring equity to the workplace. In 1970 the Equal Pay Act made it illegal to pay men and women different rates for the same job. In 1975 the Sex Discrimination Act made it illegal to discriminate against an applicant for a job on the basis of their sex – unless it could be shown that a job required a person of a specific sex. More recent legislation has increased women's statutory right to maternity leave from 14 weeks to 18 weeks, and men have had a right to two weeks' paid paternity leave since 2003. The current Labour government has been looking at introducing legislation to make 'positive action' in recruitment processes much easier, to bolster the numbers of women and members of ethnic-minority groups in certain posts.

Activity 1

The table below lists areas of life in the contemporary UK where either men or women could be seen as being advantaged. Remember, of course, that it is difficult to generalise and that there may be more than one way of seeing

each topic. Copy and complete the table, giving reasons for your views.

Share your ideas as a class and see to what extent there is a consensus of opinion.

	Female advantage	Male advantage	No difference
Home life			
Workplace			
Health			
Media representations			
Crime			
Education			
Political life			

Activity 2

Discuss the following questions and then write down your views.

- Do any jobs specifically require a man or a woman to carry them out, and if so what are the reasons for that?
- Should a woman have the right to 18 weeks' maternity leave, regardless of the impact it has on her workplace?
- What are your views on taking 'positive action' to get more men or women into jobs where they are under-represented? (All-women shortlists for MPs are a good example of this.)

Men are significantly more likely than women to work full time and to be self-employed, although as Table 1.9 shows, the differences in

employment status over time may be reducing. Men have also been shown to work longer hours than women, regardless of their status as fathers (Dermott, 2006).

When women do work full time, they are less likely than men to achieve positions of authority. Data shows that female directors of FTSE 100 companies lag significantly behind male appointments.

The concept of the **glass ceiling** has been used to describe how women can reach a certain position but find it difficult to break through to the top jobs – a ceiling prevents them from accessing them. The concept of the leaky pipeline has been used, referring to the steady attrition of females from Science and Technology posts which are associated with the higher-paid jobs in society. Conversely, women are more likely than men to be employed in the areas of education, health and welfare – traditionally not the highest-paid occupational areas.

	1992			2007		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
Full-time employees	10.6	5.9	16.5	11.6	7.1	18.7
Part-time employees	0.6	4.5	5.1	1.3	5.1	6.3
Self-employed	2.6	0.9	3.5	2.8	1.0	3.8
Unemployed	1.8	0.9	2.8	0.9	0.7	1.7

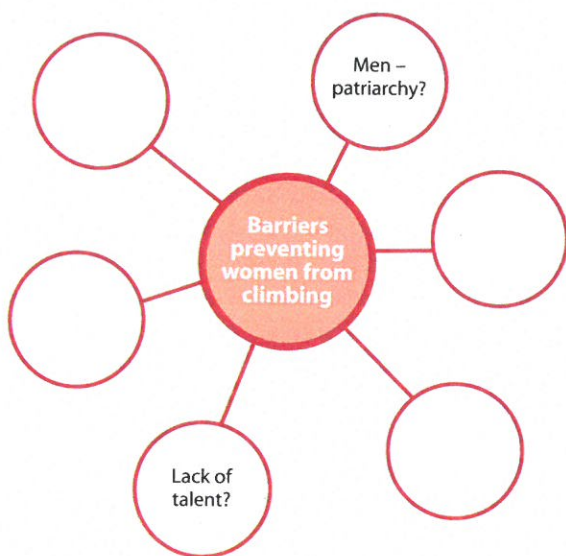
Table 1.9: Economic activity by employment status and sex (of all economically active people, figures in millions)
(Source: Social Trends, Office for National Statistics)

Female FTSE 100 (in numbers)	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of new female appointments	15	13	20	24	30	23	30
Number of new male appointments	113	111	129	117	149	181	152
Female % of new appointments	12	11	13	17	17	13	20

Table 1.10: Appointment years of FTSE 100 directors 2001–2007, by gender (Source: Sealy et al., 2007)

Activity 3

In pairs, think of what barriers prevent women from reaching the top positions in the workplace. Present your findings in a diagram like the one below.



There are also differences in relation to working patterns: women are significantly more likely to have flexible working patterns. This flexibility would of course fit with the domestic homemaker role. Again however, this is changing and men are increasingly being given access to flexible working patterns. Although a gender divide

remains, the overall picture is one of convergence rather than divergence.

These patterns and trends are part of the reason why incomes differ between men and women. According to the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (Office for National Statistics, 2007), the average earnings of all full-time employees were £457.00 per week. The figure for men was £496, and for women it was £394. The peak earning age group for men was the 40–49 sector, for women it was 30–39. These figures suggest that men and women have differing life courses in relation to the workplace and income. Different earning levels throughout life will impact on the ability to buy into a private pension scheme, which women are less likely than men to do.

Women are more likely than men to live in low-income households, linking with what has been termed the feminisation of poverty. However the gap between male and female earning has reduced over the past twenty years. In 1994, 20 per cent of men lived in low-income households, compared to 24 per cent of women. In 2005, the figure remained at 20 per cent for men but had reduced to 22 per cent of women (Palmer et al. 2007, pages 42, 47). These data suggest that the inequalities between men and women may be diminishing, however the economic well-being of most women is weaker than that of men. One reason for this is differing roles carried out in the private sphere – the home.

	Men (%)	Women (%)	All (%)
Full-time employees			
Flexible working hours	10.1	14.9	12.0
Annualised working hours	5.2	5.2	5.1
Term-time only working	1.1	6.1	3.0
Any flexible working pattern	18.3	27.4	21.8
Part-time employees			
Flexible working hours	7.4	9.2	8.9
Annualised working hours	3.1	4.2	4.0
Term-time only working	4.5	11.4	10.0
Job-share	1.0	2.4	2.1
Any flexible working pattern	17.8	28.0	26.0

Table 1.11: Employment with flexible working patterns: by sex and type of employment, 2007 (Source: Social Trends, Office for National Statistics)

Home

Despite the fact that women are more likely to be in paid employment than they were 50 years ago, their entry into the labour market has not seen the end of their role as homemakers. Part-time work and flexible working arrangements can complement the role of homemaker. Some sociologists have referred to this as the dual role: women play an active role in the public and the private domestic spheres. However, men are increasingly playing a greater role in domestic life. Data from the organisation Carers UK (2007) show that there are almost as many male carers in society as there are female carers.

Seager (1997) used time diaries as a way of researching the number of hours men and women used per weekly on different tasks; home and work related. Women spent more time each week on domestic activities and men spent more time on paid work. Men had more leisure and rest time than women.

Politics

Although the number of female MPs has grown during the last 100 years, women are still grossly unrepresented in Parliament. In October 2008 there were only 126 female MPs out of 646.



Weblink

You can find out more about women's role in politics in the UK (see 'Websites', page ii).

Activity 4

Why do you think so few women are MPs?

List the possible reasons and write a paragraph explaining the one(s) you think are the most likely causes of female under representation in politics.

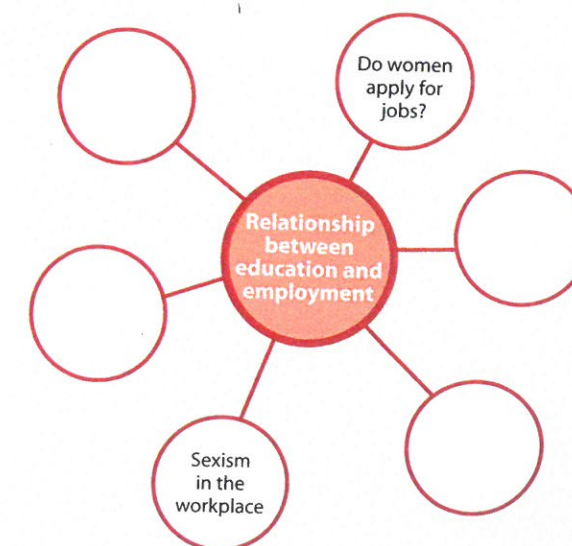
Education

Education is an area where males seem to experience more disadvantage than females. On average, females achieve better results in SATs at all Key Stages, in GCSEs, A Levels/Diplomas and degrees. There are differences in relation to subject choice, with Maths, Physics and ICT being male-dominated and English, modern languages and Biology being female-dominated. Truancy rates show that males are more likely to truant from school and significantly more likely to be excluded than females.

Data from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2006/7) shows 65.5 per cent of girls and 56.4 per cent of boys achieved five or more grades A*–C at GCSE. This pattern is reflected over time in performance data. At degree level 56.6 per cent of all first degrees awarded in 2007 were to women and 43.4 per cent awarded to men (Office for National Statistics). It would seem that education favours females in the contemporary UK, however some studies suggest that girls have a harder time in the classroom and in school than boys, that they receive less attention from the teacher than the boys, who dominate space both in the classroom and outside.

Activity 5

If women are achieving stronger examination results, why are they not improving their position in the workplace at a similar rate? Copy and complete this spider diagram illustrating factors that may explain the relationship between education and work.



Health

Activity 6

Summarise what the data in Table 1.12 show about health differences between men and women in the contemporary UK.

	Men	Women
Life expectancy	76.6	81.0
Healthy life expectancy	67.9	70.3
Years spent in poor health	8.7	10.7

Table 1.12: Life expectancy, healthy life expectancy, by sex in the UK, 2004 (data in years) (Source: Social Trends, Office for National Statistics)

Stretch and Challenge Activity

Using the data in this section and any of your own research, create a diagram to show the areas where either women or men are disadvantaged in the UK. Then draw lines between different factors to indicate how they may be connected.

Theoretical explanations of gender inequalities

Functionalist

For functionalists, men and women naturally serve different social roles. Parsons (1955) refers to the 'expressive' caring role that women play, compared to the 'instrumental' practical role played by men. For Parsons these differences are innate, ascribed at birth, and contribute to a healthy, smooth-running society.

Insurprisingly, the functionalist argument has been criticised, not least by feminists such as Oakley (1974) who argue that gender roles are socially constructed and not biologically ascribed. Critics of Parsons point out that his theory is written from the point of view of a male academic – for whom the social roles of female homemaker and male breadwinner were probably very convenient.



Figure 1.5: Structure or agency?

Activity 7

Think of three arguments that would support Parsons' view and three that would oppose it.

Human capital theory is related to the idea that men and women serve different roles and purposes in society. Human capital theorists argue that many women choose to prioritise their role as homemaker, fitting with their maternal instincts, they are therefore the architects of their own position. Critics, however, point out that this view ignores the structural constraints in society which many argue disadvantage women.

Marxist

Marx himself wrote very little about gender; his interest was in economic disadvantage. However, the concept of the reserve army of labour has been applied to women in capitalist society. As a social group they have been easy to hire and fire and could be seen as useful to the workings of a capitalist economy. According to Beechey (1976), women are less likely to join trade unions and more likely to accept low wages as their income is frequently supplementary to that of the male breadwinner. However, in the twenty-first century, jobs are less likely to be unionised and women are increasingly the main wage-earner or in dual-income households. To consider women as a reserve army of labour is probably over-generalising.

Engels (1972) did write on the subject of gender and women's role in society. For Engels, the subordinate position of women was a result of historical development and the growth of private property and accompanying laws of hereditary rights. Keen to pass on their property, it became important for men to establish their rightful heirs, hence the development of monogamous relationships. For Engels, men gained control over women through their initial acquisition of private property. Many Marxists agree with this basic argument, however it does not explain why it was men, and not women, who gained control of private property. The whole explanation has been accused of prioritising class and economic differences over sex differences without any real supporting evidence.

Weberian

Men and women are thought to occupy differential positions in the workplace in terms of position they reach and the area they are employed in. Horizontal and vertical segregation have been used as metaphors to describe women's position in the workplace. Horizontal segregation refers to the different types of jobs women and men hold; vertical segregation refers to the different levels they reach within the workplace – in effect, status.

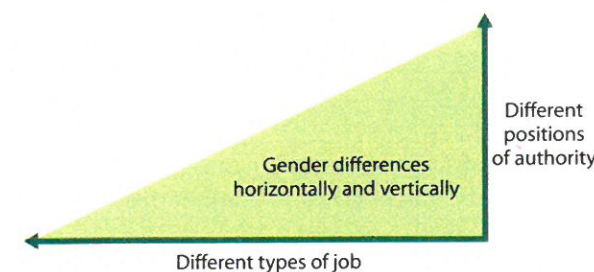


Figure 1.6: Horizontal and vertical segregation

Barron and Norris' (1976) dual labour market theory has been applied to women's employment patterns. There are two labour markets: the primary, characterised by high pay, secure jobs with good promotion prospects and the secondary labour market with low pay, poor promotion prospects and poor job security. They suggested that women were more likely than men to be in the secondary labour market.

Feminism

Most of the prominent literature on gender inequalities is associated with second-wave feminism and the 1960s and 1970s.

Activity 8

Using pages 188–189, remind yourself what first- and second-wave feminism are.

Different groups of thinkers have been identified within second-wave feminism; liberal, Marxist and radical feminists, and this section will look at each in turn before moving onto third-wave/post-feminist thought. You will need to be familiar with a range of different types (sometimes called strands and faces) of feminism, criticisms of each and consider the contribution of feminism as a whole to understanding gender inequality in the contemporary UK. Beware, however, that there is as much disagreement within feminism as between feminism and other sociological theories. Generally however, feminists are united in the belief that aspects of gender inequality need to be the focus of their work.

Activity 9

How does the key focus of feminism differ from Marxism, Weberianism and functionalism? What does each of these theories focus its explanations of inequality on?

Liberal feminism

Liberal feminists such as Friedan (1963) are associated with the belief that gender inequality is a product of general inequality in society which has been allowed to proceed unchallenged for centuries. They do not blame anyone or anything in particular for this, and tackle reform by removing the barriers blocking equality of opportunity between men and women. They were supportive of legislation such as the Equal Pay Act, Sex Discrimination Act, and Education Reform Act (1988). They would be largely supportive of ideas such as positive discrimination, but would not seek to extend women's rights beyond those of men. Their ideas were massively influential in challenging male dominance in society from the 1960s onwards.

however most commentators would agree that legal changes do not go far enough in developing equality of opportunity between men and women.

Activity 10

Despite the Equal Pay Act, men's and women's earnings are not equal. What other factors may explain this?

Marxist feminism

Marxist feminism built on the work of liberal thought and argued that deeper and more fundamental changes were needed in society to tackle gender inequality. They positioned most of their explanations within the contribution of gender differences (and inequalities) to explaining the rise of capitalism. Writers such as Benston (1972) focused on the economic aspects of gender inequality: women as a reserve army of labour, the contribution of domestic labour to capitalism and the ideology of the nuclear family used by the state. In short, they argued that women are used to benefit the operation of the capitalist economy and Marxist feminists can be seen as fusing Marxist thinking with gender inequality.

However, critics are keen to question who, or what, was being blamed here: was it the

economy as in classic Marxist theory, or patriarchy and male dominance? Was Marxist feminism signifying a unified system of society or a dual system where patriarchy and economics were interlinked? The relationship between Marxism and feminism has been described by Hartmann (1981) as an *unhappy marriage*, as the focus of the two strands are difficult to mould into a coherent theory.

Hartmann (1981) argued that patriarchy and economic both play a crucial role in explaining and understanding gender equality. She argued that historically men have controlled women for many reasons, and key among these is the control of 'labour power'. This can come through legislation that operates economically to the benefit of men in society, for example laws on maternity and paternity rights, or through purely economic differences in terms of access to income and wealth. Hartmann's work begins to explore the idea that neither patriarchy nor economics alone can explain gender inequality. Her work is an example of a **dual systems theory**.

Marxist feminism is a complicated theory which has many divisions regarding what to foreground: economics, patriarchy or an intertwined approach to explaining gender inequality. It did, however, move the feminist argument into new terrain by asking searching questions for its day.

Activity 11

Copy and complete the table below, showing how women could be seen as contributing to

the development of capitalism and any solutions that could be put in place to combat this.

Women assist capitalism by:	Possible solutions	Potential problems
Providing free housework	Pay women for carrying out housework	How much, and where would the money come from?
Providing free childcare		
Promoting an ideology of the nuclear family		
Beautifying themselves		
Working for lower wages than men		

Radical feminism

Radical feminists foreground patriarchy in explaining gender inequality between men and women. In short, society is patriarchal, men have been allowed to control women in both the personal and the public spheres, and hence a situation of extreme inequality has arisen between them. Some radical feminists argue that the source of patriarchy lies in biological differences between men and women, women's ability to give birth resulting in patriarchal dominance (Firestone, 1971). Millet (1971) disagreed with this biological argument and argued that patriarchy was not ascribed but rather socially created and therefore capable of being challenged and deconstructed.

Activity 12

- 1 If patriarchy has a social cause, what solutions could be offered?
- 2 If patriarchy has a biological cause, what solutions could be offered?

Radical feminists are associated with the slogan 'the personal is the political,' and their work moved the feminist debate into the role played by patriarchy in the private and public arenas. Radical feminism is characterised by the concept of patriarchy, but internal disagreements are evident in terms of what causes patriarchy and how it could be challenged. Radical feminism has been associated with a number of controversial ideas.

Activity 13

Here are three slogans associated with radical feminism. Discuss what they mean and where you think they originated.

- 1 All feminists are lesbians.
- 2 All men are rapists.
- 3 Marriage makes women 'sick'.

Walby (1990) has made an important contribution to our understanding of patriarchy in recent years. Although not accurately described as a radical feminist, she suggests that patriarchy is

not a universal term which is true in one form at all times and in places. At one level, patriarchy exists as a social system built on the assumption that men will try to oppress women, but they do not and cannot always do this in the same way and with success. For Walby there are a number of patriarchal relations in operation in paid work, the state and cultural institutions such as the media and education.

This section has outlined the main ideas associated with different feminists in the second-wave phase. It is worth noting that these labels have been ascribed to the writers and that many feminists see them as unhelpful as they stereotype their thinking. However, they do provide a useful way of analysing the work of a group of sociologists who have as many differences as they do things in common. We now turn to focus on more recent feminist work.

Black feminism

A group of black feminists have developed, whose work raises the profile of race and ethnicity as hidden dimensions of inequality. They argue that much feminist thought was based on the experiences of white, middle-class women writing about their own lives. Far from being a source of oppression, some black feminists argued that the family was frequently a source of solidarity and support for them. Black feminists began to question the notion of 'womanhood' and what it meant – perhaps there were different ways and pressures of experiencing it – and that ethnicity, class and age were neglected areas of feminist research.

Stretch and Challenge Activity

Research the work and writings of bell hooks.

Third-wave feminism

Feminist thought has moved on since the second wave and some argue that it has entered a third wave or post-feminist stage. However, there is no agreement as to what characterises the third stage. For some writers the battle between men and women has moved on and changed, while others raise questions about whether women can have it all, and whether they want to have their place as primary carers and the right to equality

in the workplace. Others say that feminism has simply gone too far and that men are as disadvantaged as women in many ways. There is no doubt that third-wave feminism is as divided as second-wave feminist thought. However that is not to overlook its contribution. Asking questions and offering commentary help to ensure a healthy debate about gender inequality.

This is not to suggest that feminism is dead, but it is changing. Increasingly, feminist groups use new technology to convey their messages and set up cybernetworks.



Weblink

Finn MacKay is a leading feminist in the contemporary UK. To look at some of her ideas, see 'Websites', page ii.

Preference theory

One of the most comprehensive challenges to all modes of feminist thought comes from Hakim (2000), who argued that not all women are disadvantaged. Employing concepts from rational choice theory, she proposed what is known as **preference theory**, that women do exercise choice in relation to their position in the home and workplace. Her research identified three groups of women, characterised by their relationship to their domestic roles and workplace.

The adaptive group constitute the largest percentage of women, with approximately 60 per cent, compared to 20 per cent each for the other two groups. For Hakim, feminism must move on and accept that women have

choice which they exercise, and acknowledge that many are happy with their position in society. Her typology is useful for beginning to understand the differences between groups of women. However, it has been stated that exercising choice/agency is never really free from structure/circumstance. In this sense although preference theory contributes a great deal to the patriarchy/biology/economic debate that characterised second-wave feminism, it still fails to capture the variety of women's experiences.

Activity 14



Carry out some research into how much choice women of different generations feel they have/had in their lives.

You could repeat the exercise with men.

A questionnaire or an interview would be the most useful method to use.

Collate your results and see if any patterns emerge.

Stretch and Challenge Activity

Find out more about the following contemporary writers and their views of feminism.

- Camille Paglia
- Naomi Walters
- Finn MacKay

	Work-centred	Adaptive	Home-centred
Key characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career-orientated • Often single • If with partners, in egalitarian relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clear preference for main role • The drifters • Lack clear economic use of qualifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wives and/or mothers • Work flexibly or part-time

Table 1.13: Hakim's three groups of women (Source: Hakim, 2000, p. 6. Reproduced with the permission of Oxford University Press)

This section on feminism has introduced a variety of different feminist writers and approaches. Many commentators ask whether there is any such thing as feminism – and point out that feminist thought has as many divisions within it as it has similarities to the feminist cause. While feminism may be characterised by diversity, all feminists share a common cause in wanting to eradicate sexual discrimination – they differ in what they see as its cause and crucially in what its solution is.

Stretch and Challenge Activity

Write an essay on the following:

'Feminism is characterised more by disagreement than by agreement.' Discuss.

Section summary

The key theories to consider in this section are functionalism, Marxism, neo-Marxism, Weberianism, feminism and preference theory.

Use the following words to write a paragraph explaining the key themes of this section.

- Patriarchy
- Dual systems
- Glass ceiling
- Preference theory

Exam practice

- 1 Outline the evidence to show how women face both advantages and disadvantages in the contemporary UK. (20 marks)
- 3 Assess sociological explanations of gender inequality in the contemporary UK. (40 marks)

(iii) Inequalities relating to ethnicity

Pause for thought

- Are some ethnic-minority groups more advantaged than others in the contemporary UK?
- Do you think that ethnic inequalities are changing in society?

Differences between and within ethnic groups provide a rich source of data for sociologists studying social inequalities and differences. The workplace in particular provides evidence that some ethnic groups are distinctly advantaged over others in terms of their potential work and market situations. These differences correspond to some degree with differential patterns of educational achievement. In this section we will consider a range of data in relation to social inequalities between ethnic groups. First, however, we will take a brief look at the issues of terminology and classification systems.

Ethnic classification

As you will recall from the AS Sociology course, the concept of 'ethnicity' refers to cultural differences and 'race' refers to biological ones. Everyone belongs to at least one ethnic group. The majority ethnic group in the contemporary UK could be described as white British, although what it means culturally to be white British is a matter of debate. British sociologists are more likely to use the term 'ethnic differences' than American sociologists, who tend to use the concept of race. Throughout this section we use ethnicity as a concept.