

An exploration on the Nature of Gender Inequality: Are men and women fundamentally attributed by nature with equal ability and power?

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Abstract:

Gender inequality and the liberation of women had been a recognized social problem world-wide. The discussion lasted for ages, dating deep into history that it's too far to know the exact happening and start of the stratification. As the society evolve, we do acknowledge the rise of the power in women's hands----women was given first time the right to vote in 1893, New Zealand (Soken-Huberty, 2024); The #MeToo starting in 2017 on twitter from a hashtag to a movement of women revealing the harms they experienced due to their sex, informing the world "the magnitude of the problem" (Jamillah Bowman Williams, Lisa Singh, Naomi Mezey, 2019). It is also clear, however, that such imbalance of power and treatment had yet not been solved with the dogged existence of workplace discrimination and conventions in need of questioning. Critics had informed readers with the origin and progression and changes of the disparity, advocated for the importance of addressing it. The issue is still there, so there's more changes needed. Or, given its difficulty to be traced back and to be solved even after centuries of development and effort for liberation, is gender inequality ever an issue, or just a pattern of nature?

Keywords: Gender Inequality, gender essentialism, women's rights, stratification, gender roles

Introduction

Review suggested that the happening of women's inferiority possibly had happened during the Neolithic age. (Hamilton, 2023) Wars, shift of social stages, solutions made for the issue, but inequality persists.

This triggers the wondering of reasons behind the in-defatigability: What had consistently gone wrong in the changes humans made toward the issue over the past that hindered us from achieving equality? Or is inequality between male and female a determined fate that is set by nature from the start, and thus is

nothing to be called a “social problem” but a natural phenomenon?

With gender inequality stubbornly persisting even under intentionally made resolutions, finding the issues of our actions and solutions may be a tough one that still needs years of attempts and trials. The conjecture on whether gender stratification is destined to happen, however, could be taken into exploration: biological features of men and women relates to the nature’s intention, and theories on the first signs of male domination offer insights on the essence of gender inequality. This essay will first explain the origin of gender inequality to provide a general view and point out the main cause of the issue. Theories such as gender essentialism, and the perspectives of the old Greek philosophers will also be discussed along with evaluations. It will be concluded that man and women are in fact naturally attributed with equal capability by the nature, and thus calling for the necessity for solutions of gender inequality.

The Origin of Gender inequality

According to his theory of Historical materialism, Marx postulates that the shaping of culture and human society depends on the economic activities and productive forces of the time. (Marx, 1848) The implication is that the role ones hold in the society is determined by one’s productivity and his/her contribution to the society.

In preliminary society, men and women held equal social status. Women gave birth and played a crucial role in maintaining human species; though with less physical strength, they stayed home for suitable jobs like house chores, gardening, and pottery making. Men as the stronger one of the races went out to hunt and play a protective role to the family. There were equal contributions from the two sexes as they held equally important role in the only job they are doing: taking care of their family. (Beauvoir, 1949)

With the advent of the Bronze Age came the used tools. The Bronze-made tools, often heavy, were open to men who used them to anticipate the emerging form of production. Tools increased productivity as products made from them were involved in trading purposes. Trade brought profits, and men became engaged in a new form of economic activity apart from their previous mere involvement in a family. Women lacking the physical strength were excluded from the economic activity brought using tools, while men became the ones who since then are capable for creating higher value.

Thus, it is suggested that women’s natural lack of physical strength than men doomed them to be left behind in a crucial social shift. However, the society that values one’s physical strength does not persist forever. The industrial evolution provided machines that women could operate,

economic engagement can happen regardless of gender, and women became an integral part of the society. (Marx, 1848) Now, in modern society, intelligence is the one most valued, and women are recognized to hold comparable capability in contributing to the society and creating value.

The lack of physical strength was the reason that started the exclusion, but now as that it no longer is the most valued trait, why do humans still endure inequality?

Explanations were made claiming that the gender inequality that started in the deep old history and lasted for centuries had become rooted in the cultural norms and ingrained in history. (Hamilton, 2023) While this could be one of the reasons----also an implicature that gender inequality had become a social rule and natural law---other theories can provide a perspective in exploring the nature of gender inequality.

Theories on the nature of men and women

2.1 Gender Essentialism

Gender essentialism asserts that men and women possess inherent traits that result in distinctive features and abilities between the two sexes. These intrinsic traits are considered as the “essence” bestowed upon the two sexes, defining their potential, future identity, and roles that will be unalterable. According to this perspective, all men possess essential masculine qualities, while women possess essential feminine qualities. (Vinney, 2021) For instance, gender essentialists would believe that women are natural caregivers and nurturers, predisposed with gentleness and docility that serve best as a tender wife and careful mother, while men are naturally born with assertiveness and rationality that makes them leaders and pioneers. (Brito, 2020)

This theory is notable in this essay not for its assertion on “essence” or a predetermined fate, which, certainly is worth to be skeptical on, but its perspective that men and women have fundamentally different capabilities, which serves as one of the sides of the issue. The significance is that it attributes women with roles of less value, suggesting that there are natural caregivers as those who are obedient and listen and resign (like a tender wife), while men are much more capable, with abilities to be pioneers and ambitious leaders. It believes women are naturally weaker and less capable.

Though gender essentialism responds directly to the issue, saying that the two sexes are born with different abilities, it has great limitations. One major flaw is its rigidity in defining individual identities, which is both impractical and unreasonable. By saying men and women born different in terms of capabilities, it is stating that the differ-

ence in abilities directly defines their identities and roles. It suggests that women are only suited for caregiving or homemaking roles, while men are suited for careers such as politics or law. (Brito, 2020) However, in contemporary society, we observe a great departure from these prescribed roles suggested by the theory. Women can be decisive leaders, while men can excel as attentive nurses. Moreover, as acknowledged in modern society, such acts assigning a gender fixed roles according to the fixed abilities perpetuate discrimination, marginalizing those not holding expected roles, such as men with the 'feminine qualities' defined by the theory. Assigning fixed abilities based on gender is absurd and feudal.

Therefore, in respond to the issue, gender essentialism suggests men and women hold predetermined different abilities, such as men being inherently capable in leading and women in nursing. This is not a consistent theory because the different abilities it stated contradicts to what is actually observed in real-world society, and thinking in a gender-essentialism perspective worsens injustice.

2.2 Aristotle's point of view

Aristotle also believed men and women to naturally hold different abilities. Due to the difference in abilities, and more specifically women being less capable, they should play a submissive role at home rather than engaging in politics or debates. (Mulgan, 1994) He believed in the natural inferiority of women and tried to justify it by saying that women do not have the psychological and biological capacity for independent actions or complete virtue; That women are ineloquent and indecisive, for they naturally have fewer teeth than men; (Mulgan, 1994) That women are passive and irrational because their bodies are too cold and weak to produce semen (which according to Aristotle, contributes to the rational and intellectual part of the embryo) (Huber, 2015). Aristotle considers women as naturally weaker than men in mind and body, and resigning to men serves them best for men are rational.

Aristotle's points answer the issue by saying that men and women are fundamentally different in their abilities, that women are naturally inferior to men. (Femenias, 1994). It is believed that Aristotle held a biased stance on women's abilities and had some of his ideas based simply on the observations and cultural norms in the past that are neither universal or held truth across time, and thus not fundamentally true.

Aristotle's ideas were influenced by the understanding and aesthetic of human anatomy and biological traits prevalent during his time. While his arguments may have been deemed reasonable in the past, it is important to acknowledge that they were largely shaped by the prevailing

perceptions of beauty and excellence during that era. In Ancient Greece, attributes such as well-defined muscles and physical strength were highly valued, and Aristotle personally associated these traits with rationality and autonomy. However, these standards placed excessive demands on women, as they were not typically expected to possess such physical attributes. (Huber, 2015) Being influenced by such social context, Aristotle blended in biases throughout his viewpoints, thinking sperm from men constitutes the rational and strong part of the embryo. (Huber, 2015) His idea of connecting women's biological inferiority (back in the past) to the entire and absolute inferiority of the sex does not form a consistent logic chain but is rather greatly influenced by cultural context. Overall, his point on women's natural inferiority fails to be a favorable answer of the philosophical issue for its huge reliance on cultural perceptions, leading to biases and inconsistencies.

2.3 Plato's Point of View

Plato, as Aristotle's teacher, was a main opponent of Aristotle's thoughts on women's ability. Opposing to Aristotle's idea on the natural inferiority of women, Plato believed that women have the same rationality and ability as men, thus same potential in governance and other jobs that only men are believed to be able to do. (Plato, 2003) In his *The Republic* on the governing of civilization, he insisted that the two sexes are the same in intellectual capabilities, saying:

...There is no pursuit of the administrators of a state that belongs to a woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all... (Plato, 2003)

Because of the equality of abilities held within men and women, Plato consider there to be no reason women should be excluded from politics or not get educated. Plato suggests that men and women are equal in the eye of gods; the only thing that distinguished them is their physical strength. (Calvert, 1975) In his perspective, the natural inferiority of women from Aristotle and the degrading traits to women from gender essentialism are all false.

Plato's arguments are subject to various interpretations. There have been critics of Plato's changing and inconsistent views throughout his book *The Republic*. (Forde, 1997) However, still, as the book approaches to end, it presents clearly that Plato is serious in saying women have similar capabilities to men, that "Plato is as serious about gender equality as he is about any element of the perfectly just regime in the Republic." (Forde, 1997)

Plato's points fit better in our evolved modern perceptions

of women. The idea of women being equally capable with men promotes more engagement in production and creation, constructing a better future society. Additionally, Plato's beliefs are more reasonable and realistic, and considered the issue of men's and women's abilities in different aspects: While saying that women and men are equal in mind, he didn't deny that the two sexes are different in physical strength; Plato admits that women are weaker in body. (Calvert, 1975)

Here, Plato's ideas seem to be a relatively consistent and comprehensive one, and people would possibly accept the idea that women are as capable as men. Nonetheless, as the previous paragraph suggested, Plato also claimed men to be physically stronger. Thus, although women and men have the same strength in mind and other things, doesn't their weakness in physical strength still imply that nature attributed fewer capabilities to women than men? A difference in mightiness could've been the cause of gender issues; a mere distinction still makes inequality.

2.4 Darwin's Theory of Evolution

Darwin and his theory of evolution can possibly offer insights into this question. In Darwin's book *On the Origin of The Species*, the theory of evolution was proposed, in which he claims that everything the creature within the species does works to serve one purpose: the maintenance and procreation of the species. (Darwin, 1859) According to Darwin, the creation of, the development of, and the adaptation to the surroundings of the organisms are all acts with the purpose to help the species to survive and procreate. (Nancy Le Nezet, 2014)

Since the only purpose for a species is to maintain itself, the implicature is that reproduction is key, along with the survival and protection of the offspring(s). Reproduction would not be possible with the absence of either of the two sexes. The most important ability, the ability to procreate, is equally attributed to males and females. Furthermore, women are ones to be pregnant and to nourish the child in the belly. Women during pregnancy are vulnerable and at risk. Therefore, men, who do not have babies inside their bodies, are given to responsibility to protect the female and their child inside, and so nature gave them the power, which is physical strength.

Using Darwin's theory, it would be argued that although women may be equally capable in intellectual activities but physically weaker than men, this still does not mean that nature fundamentally attributed them with unequal powers and abilities. It could be concluded that in the process of reproduction, which is the most important process for the human species, women can be pregnant while men can't, so physical strength was given to men from

nature as compensation. Along with power comes responsibility; Men are responsible for protecting the expectant mother and the child. With and only with a man and a woman, reproduction is possible.

Darwin's theory of evolution, although faced a problem of falsifiability, was still based on observations on fossils, collection of data, and plenty of experiments. (Ker Than, 2022) Though it could never be proven true or false, it is quite reasonable and conforms to our modern beliefs, still well-sustained in the history of science from the time it was first proposed.

Conclusion

Overall, it is to be believed that women and men are fundamentally attributed by nature to equal ability and power. While initially presenting gender essentialism and Aristotle's ideas that suggest women are naturally less capable than men, upon evaluation, these views are shown to be rather inconsistent as they perpetuate injustice and is influenced by their cultural context. By considering Plato's thoughts and providing my analysis upon Darwin's theory in respond to the issue, which emphasize the natural equality of men and women, we arrive at the conclusion that both genders possess equal capabilities though still pointing out their strengths and limitations. Given the significance of this issue, the existence of gender inequality in today's world becomes a problem in need of a solution. Gender inequality is a human-created stratification and a problem that should be solved. Men and women are equal in nature, and working together builds a world that could benefit each other equally.

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