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Stratification, Gender

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Gender stratification is the stratification of individuals based on biological sex and the socially derived gender roles attached to sex. Stratification based on gender has existed in human society from the beginning of recorded history, if not before. In the United States, such stratification has traditionally existed in the institutions of education, work, and family, with men in the privileged position. Although great changes have occurred since the women's rights movement, men and women still remain stratified from each other in these three domains.

Education, one of the main conduits to upward mobility and increased status in the United States, [p. 906 ↓] experienced change in recent decades, with girls increasingly reporting liking traditionally male subjects in school such as math and science. Girls have also surpassed boys in obtaining higher grades in both elementary and secondary school. At the collegiate level, women have made great inroads, now comprising over half the population of undergraduates. Additionally, the Census Bureau reports that women graduate from college at higher rates than men. However, despite these substantial inroads in the educational domain, women do not experience the same benefits as men in occupational upward mobility.

According to recent Census data, the female-to-male earnings ratio among full-time, year-round employees has increased since 1960, from roughly 61 percent to 77 percent. Such differences persist regardless of education. The gender gap in wages tends to be the largest for women in the highest-paying jobs, which often require the most education. In addition to obtaining less for the same work, women often face other barriers to upward mobility. Research indicates that women in high-status jobs often face a “glass ceiling” beyond which they can no longer advance in a company, an invisible barrier that their male counterparts do not encounter.

Gender stratification in the work domain often reinforces traditional distinctions between men and women within the family. Although biological justifications for women as homemakers and men as breadwinners are often employed to ensure women's dependence on men, the desire to maintain a decent lifestyle has helped create many dual-earner families. Indeed, at least 58 percent of women have full-time, year-round employment. Such numbers might influence traditional gender stratification in the home, since many women now have an independent source of income. However, many

women must take on a “second shift,” in which they perform their traditional tasks in the home in addition to working a full day in the paid workforce, a trend that reinforces traditional gender stratification in the family.

As society evolves, women will likely continue expanding their presence in the educational and work domains. However, unless cultural change in the status of men and women additionally occurs, gender has the potential to remain a stratifying characteristic in the United States.

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See also

Further Readings

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