Gender equality usually refers to a condition of parity between men and women. However, given the widespread tendency to ascribe different roles and status to each in various settings across societies, what should constitute gender equality has provoked fierce debate. Based on the premise that females and males are inherently different in their reproductive, psychophysiological, and consequently social functions, the question remains whether men and women can ever be truly “equal.” Answers depend on the degree to which one thinks women’s and men’s capacities differ, what should be equalized, and by what means.

The Roots of Gender Inequality

The roots of gender inequality are hotly contested (not least within feminist thought itself). Irrespective of any consensus that gender equality should be the overall sociopolitical objective, causal interpretations of why it is such a perennial problem are located along a broad spectrum. These range from essentialist arguments (including biological reductionism and evolutionary psychology) whereby women’s societal experience, with and in relation to men, is a reflection of innate biological or physiological and psychological sex differences, through to more cultural accounts of gender inequality that claim that men and women are largely herded into different or unequally valued roles because of constructed social norms, and legal and institutional obstacles.

Gender in Context

The manifestation of gender inequality is multidimensional, and illustrations of it vary extensively depending on context. In industrialized democracies with highly developed legal systems, there is a contemporary preoccupation with women’s employment experience, in particular the perpetual issue of pay and status gaps between men and women in labor-market hierarchies (vertical occupational segregation) and the problems of balancing the demands of paid work and domestic life. In developing countries, the onus has been on educational opportunity, independent financial means for subsistence (particularly relative to motherhood), and health.

Amartya Sen delineates seven forms of gender inequality:

- **Mortality inequality**—a disproportionate female death rate, particularly in North Africa and Asia compared with other less gender-biased societies.
- **Natality inequality**—the consequences of parents’ preference for male children facilitated by fetal sex selection technology, particularly in East Asia, China, and South Korea.
- **Basic facility inequality**—the underrepresentation of females in state-coordinated services such as schooling, prevalent in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
- **Special opportunity inequality**—even where both sexes have access to basic facilities, in many environments substantive opportunities to acquire specialized knowledge and skills such as higher education and professional training are more likely to be open to men. This is a tendency found even in environments framed by extensive gender equality initiatives, such as in the United States.
Professional inequality—gender inequality in employment is a universal phenomenon and relates to the persistent pay inequities between men and women and to the fact that women are more likely to be clustered in low-status occupations with diminished career opportunities, irrespective of the quality of equality legislation. Even after approximately thirty years of progressive gender equality policies across European Union (EU) member states for example, women are still heavily underrepresented in political posts and high-powered positions in public life.

Ownership inequality—this refers to the fact that most privately owned property across the world is held by men, illustrating domestic inequity and the limitations on women's capacity to prosper commercially and even socially.

Household inequality—this form of inequality is often the most difficult to quantify because it may not be blatant. Even in an environment where women and men are equally represented in educational, monetary, and professional terms, the division of labor within households is still likely to be heavily skewed between the sexes. Women predominate as the primary domestic workers and child carers irrespective of other roles they may have outside of the home. This again is a global phenomenon, and many argue it is the most fundamental form of unequal gender relations.

Policy Approaches
Many of Sen’s seven forms of gender inequality—for example, mortality inequality or basic facility—could be called issues of human rights and that in attempts to increase the well-being of humans, it is vital that women are not subject to less concern and respect than men—nominally the equal treatment approach. Gender mainstreaming, another general policy, relates to the systematic incorporation of gender issues at both the planning and implementation stage of all organizational policies. In the context of less extreme forms of gender inequality, such as professional inequality, particularly in environments where equality legislation is long-standing and sophisticated, the major debate lies in the degree to which women should be granted special provision and exclusive benefits to equalize background conditions. These provisions take the form of, for example, affirmative action programs that aim to implement specific measures to boost women's chances of success in employment, and specific protection rights such as paid maternity leave with a right to return to work. The emphasis here shifts from equality of access and of opportunity to creating conditions deemed more likely to result in equality of outcome. However, skeptics of this approach grapple with the extent to which exclusive benefits for women lend themselves to the exacerbation of gender divides without the comparable provision of benefits for men.

Problems of Terminology
The term gender equality is, in and of itself, a point of contention. Gender and sex have recently come to be deployed indiscriminately (or gender is increasingly being used to cover both terms). It is, however, worth re-establishing the quintessential difference between the two concepts. Sex as a category of analysis relates to the identification of an individual by biological endowments and functionings (although even this is contested). Gender is concerned with the ascription of social characteristics such as “womanly,” “manly,” “feminine,” and “masculine” that can be seen as culturally variable and not necessarily associated with the sex of an individual. Previously, sex invoked an analysis of men and women based on an a priori set of assumptions about the behavior of each sex. In an attempt to overcome this crude reductionism, the term gender was introduced as a way of classifying individuals socially rather than just biologically. This, however, presents some problems for the concept.

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gender equality because its common usage connotes the equality of men and women rather than equality of cultural codes. Moreover, gender also can relate to issues of sexuality, for example, homosexuality, bisexuality, and transsexuality. Accordingly, gender equality is sometimes also used to mean universal equality irrespective of gender, sex, or sexuality.

See also
Equity; Feminist Theory; Global Compact; Human Capital; Segregation; Social Justice; Welfare Reform

Further Readings and References

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