



Mary Evans

The Persistence of Gender Inequality

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Preface

This book is written against the backdrop of bitter and devastating conflicts in many parts of the world. In many of those contexts one of the central issues is the appropriate order of relations between men and women. Whilst the social and political rights of women are greater in some places than others, there is no country where gender equality has been achieved. The question of why not, of why change should be so difficult and so challenging, is the subject here. From what Laura Bates has described as ‘everyday’ sexism to brutally enforced regimes of gender differentiation, biological difference continues to bring with it distinct, and often radically distinct, implications.¹ Addressing this reality and the part that it continues to play in global politics is the subject here. Not least in the discussion is the issue of who profits from gendered inequality.

Questions about the relationship between women and men have a long lineage, and this book does not intend to review that long history or the academic work about it. This book is essentially about the present, about what is called, variously, late capitalism, neoliberalism or late modernity. There is considerable distance between these titles but all relate to the world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is commonly assumed that connections and relationships between parts of this world are closer than ever

before. In this, what is also often assumed – and it will be a central issue discussed here – is that the lives of men and women are becoming more similar, and that distinctions made on the basis of biology are disappearing. What continues is that men and women share, as they have always done, the immediate circumstance of their lives, and for many people alive today that circumstance is the political economy of capitalism; not the form known to historians of the eighteenth or nineteenth century but the form about which Beatrix Campbell has written ‘[this] new articulation of capitalism and patriarchy is hegemonic. That does not make it stable: all over the world there is tumult and resistance.’²

The tumult and resistance of which Campbell writes have various forms, from those not specifically focused on gender politics, such as the ‘Arab Spring’ or the protests of the Occupy movement in the United States, to those much more explicitly about gender, such as protests about sexual violence against women, internet sexism or punitive attacks on homosexuality. Globally, however, what is clear is that the politics of gender are part of what the sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have described as the ‘new spirit of capitalism’, a form which has produced a curious paradox: that of the increasing instability and uncertainty of material existence accompanied by an abandonment of previous forms of the control of individual choices, notably that of sexuality.³ In the UK, for example, the years 2010–15 have seen a determined assault on all forms of state provision whilst a ‘new Conservatism’ allows diverse forms of sexual relationships, for example that of same-sex marriage. In this context, what will be explored in the following pages are the complexities of not only the continuity of gender inequality but also its constant reappearance in new forms. In particular, what will be suggested is that whilst millions of women, by virtue of their biological association with care, are widely exploited, the fantasies and ideals of femininity constitute the basis of exploitative and highly profitable forms of consumption.

These two aspects of the exploitation of women and the feminine are found in the context of a growing social inequality that besets the lives of men and women throughout the world. The optimism of previous decades, in which the goal of the elimination

of poverty was the aspiration of many countries, has been replaced by more pessimistic expectations in which it is assumed that the majority will not see rising standards of living. But the politics necessary to contest this has to recognize more specific forms of inequality than that of overall social inequality, forms which do not just produce different aspects of inequality but contribute to and help to maintain overall social inequality. The persistence of gender inequality is not, therefore, only about the specific inequalities and injustices experienced by women but about the ways in which those conditions help to maintain general, structural and increasingly considerable forms of inequality. The aim here is to explore the part that the various forms, processes and contexts of gender differentiation play in maintaining a wider order of social inequality.

1

What is Gender Inequality?

Debates about gender have existed in both print and daily life for generations, and heated discussions about the state of relations between men and women show little sign of decreasing. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, issues about gender and sexual identity have become the subjects of increasingly complex debates, whilst the actual lived experience of gender can still be defined by rigid and often non-negotiable assumptions derived from biological difference. For example, debates arising out of the politics of transgender have called into question the very meaning of the terms ‘male’ and ‘female,’ whilst in certain parts of the world these very definitions of identity constitute mandatory forms of social existence. Discussions about gender exist universally; it is the nature of the debate, and certainly the degree to which it is a matter of public debate, that differ. But apart from these debates – about the implications of biological difference – there is a considerable degree of consensus that women, both born and made, have less access to power and privilege than men. Hence, although we speak of ‘gender inequality’, the term here has a more specific focus. It refers to those various social inequalities which are more often experienced by women than men. Those inequalities take forms which will be the basis of the discussion here and in later

chapters: those of material and political disadvantage and of various forms of abusive representation.

At that point, and through the use of the apparently inclusive term 'women', we encounter a potential minefield: a minefield in which much of the strength of that binary division between women and men is disrupted. Questions of class, of race, of sexual identity, of age, of ethnicity all disrupt any simplistic view that gender 'inequality' is solely a question of all men having more power and privilege than all women. There are two reasons for this: one is the point that the American academic Kimberlé Crenshaw made in 1991 when she wrote about the 'multiple grounds of identity' – of gender, race and class – which we all occupy. In doing so she articulated the concept of 'intersectionality', the recognition that all human beings are located within conditions of class and race as well as that of gender.¹ The second reason is that the terms power and privilege are no less problematic. In the second decade of the twenty-first century it is becoming demonstrably clear that power and privilege, in terms of access to material resources and control over the lives of others, are not just as concentrated as they have been in the past but are becoming both increasingly so and at the same time distant from any form of public, democratic scrutiny. The vast majority of men and women are, in this context, united by living outside that tiny minority where wealth and power are situated.

Yet amongst that majority of the world's population which lives outside the world of substantial wealth there are important differences which divide us. Many of those differences have until recently been expressed in a distinction between the 'global north' and the 'global south'. This division – between worlds of material plenty and worlds of material poverty – has lost some of its resonance as we have come to recognize that these categories have less homogeneity than has been supposed, and that neither poverty nor wealth is exclusively the preserve of particular geographical areas.² This is not to evade or obscure the very real differences that exist in the lives of the world's population, but it is to recognize that one of those straightforward divisions between 'the west' and the other parts of the world has often been supported by comparisons between the situation of women in the industrialized world and

elsewhere. In this, what has been assumed is a distinction between the 'emancipation' of women in the 'modern' west and the lack of emancipation in other parts of the world. It is an assumption that has played its part in the global politics of the legitimization of militarized engagements. For example, taking 'emancipation' to the women of Afghanistan was presented as part of the justification of the twenty-first-century military campaign led by the United States and the United Kingdom against the Taliban. Largely ignored was what was described in 1984 by Edward Said as the problem of 'travelling theory', the western practice of imposing on other countries its templates for social existence, not the least of which was the asymmetry between the dominant and the subject races.³ In this instance, the introduction of a legal framework for gender equality did not (in Afghanistan as elsewhere) immediately produce that reality. The assumptions, habits and culture of patriarchy, as women throughout the global north have discovered, do not automatically disappear with changes in the law or other forms of institutional rearrangement.

The part that ambitions about progress towards greater equality between men and women can play in legitimizations of western military interventions is an important instance of a widespread contemporary view about gender relations, namely that there was a steady progress towards equality in the twentieth-century west. It is an assumption which has appeared in various forms, perhaps most vividly in the infamous slogan used in a cigarette advertisement campaign in 1968: 'You've come a long way, baby'. What this campaign did was to position an account of the past (for example, in one advertisement, the statement that 'In the past a man allowed his wife one day a week out of the house') against what was suggested as contemporary reality. The fictional man and the equally fictional woman of the present day (who could still be addressed by advertisers as 'baby') were presented as equally independent, urban, young, white and autonomous. The 'new' woman of the latter part of the twentieth century was the woman who took a full part in what was assumed to be the norm of modern existence. That life was one of paid work, financial independence and sexual choice. In these contexts, it was assumed, gender equality had been achieved. But perhaps most important

about this advertisement was the way in which the very judgement about women, and their changed status, came from a masculinized voice. It was not women who were naming their own situation; it was being defined by men.

This book does not reject the view that there have been important changes in the lives of women and men in the past one hundred years. But what it does reject is the idea that these changes can easily be assumed as 'progress' and that equality between men and women now exists. Thus, although important alterations have taken place throughout the world in the legal status of women and men, many of the various contexts within which we 'do' gender changed remarkably little in the twentieth or the first decades of the twenty-first centuries. Perhaps most centrally what has not changed is the relationship of women to the work of care. That category involves not just the sometimes recognized (if not rewarded) work of the care of dependents but the more subtle assumption that part of the social meaning of womanhood is that of the caring human. The associative strength of this connection has endured for centuries. It remains intact and as such is responsible for much of the radically unequal way in which all women (with or without dependents) exist within the world of paid work. But this world is increasingly precarious and socially divided. The place of women in this context is structured through not only the habits of the past but also the specific inequalities of the present.

Amongst these inequalities are those which, as suggested, unite rather than divide women and men. For example, the British geographer Danny Dorling writes of the growing disparity between 'the rich' and 'the rest' in terms of the dramatic slogan, echoed in the rhetoric of the Anglo-American Occupy movement, of the '1%'.⁴ In this there are no distinctions of gender. This is important to notice, not just because of the absence of a gendered analysis, but because no discussion about gender inequality can ignore or overlook other forms of inequality. Hence the question of gender inequality has to be seen not in terms of static and idealized forms of achieving 'equality' but in terms of the ever-changing and evolving meaning and reality of overall social inequality. The comfortable – although mistaken – assumption of the achievement of gender equality leaves unanswered questions,

for example, about the way in which the global pay gap between women and men contributes to the accumulation of that wealth which is constitutive of patterns of growing social inequality.

Making Inequality

The view that we should be highly sceptical about the achievement of gender equality has become more generally current for two reasons. The first is that it has become increasingly apparent throughout the world that new media of communication provide a form through which women, both generally and specifically, can be threatened and derided. High-profile cases of these kinds of instances have been the internet attacks on (amongst others in the UK) the academic Mary Beard and the campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez. Mary Beard had challenged the attacks on women who voiced political opinions; Caroline Priado-Perez had suggested that Jane Austen might appear on UK banknotes. The second reason is that the austerity politics that have become common throughout much of Europe since 2010 have impacted in especially damaging ways on women; Ruth Pearson and Diane Elson are amongst those who have set out particularly clearly the impact of financial austerity on women.⁵ Others, such as Linda Tirado for the United States and Lisa McKenzie for the UK, have discussed more general aspects of austerity's impact.⁶ In these two circumstances women have raised questions about the forms of inequality which women globally encounter. Jacqueline Rose, for example, in her 2014 book *Women in Dark Times*, wrote that 'Women are not free today – not even in the West, where the inequalities are still glaring.'⁷ A central thesis here, shared by Rose and other writers such as Laurie Penny and Laura Bates and by groups in the UK such as the Women's Budget Group, is that we live in what has been described (in the words of Rose) as both a time of 'unprecedented violence against women' and one where new conditions of paid work and 'austerity' politics have been damaging to millions of women.⁸ These neoliberal policies have not of themselves created material poverty amongst women – women's

average pay has always been lower than that of men, and women have consistently been a marginal presence in public politics – but they have enlarged the contours of gendered inequality through, amongst other policies, the decrease in jobs traditionally taken by women in the public sector and in those services (such as forms of publicly provided care) that are central to women's lives.

In recognizing the ways in which neoliberal policies have had specific, and negative, consequences for women, there also has to be an engagement with the implications of political narratives which assume that change is always positive and that the changes instituted in what we think of as the 'modern' world are always for the better. One of the aspects of this view is particularly important here: the belief that to 'modernize' is to extend the boundaries of human freedom, to shake off the strictures and the confines of the past and bring into being a 'new' society. Political rhetoric, particularly in the west, is markedly enthusiastic about 'modernization' without much consideration of either its meaning or its possible consequences. This vagueness about the term 'modernization' has allowed, since the early 2000s, neoliberal policies to be presented as forms of 'modernization', regardless of their socially regressive consequences.

It is the generally socially regressive consequences of neoliberal policies that have been the focus of other widely influential forms of critique. The works of authors such as Joseph Stiglitz, Anthony Atkinson, Thomas Piketty, Danny Dorling, Ha-Joon Chang, Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson have formed powerful – although often theoretically distinct – accounts of general social inequality, which exist parallel to accounts of the specific inequality of women.⁹ The question here, however, is that whilst the publications of this group of authors (and others with similar views) are important, and a daily rebuttal to neoliberal narratives about the merits of largely unregulated markets and a smaller state, it is work, as its various critics have pointed out, in which the implications of the socially inscribed differences of gender play little part.¹⁰ Amongst those absences, which have nevertheless been a longstanding presence in feminist economics, is the discussion of the impact of women's unpaid work on that of paid work.¹¹ For generations, the care work (paid and unpaid) of women has been