

# Women and Men at Work

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## Work and Gender

Underpinning all human activity is work. We spend most of our lives preparing for work, working, or using the products of others' labor. Even when we are simply relaxing in front of the TV set watching *General Hospital*, the evening news, or Monday night football, we are enjoying the results of the labor of others. The workers who bring these television shows to millions of viewers include executives and administrators, personnel managers, advertising agents, writers and editors, producers and directors, newscasters and announcers, actors and musicians, production engineers, camera operators, electrical technicians, computer operators, clerks and typists, and maintenance workers. Fifty years ago, neither royalty nor oil barons could summon up the labor of so many thousands simply to entertain them.

Just as we take for granted the air we breathe, we take for granted the work that creates the world around us. This book aims to make work visible so we can examine the work that women and men do and explore the ways that workers, the workplace, and work become saturated with gendered meanings.

### What Work Is

Although we use the term *work* in many ways ("working on a relationship," "working on a suntan"), its core meaning is activities that produce a good or a service—such as mowing the lawn, selling encyclopedias, testing silicon chips, and refueling military aircraft. In this book, we define **work** to include activities that produce goods and services for one's own use or in exchange for pay or support. This definition encompasses three kinds of work: *paid* work (also called **market work**), which generates an income; **coerced work**, which people are forced to do against their will and with little or no pay (for example, as slaves or prisoners);

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Note: **Boldface** terms in the text are defined in the Glossary/Index.

and *unpaid* work (also called **nonmarket work**), which people voluntarily perform for themselves and others. An important form of nonmarket work in modern societies is **domestic work**—work that people do around their homes for themselves and members of their household. If you aren't convinced that unpaid work is really work, think of your experiences waxing your car, planning and cooking a meal that will impress your friends, or buying groceries or gifts on a limited budget during exam week.

This distinction between market and nonmarket work is fairly recent. For most of history, people did not see work as separate from the rest of their lives. Life was work, just as it was rest and recovery from work. The average person consumed all that she or he produced, and few people were paid for their labor. Only with the development of capitalism and industrial work did work come to be seen as paid activities. As more people became engaged in this new form of work, the terms *unpaid work*, *nonmarket work*, and *domestic work* came to refer to the plain, old-fashioned, unpaid work that people had always done.

As more workers took paid jobs, however, people increasingly treated paid work as the only “real” work; the unpaid work that people did in their own homes became devalued or invisible. Today economists and statisticians who monitor the size and productivity of the workforce in industrialized countries reserve the term *work* for activities that people do for pay. American economists, for example, estimate the nation's gross national product in terms of the output of its paid workers. Defining work in this way excludes much of the work done by people in developing countries as well as almost all the work that women—and sometimes men—perform at home for their families.

This book examines the roles that women and men play in paid and unpaid work. We show that workers' sex profoundly affects their work lives, although the way that it does so also depends on people's race, ethnicity, and class. We show too that the effects of sex have varied throughout history and around the world. However, before we discuss the ways that people's sex affects the kinds of work they do, the rewards it brings, and its effects on their family lives, we must clarify the terms *sex* and *gender* and introduce the concepts of sex differentiation and gender differentiation.

## Sex and Gender

Although many people use the terms *sex* and *gender* as synonyms, they have different meanings. We use the term **sex** for a classification based on human biology. Biological sex depends on a person's chromosomes

and is expressed in the person's genitals, internal reproductive organs, and hormones. **Gender**, in contrast, refers to a classification that societies construct to exaggerate the differences between females and males and to maintain **sex inequality**.

### Sex Differentiation

All societies recognize the existence of different sexes and group people by their sex for some purposes. Classifying people into categories based on their sex is called **sex differentiation**. Because of the importance societies attach to sex, sex differentiation begins at birth. However, in our society each new baby is assigned to one of just two sexes on the basis of just one indicator, the appearance of the external genitalia.<sup>1</sup> The term *the opposite sex* reveals our society's preoccupation with the differences between males and females.

Sex differentiation usually exists as part of a system of sex inequality—a **sex-gender hierarchy**—that favors males over females. Although sex differentiation need not inevitably lead to sex inequality, it is essential for a system of inequality. Distinguishing females and males is necessary in order to treat them differently.

### Gender Differentiation

To justify unequal treatment of the sexes, the differences between them must seem to be large and important. **Gender differentiation** refers to the social processes that exaggerate the differences between males and females and create new ones where no natural differences exist (West and Zimmerman 1987:137; Reskin 1988). Gender differentiation also distinguishes activities as male or female.

Together, sex differentiation and gender differentiation ensure that females differ from males in easy-to-spot ways. Clothing fashions, for example, accentuate physical differences between the sexes. At times, fashion has enhanced the breadth of men's shoulders or of women's hips and has called attention to women's or men's sexual characteristics. After trousers were introduced in the nineteenth century, it was several years before men gave up the skin-tight breeches that “showed off [their] sexual parts” (Davidoff and Hall 1987:412). Shoe styles, too, have contributed to gender differentiation by exaggerating the difference in the

<sup>1</sup>Biologically, most people are one sex or the other, although a few people have a combination of chromosomes, reproductive organs, and hormones that is not unambiguously male or female.

sizes of women's and men's feet. In prerevolutionary China, upper-class Chinese women had their feet bound so they could wear tiny shoes; in the United States in the early 1960s, the only fashionable shoes women could buy had narrow, pointed toes and 3-inch heels.

Clothing also creates differences between the sexes that have no natural basis. Disposable-diaper manufacturers now market different designs for girls and boys—for example, police cars and cement trucks on boys' diapers and frolicking teddy bears on girls'.<sup>2</sup> Until the beginning of the twentieth century, however, male and female infants were dressed alike—usually in white dresses. When Americans did begin to color code babies' clothing, they dressed boys in pink and girls in blue. Not until almost 1950 did the convention reverse, with blue becoming defined as masculine and pink as feminine—and hence taboo for boys (Kidwell and Steele 1989:24–7). Such shifts demonstrate that what is critical for maintaining and justifying unequal treatment between the sexes is not *how* cultures set the sexes apart but *that* they do it.

### *The Social Construction of Gender*

The process of transforming males and females who differ rather minimally in biological terms into two groups that differ noticeably in appearance and opportunities is called the **social construction of gender**. As anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1975:178) said, "A taboo against the sameness of men and women [divides] the sexes into two mutually exclusive categories [and] thereby *creates* gender." Various rewards and punishments induce people to go along with the social construction of gender and thus conform to cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity.

A fable about a stranger who arrived at a village begging for food provides an analogy of the difference between sex and gender. When the villagers said they had no food at all, the stranger announced he had a magic stone with which he volunteered to make "stone soup." As the stone simmered in a pot of boiling water, the stranger told onlookers that the soup would be even more delicious if they could find just one onion to add to it. Someone admitted to having an onion, which was added to the pot. When the stranger said that the soup would be truly superb but for the lack of a carrot, another villager produced a carrot. The stranger got the villagers to add potatoes, turnips, garlic, and even bones with a

bit of meat. The "stone" soup the stranger eventually dished out to the villagers was hearty and delicious. Although we do not want to push the analogy too far, sex and gender resemble the stone and the soup. Like the stone, biological sex is the foundation on which societies construct gender. Like the soup, gender depends little on people's biological sex and mostly on how societies embellish it. And just as the stranger tricked the villagers into thinking that an ordinary stone was the essential ingredient in stone soup, cultures often deceive us into thinking that biological sex accounts for the differences between females' and males' behavior and life outcomes.

The emphasis that cultures place on sex blinds us to the far greater importance of gender differentiation in producing differences between men and women. Gender is a social construction, not a biological inevitability. This distinction is clear in the striking variability anthropologists have observed in male and female behavior across different cultures (Mead 1949).

In this book, we use the term *sex* when people's biological sex is the basis for how societies, organizations, or other people treat them. We use the term to stress the point that people's sex influences how others act toward them. For example, we refer to *sex discrimination* and *sex segregation*. In contrast, we use the term *gender* to refer to differences between the sexes that are socially constructed.

Societies produce and maintain gender differences—that is, engage in **gendering**—through several social processes: socialization, the actions of social institutions, and interaction among people (West and Zimmerman 1987). Thus gender is a system of social relations that is embedded in the way major institutions (including the workplace) are organized (Acker 1990; Lorber 1992:748). This conception of gender encourages us to examine the ways that social institutions embody gendered arrangements and at the same time create and maintain differences in their female and male members.

A primary reason for the gendering of human activities is to maintain male advantage. Gender roles and gendered organizations institutionalize the favored position of men as a group; in other words, organizations play a fundamental role in establishing a sex-gender hierarchy that favors men over women. Individual men then enjoy the benefits of being male without doing anything special to obtain those benefits. Most men are not even aware of the benefits they derive solely because of their sex.

Although sex is an important basis for differentiating people into categories, societies use other characteristics as well. Foremost are race and

<sup>2</sup>When our research assistant was in the supermarket checking diapers, she overheard a mother ask a little girl which "pull-up" diapers she wanted. The little girl shouted, "Boys'!"

ethnicity; in many societies, religion, appearance, age, sexual orientation, and economic position are also important bases for sorting people. Just as societies magnify the minor biological differences between males and females, they elaborate small differences between persons of different ages or races. The discussion of the history of work in Chapter 2, for example, will show that just over 100 years ago, families and employers treated children as small adults, who worked alongside their parents in fields and factories. Some societies still do not legally differentiate children from adults: Children can enter into marriage or be tried for murder. Today, however, Americans differentiate children, adolescents, and “senior citizens” from everyone else. Thus childhood, adolescence, and “senior citizenship” have been socially constructed as special statuses. Some societies also engage in social differentiation on the basis of race and ethnicity. In the United States, for example, patterns of immigration and world affairs have created a strong tradition of racial and ethnic differentiation, and people’s race and ethnicity may strongly influence their work lives. When we address the effects of such differentiation, remember that race and ethnicity may also have socially constructed meanings.

## Gendered Work

To stress the fundamental role of gender differentiation in creating differences between men and women, some social scientists use *gender* as a verb to refer to the process of differentiating the sexes. They call the process of gender differentiation *gendering* and speak of activities that organizations or cultures have attached to one or the other sex as *gendered*. These terms signify outcomes that are socially constructed and give males advantages over females (Acker 1990:146). They describe the production of assumptions about gender as well as the institutions that are shaped by those assumptions. One such institution is gendered work, which is the subject of this book. This section focuses on three features of gendered work: the assignment of tasks based on workers’ sex, the higher value placed on men’s work than on women’s work, and employers’ and workers’ construction of gender on the job.

### *The Sexual Division of Labor*

The assignment of different tasks to women and men, or the **sexual division of labor**, is a fundamental feature of work. All societies delegate tasks in part on the basis of workers’ sex, although which sex does ex-

actly which tasks has varied over time and differs across the countries of the world. Tasks that some societies view as naturally female or male are assigned to the other sex at other times or in other places. In Muslim societies, for example, where religious law requires strict sex segregation, men hold such jobs as elementary school teacher, secretary, and nurse; Westerners think of these as women’s work (Papanek 1973:310–1). In the United States, only one-fifth of physicians and less than 4 percent of street sweepers are female; in Russia, women are the majority in each of these occupations.

Within the same country and the same occupation, either sex may do a particular job. Although women were four times as likely as men to work as food servers in the United States in 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992a), many restaurants—especially fancy ones—employ only waiters. Neither sex has a monopoly on the skills needed to serve food, but many restaurants create a sexual division of labor in which one sex cooks and the other serves. Race and age frequently figure into particular job assignments as well, and Chapter 4 will describe these divisions of labor.

The production of cloth illustrates how the sexual division of labor can shift. Up to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, producing silk was women’s work. The delicate nature of spinning and weaving silk by hand might have explained this division of labor, but during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries an all-male weavers’ guild in London not only took over silk work but also prohibited members from teaching the trade to females (Kowaleski and Bennett 1989). In contrast, female silk workers in Paris, having formed their own guilds, were able to remain in the trade. Over the succeeding centuries, textile manufacturers have hired women or men—or sometimes both—at one time or another.

Changes in which sex does a task occur slowly, because the existing sexual division of labor shapes social expectations. Kinds of work become labeled in people’s minds as belonging to one sex and inappropriate for the other (Oppenheimer 1968). In Gambia, for example, women have cultivated rice since the fourteenth century. During a desperate food shortage in the nineteenth century, the government tried to encourage men to help grow rice. The men refused, insisting that rice was “a woman’s crop” (Carney and Watts 1991:641). Of course, there is nothing inherently female about raising rice: In parts of Asia, men have traditionally been responsible for growing rice (Schrijvers 1983).

For each example of a rigid use of sex to assign tasks, there is another in which the sexual division of labor is blurred. Consider an example from U.S. history. In colonial America, survival required that everybody work. The sexual division of labor made men primarily responsible for

growing food and women for manufacturing the products their families needed. The sexes often cooperated, however, as in the family production of linen from flax plants. Boys pulled the flax and spread it out to dry. Then men threshed it to remove the seeds. After the stalks had been soaked, cleaned, and dried, men broke the flax with wooden daggers. Then women combed out rough material and wound the flax around a distaff, from which they spun linen thread. Women repeatedly washed, bleached, and “belted” the thread with a branch against a stone before they wove it into fabric. The sexual division of labor through which colonists survived made the sexes interdependent; when necessary, each sex did work usually done by the other (Earle 1896).

Nor did North American slave owners exhibit much regard for a conventional sexual division of labor. Instead, they used race as the primary basis for assigning tasks. Enslaved African-American women, men, and children were forced to work in factories, mills, and mines, as well as in fields. Women and children worked alongside men in processing iron, textiles, hemp, and tobacco; refining sugar; and lumbering. Half the workers who dug South Carolina’s Santee Canal were women. Female and male slaves worked together maintaining railroad tracks. In iron mines and refineries, women lugged trams, loaded ore into crushers, and operated the furnaces and forges. Neither on plantations nor in factories did their sex spare female slaves from grueling work (Starobin 1970:165–8).

Societies gender work by labeling activities as appropriate for one sex or the other. These labels influence the job assignments of women and men, and they influence employers’ and workers’ expectations of who ought to perform various jobs. Across societies and over time, however, no hard-and-fast rules dictate which sex should do a particular task. What is crucial for preserving sex inequality is not the tasks performed by each sex but the fact that men and women do different tasks.

### *The Devaluation of Women’s Work*

A sexual division of labor need not lead to inequality between the sexes. Historians Joan Scott and Louise Tilly (1975:44–5) argued that, although women and men in preindustrial Europe had different spheres, neither sphere was subordinate. In practice, however, sex differentiation fosters the tendency to devalue female activities.

The devaluation of women and their activities is deeply embedded in the major cultures and religions of the world. For example, the Judeo-Christian religion, a strong influence on Western culture, ascribed to female servants three-fifths the value of male servants (Leviticus 27:3–7).

The devaluation of women’s work has existed for so long that we cannot explain its origin. It continues to occur both because it is part of the ideology in many parts of the world and because it is in men’s interest. Men, who assign value to human activities (as pay setters, for example), tend to take male activities as the standard and see other activities as inferior—regardless of the importance of these activities for a society’s survival (Mead 1949; Schur 1983:35–48).

The devaluation of women and their work is a key factor in differential compensation for men and women. In the United States, for example, where most dentists are male, dentists are near the top of the income hierarchy; in Europe, where most dentists are female, dentists’ incomes are much closer to the average. Generally, as you will see in Chapter 6, the more women in an occupation, the less both its female and male workers earn. Contemporary societies’ devaluation of unpaid work—particularly housework—stems partly from the second-class status assigned to any work that is usually done by women.

Living in a culture that devalues female activities makes these practices seem natural. Consider 13-year-olds’ after-school jobs. A neighbor pays a boy \$10 for 45 minutes’ work mowing the lawn, and a girl \$4 for an hour’s babysitting. Why does the babysitter accept this pay gap? She may not realize how much less she has earned, of course. In addition, she has probably already absorbed her society’s attitude that girls’ jobs are worth less than boys’. In a series of experiments, students assigned lower values to identical tasks when women students did them and judged women’s performance as inferior to men’s, although the female students worked more quickly and accurately than the men did (Major 1989:108–10). Students who were told that women usually did the job thought it deserved less pay than those who had been told that men usually did it (Major and Forcey 1985).

In sum, enduring cultural attitudes that devalue women are expressed in the lower value that employers, workers, and whole societies place on the work that women usually do. This devaluation of women’s work reduces women’s pay relative to men’s. In this and other ways, which Chapter 6 will discuss, devaluation helps to preserve the sex-gender hierarchy.

### *The Construction of Gender on the Job*

A byproduct of the ways that employers organize work and workers produce goods and services is their construction of gender on the job. Employers and workers bring gender into the workplace through sex

stereotypes that fabricate or exaggerate actual sex differences and through policies and behaviors that highlight irrelevant sex differences. Such gender differentiation is prevalent in the workplace. However, gender differentiation is so fundamental in social organization and plays such a key role in sex inequality that we see it not only in the workplace but in every social institution.

Within the workplace, however, employers play a primary role in gendering. When they create new jobs, set pay levels, organize how work will be done, and settle on working conditions, employers often have a particular sex in mind. For example, machinery would be designed quite differently for workers averaging 5'11" and 175 pounds and workers averaging 5'4" and 125 pounds. Furthermore, if employers have male workers in mind, they assume their workers will accept shift work and overtime. In contrast, employers who plan to hire women workers often organize jobs as part time and create pay and benefit systems that discourage long-term employment.

Many modern jobs were created when most workers were male. The assumptions surrounding the creation of these jobs were gendered, and the consequences of those assumptions have survived. Until the late 1960s, for example, many states barred employers from putting women in jobs that could involve lifting more than 25 pounds. Ten years after the Supreme Court struck down such laws as discriminatory, many employers continued to exclude women from such jobs. These employers did not consciously decide to ignore the Supreme Court's decision; however, organizational practices resist change. Employers that do not wish to discriminate have higher priorities than examining the gendered assumptions that earlier generations built into jobs (Bielby and Baron 1986). In effect, the workplace remains gendered partly because of organizational inertia: Past decisions were based explicitly or implicitly on sex stereotypes, and effects of those decisions persist in today's places of work.

To be sure, many employers continue to introduce gender into the workplace through current actions or policies. Sometimes employers use gender to control workers, get more work out of them, or sell products. For example, when a male coal miner assigned to lift heavy steel rails remarked that it looked like a four-man job, his supervisor asked him, "Aren't you man enough?" (Yarrow 1987:9). Some employers emphasize workers' sex to prevent collective action by male and female employees or to divert workers' attention from bad working conditions. Silicon-chip factories in Southeast Asia, for example, sponsored makeup classes and beauty contests to distract young women from their physically punish-

ing jobs (Grossman 1979:4). By orienting these young women to their appearance and to marriage, the company reduced the likelihood that the women would protest dangerous working conditions. Employers have also turned a blind eye to sexual materials in the workplace because such materials seem to make some male workers happy.

Workers, too, construct gender at work. They may do so in order to forge bonds with other workers of the same sex, to express their gender identity, or to amuse themselves. Workers also use gender to control one another, to exclude workers of the "wrong" sex, or to get back at their employers. However, in bringing gender into the workplace, the actions of male and female workers sometimes differ.

Many observers have commented on how all-male work groups affirm members' masculinity by discussing such "male" concerns as sports and by sexualizing women. All-male work groups may also engage in **gender displays**, which are language or rituals so characteristic of one sex that they mark the workplace as belonging to that sex. Male gender displays include sexual language and conversations about sex, as in the chants that sergeants use to drill new recruits in boot camp. In another example, described in the best-seller *Liar's Poker* (Lewis 1989), top securities traders at Salomon Brothers, a leading Wall Street firm, were nicknamed "big swinging dicks." A characteristic type of male gender display in blue-collar settings is macho behavior. Workers who use brute force ("hammer mechanics") rather than standard procedure to accomplish a task or who flaunt safety regulations signal the importance of muscle or bravado on the job and hence imply that women don't belong (Weston 1990:146).

Workers often import gender to the job in order to create solidarity among themselves. In one instance, an almost exclusively male work crew singled out an unmarried man whose sexual orientation was unclear. The group tried to use its only female member to confirm the man's heterosexuality. At the end of the shift one day, crew members locked the couple in a room so the suspect male worker could initiate sex with the female worker (although they had no reason to believe she would cooperate). The male victim's coworkers taunted him for failing to take advantage of this and other "opportunities." This group invoked gender both in trying to pressure a male member to display stereotypically masculine, sexually aggressive behavior and in casting its female member in the role of sex object (Padavic 1991).

When workers use gender to create solidarity among themselves, they simultaneously define the job site as out of bounds for persons of the other sex. For example, men often use sexual language when women

are not present; at the same time, most men recognize that sexual language may make female coworkers uncomfortable. Through social interaction, "men constantly remind women where their 'place' is and [through interaction, women] are put back in their place should they venture out" (Henley and Freeman 1975:391). A woman coal miner concluded that her coworkers wanted her off the job when obscene anti-female bathroom graffiti mentioned her by name. The only woman in a power-plant crew felt unwelcome when a list headed "Twenty Reasons Why Beer Is Better Than Women" appeared on the bulletin board. Every item on the list disparaged and sexualized women ("you always know you're the first one to pop a beer"; "when a beer goes flat, you can throw it out"). The list reminded the woman that she was in male territory, where her coworkers saw women as sex objects (Padavic 1991).

Women also bring gender to the workplace. Like men, women may try to force coworkers to affirm their heterosexuality, femininity, or masculinity. Sometimes women do this by swapping stories about their male partners and children or by celebrating marriages and births. Women can also enact gender by defying conventional gender roles. A sociologist observed this phenomenon in Mexico among female factory workers riding the bus home from work. When a man boarded the bus, the women subjected him to the kinds of verbal abuse that they often suffered from men. "They chided and teased him. . . . They offered kisses and asked for a smile. They exchanged laughing comments about his physical attributes and suggested a raffle to see who would keep him" (Fernandez-Kelly 1983:131-2).

Women workers also use gender to resist their employers. In Malaysia, some female factory workers displayed hysteria, alleging they were "possessed by evil spirits" (Ong 1986). In one incident, a woman sobbed, laughed, shrieked, and flailed at her machine before her supervisor sent her home. These outbursts allowed women to stop work and even attack their male bosses (Ong 1986:207).

In sum, employers and workers engage in gender differentiation at work by making sex salient when it is irrelevant and by acting on sex-stereotyped assumptions. Employers also gender work by sex segregating jobs, by setting pay based on workers' sex, and by accommodating a whole set of subtle and not-so-subtle practices. In other words, gender is constructed within institutions through interaction and is a result of organizational practices (Acker 1992; Steinberg and Jacobs 1993). Chapter 7 will discuss employers' and workers' construction of gender on a day-to-day basis.

### *Diversity in Gendered Work*

The ways in which work is gendered depend on the work site and the characteristics of workers. In some situations (such as one-sex work settings), workers' race has a greater effect than their sex on jobs, pay, and day-to-day experiences. More commonly, sex, race, and other characteristics interact to shape workers' outcomes. At colleges and universities, for example, most female workers do clerical work, but white women are more likely to hold such jobs than women of color, who disproportionately hold custodial jobs. Meanwhile, being a white male increases a worker's chance of being an administrator or professor; minority men more often have a blue-collar job. You will see in the chapters that follow that work experiences differ not only by sex but also by other factors. However, without losing sight of this diversity, we will focus on the importance of people's sex on their lives as workers.

### *Summary*

Sex and gender differentiation are fundamental features of work. First and foremost, they operate through the sexual division of labor, which assigns tasks to people partly on the basis of their sex and labels certain tasks as belonging to one sex or the other. Sex and gender differentiation are also expressed in the undervaluation of women's work. These processes occur in the day-to-day interactions among workers and their bosses, as well as in the policies and practices of employers, governments, and families. Their result is to make work a gendered institution, in which employers and workers often place undue emphasis on people's sex.



## A History of Gendered Work

Although every society assigns some tasks on the basis of people's sex, the kinds of tasks that go to women and men have varied over time and around the world. This chapter traces the evolution of the Western sexual division of labor over the past 400 years. After describing how Western preindustrial societies divided work between the sexes, we show how industrialization, by commercializing work, created a new basis for distinguishing between men's and women's work: whether or not one worked for pay. We then describe the sexual division of labor across nations around the world.

### The Sexual Division of Labor in Preindustrial Europe

In preindustrial Western societies, almost everyone worked. Most people devoted their lives to feeding themselves; the rest—except for royalty and the nobility, who lived off the fruits of others' labor—worked at making products or serving others.

#### *Agricultural Work*

Prior to industrialization (which began in the eighteenth century), most people in Europe farmed, either as serfs who farmed land held by members of the nobility or, later, as peasants who owned small parcels of land. Among peasants and serfs, men usually plowed, women weeded, and both sexes harvested. Girls and women took charge of raising pigs, sheep, cows, and chickens. Thus they milked, churned butter, made cheese, and butchered animals. Women also made bread, beer, cloth, and clothing.

Consider the division of labor of a seventeenth-century Basque farm couple. The wife rose at dawn and lit the fire. Her husband and the hired men remained in bed while she made breakfast. After the men left for the fields, the wife cleaned the house and prepared the noon meal, which she served standing behind her husband's chair so she could wait on

him. In the afternoon, the wife joined her husband and the hired men in the fields until it was time for her to fix the night's meal. In the evening, the husband might repair tools or go to the village tavern. The wife spun by lamplight until around 11 P.M. when she would follow her husband to bed (Shorter 1975:67–72).

Servants' work resembled that of peasants. Both sexes worked as servants, often for just their keep. An English woman who began an apprenticeship when she was 9 years old described

driving bullocks to [field] and fetching them in again; cleaning out their houses, and bedding them up; washing potatoes and boiling them for pigs; milking; in the field leading horses or bullocks to plough . . . , digging potatoes, digging and pulling turnips . . . like a boy. I got up at five or six except on market mornings twice a week, and then at three. (Pinchbeck 1930:17–8)

Notice that in preindustrial agriculture, women's and men's tasks overlapped, although a sexual division of labor defined cooking, cleaning, and spinning as women's work. Importantly, people did not see the jobs that women usually did as less valuable than those that men usually did. However, we should not conclude that preindustrial agriculture was a paradise of sex equality. In 1823, an observer wrote of the Scottist Highlands that women were regarded as men's "drudges" rather than their companions:

The husband turns up the land and sows it—the wife conveys the manure to it in a creel, tends the corn, reaps it, hoes the potatoes, digs them up, carries the whole home on her back, [and] when bearing the creel she also is engaged with spinning. (Quoted in Berg 1985:142)

### *Manufacturing Work*

Even in the preindustrial era, some people worked in manufacturing—in workhouses, in workshops, or in their own cottages as craftworkers. However, men's and women's manufacturing work was organized in different systems of production. And as a rule, although the sexes had similar levels of skills, men involved in manufacturing earned substantially more than women and enjoyed more autonomy.

*Women's workshops.* In medieval Europe, all-female workhouses existed in which women lived and worked at manufacturing textiles.<sup>1</sup> These

highly skilled workers dyed, wove, and embroidered fabric that they sewed into clothing for monks and nobles. In exchange for their labor, the women received their board and room. Many were slaves of the nobility or the monasteries or the wives and children of slaves. Others were serfs or imprisoned in the workhouses for crimes like prostitution.<sup>2</sup>

These women's workshops died out before industrialization, but their legacy lives on. The textile factories that sprang up in the early years of industrialization relied almost exclusively on female workers, and in most of the contemporary world, textile manufacturing continues to be women's work.

*Artisans.* A more enduring preindustrial system of production was the guild system, in which *artisans* (craftworkers) produced a variety of products from scratch. *Guilds*—associations of tradespeople or craftworkers organized to protect their members' interests—oversaw most production that occurred outside the home: from silverware, iron tools, and wheels to fabric, bread, and beer. Like the textile workers in the women's workshops, artisans were highly skilled workers who produced fine products. Unlike the workshop workers, artisans were almost always males, and they earned an income from the products they made.

The guilds controlled the apprenticeship systems that taught artisans their craft. Their goal was to reduce competition, and one way they did this was by closing apprenticeships to young women. The wives of master craftworkers worked alongside their husbands, and in the early Middle Ages, guilds sometimes allowed widows to continue their late husbands' work. Gradually, however, guilds restricted wives' and widows' rights to carry on their husbands' trade, and eventually the status of master craftworker was virtually off-limits to women (Howell 1986). This monopoly of artisan work in the preindustrial period gave men a head start in the skilled trades, the benefits of which they continue to enjoy at the end of the twentieth century.

*Cottage industry.* Before industrialization shifted production to factories, peasants—mostly women and children—manufactured some goods at home through a system of *cottage industry*. Cottage workers might spin wool, make lace, weave cloth, or attach shirt collars, for which they were paid on a *piecework* basis (by the amount of work they completed).

Peasant women, whose first priority was work for their own families, made time for cottage industry by laboring late into the night. Their

<sup>1</sup>When Japan was industrializing at the end of the nineteenth century, it had similar all-female workshops (Kondo 1990:269–70).

<sup>2</sup>In fact, some historians believe that the owners treated the women's workshops as brothels (Herlihy 1990:85).

earnings were often the household's only cash income. Cottage industry was not simply a source of supplemental income. A historian described seventeenth-century British women whose work spilled out of their cottages: They "knitted as they walked the village streets, they knitted in the dark because they were too poor to have a light; they knitted for dear life" (Berg 1985:103). As cottage workers, then, women and children were well represented in the earliest labor force.

## The Industrial Revolution

For many centuries, people met their needs through agricultural and preindustrial manufacturing work. Then, in the eighteenth century, capitalism transformed the ways that Western Europeans produced and distributed goods and services. Family production was replaced by market production, in which capitalists paid workers wages to produce goods in factories and mines. As paid workers, people manufactured products that they bought with their wages. This **Industrial Revolution**, which took over 200 years in the Western world, is still under way as countries around the globe industrialize.

### *The Emergence of the Labor Force*

In moving the production of commodities from home to factory, industrialization created the **labor force**, or the pool of people who work for pay, as a major institution. In England, industrialization's major changes occurred in the last half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. Armies of peasants who were forced off the land made their way into the cities to search for jobs. These peasants were the first recruits into the modern industrial labor force.

The emergence of wage workers created a new social distinction: people who work for pay versus those who do not (the **nonemployed**). Of course, a class of nonemployed was not new; throughout history, privileged classes have been exempt from productive work. But the new category of nonemployed did not distinguish nonworkers (students, the retired, the "idle rich") from unpaid workers (those who cook, clean, and shop for family members; raise children; care for sick relatives; and provide social and emotional support to family, friends, and community). What set the new labor force apart from the nonemployed was not the kinds of work they did, but the fact that they were paid for their work.

This distinction has had important consequences for gendering work, because for the last 200 years, men have been more likely than women to belong to the labor force.

### *Industrialization and the Sexual Division of Labor*

Prior to industrialization, each sex produced goods for their household, although they specialized in different tasks. Industrialization created two new distinctions between men's and women's work roles. The first assigned men to paid work and women to unpaid work. Although women predominated in some sectors of the early industrial labor force, once industrialization was well under way, men became the majority in the labor force. Running the household became women's responsibility. As a result, employers organized work and systems of pay on the assumptions that workers are men and that male incomes support women. This division of paid and unpaid work according to sex is the subject of the rest of this chapter. The second new division of labor was among women and men who worked in the labor force. This division segregated women and men into different jobs. It is the subject of Chapter 4.

## The Division of Paid and Unpaid Work by Sex

Although early **labor force participation** was just as likely for women as for men, with advancing industrialization throughout the nineteenth century, the labor force became more male. In the eighteenth century, as cottage industries gave way to small textile factories, many employers continued to hire women and children. Not only were women and children more likely than men to be available in some areas, but they worked for lower wages than men did. However, as displaced peasants flocked to urban labor markets seeking jobs, women's representation in the labor force declined. The entry of large numbers of men into the labor force unleashed new forces that led to the **masculinization** of the labor force, making it progressively more male.

The number of people seeking jobs often exceeded the number of jobs. The result was hordes of **unemployed** people desperate for work. Employers took advantage of the situation by cutting pay. Furthermore, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British mine and factory owners openly exploited workers. Girls as young as 6 and women in their 60s worked in coal pits and in copper and lead mines. According to a mining supervisor, they worked "up to their knees in water." A commissioner

described girls and women as “chained, belted, harnessed like dogs . . . crawling on hands and knees . . . dragging their heavy loads over soft slushy floors” (Pinchbeck 1930:248–9). Factory and mining work were dangerous for men too. For example, men who ran “spinning mules” in textile factories had to lift 160-pound frames every three seconds for 12 hours a day (Cohen 1985).

Early unions, viewing women and children as a threat to men’s jobs and wages, mounted campaigns to drive children and women out of factory and mining jobs (Pinchbeck 1930). Unions found allies in middle-class reformers, who fought for laws to protect children and women from dangerous or immoral working conditions. Pressure from both unions and reformers led nineteenth-century lawmakers in Europe and the United States to pass **protective labor laws** banning many employment practices. These laws prohibited firms from employing children and women to work more than a fixed number of hours a day, to lift more than specified weights, to work at night, or to hold certain jobs. Although these laws may have protected some women, they denied many other women high-paying factory jobs. Gendered assumptions gave women but not men protection from hazardous work and gave men but not women the right to weigh risks against rewards in deciding for themselves how to earn a living. In putting many lines of work off-limits to women, protective labor laws thereby contributed to the masculinization of the labor force.

Despite protective labor laws, many women continued to work for pay. Fortunately for women, the movement to bar women from all factory jobs failed. Employers still hired women for low-paid factory jobs, which offered better pay than the alternative: becoming a servant (Pinchbeck 1930). Because women could be paid less than men, textile-mill owners actively sought unmarried female workers, promising fathers to keep their daughters from the “vices and crimes” of idleness (Lerner 1979:189). Families welcomed their daughters’ income (Pleck 1976:181).

Nonetheless, the labor force became increasingly male throughout the nineteenth century. In 1840 women and children made up about 40 percent of the industrial workforce in the United States; by 1870 three out of four nonfarm workers were male (Baxandall et al. 1976:83); by 1890 only 17 percent of women were employed outside the home (Goldin 1990). Women’s labor force participation did not drop uniformly across all groups, however. For instance, at the beginning of the twentieth century, only 6 percent of married women were in the labor force, compared to 40 percent of single women over age 10 (Folbre 1991:465).

### *The Doctrine of Separate Spheres*

Why was married women’s labor force participation so low? A major factor was the **doctrine of separate spheres**. This doctrine, which was born among the English upper-middle classes, called for the separation of work and family life. It held that a woman’s proper place was in the home and not in the workplace; a man’s natural sphere was in the world of commerce—or, at any rate, at his job—and not at home (Davidoff and Hall 1987:364–7; Skolnick 1991:30–1). These ideas encouraged male workers who had some voice in the matter to work away from home. Reinforcing these beliefs were stereotypes of men as strong, aggressive, and competitive and of women as frail, virtuous, and nurturing, images that depicted men as naturally suited to the highly competitive nineteenth-century workplace and women as too delicate for the world of commerce.

To earn respect, married women had two responsibilities: creating a haven to which their husbands could retreat from the world of work and demonstrating their husbands’ ability to support their families. An employed wife was a sign of her husband’s failure (Westover 1986). As one British woman who worked as a tailor recalled,

I never went out to work after I was married. There wasn’t many who did. They used to cry shame on them in them days when they were married if they went to work. They used to say your husband should keep you.

The doctrine of separate spheres led to extremes. The tiny waists that women achieved through tightly laced corsets both ensured and symbolized their incapacity to do any work. Middle- and upper-class families hid the parts of the house devoted to productive work (cooking, bathing, laundry) out of sight from the areas of relaxation (parlor, dining room), furthering the illusion that the home was not a place of work (Davidoff and Hall 1987:359).

In reserving paid jobs for men, the doctrine of separate spheres especially victimized working-class wives whose families needed their earnings. Many employers refused to hire married women for “respectable” jobs; indeed, some firms enforced rules against employing married women until World War II (Goldin 1990). As a result, working-class women had to find ways to earn money at home, such as taking in laundry, sewing, or boarders. Conforming to the social standard meant doing piecework at home, which paid less for more hours of work (Westover 1986).

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the movement of people into and within the United States significantly affected patterns of paid

labor. One such population shift was the migration to northern cities of 2 million African Americans from the rural South. After Emancipation, most former slaves in the South became sharecroppers, with entire families working in the fields. But in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many sharecroppers sought to move North, where both the women and the men hoped to get paid jobs.<sup>3</sup> Another population shift occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the United States recruited families from Mexico for temporary agricultural jobs. Mexican women worked alongside their husbands at back-breaking work on huge “factory farms” in the Southwest (Amott and Matthaei 1991:75).

As these examples indicate, even during the heyday of the doctrine of separate spheres, thousands of women worked for pay: minority women, young single women, widows, and married women whose husbands had deserted their families or could not earn enough to support them. Employers in the market for cheap female labor did not care whether the women were married. Married immigrant women and former slaves were particularly likely to be employed. They labored in sweatshops, factories, offices, schools, and other families’ homes, and some did paid work in their own homes. For sharecropping women who plowed the fields and for many immigrant and African-American women who worked 14-hour days as servants, staying out of the labor force would have meant starvation.

Nevertheless, the doctrine of separate spheres helped to drive all but the poorest married women out of the labor force. By 1890, fewer than one in 20 married American women worked for pay (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1961:72). But racial and ethnic background made a difference. In 1920, for example, only 7 percent of married European-American women were in the labor force, compared to one-third of married African-American women and 18 percent of married Asian-American women. The la-

<sup>3</sup>Leaving the South could be dangerous. The Reverend D. W. Johnson, who helped fellow African Americans come North by providing railroad passes, recounted his narrow escape from southern officials:

There was . . . three great big red-faced guys. . . . [T]hey had a bullwhip on they shoulder and a rope and a gun in each of their hands. They gonna kill every so-and-so Negro that they found had a pass. Well, so they search us one by one and they searched me. Had they pulled off my shoe, that’d been it for me. Because they swo’ they was gonna kill the ones who had it. Yeah, it was in the toe of my shoe. (Crew 1987:7–8)

bor force participation rate for unmarried European-American women was 45 percent; for African-American women, 59 percent; and for Asian-American women, 39 percent (Amott and Matthei 1991:table 9.2). Even the Great Depression (1929–1937), which brought record unemployment among American men, did not draw large numbers of married women into the labor force. Families sent their children to work before mothers took jobs outside the home.

The doctrine of separate spheres contributed to the gendering of work in the twentieth century in several ways. First, men gained social approval as workers, but women’s work became invisible because it was done at home. Second, social values that encouraged employers to ban women from many jobs made sex discrimination commonplace. Third, employers could justify low pay for women because men presumably supported them. Indeed, people came to define pay as what one earned for going to work; women’s relegation to the home put them outside the system of pay for labor.

Finally, the sexual division of labor that assigned men to the labor force and women to the home encouraged employers to structure jobs on the assumptions that all permanent workers were men and that all men had stay-at-home wives. These assumptions freed workers (that is, male workers) from domestic responsibilities so they could work 12- to 14-hour days. These assumptions also bolstered the belief that domestic work was women’s responsibility, even for women who were employed outside the home. The chapters that follow will trace the consequences of these gendered assumptions and employment practices throughout the twentieth century, long after economic forces began to erode nineteenth-century sex differences in labor force participation.

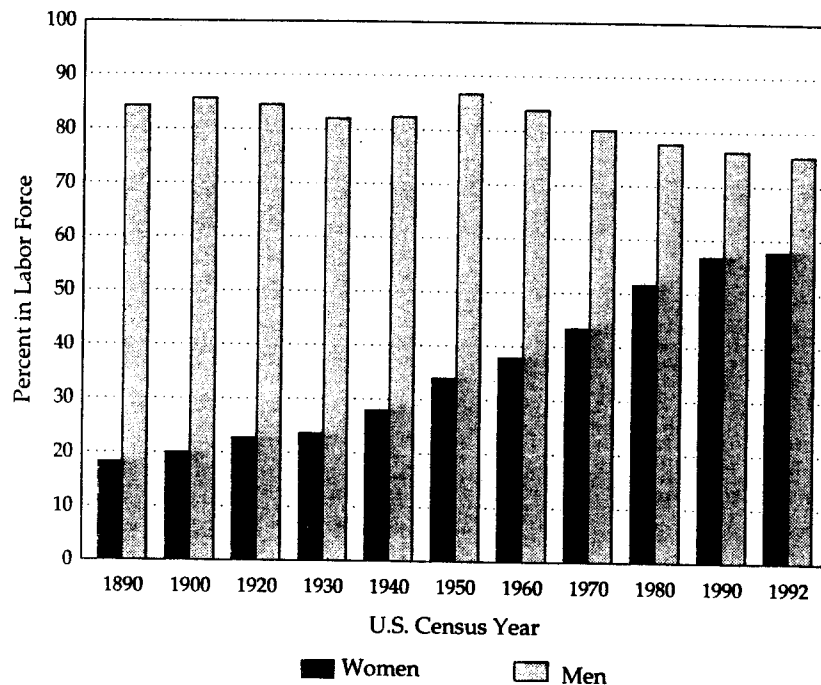
### *The Convergence in Women’s and Men’s Labor Force Participation*

The legacy of the doctrine that married women should not work outside the home has haunted us throughout the twentieth century. Not until the 1970s did married women’s likelihood of paid employment catch up with that of single and divorced women. Moreover, the doctrine of separate spheres has not entirely disappeared. You will see in Chapter 8 that although society now expects married women to participate in the labor force, it continues to define domestic work as women’s sphere.

As public support for the doctrine of separate spheres has waned, the gap between men’s and women’s labor force participation rates has narrowed, as Figure 2.1 shows. In 1890, 84.3 percent of males over the age of

FIGURE 2.1

Trends in U.S. Labor Force Participation Rates by Sex, 1890 to 1992



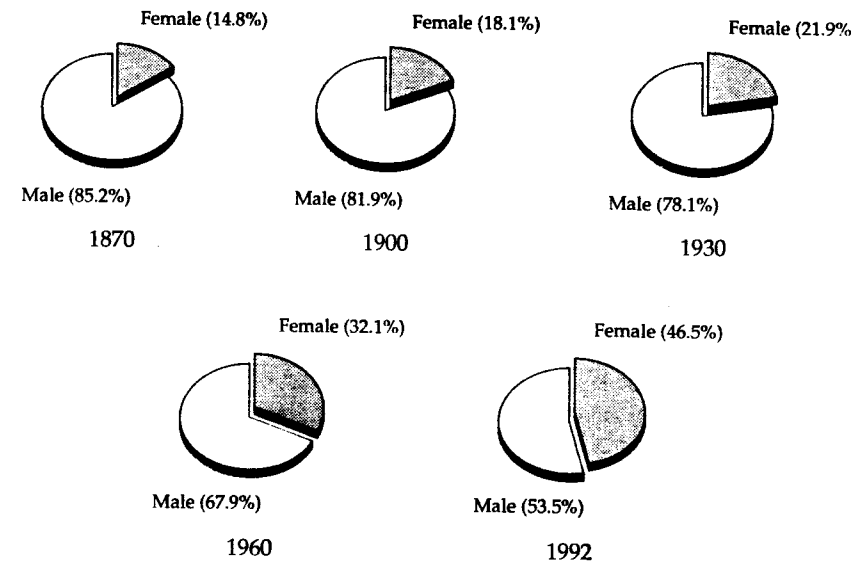
Source: Data from U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975:131-2; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992d:table 609; U.S. Women's Bureau 1993:1.

14 were in the labor force, compared to only 18.2 percent of similar females.<sup>4</sup> Over the next hundred years, women's participation in the labor force climbed steadily. In contrast, men's labor force participation fell slightly. By 1992, 76 percent of men and 58 percent of women were in the labor force. More than three-quarters of women between the ages of 35 and 44 were in the labor force. Experts project that women's and men's labor force participation will continue to converge.

<sup>4</sup>If the Census Bureau had counted farm wives on the same basis as it counted farmers, and if it had counted women who ran boardinghouses, women's labor force participation rate for 1890 would have been about 28 percent (Goldin 1990:44-5).

FIGURE 2.2

Composition by Sex of the U.S. Labor Force, 1870 to 1992



Source: Data from U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975:131-2; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1993d:table 1.

Although a substantial sex gap remains between men's and women's labor force participation, it has declined sharply, as Figure 2.2 shows. In 1870, during the heyday of the doctrine of separate spheres, fewer than 15 workers out of every 100 were female. In 1992, out of every 100 persons in the U.S. labor force, over 46 were women.

### *The Devaluation of Women's Work*

The shift of production from homes to shops and factories during the Industrial Revolution transformed men into wage laborers who left home each day for jobs in factories, shops, and offices. These jobs expanded men's contribution to their families: They became both the producers of the products their families needed and the earners who could pay for these products. The decline of domestic production, in turn, left women with the invisible and socially devalued tasks of housekeeping

and child rearing. Thus, in the wake of industrialization, women found themselves in a no-win situation. Social norms and discrimination by employers reduced their participation in the labor force. As a result, women's path to economic security and respectability was through a husband, and women who worked at home were denied the esteem that society grants those who are economically productive. In sum, the definition of "real" work as paid activities performed away from home and the idealization of the home as a refuge from work rendered unpaid domestic work economically insignificant.

The devaluation of unpaid work in industrialized countries was exported by colonialists to Africa and Asia (Schrijvers 1983). Nowadays, no country counts as "employed" those people who do unpaid work in their own homes. Women who work in subsistence agriculture or who work without pay in a family business are also usually counted as nonemployed. Because laws often stipulate that only men can own farms or other property, in households engaged in farming, census takers tend to list the husband as a farmer and the wife as nonemployed. These practices underestimate women's economic contributions in developing countries, where most people work on family farms. Thus, as an indirect consequence of the Western doctrine of separate spheres, a twentieth-century Iranian peasant woman—who may harvest grain every day for her family's meals, tend animals, and haul water and wood for cooking and laundry—would officially be counted as nonemployed.

## Women's and Men's Labor Force Participation Around the World

Today, countries differ widely in the degree to which they enforce a sexual division of labor. Figure 2.3 shows the proportions of women and men who were "economically active" in 1990.<sup>5</sup> The economically active, like the employed, exclude people engaged in unpaid family work that is important in developing countries, such as gathering fuel or water, processing crops, raising animals, keeping a kitchen garden, and laboring in cottage industry (United Nations 1991:85). In Figure 2.3, the large

sex differences in some countries thus stem from the undercounting of women's economic activities and a sexual division of labor that limits women's access to paid work and confines them to unpaid domestic work.

From the data depicted in Figure 2.3, we can draw some conclusions about the global sexual division of labor. Women's formal labor force participation is lowest in Muslim societies that strictly segregate the sexes (such as Saudi Arabia and Algeria). In developing countries that are not Muslim (such as Egypt and Brazil), men also greatly outnumber women in the labor force, because men tend to monopolize the paid jobs in developing labor markets, just as they did in earlier times in Western Europe and the United States. In fully developed capitalist societies (such as the United States, South Africa, Japan, and Canada,) women's rates of labor force participation are somewhat closer to men's. They are even closer in Scandinavian countries (such as Sweden and Iceland), which provide paid leave for new parents and childcare for those who are employed. Finally, the gap between women's and men's labor participation rates is smallest in communist, formerly communist, and socialist societies (China, East Germany, the Soviet Union, Mozambique, Poland, and Vietnam), reflecting the Marxist ideology that all able-bodied adults have both a right and an obligation to work. We see in these patterns the influence of economic development, social policies, and cultural norms.

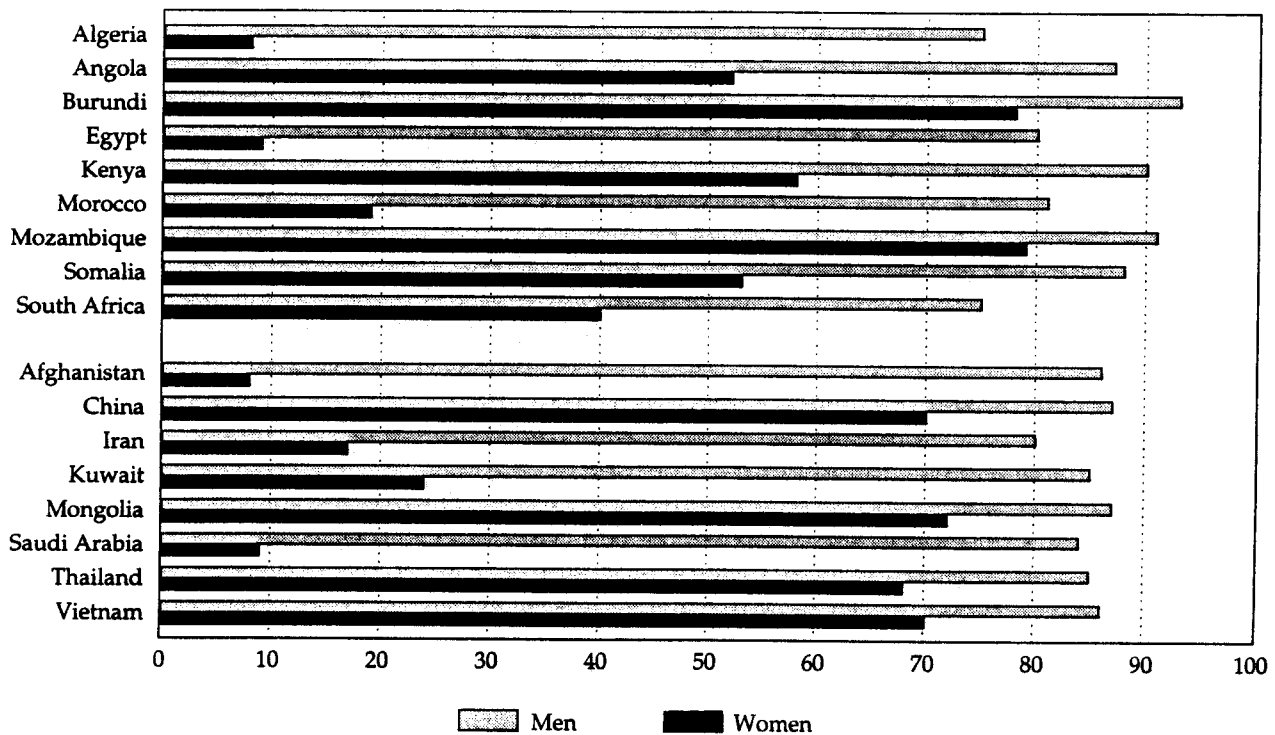
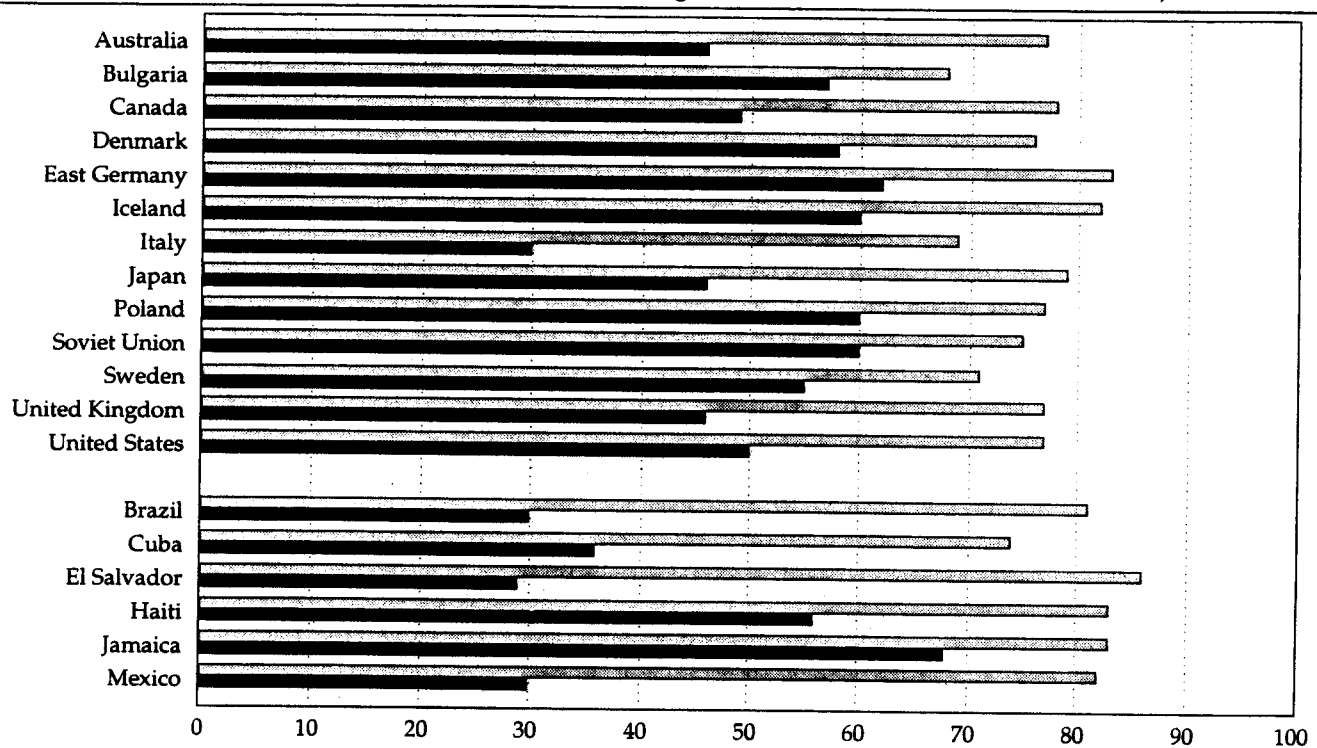
Women's labor force participation in industrializing countries has been on the rise in the latter half of the twentieth century, at least until the economic recession of the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> In developing countries, transnational corporations have drawn women into the labor force as a source of cheap labor; transnational corporations pay these women between 5 and 25 percent of what Western workers earn for similar jobs (Safa 1990:77). Moreover, developing countries have few if any laws against exploitative conditions for workers. But women work for transnational corporations for the same reasons they left agricultural work and cottage industries in Western societies: These women want jobs that pay more than domestic work, farming, or jobs in the service sector.

<sup>5</sup>Some societies and organizations, like the United Nations, use the terms *economically active* and *nonactive* instead of *employed* and *nonemployed*.

<sup>6</sup>Women are generally the last to benefit from job expansion and the first to suffer from job contraction, so the recent recession has slowed the growth in women's labor force participation in developing countries (United Nations 1991:chart 6.7).

FIGURE 2.3

Percentage of Economically Active Women and Men Ages 15 and Over for Selected Countries, 1990



Source: United Nations 1991:table 8, pp. 104-7.



## Summary

This chapter has examined one way that industrialization changed the sexual division of labor: It concentrated men in paid work away from home and women in nonpaid domestic work. In the Western world, this division of labor was most extreme during the nineteenth century. Its consequences persist today in gendered assumptions about men's and women's work and in the devaluation of women's work in both Western and non-Western societies. Chapter 4 will examine a second form that sexual division of labor took under industrialization: the segregation of employed women and men in different kinds of work.

## 3

## An Overview of Sex Inequality at Work

This chapter summarizes women's and men's unequal status in the contemporary American workplace and introduces several general explanations that may account for sex inequality at work.

### Sex Inequality in the Contemporary American Workplace

The workplace is an important arena for sex inequality in our society. First, the workplace maintains sex differentiation by concentrating women and men in different settings and assigning them different duties. Second, sex differentiation in jobs leads to unequal earnings, authority, and social status for women and men, because jobs are the main way through which most adults acquire income and social standing. Finally, interactions at work subject women to subtle and not-so-subtle expressions of inequality—from paternalism to sexual harassment, from invisibility to ostracism.

Sex inequality at work takes four forms:

- *Sex segregation.* In Chapter 1 you saw that throughout history and around the world, societies have imposed a sexual division of labor in which women and men perform different tasks. Another term for this sexual division of labor is **sex segregation**. (The concentration of men and women in different kinds of work will be the topic of Chapter 4.) Like those in the rest of the world, America's workplaces are sex segregated. Fewer than 10 percent of Americans have a coworker of the other sex who does the same job, for the same employer, in the same location, and on the same shift (Bielby and Baron 1986). Of course other characteristics of workers besides their sex affect what jobs they get. Workplaces are segregated by race and ethnicity as well. African-American women are concentrated in

different jobs than Mexican-American women, for example, who in turn are underrepresented in jobs in which European-American women predominate. The jobs in which women and men are segregated are not only different but also unequal.

- *Sex differences in promotions.* Women are concentrated at low levels in the organizations that employ them and in the lower ranks in their occupations and professions. Even in predominantly female lines of work, such as nursing, the higher the position, the more likely the job holder is to be male (Williams 1992). Women are also more likely than men to work in dead-end jobs and, as a result, are less likely to be promoted. Even women who win jobs in middle management find top-level positions beyond their reach.
- *Sex differences in authority.* Employers tend to reserve powerful positions for men; women are less likely than men to exercise authority in the workplace. Women supervise fewer subordinates than men and are less likely to control financial resources. Even women managers—whose numbers have grown dramatically—are less likely than men to make decisions, especially decisions that are vital for their employer (Jacobs 1992; Reskin and Ross 1992).
- *Sex differences in earnings.* Around the world, men outearn women. In 1992, for example, U.S. women who worked full time, year-round, earned just under 70 percent of what similar men earned. Put differently, for every dollar paid to a woman who worked full time, year-round, a man earned \$1.43. What's more, men are more likely than women to have health insurance and other benefits. The consequences of this disparity in earnings and benefits follow workers into old age: Among retired persons, women's resources average about 60 percent of men's.

The three chapters that follow document women's disadvantaged position in the workforce.

## Explanations for Sex Inequality in the Workplace

How can we explain systematic sex inequality in the workplace? Social scientists have proposed a variety of explanations, including cultural beliefs, men's actions, employers' actions, and workers' own preferences and abilities.

### Cultural Beliefs About Gender and Work

A major category of explanations for sex inequality at work relates to culture. Indeed, gender is the paramount organizing principle in most societies. As we argued in Chapter 1, societies go to great lengths to produce differences between the sexes in appearance, talents, hobbies, and so forth.

Contemporary cultures are so riddled with **sex stereotypes**, or assumptions about individuals based on sex, that we all engage in stereotyped thinking. If a newscaster reports a complaint that a police officer used excessive force, most of us imagine a policeman wielding the nightstick. Some of us may not even think a policewoman is capable of such aggressiveness. In 1993 an elevator operator at the House of Representatives repeatedly told a newly elected African-American woman that she could not use an elevator reserved for members of the House. Finally it dawned on the elevator operator that the woman was a Representative. Note that cultural beliefs about men, women, and work affect everyone in a society: workers, customers, and clients, as well as the people who hire workers, assign them to jobs, and set their pay.

Unless someone directly challenges our assumptions about sex, race, and work, like the congressional elevator operator, we rarely question our stereotypes. This invisibility makes these assumptions especially powerful in shaping our behavior. If it never occurs to a branch manager that a female clerk might accept a promotion to night manager, he will not offer it to her. His assumptions about sex differences in workers' desire for promotion, need for a raise, willingness to work nights, or family responsibilities prevent him from considering whether he should offer the promotion to a woman.

The discussion that follows focuses on Western cultural beliefs about gender and work, although Western beliefs are by no means universal. As you saw in Chapter 1, men's work in one culture may be women's work in another. Cultural values can also change, especially in response to outside influence. Anthropologists, geographers, and historians have documented how the introduction of Western notions about the sexual division of labor into non-Western societies has undermined women's economic roles. For example, in Sri Lanka, British colonialists encouraged the peasants to devote less land to growing millet (which women grew) and more to rice (which men grew) so the country could export rice. The result was local food shortages, the deterioration of women's economic contributions to their families, and hence the deterioration of women's social, economic, and legal status (Schrijvers 1983).

*Sex stereotypes.* A poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, although written in the mid 1800s, illustrates several contemporary sex stereotypes about work:

Man for the field and women for the hearth;  
 Man for the sword and for the needle she;  
 Man with the head and woman with the heart;  
 Man to command and woman to obey;  
 All else confusion.

The first stereotype expressed in the poem is that women and men are naturally suited for different tasks. Second, the sexes supposedly differ innately, with men being governed by reason ("the head") and women by emotion ("the heart"). Third, men are assumed to be naturally suited to exercising authority over women. Finally, deviations from these natural patterns will allegedly lead to chaos.

Sex stereotypes like these, along with stereotypes about the characteristics that various jobs require, lead jobs to be labeled male or female (Oppenheimer 1968). For example, Western culture stereotypes men as assertive and competitive. These notions, along with the assumptions that assertive salespeople sell more cars and that combative lawyers win more trials, imply that men will naturally outdo women at selling cars or arguing cases in court. Both sex stereotypes and job stereotypes are often off the mark. Insurance companies, for example, have learned that, although women can sell as aggressively as men, a soft sell is often more effective than a hard sell. Nonetheless, you will see in the following chapters that sex and job stereotypes contribute to various forms of sex inequality at work.

*Relations between the sexes.* Cultural beliefs about relationships between the sexes also contribute to sex inequality at work. The beliefs of fundamentalist Muslims, for example, which require the physical segregation of the sexes, give rise to employment patterns quite different from those in the Western world. In rural Muslim societies, this segregation has kept women out of the paid labor force and close to home, where they prepare food, do housework, deliver babies, and sew clothing (Sharma 1979).

Western and Eastern cultures share some beliefs that legitimate sex inequality. One of these is that men are inherently superior to women. This view supports greater job authority and higher pay for men.

A corollary of the ideology of male superiority is **paternalism**, the notion that women, like children, are inferior creatures whom men must take care of (Jackman 1994). As you will see in Chapter 6, the belief that men support women has helped to justify women's lower pay. The idea

that women require protection has also helped exclude women from many jobs. Past actions of the battery manufacturer Johnson Controls illustrate how paternalism can reduce women's job options and pay. Johnson Controls barred women from all jobs that either exposed them to lead (which can cause birth defects) or led to jobs that could expose them to lead, unless they were surgically sterilized. In 1991 the Supreme Court ruled that Johnson's policy violated the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, but this decision was too late for the women who had already been sterilized or transferred to lower-paid work.

In the chapters that follow, you will see that cultural concerns with preserving men's superiority over women and maintaining women's dependency on men support several specific beliefs that contribute to sex inequality in jobs, promotions, authority, and pay.

*A woman's place.* The doctrine of separate spheres, discussed in Chapter 2, is another cultural belief that restricts women in the labor market. In many developing countries, this doctrine still limits women's chances for employment. In the contemporary Western world, although women have won a place in the paid workforce, the ideology of separate spheres contributes to the unequal division of housework, as Chapter 8 will show.

### *Men's Efforts to Preserve Their Advantages in the Workplace*

A different explanation for sex inequality rests on the idea that privileged or **dominant groups** try to preserve their advantaged position (R. Collins 1974; Goode 1982). Monarchs rarely give up their kingdoms, and millionaires are not known for ridding themselves of their fortunes; on the contrary, the rich and powerful are bent on retaining and even expanding their wealth and power. They do so in a variety of ways, from segregating **subordinate groups** to denying them the opportunity to acquire the skills needed to advance.

Men and women do not differ when it comes to the impulse to retain their advantages. Although women lack the power and the incentive to exclude men from "women's" jobs, history offers examples of white women resisting the entry of women of color into their domain (Anderson 1982; Milkman 1987). However, as a group, working men are indisputably better off than working women, even though many men—particularly men of color—hold low-paying, undesirable jobs, enjoy no authority at work, and have little chance of a promotion.

Why do men see women as threats to their advantaged position? Many men believe that women might take jobs away from men, outperform men

in the same job, or lead employers to cut a job's pay. Furthermore, if women can perform "macho" jobs like coal mining, police work, or military combat, these jobs lose their capacity to confirm male workers' masculinity. Some men also fear that having female coworkers will lower the prestige of their work. A male law professor reportedly rejected a female applicant for a faculty position with this explanation: "This is a law school, not a god damn nursing school!" Finally, men may worry that women's equality at work will undermine men's privileges in other realms: If women earned as much as men and had as much authority at work, women could insist on greater equality in the family, the community, and national political life. In view of all the benefits that men, especially white men, enjoy because of their sex and race, it is not surprising that men sometimes take action to preserve their advantaged status.

Like other groups concerned about competition from lower-paid workers, male workers' first line of defense has been to try to exclude women. One strategy is to prevent women from acquiring the necessary qualifications for customarily male jobs. Some unions, for example, have barred women from apprenticeship programs, and before 1970 professional schools admitted few women.

When entry barriers begin to give way and it is harder to exclude outsiders, some workers try to drive out newcomers by making them miserable on the job. For example, when the U.S. Department of the Treasury hired its first women in 1870, men blew smoke and spat tobacco juice at them and made catcalls (Baker 1977:86). A hundred years later, women entering customarily male blue-collar jobs got similar treatment. An African-American woman who took a job as a sheet-metal worker recalled, "When I first starting working there, they gave me a hard time. . . . They would make wisecracks about what they would like to do. I just kept on walking . . . but it made me feel trampy" (Schroedel 1985:134). Another strategy to drive out female pioneers is to prevent their doing the job properly by denying them information, giving them the wrong tools, or sabotaging their work (Bergmann and Darity 1981). Even if most men are neutral or welcoming, a few men can create a hostile environment.

### *Employers' Actions*

It is employers who hire workers, assign them to jobs, decide whom to promote, and set pay. Most sex inequality at work results from these actions. Until recently, employers' main contribution to sex inequality was simply hiring few or no women for certain kinds of jobs. To understand how employers' hiring practices produce sex inequality, consider the

three ways that employers locate most workers. Some employers choose from a pool of applicants, some use formal intermediaries such as employment agencies, and still others rely on referrals by employees. This third method—workers' referrals—is most common because it is free and effective (current workers screen out unacceptable job candidates). However, recruiting new employees through workers' referrals tends to perpetuate inequality. First, people's social networks tend to include others of the same sex, ethnicity, and race (Braddock and McPartland 1987). Second, sex stereotypes, fears of competition, and concern with coworkers' and bosses' reactions prevent workers from recommending someone of the "wrong" sex or race. For example, a worker whose sister-in-law is looking for work may hesitate to nominate her for a job in his all-male department because his coworkers may be mad, his boss will hold him responsible if she doesn't measure up, and she may blame him if the boss or workers give her a hard time.

Employers also contribute to sex inequality through job assignments. Who ends up in what job is largely up to employers and managers, whose biases or stereotypes can lead them to assign women and men to different jobs. A recent lawsuit charging Lucky Stores, a West Coast grocery chain, with sex discrimination illustrates both the role of stereotypes and the impact of managerial discretion. At the trial, a Lucky's executive testified that his experience managing a store 30 years earlier had convinced him that "men preferred working on the floor to working at the cash register . . . and that women preferred working at the cash register" (*Stender et al. v. Lucky* 1992). The qualifications that employers require also influence whom they assign to what jobs. Some organizations require qualifications that are more common among men and unnecessary to do the job. Requiring production experience or an MBA for a management job, for example, may unnecessarily restrict the number of women in the pool of job candidates.

Why might employers treat female and male workers differently? They may do so because of biases toward women or because they believe it will be more profitable in the long run.

**Discrimination.** Discrimination is treating people unequally because of personal characteristics that are not related to their performance.<sup>1</sup> Few would claim that a local park is discriminating by refusing to hire a

<sup>1</sup>Sociologist Robert Merton (1972:20) proposed a similar definition: Discrimination consists of treating functionally irrelevant characteristics as if they were relevant.

9-year-old girl as lifeguard. Presumably, age is relevant to ensuring the safety of a pool full of swimmers (and the park wouldn't hire a 9-year-old boy either). In contrast, refusing to hire a 19-year-old because she is female is sex discrimination, because her sex is irrelevant to her ability to perform the job.

Around the world and for most of the history of the United States, employers have openly discriminated on the basis of sex, as well as on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, age, appearance, and sexual orientation. Employers have refused to hire women and other social minorities, segregated them into jobs different from those held by white men, denied them promotions, and paid them lower wages. Until quite recently, employers discriminated without a second thought. In the mid-nineteenth century, the publisher of the New York *Herald*, for example, stormed into the newspaper's office one day and bellowed, "Who are these females? Fire them all!" (N. Robertson 1992:46). Although such discrimination seems outrageous today, until 30 years ago, it was both legal and commonplace. It took the civil rights movement of the early 1960s to persuade Americans that race discrimination is unfair and to spur Congress and state legislatures to outlaw employment discrimination based on sex and race.

Although antidiscrimination laws have prompted employers to change some of their practices, employers continue to discriminate illegally on the basis of people's sex, race, national origin, and age. (They also discriminate on the basis of people's appearance and sexual orientation, which is legal in most of the United States and the world.) In the last half of the 1980s, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission received more than 30,000 complaints of sex discrimination per year, and nearly 80 percent of 803 Americans surveyed in 1990 believed that most if not all employers practice some form of job discrimination (National Opinion Research Corporation 1990).

*Statistical discrimination.* Another reason for employers to discriminate against women is the fear that employing women will reduce profits because women are less productive or more costly to employ. The idea that women may be more expensive employees stems from the assumption that motherhood will cause women to miss more work than men or lead to higher turnover rates. The practice of treating individuals on the basis of beliefs about groups is called **statistical discrimination**. Although employers may legally refuse to hire or promote an individual who cannot do the job, it is illegal to treat an individual differently solely because she or he belongs to a group that is, on average, less productive or more

costly to employ. Moreover, because employers are often wrong about which workers are productive, statistical discrimination is not necessarily good business.

*Customers' and male workers' opposition to women.* Some employers treat men and women differently in deference to the prejudices of their customers or workers. Until the early 1970s, for example, airlines refused to hire male flight attendants because they claimed their passengers preferred stewardesses. Then the Supreme Court let stand a lower court ruling that customers' preferences do not justify sex discrimination (*Diaz v. Pan American* 1971), opening the occupation of flight attendant to men (and eventually to older people). Nonetheless, employers still defer to customers' preferences. For example, a recent lawsuit charged that a white male professor vetoed hiring a female to direct a Pacific-Asian studies program because he claimed that scholars and students from Japan would object to a female director.

Employers may also avoid hiring women out of fear that male workers will take offense. Male workers might sabotage the women's productivity (Bergmann and Darity 1981), insist on higher pay to work with women (Bielby and Baron 1986), or even go on strike.

### *Sex Differences in Workers' Preferences and Productivity*

Up to now, we have focused on the ways that employers' and male workers' actions contribute to sex inequality in the workplace. Now we turn to explanations that emphasize differences between female and male workers. Some social scientists and employers argue that women choose customarily female jobs, do not want promotions, and willingly accept lower wages because, unlike men, they are not primarily oriented to paid work. An employer that was sued for discrimination in promotions, for example, argued that its female employees were just working for extra money and were not interested in moving into management (Hoffman and Reed 1981).

Why should women willingly settle for fewer opportunities and rewards than men? Two explanations that social scientists have proposed boil down to the claim that women's primary orientation is to their families, not their jobs. The first of these is human-capital theory; the second is gender-role socialization theory.

*Human-capital theory.* Mainstream economic theory assumes that labor markets operate in a nondiscriminatory fashion, rewarding workers for

their productivity. Thus, if women are worse off than men, it is because they are less productive workers. This assumption cannot be tested, however, because measuring productivity is impossible for many jobs. So researchers examine characteristics that they assume increase productivity: the skills, experience, and commitment that workers bring to their jobs. Workers' skills and experience, according to economists, constitute their **human capital**. Theoretically, through education, training, and experience, workers invest in their human capital, and these investments make some workers more productive than others. Human-capital theorists assume that women's orientation to their families inhibits their investment in education, training, and experience and thus makes women less productive than men (Becker 1964).

The amount of schooling people have is indeed important. It affects whether they are in the labor force, the jobs they hold, their authority, and their earnings. But differences in education are not very important for explaining most forms of sex inequality in the workplace. Although male and female workers both average a little over 12 years of education, men are less likely than women to finish high school and more likely to go beyond the master's degree. Also, although male and female college students tend to major in different subjects, this difference has been shrinking (Jacobs 1989b).

Training is a different story. Women and men tend to receive different kinds of training, sometimes because of cultural values and sometimes because of employers' actions. In the past, much of the job training that public schools provided was sex stereotyped and sex segregated, channeling males and females into different courses. In fact, the federal law establishing vocational education specified job training for males and home economics for females. A second source of training is apprenticeships, most of which unions run under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor. Like their ancestors, the medieval guilds, these training programs often exclude women. The third and most important source of training occurs on the job. Female jobs are less likely than male jobs to provide on-the-job training, however (Carey and Eck 1984:12). For example, employers train 44 percent of construction workers compared to 5 percent of typists (Carey and Eck 1984:5, 18). Employers often expect workers in traditionally female occupations, such as nursing, to obtain and pay for their own training before they start work. These kinds of differences contribute to women's lower workplace status.

Experience, the third element of human capital, presents a more complicated picture. Women average less work experience than men, although the difference is narrowing. In the late 1980s, experts predicted

that the average 18-year-old woman would be in the labor force about 29 years, 9.4 years less than the average 18-year-old male (S. Smith 1985). Women are also less likely than men to work continuously (Wilson and Wu 1993:table 5). The chapters that follow will address the effects of experience on the assignment of women and men to different jobs and on women's and men's chances of promotion and earnings.

Before leaving this subject, we should note that more educated or experienced workers are not necessarily more productive and that female workers are as committed to their jobs as males. However, productivity is strongly influenced by the resources that employers make available to workers and the commitment that workers bring to their job. Employers are more likely to give male rather than female workers the kinds of tools that enhance their productivity. International studies of agricultural modernization, for example, revealed that male workers monopolize the most efficient equipment and methods, leaving manual tasks to women (Boserup 1970). Also, recent research has indicated that women's job commitment equals men's (Bielby and Bielby 1988; Marsden et al. 1993). The kind of job a worker has affects commitment more than the worker's sex does (Marsden et al. 1993). The same factors—working conditions, autonomy on the job, and promotional opportunities—increase men's and women's commitment. In fact, researchers found that women devote more effort to their jobs than men do in jobs with similar amounts of autonomy (Bielby and Bielby 1988).

In sum, the human-capital claim that sex inequality at work arises from women's family obligations was more plausible 20 years ago, when it was first proposed, than it is today. Two incomes are now needed to purchase the goods and services that one income bought a generation ago. Thus in most families both men and women must now work for pay. Nonetheless, you will see in Chapters 4 through 7 that human-capital differences between the sexes explain some of the sex inequality in today's workplace.

*Gender-role socialization theory.* Human-capital theory does not try to explain its assumption that women are oriented primarily to their families rather than their careers. Gender-role socialization theories address that issue. **Gender-role socialization** is the process by which families, peers, schools, and the media teach a society's expectations of "appropriate" dress, speech, personality, leisure activities, and aspirations for each sex (Weitzman 1979).

Gender-role socialization might contribute to unequal workplace outcomes in several ways. First, it might lead women to be oriented more to

their families and men more to their jobs. Traditionally, girls have been socialized to want to have babies, bake cookies, and so forth, whereas boys have allegedly been socialized to compete for fame and fortune in the wider world. The different socialization of females and males may incline them to seek only those jobs that society has deemed acceptable for their sex. Also, socialization may contribute to a tendency for men and women to hold different values that affect their work lives, such as how important it is to have authority on the job or make lots of money. Finally, men's gender-role socialization may encourage them to expect a sexual division of labor at work that reserves for them certain jobs, an inside track on promotions, a position of authority, and higher pay for their work, as well as a sexual division of labor at home that relieves them of most day-to-day domestic work. Because men are usually the workplace decision makers, they are in a position to enforce these expectations.

Can the concept of gender-role socialization help explain workplace inequality? Some sociologists and economists argue that socialization orients women (but not men) to home and family, so women choose jobs that are easy to combine with their duties to their families. A different path to the same result is the idea that family demands hamper women's ability to compete with men for jobs and promotions. Women's responsibility for most of the domestic work and child rearing and men's avoidance of these tasks are consistent with this explanation for men's advantaged position at work. However, research showing that women work as hard as similar men and are as committed to their jobs indicates limitations in this explanation.

Most people assume that childhood socialization permanently shapes adult outlook. But childhood gender-role socialization is actually not very important for explaining women's and men's concentration in different jobs, their different rates of promotion, and their different average earnings. What is important are the ongoing rewards and punishments people experience in response to their behavior. Imagine a couple with two children. When the wife's employer sends her to a week-long workshop on management training, her husband enjoys the excuse for spending more time with the kids. But when he tells his buddies he can't have a beer after work because his wife is gone and he has to take care of the children, they kid him about it. The next year, when his wife proposes another trip, he balks. We cannot explain his reaction as a result of the subtle messages he may have absorbed as a child; rather, it is more closely related to present-day rewards (enjoying his kids, pleasing his wife) and punishments (being ribbed by his coworkers). His wife's case

illustrates the same point. When she was 17 years old, she may have thought that she would work for a few years after marriage and then quit to raise her children. But the reward of being selected for management training and the potential punishment of scraping by on one income may orient her toward pursuing a highly paid, prestigious career.

## Summary

Sex inequality in the workplace is manifested in several ways: The sexes are concentrated in different occupations; women are often confined to lower-ranking positions than men and are less likely than men to exercise authority; women earn less than men. Social scientists have advanced several explanations for these disparities: cultural factors, sex stereotypes, the preservation of male advantage, and discrimination by employers. Also contributing to unequal outcomes, however, are men's greater training and experience. In the next three chapters, we will use the concepts presented in this chapter to explain sex differences in workplace opportunities and rewards.