

Chapter 2: Women and Men: Historical Perspectives

Overview

The Source of Gender Differences: Nature versus Nurture—The Ongoing Debate

Factors Influencing Women's Relative Status

Women's Roles and Economic Development

The U.S. Experience

Colonial America: The Preindustrial Period

Period of Industrialization

The Evolution of the Family and Women's Labor Force Participation

Occupations and Earnings of Women in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

Conclusion

Suggested Answers to End of Chapter Questions

Notes to Users:

The answers that follow should be regarded only as a starting point for complete answers.

Complete answers may vary in length and content, depending on the instructors'

emphasis in the course and any additional readings made available to students. In

addition, some questions call for students to argue for a particular position, speculate

about an issue, or draw from their own experience. In these cases, we have sometimes

simply indicated the types of factors students might discuss in their answers. In other

instances we have sketched out one possible answer, but other alternatives may also be

acceptable.

1. What is the relationship between economic development and women's labor force participation?

This relationship is U-shaped. As the locus of production moves from family farms and businesses to the market, women's participation declines (this is the left-hand part of the U). This decline is a consequence of the income effect; as income rises, families increase their demand for all normal goods, including goods and services produced with wives' nonmarket time in the home. A further explanation for the decline is the stigma associated with married women's employment in wage-based manufacturing. Eventually the bottom of the U is reached. Then, with further economic development, women's education as well as opportunities for more desirable white-collar employment rise. In this right-hand portion of the U, the substitution effect is dominant: women's higher wages increase the opportunity cost of time out of the labor market, thereby spurring labor force participation. There is also less stigma associated with married women taking white-collar jobs.

2. Explain how women's and men's roles in the United States changed between the Colonial period and early industrialization.

In the colonial period the family, both husbands and wives, were engaged in production and consumption activities. Women typically engaged in light manufacturing, such as spinning and candle-making, and also at times, working in

the fields, and husbands focused their attentions on the fields and farms. In early industrialization, the married-couple family became more of a consumption unit . Most production activity shifted to factories. Husbands worked in factories and earned incomes, while wives maintained the home and family. Young unmarried women also shifted their production activities from home to factories, but tended to leave these jobs once they were married. However, there have always been exceptions, especially among immigrant and black women.

3. From a historical perspective, how has the labor market experience of black and white women differed?

As noted above, black women have historically helped to support their families by participating in market work to a greater extent than white women. This can be seen in the much higher fraction of married black women who were in the labor force in 1890, as compared with the fraction of white married women. In addition, black and white women were employed in very different occupations. As indicated in the chapter, over 90 percent of black women in 1890/1900 were in domestic service or agriculture, as compared with only around 40 percent of white women. Today participation rates of black and white women are fairly similar and, while there continue to be occupational differences between black and white women, they are far less pronounced than in the past.

4. In view of our discussion of evolutionary psychology and the social structural approach, to what extent can traditional roles of men and women be expected to change with changing economic conditions?

While speed dating experiments and other evidence suggests that women continue to prefer men with greater earnings ability and men continue to focus more on the physical attributes of their mates, there is also evidence that expected gender roles are not fixed. As discussed in the text, cross-cultural evidence indicates that these preferences are narrower in societies where gender equality is greater, suggestive that they are influenced by societal and environmental factors and thus subject to change.

5. Explain how the relationship between economic development and the expansion of women's rights may operate in both directions.

One would expect existing institutional arrangements such as laws, rules, and property rights to affect economic outcomes, with the effect depending on the way the rule is structured. For instance, if it is well-established that individuals own the fruits of their own labor, this provides a direct incentive to them to increase their labor market earnings. (On the other hand, the argument is often made that taxes reduce the return to work, and hence may discourage it). As discussed in the text, it is also possible that changes in the economic environment may cause institutional arrangements to shift. One example offered is that the growing market economy of the 19th century provided an economic incentive to

change property laws regarding women's rights, otherwise family incomes would not have benefited as much from the expanding market economy.

6. What factors account for the decline in fertility that occurred in the course of industrialization?

Fertility (or the demand for children) is affected both by changes in prices and changes in incomes. Both the value of children and income changed over the course of U.S. industrialization. For one, children became less valuable (or, put differently, more costly) as families moved from farms, where children were valuable as workers, to urban centers, where children no longer made a (major) economic contribution. Higher urban housing costs also served as a deterrent to larger families. While incomes rose with industrialization, which might be expected to increase fertility since parents could then afford more children, parents appear to have used the increased income to invest in child quality instead of increasing child quantity.