

# Family as a Perpetuator of Gender Inequality

Kianna Cooper

**Abstract**

This paper examines how the social structure of family perpetuates gender inequality, including examining social interactions and how they influence social interactions, structural framework that perpetrates and enforces ideology, and social problems seen in family that perpetrate and enforce these inequalities.

## **Introduction**

Family is a crucial social structure in an individual's life. It shapes the individual from an early age and ultimately influences them and their future. Other social structures seldom influence individuals as powerfully as families do. Family tends to be a gendered institution because the roles within it are organized around gender. Traditionally, the mother is the caretaker, while the father is the breadwinner. As stated in *Constructing Differences* by Ore, hegemonic ideologies dominate, not only social structures, but individual's ideologies as well.

Our social interactions are influenced by the dominant and hegemonic ideas. Because what we see as real is through human interaction, we see these hegemonic ideas, like gender roles, statuses, and expectations, as real.<sup>1</sup> Specific mechanisms used are (a) promoting gender roles, (b) maintaining dominant ideology, and (c) ostensibly accepting behaviors that create issues like domestic violence. Family supports gender inequalities by instilling them in children at an early age and reinforcing it through gendered statuses/roles and expectations, whether consciously or subconsciously.

## **Structural Framework**

The structural framework is as follows; institutions perpetuate and enforce ideology. This ideology supports the dominant ideology which also inversely influences the ideologies perpetuated by institutions. These ideologies then influence individual interactions including statuses, roles, and expectations. In this case, gender inequality is the ideology being perpetuated by the social institutions and supporting the dominant ideology. This then creates a dominant ideological culture of gender inequality and can be seen in individual interactions

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<sup>1</sup> Ore, "Constructing Differences." 2006, 3.

through gendered statuses/roles (women as the cook or cleaner) and expectations (lady-like behavior).

In the reading, “Repacking the Package Deal: Promoting Marriage for Low-Income Families by Targeting Paternal Identity and Reframing Marital Masculinity,” the promotion of marriage and responsible fatherhood is used as a prevention for poverty among low-income families. In this article it is evident that the dominant ideology is influencing the social institution (family) and in turn influencing the individual’s interactions and behaviors. By encouraging the father, economic success comes after marriage, it is instilling the idea in couples that the father is the one who works toward economic success while the mother stays home to take care of the children.<sup>2</sup>

Later, this idea will be instilled in the children, as early as the child is able to cognitively understand. This perpetuates gender inequality. Gender inequalities play into the structural framework by being perpetuated by social structures like the family or government. Thus, gender inequality becomes a dominant ideology and is seen in individual interactions and behavior.

### **Family as an Institution that Perpetuates and Enforces Gender Inequality**

As mentioned earlier, family is a pertinent institution in influencing individuals. As family is an institution that follows dominant ideology, it can perpetuate gender inequalities. One of the ways family does this is by taking up gendered statuses/roles and expectations, claiming it has a biological nature. For example, the mother often stays home with the children and takes care of them. She is known as the nurturer and it is assumed that women are natural in doing this. The Father, on the other hand, will go to work each day and bring home the

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<sup>2</sup> Randles, Jennifer M. “Repacking the Package Deal: Promoting Marriage for Low-Income Families by Targeting Paternal Identity and Reframing Marital Masculinity.” 867-868.

necessities to the family, taking care of everyone and protecting them. These roles will be seen by their children and the children will follow in their footsteps, believing it as biological value, though it has not as much validity as most people may believe it does.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, how children play is influenced by the family and often follows gendered roles. A girl may play house, where she has her own home and a baby doll to take care of. She will cook dinner and take care of the baby. The son on the other hand may play with toy tools where he is fixing something and working. This instills in the son that he must be the hard worker and instills in the daughter that she needs to be the caretaker. Throughout her life, the daughter will be encouraged by the family to act ladylike while the son will often hear the term ‘boys will be boys,’ excusing his behavior. This can perpetuate gender inequality.

Another way the family perpetuates gender inequality is in the way sexual violence is seen and dealt with. Domestic violence is a pressing issue, especially in the United States. Domestic violence can be a form of systematic violence against women as it is the leading cause of harm to women in the United States. Additionally, the United States has some of the highest rape, domestic violence, and spousal murder statistics in the industrial world.<sup>4</sup> As domestic violence is an issue within the family, this can influence children in many ways.

This can influence girls that this type of behavior is acceptable when shown toward them or influence boys that it is acceptable to show this type of behavior to others (or vice versa). Although, children are not always influenced in this way it is possible and happens. If this issue goes unaddressed within the family, it can influence and perpetuate gender inequality. If it is unaddressed, children will see that and believe this is an issue that (a) does not need to be

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<sup>3</sup> Lorber, Judith, “Believing is Seeing: Biology as Ideology.”

<sup>4</sup> Armaline, William T., Glasber, Davita S., Purkayastha, Bandana. “Human Rights in our own Backyard: Injustice and Resistance in the United States.” 222-223.

addressed if it is happening to them and/or (b) dismiss the behavior or recognize it as acceptable behavior.

## **Conclusion**

Family sustains gender inequalities by instilling them in children at an early age and reinforcing it through gendered statuses/roles, and expectations, sometimes consciously or subconsciously. Family is a pertinent and powerful social structure when it comes to influencing individual's ideologies. These ideologies follow that of the dominant culture and are sustained by social institutions, one of these being the family.

The structural framework allows one to draw connections and understand how social institutions influence the dominant ideology and they in turn inversely influence social structures. These both influence individual interactions which ultimately perpetuate gender inequalities. Specific mechanisms used are (a) promoting gender roles, (b) maintaining dominant ideology, and (c) ostensibly accepting behaviors that create issues like domestic violence.

Families promote gender roles, such as the mother being the at-home caretaker and the father being the hard-working breadwinner. This aides in maintaining the dominant ideology. Moreover, the way children are told to and allowed to play influence gender inequality by making children play in gender roles/statuses. Additionally, by domestic violence remaining unaddressed in the household, this allows children to learn to justify and/or excuse otherwise inexcusable behavior. These are just a few ways family perpetuates gender inequality as a social institution.