



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of World Poverty**

## **Gender Division of Labor**

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The concept of gender could be described as society's deliberate division of humanity based on sex into two different categories, with negative implications for one category. The role of this division in fueling poverty in one category cannot be overemphasized. Gender dictates how females and males think about themselves, how they interact with others, and what positions they occupy in society. Theoretically, gender has been understood as socially constructed, and it is central to the organization of everyday life across cultures and societies. Gender is associated with sociocultural and psychological factors that influence the development of an individual. Gender division of labor is a situation where society has patterned some set of gender roles to be performed by women and another set to be performed by men. This has constrained women more than men in their access to a range of productive resources—credit, tools and equipment, new technology and information—that are needed in the fight against poverty.

On how gender division of labor started, some scholars have traced the origin to a division of labor between sexes/gender; although with some overlap to all modern hunter-gatherer societies as stated by Murdock and Provost. Evidence suggests that the division of labor between the sexes can be traced to the biological differences between men and women. And these biological differences have acted as constraints on women (especially female reproductive activities), preventing them from performing certain activities undertaken by men. However, there are few societies where biological differences play little or no influence on the roles performed by women. Such societies include the Mbuti Pygmies in the Congo rainforests and the Australian Aborigines of Tasmania. Stephanie Coontz and Peta Henderson noted that most early societies began with equality between the sexes and that division of labor by sex from the earliest times was not based on biological makeup but on social convenience. For example, women could not combine nursing babies with warfare or with engagement in high-risk activities.

Studies on the gender division of labor are broadly divided into two categories: (1) those that focus on the division of household labor and (2) the school of thought that focuses on gender segregation in the paid labor market. On the division of household labor, Coltrane has shown that women do the lion's share of unpaid labor within households. On gender segregation in the labor market, it continues despite the changes that have taken place over the years. This could also be understood through certain processes that operate in the society, such as the imposition of structural constraints on women's participation in paid labor, especially through child care and domestic responsibilities; the social construction of what women should do, particularly their reproductive role, which shapes the kind of employment they can engage in; and, finally, the specific contexts in which gender is examined.

However, gender division of labor is the outcome of how each society or community divides work among men and women according to what is considered culturally appropriate. These kinds of work are socially defined and ascribed by the traditions, beliefs, customs, norms, and values of that particular society. There is an argument that the continued dominance of women in certain job activities across societies might be attributable to women's low levels of education, which limit their competitiveness in the formal labor market; hence, restricted them to informal sector activities. This could lead to low pay or wages creating room for poverty to thrive among such women.

Furthermore, gender division of labor implies a societal pattern where women are given one set of gender roles and men are given a set of different roles. This means that the roles and obligations deemed appropriate for women and men are socially and culturally determined by

the ideas, beliefs, norms, and practices of any given community. In most cases, roles designated as female activities are almost invariably less valued than those designated as male activities. Women are expected to fulfill their reproductive role of bearing and raising children, provide care for the family members, and perform general household activities. These are not income-generating activities, and they limit their purchasing and decision-making capacities. Men are socialized to be associated with more productive roles, engaging in paid work outside the home and thus generating income to enhance their capacity in all ramifications of social life.

Gender division of labor has been identified as an important factor leading to gender inequality at the levels of both economic and social construction of gender identities, as noted by Huber. Whatever work is assigned to men or women, gender division of labor serves the purpose of assigning jobs that continue the subordination of women to men in social interaction and relations. This makes women vulnerable to low pay, limited upward mobility, exploitative labor practices, and poor working conditions; all these contribute to women's poverty.

At the household level, women are in a disadvantageous position; for example, there is evidence that women who live in a household where the income is below the poverty level have higher chances of becoming victims of domestic violence because of their status of being economically dependent. Even though women now go out to work and participate in income-generating activities outside the home, the gendered division of labor within the house has remained a permanent feature across culture. Also, despite women's participation in the labor market, the sharing of unpaid work in the household continues to be unequal between the sexes, with women performing more tasks than their male partners at the domestic level.

Different factors that have been identified as responsible for the continued existence of the gender division of labor in the household include (a) time availability restricted by paid work and (b) sex role attitudes triggered by popularly held views of traditions as internalized by individuals. Individuals, both male and female, are socialized into gender-specific identities at an early age, and this is carried on throughout one's lifetime. The marital power equation demonstrates that inequality or gender division of labor exists in the household because men have power over women.

The implications of the gender division of labor could be identified for both men and women and the society at large. In some societies, women of a certain age group are classified as economically inactive compared with men in the same age group. And in other cases, even where women do work in the labor market, they contribute fewer hours to paid work and hence might earn less, thus continuing in the cycle of poverty.

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**See Also:** [Gender and Allocation of Time](#); [Gender Discrimination](#); [Women](#).

### Further Readings

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