

Egalitarianism and women

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Abstract

Their conceptual approach is the signal strength of this important paper. Future researchers on egalitarianism, whether archival or original, would be well advised to use their approach as a research guide. One major problem with the study of egalitarianism is that it only applies to the status of men and not women. This gap is the focus on my commentary.

Their conceptual approach to human inequality is the signal strength of this important paper. New research on egalitarianism should lean heavily on their two-part framework of domains and mechanisms. Their domains or types of inequality in Table 1 are comprehensive and analytically nuanced. Previous approaches usually only focused  one dimension, such as Ross' female political participation (1986) or Boehm's constraints on leaders (1993), while others haphazardly merge distinctive analytical constructs. The center of Figure 1 and Table 2 lists the fundamental mechanisms that modulate egalitarianism and our knowledge gaps in those areas. These distinctions will aid researchers as they comb through cross-cultural archives or influence current or new ethnographic research.

Crucially, they note a Darwinian dynamic: as individuals compete to selfishly secure status and resources, thereby weakening the egalitarian social contract, they are countered by egalitarian processes. The desire to aggrandize is chronically present but cannot gain a foothold in certain socioecological settings.

The recent reformulation of egalitarianism by Graeber and Wengrow as three freedoms, or the freedom to disobey, move, and reorganize social relations (2022, p. 362), is inferior to the target article's definition of egalitarianism, "... where socio-ecological circumstances enable most individuals to successfully defend their own resource access, social status, and autonomy." Sex is stated as one of the domains of inequality in Table 1 and is also noted as a research priority in Table 2. Given that any society is about half female, then understanding how this form of inequality operates is crucial to any account of egalitarianism. Their definition specifies "most individuals" actually means "most men" and not women or sometimes the aged, which will be the focus of my comments. In doing so, I shift emphasis slightly from egalitarian societies to inequality based on sex and age in all societies.

Classic works on female inequality, such as Whyte (1978), Rosaldo, Lamphere, and Bamberger (1974), or more recent evolutionarily informed work by Low (1992) or Yanca & Low (2004) on factors that affect female status, are not consulted. This paper may lead one to conclude that preindustrial sexually egalitarian societies do not exist and may never have existed among simple foragers or other acephalous peoples. I believe this to be largely accurate even though they state, "This doesn't mean that gender relations within egalitarian societies are always unequal." Ethnographic examples would be instructive.

It is not clear to me why the classic sexual division of labor (what the authors call "gender-structured differences in labour specialization") in hunting, gathering, and childcare is considered a domain of inequality. As an aside, I would add that the claim that "women often hunt" is belied by the ethnographic record (Koster et al., 2020). Women sometimes hunt, which would be more accurate overall (Gurven & Hill, 2009). More to the point, it seems to me that because one sex or the other does more or less of a certain activity is not a measure of inequality in status but only a difference in, say, time allocation. The important question unanswered is why hunting or meat production dominated by males is usually afforded more status than gathering or childcare dominated by females. As they note, we need to delve deeper into why gathering "yields less social capital" than hunting.

Comparative researchers noted above on female status, and recently, Lowes (2022) has attempted to examine factors that affect female political participation, status, and autonomy and has noted factors such as external warfare, matrilocality, matrilineality, equal property inheritance rules, lack of marriage payments, ease of divorce, etc. The presence of female allies and networks gained through matrilineality and/or matrilocal post-marital residence seems critical (Mattison, Quinlan, & Hare, 2019).

Ironically, it may be the case that factors that increase female status may be found in strongly stratified societies marked by high levels of class inequality. For example, long ago, Divale found a weak positive correlation between female status and social complexity (1976, p. 194). Clearly, this trend of increased female status and power has accelerated in the recent century. Methodologically, Divale also notes that compared to male ethnographers, female ethnographers were more likely to have a more positive assessment of female status, suggesting bias, which was further confounded by length of time spent in the field, language competence, and other indicators of research competence. This problem, if significant, may seriously hamper the comparative use of older sources. A more recent approach to this problem is presented in Post and Macfarlan (2024) in their comparative study of reputation  prestige, which they define as positive attributes or social capital and includes personal characteristics such as leadership, economic ability, generosity, etc. Like Divale, they find evidence that female ethnographers are more likely to find evidence of valued female reputations.

How age affects status in an egalitarian society is a topic worth greater investigation, as noted in section 3.5. Cross-culturally, status generally increases with age, and whether it flattens out slowly or rapidly declines is quite variable. The issue of status and age has not been comparatively researched in studies of egalitarian societies. Simmons (1945) was the first to systematically investigate the status of the aged in industrial and preindustrial societies, but he did not compare egalitarian and stratified societies. Aside from noting significant role changes associated with tasks that require strength and endurance, he found in some cases that the aged may be valued for their social, technical, and ecological knowledge. In other cases, the inability to economically support oneself may lead to a decrease in status in some societies, and in times of stress, so-called “death hastening” practices are aimed at the elderly. A later holocultural study by Glasscock and Feinman (1980)  found that treatment of the elderly  better in more stratified societies. One could infer that better treatment means higher status. This may be the case because of property ownership.

As noted earlier, this is a landmark paper that will assist us in structuring our investigations into status variation in terms of domains and mechanisms within and between societies and theorizing about the relevant socioecological factors.

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