

In Search of Gender in Historical Political Economy

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Abstract

This chapter summarizes the quantitative literature on the origins and manifestations of women's political and economic progress over the last two hundred years. It discusses key critical junctures that durably changed women's economic roles, such as the Industrial Revolution, the introduction of the contraceptive pill, and large-scale conflict, as well as some of the institutionally imposed constraints on women's social, economic, and political roles, and how these were overcome. To conclude, the chapter calls for more empirical evidence from underresearched areas and for a new and coherent theoretical paradigm that would not only account for the stubborn persistence of gender inequality but also incorporate the progress made by related disciplines on the understanding and definition of gender, masculinity, and intersectionality.

Keywords: gender; suffrage; inequality; household bargaining; Marxism; feminism; human capital theory; political development

The historical turn that has, in recent years, galvanized much of political economy has also begun to percolate in the study of gender. Yet the issue of gender itself—of the social construction of value and meaning that echoes and distills centuries of inequality related to sex differentiation—presents a primary challenge for scholars in this field. The gender trouble is fundamental. It has influenced the process of record keeping, including whether the activities and desires of people from different sexes have been recorded throughout history; it has influenced the process of measurement, including how the formal and nonformal economic and political activities of men and women have been conceptualized and counted; it has influenced the

scholarly record, including whether the promulgations and behavior of people other than men have been studied; it has influenced the primitives of formal models, informing the priorities and decision rules of supposedly representative agents; and it has influenced theoretical paradigms, including which types of argument draw the most attention and which ideas about human society resonate.

Scholars interested in the historical political economy of gender are tasked with two missions: fact-finding and theoretical innovation. Fact-finding is archaeological; in this step, scholars must dig into old sources and locate new repositories to uncover when, where, and why economic and political activities were mischaracterized due to gender bias. In fact-finding, we can discover how the very categories of men and women were constructed and reinforced by politics and economics, and how these categorizations reinforced the power of men over women in most societies. The second task is theoretical innovation; in this step, researchers must reveal to other scholars how the fact that most analyses and models of political economy took men as the basis for elaboration misses fundamental features of social and political life.¹ The study of gender in historical political economy (HPE) is therefore about much more than the study of what women or men did in the past; it is about how sex categorizations—and the way they are imbued in our data, our sources, our assumptions, our models, and our research questions—threaten to undermine the scholarly pursuit of truth.

The large and growing quantitative literature in the historical political economy of gender, which we review in this essay, has engaged vigorously with the fact-finding imperative. Scholars have combed through old records, considered standards of measurement and habits of assignment, and discovered creative new ways to expose the economic and political behavior of groups thought to be outside history ([Branch 2011](#); Corder and Wolbrecht 2016; [Morgan 2006](#);

[Ogilvie 2003](#); [Sanday 1981](#)). And some scholarship has made headway in the realm of theoretical innovation, revealing how canonical models of labor market choices, political power, and regime change and democratization have been stymied by theoretical frameworks that ignore gendered power and are based solely on the male experience ([Adams 2005](#); [Branch 2011](#); [Goldin 1994](#); [Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010](#); Teele 2018a). Yet the theoretical initiatives that have transformed the study of gender in cognate fields, such as sociology, anthropology, legal studies, and even international relations—which emphasize the position and roles of Brown and Black women (the study of intersectionality), and which focus more on analyses of masculinity and gender norms—have not yet become commonplace in the historical political economy of gender.² The literature is also much more developed in the context of historical Europe than other parts of the world.

The omissions hitherto are partly explained by the difficulty of uncovering facts. Though local parishes would keep records of births, marriages, and deaths, wide-scale aggregation of human data was a project of state formation and consolidation and was uncommon before the nineteenth century.³ Not until the United Nations began its own efforts at measurement and data collection did most high-quality comparative data emerge. Today, new digitization efforts, combined with vast computing power and greater visibility of archival materials online, has opened new terrain for scholars of gender and power. Difficulties persist, however, and overcoming them requires new methods and new sources of data. For example, analyses of social and economic mobility in the long run are based on linking individuals across censuses, tax, and inheritance records based on names. Because they change names at marriage, women literally vanish from those records and hence can be impossible to trace in those studies. As scholars break into emerging sources of data and uncover new formations of political and economic

activity in the past, we urge, and suspect, that the synthetic and creative exercise of theoretical revision will play a larger role in the study of gender in HPE. We conclude with a call for this paradigmatic shift.

Theoretical Paradigms

As scholars of political economy, we are interested in research that grounds political behavior and economic outcomes with reference to constraints, strategies, and incentives faced by individuals or groups of actors. As scholars of gender, we are interested in how power relations differ based on one's position relative to institutions, and access to the means of production in local, national, and global contexts. The theoretical paradigms that lurk in the background of scholarship on gender and power relations in the past are the Marxist and the human capital approach. Since the 1980s, the vigorous feminist responses to those theories have focused on how institutions and bargaining power influence gender equality, which we term the institutional approach to gender equality. We outline these three theoretical approaches before turning to the empirical literature.

The Marxist approach, articulated first by Friedrich [Engels \(2010 \[1884\]\)](#) in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, argued that women's inequality is a result of capitalist development. Pointing to the elevated position of women in certain noncapitalist communities, such as the Haudenosaunee (known to colonists as Iroquois) prior to colonization, Engels argued that the process of primitive accumulation that began first with herding, then with fiat money, and reached a pinnacle with the decline of the commons and land enclosures—and was always, as he points out in the case of ancient Greece, bolstered by slavery—allowed men to amass resources under their own names. A desire to build intergenerational wealth drove men to seek certainty in paternity, spurring the rise of monogamous marriage (which Engels noted

wryly, and rightly, was really only monogamy for women). Capital accumulation, even prior to industrialization, precipitated the collapse of “mother right” and matrilineal family formations (where children were understood to belong to their mothers’ clan and land passed on the female line) and ultimately led to the world historic overthrow of the female sex.¹

The human capital approach, in contrast, sought to explain outcomes such as women’s lower labor force participation and women’s lower earnings as the result of a rational process of family and firm maximization.⁴ In this approach, family units act like firms, so that, within the family, even small individual differences in productive endowments (i.e., women’s ability to bear children) could lead “rational” (utility maximizing) family units to choose men’s specialization in the market and women’s specialization in the home. Within firms, the very fact of reproductive differences, which might cause women to take time out of the labor market during childbearing years, make women employees a riskier prospect, rendering them less worthy of investment (e.g., training opportunities), advancement, and remuneration than men. This approach, formalized by Gary [Becker’s \(1981\) *A Treatise on the Family*](#), finds that specialization of men in the market and women in the home is the equilibrium outcome chosen by rational, cooperative family units.

Grappling with two sets of facts—that women’s status under state-directed socialism has also tended toward patriarchal arrangements, and that households in capitalist societies are not necessarily cooperative organizations that maximize all members’ utility—many feminist scholars pushed back against the Marxist and human capital approaches. Marxist feminists showed how Marxist scholarship missed the exploitation of women’s labor in the home ([Hartmann 1976](#); [Folbre 1982](#)). A host of scholarship considered gender egalitarianism in

¹ For other accounts of women’s power in noncapitalist societies and early democracies, see Brulé 2023 and Stasavage 2020.

nonmarket societies ([Leacock 1978](#); Sanday 1981 Brulé 2023) revealing how women’s position, their social “adulthood,” could vary with sex-based division of tasks and the nature of trade (Sacks 1974). And many sought to show how not only capitalist systems ([MacKinnon 1982](#)), but also state-directed socialist projects (Molyneux 1985), were based on male dominance.

The institutional approach forged a reproachment between the Marxist and the human capital accounts of gender inequality. Without jettisoning political economy models of the household, scholars working in the institutional tradition augmented models to think more seriously about bargaining power within the family ([Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010](#); [Goldstein and Udry 2008](#); [Goldin 1994](#); [Ogilvie 2003](#)). Institutions—states, markets, firms, universities, churches, militaries, the police, and even the family—constrain and incentivize behavior in distinctive ways. Women and men will behave differently based on how their societies structure gender relations ([Kandiyoti 1988](#)). In this framework, institutions confer or capture the power of people with different sexed and gendered bodies, and in so doing, they influence bargaining power in the home and women’s economic and political behavior thereafter. The goal of this new branch of research was often to show how different institutional configurations and “outside options” influence women’s bargaining power, helping to explain variation in policies, participation, and welfare related to women and families.

If institutions and bargaining power are crucial for understanding economic and political power and gender inequality, the question naturally arises as to how they persist and how they change. Most political economists of gender orient themselves toward these questions of change, asking how major historical events have transformed gender relations, or tracing how institutional, technological, or cultural legacies inform the current state of gender relations.⁵ In each area we describe prior research and point to open questions. We conclude the essay by

outlining future directions for this dynamic area of scholarship.

Major Historical Events and Gendered Power Relations

Major historical events, sometimes called “critical junctures,” are the focal point of a large body of political economy research on gender. This research can be further classified into work that looks at epochal shifts in the economy and how they influence women’s power, and the causes and consequences of major institutional changes for women’s social and economic position.

Epochal Shifts, Women in the Economy, and Women’s Welfare

A primary macro-theoretical question driving research on epochal shifts in the economy asks whether economic development promotes women’s empowerment or has an uneven effect on women’s status. Epochal shifts such as the Neolithic Revolution—which scholars have suggested brought a transformation for some societies from hunting or gathering toward settled agricultural practice (but see [Graeber and Wengrow 2021](#))—or the Industrial Revolution—which mechanized agriculture and ushered in new divisions of labor and modes of production, and new social class arrangements—are believed to have augmented the types of tasks performed by men and women and thereby shifted social and economic power among the sexes. For example, accounts of why the transition to sedentary agriculture might have empowered men vis-à-vis women suggest that early technological innovations, like the plow, required strength and became part of men’s domain ([Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn 2011](#)), and that this division reinforced men’s power in the household.⁶ Other research argues that gender-based comparative advantage might depend on ecology⁷ and on earlier technological innovations (see e.g., BenYishay, Grosjean, and Vecci (2017) and [Haas et al. \(2020\)](#)).⁸

While much of this literature seeks to simplify the causes of women’s inequality, anthropological and archaeological evidence suggests more diversity than we might have

suspected ([Graeber and Wengrow 2021](#)). For example, drawing on the General Social Survey (GSS), [Sanday \(1981\)](#) shows that although hunting societies tended to oppress women more than gathering societies, the nature and degree of gender specialization in agriculture—whether related to who did the sowing, minded animals, or even used the plow—could vary substantially across locations. In a magisterial study of early-modern Germany, Sheilagh [Ogilvie \(2003\)](#) also shows considerable differences in the gender allocation of tasks, even among parishes in the same region. And Esther Boserup, the economist who first studied the interactions between agricultural intensification and socioeconomic transformation, argued that causality ran in the opposite direction: that agricultural intensification *followed* from “increasing population or . . . the compulsion of a social hierarchy” (Boserup 1965, 54). Notwithstanding several compelling studies that argue for a causal relationship between the adoption or intensification of agriculture to the sexual division of labor ([Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn 2011](#); [Hansen, Jensen, and Skovsgaard 2015](#)), the relationship is highly complex, and systemic shifts may have been related to preexisting power dynamics.

The next epochal shift that has received extensive attention is the Industrial Revolution.⁹ The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brings more opportunities for extensive econometric work because governmental data collection became more common.¹⁰ Work on women’s economic activity in the nineteenth century tries to understand the role of women’s market and nonmarket economic activity in promoting changes in national income, the causes of the fertility transition in the late nineteenth century, and the ways that laws governing property within the family impacted women’s economic productivity. Research argues that women’s labor was much more important for the Industrial Revolution than has been acknowledged. Looking at the U.S. census of manufactures for the Northeast, [Goldin and Sokoloff \(1982\)](#) argue that women’s labor

was fundamental to the manufacturing labor force in the United States. Because of high relative wages for men in agricultural work (hay and dairy), manufacturing firms substituted women's (and children's) labor for men's. In 1840, women's labor was at its peak, representing about 32 percent of the industrial workforce.¹¹

If women were highly active in the United States' labor force in the middle of the nineteenth century, when economic growth was lower than in the twentieth, and women were less active in the labor force immediately after the Second World War, even though growth was robust, this suggests a non-monotonic relationship between economic development and women's empowerment. [Goldin \(1995\)](#) argues that in intermediate stages of development, housewives become a status marker for the middle classes, which helps to explain a U shape in women's labor force participation over the last two hundred years. Yet Goldin's work, and that of [Khan \(1996\)](#) and [Fernández \(2014\)](#), acknowledge the legal barriers to women's participation into the twentieth century, including laws that limited women's ability to take out patents ([Khan 1996](#)), to be sole proprietors of businesses, to contract freely, to retain their wages in marriage ([Skocpol 1992](#)), to control their property, and, in some cases, to keep jobs upon becoming married or pregnant ("marriage bars") (see also [Wikander, Kessler-Harris, and Lewis \[1995\]](#) and [Stewart 1989](#)). Many of these restrictions, like that on married women's right to control property, were dismantled in the late nineteenth century, which again points to a positive correlation between women's rights and development ([Fernández 2014](#)). Yet the fact that many of these restrictions on women's political and economic activity were put into place during the eighteenth century—for example, by the diffusion of the French civil code to much of Europe and the Americas ([Tudor 2022](#))—vitiates any simple story about the relationship between gender equality and development.¹²

Crucially, neither the macro theories nor the careful individual country or industry studies have adequately grappled with the interaction between wealth accumulation in industrializing countries, or accumulation within upwardly mobile segments of the working classes, and the welfare of women in primary goods-producing locales or in areas dominated by slavery. If the rise of women's relative wages in the global North was enabled through a constant supply of (coerced) cheap primary goods coming from the South, then the improvement of livelihoods, and even bargaining power in one region, was predicated on the subordination of women in another region. The example of slavery highlights the important role that institutions play in women's welfare ([Roberts 1997](#)) and underlines the argument that the Marxist or human capital approaches may miss key features of economic systems that are detrimental to the welfare of many, or even most, women. Though many historians, feminist theorists, and sociologists have pointed out the interlinkages between economic systems (and across nation states) during industrialization (e.g., [Jones-Rogers 2019](#)), no quantitative studies credibly demonstrate how the ascent of some groups of women depended on the immiseration of others. Clearly this is an important area for future inquiry.

Institutional Transformation, Women's Mobilization, and Political Power

Political scientists have taken up the question of the transformation in women's political power, asking how and when women exercise political agency ([Corder and Wolbrecht 2016](#); [Morgan 2006](#); [Teele 2018a](#)), and what impact women's agency in the past had on policies that support women's full participation in political and economic life ([Lewis 1997](#); [Sainsbury 1996](#)). Some research examines women's contributions to early social movements, such as the fight to abolish slavery in the United States, showing how activism in another arena contributed to activism in the realm of women's suffrage ([Carpenter and Moore 2014](#)). Other research shows how some

segments of American women were even more successful in attaining legislative reforms in the pre-suffrage era than they were thereafter. Writing about middle-class clubwomen, Skocpol argues that their unique nonpartisan, moralistic politics, which embraced the ideology of separate spheres, allowed them to leverage political connections and attract male allies in the service of legislation (like limiting women's working hours) that satisfied bourgeois sensibilities ([Skocpol 1992](#), 319). After suffrage, politically active American women faced the same constraints and incentives as other U.S. citizens subject to party politics.

Considerable attention has been paid to understanding the causes and consequences of women's suffrage. The literature on franchise expansion in political economy has focused on the distributional consequences of suffrage expansion for the lower classes (implicitly, working-class men) and tended to see women's suffrage as a consequence of inevitable cultural change with rising income (see Hanlon XX, this volume). Political scientists have argued, instead, that legislative and partisan incentives are crucial for understanding the timing of women's suffrage reform, especially during the first wave of democratization from 1848 to 1920 ([Teele 2018a](#); [Przeworski 2009](#); [Barnes 2020](#)). Women's agency is crucial to the politics of suffrage, both because the strategies they pursue as activists inform the nature of women's voting behavior after suffrage ([Skorge 2021](#); [Morgan Collins 2021](#)), and because politicians look to suffrage mobilization when deciding whether to extend the vote in the first place ([Teele 2018b](#)). While the suffrage movement is often thought of as an indication of women's demand for rights, [Teele \(2018a\)](#) argues that suffragists were strategic in a larger sense: sometimes they actively chose not to pursue broad movements because they feared the downstream consequences associated with *all* women having voting rights. To date there are few high-quality measures of women's political activism for suffrage, and more research is needed to understand the degree to which

countries' movement sizes varied based on the strategic electoral incentives faced by women from specific socioeconomic groups.

Scholars disagree about the degree to which women's suffrage changed electoral politics writ large, that is, whether women as voters impacted the partisan distribution of legislatures after suffrage. Analyzing electoral politics in the US South after suffrage, Schuyler (2006) argues that southern white women were important lobbyists in the area of health, education, and moral reform, but notes that most supported the maintenance of Jim Crow policies. The impact of women voters on election outcomes is less obvious. A major recent work on the United States argues that women made more or less similar choices at the ballot box as men (albeit with lower inclinations to support fringe or third parties) ([Corder and Wolbrecht 2016](#)), findings that echo earlier research on the state of New York ([Harvey 1996](#)). Yet [Morgan-Collins \(2021\)](#) shows that politicians who were unfriendly to suffragist-supported progressive causes were more likely to lose their seats after suffrage was extended in the United States.

A key challenge for understanding women's post-suffrage vote choice stems from a problem known as "ecological inference"; because the ballot is secret, we have to estimate group-level behavior from aggregate electoral results. New scholarship seeks to probe these issues using fine-grained local data on women's turnout and electoral outcomes. For example, in the Scandinavian context, [Teele \(2022\)](#) shows that given the way that political geography correlates with partisan performance across space—and the fact that cities were more left-leaning—women in cities had to have been more liberal than women in the countryside. Future research should refine the techniques and levels of analysis employed in the study of women's vote choice.

Thanks to the fact that a host of countries recorded voter eligibility and participation

separately across the sexes, the study of women's political participation is much more robust than that of vote choice. A growing body of evidence shows how women's post-suffrage participation hinged fundamentally on the electoral institutions in place when women attained voting rights. Focusing on municipal elections in Norway, [Skorge \(2021\)](#) shows that women's political mobilization—measured by women's petitioning activity—prior to suffrage is a good predictor of women's share of turnout after the vote was extended. He further demonstrates that this relationship is more robust in municipalities that adopted proportional electoral rules prior to a national Proportional Representation reform in 1919. Kim (2019) shows that women participated at higher rates in municipalities that used direct democratic procedures for local governance as opposed to those that utilized representative institutions. Future research should examine the degree to which the electoral rules in place at the time of suffrage impacted other variables besides turnout.

Unlike the literature on the electoral impact of women's suffrage, the cross-national literature on the impact of women's suffrage on human development and fiscal outcomes has been unequivocal: women's suffrage changed economic policies in a variety of ways.¹³ [Bromhead \(2018\)](#) studies thirty countries from 1919 to 1939 (two-thirds are from Europe), showing that tariffs increased by around two percentage points on average after women secured voting rights.¹⁴ He believes, and has some archival evidence showing, that this is due to women's preferences for higher tariffs, and to their mobilization by labor and various clubs in the interwar United States and United Kingdom. [Bertocchi \(2011\)](#), in a study of twenty-two countries, mostly from Europe, shows how women's suffrage had a positive effect on government pensions and health expenditures, as a share of GDP, even while the size of government spending remained unchanged. Similarly, [Aidt and Dallal \(2008\)](#) estimate that suffrage was immediately followed

by an increase in spending on collective goods, with the long-run effect being more than 3 percent of GDP.¹⁵ More research is needed to understand the micro-level processes that gave way to these macro-level correlations.

Finally, in the legislative realm, [Moehling and Thomasson \(2012\)](#) argue that the United States' Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, which sought the promotion of welfare and hygiene for mothers and infants, was adopted right after the Nineteenth Amendment, when the threat of women's electoral backlash seemed greatest, yet ten years later it was dropped. The authors argue that upon learning that women did not vote as a bloc, politicians were able to vote with their wallets and shut down the program. Although the research on women's turnout is beginning to accumulate ([Skorge 2021](#); [Teele 2022](#)), comparative knowledge of women's participation after suffrage, such as the effect of women's suffrage in the legislative realm, has been less well studied and is an area where more research is needed.

Historical Legacies and Gender Equality in the Present

A second common approach in the historical political economy of gender examines the historical roots of gender inequality. In some areas, such as education, women and girls have made unequivocal progress. Indeed, in most advanced democracies, and generally in most countries with high average levels of education, women have overtaken men in tertiary education, a phenomenon that occurred in the United States and Western Europe as early as 1980. Women's attachment to the labor force has also risen, spurred in part by the removal of bans on married women remaining in the labor force, the diffusion of contraception ([Goldin and Katz 2002](#)), and the introduction of maternity leave provisions and early childhood care ([Morgan 2006](#); [Olivetti and Petrongolo 2017](#)). Nevertheless, these transformations sit side by side with gender inequality as a persistent reality today.¹⁶ As a result, there has been growing interest in understanding why

gender inequality persists, and why there is so much variation across countries, regions, and groups in the position of women. Two major strains of research deal with persistence. The first looks at historical shocks—for example, to prices, relative wages, or sex ratios in the population—tracking the relationship between these shocks and long-term development outcomes. The second looks to the realm of culture and the intergenerational transmission of values to understand the reproduction of inequality across social groups.

Technology, Demography, and Development Outcomes

The first set of studies focused on how shocks to commodity prices, and “sex-biased” technological changes—innovations that change the relative importance of men’s and women’s labor—can leave a long-lasting imprint on cultural norms and gender gaps. For example, the “cotton revolution” in China (1300–1840 CE) increased revenues in the textile industry and the demand for women’s weaving. This led to a range of economic benefits for women and durably changed norms and attitudes toward women. After the cotton revolution, female breadwinning and industrial employment became more common; dowry use declined; and the sex ratio became more balanced, suggesting a weakening of historically male-biased parental preferences (Xue 2016). Following Mao’s economic reforms in the twentieth century, and a boom in the tea industry, women’s relative incomes rose in China’s tea-producing regions because women’s labor was essential for harvesting the export crop. This led to educational gains for all children, improvements in girls’ survival, and less biased sex ratios ([Qian 2008](#)).

A series of papers show how the Neolithic Revolution, and particularly the use of the plow, continue to be correlated with present-day women’s labor force participation, women’s participation in politics, parental preference for boys, and norms guiding socially accepted behavior of women ([Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn 2011](#); [Hansen, Jensen, and Skovsgaard 2015](#)).

The hypothesized mechanism of persistence relies on an internalization of sex-biased historical economic specialization as cultural norms of economic and social behavior, habits, and rules of thumb (similar to the sociological notion of *habitus* developed by, e.g., [Bourdieu 1980](#)). Given sex-based specialization in economic production, further sex-biased technological advances or relative commodity price fluctuations can alter or reinforce the dynamics of gendered economic specialization and gender norms.

Researchers have also examined the long-term legacy of sex-biased demographic shocks, that is, historical events that transform the ratio of men to women. Sex-biased demographic shocks can alter not only sex-specific economic specialization but also the conditions of household bargaining. For example, large-scale conflicts can create a deficit of men. This not only pushes women to substitute for men in the labor force, but also changes the conditions of the marriage market and household dynamics that should benefit the short side of the market. In France, the scarcity of men due to the First World War and its 1.4 million military fatalities initially enabled men to “marry up” ([Abramitzky, Delavande, and Vasconcelos 2011](#)) and generated an upward shift in female labor force participation that has persisted until today ([Gay 2019](#); [Boehnke and Gay 2020](#)). [Teso \(2019\)](#) documents similar long-term consequences on female labor force participation of a different historical shock that also created a deficit of men: the slave trade out of Africa. [Grosjean and Khattar 2019](#) rely on the convict colonization of Australia in the beginning of the nineteenth century to study the long-term effects of a deficit of *women*. They find that historical male-biased sex ratios are associated with lower female labor force participation and a lower share of women in high-ranking economic occupations, and these effects have persisted until the present day. They also find evidence for persistence of a higher bargaining position for women, who still enjoy more hours of leisure in areas that were more

male-biased in the past, despite balanced sex ratios today. In all these cases, long-term persistence is sustained by cultural transmission processes within families and local social interactions that “normalized” a given division of labor between men and women across market activities, household work, and leisure.

A final technological change that has influenced women’s economic position is contraception. By enabling women to delay marriage age and childbirth (Bailey 2006), contraception revolutionized women’s participation in, and attachment to, the labor force ([Goldin and Katz 2002](#); Bailey and Lindo 2017). Greater control over the timing childbirth incentivized women to increase their educational achievement, which in turn enabled them to access highly skilled and previously exclusively male occupations, such as in law and medicine. It is estimated that about a third of women’s professional advancement in the 1970s can be attributed to access to contraception and abortion ([Goldin and Katz 2002](#))—and about 10 percent of the convergence in the gender gap in the 1980s and 1990s to the contraceptive pill alone (Bailey, Hershbein, and Miller 2012). Given medical evidence of a link between hormonal contraception and mental health and the negative consequences of depression on labor market outcomes, the economic gains of the pill might even be underestimated ([Valder 2022](#)).

Most existing work on the relationship between technology, demography, and development has focused on how these processes constrain the choices and opportunities of women, while the constraints that guide the behavior of men have received much less attention in the economics and political science literatures. One exception is Baranov et al. (forthcoming), which establishes the enduring effects of male-biased sex ratios on masculinity norms in Australia. Historically, more male-biased areas saw higher levels of voluntary enlistment in World War I and are still characterized by heightened violence, less acceptance of

homosexuality, higher levels of male (but not female) suicide, and riskier health behavior, including lower take-up of COVID-19 vaccination among men (but not women). The long-term impact of technological and demographic shocks on men, masculinity, and culture is a fruitful area of future research.

Kinship, Social and Political Institutions, and Gender Norms

A rapidly growing area of research examines the endurance and variation in gender gaps as a result of kinship structures, such as inheritance rules and marriage practices.¹⁷ Not all of this work is historical in the sense of focusing on historical outcomes, but much of it does trace how the persistence of institutions related to lineage and inheritance impinge on women's equality and freedom ([Brulé 2020](#)). Lineage and inheritance structures sometimes go through the male line (patrilineal institutions), and sometimes through female group members (matrilineal institutions). Studies in economics and political science show that historically persistent practices of matrilineality are associated with better health and higher educational achievement among children, and greater autonomy for women ([Lowes 2017, 2020](#)), lower fertility ([BenYishay, Grosjean, and Vecci 2017](#)), and a lower, or even reversed, gender gap in engagement in politics and in political preferences over redistributive policy ([Robinson and Gottlieb 2021](#); [Brulé and Gaikwad 2021](#)). Meanwhile, bride price payments are associated with higher opposition to domestic violence and higher self-reported happiness of the wife ([Lowe and Nunn 2017](#)).

This literature illustrates the need to take the broad social structure into account when designing public policy. Preexisting social structures condition behavioral responses to economic incentives. For example, while dowry payments have decreased with economic development in non-caste-based societies, such as Europe, the reverse has been true in caste-based societies. This is explained by the need for dowry payments to adjust for the rising income of the potential

groom ([Anderson 2003](#)). Expansion of educational opportunities in Indonesia and Zambia only improved girls' educational outcomes in communities where husbands' families pay a bride price for the right to marry a daughter. The interpretation of these findings is that bridal payments enable parents to recoup part of their investment at the time of marriage and thus provide an additional monetary incentive for parents to invest in their daughters' education, improving the take-up of school construction programs ([Ashraf et al. 2020](#)). Religious practices can also condition responses to political reform. Inheritance rights granted to widows led to a *rise* in widows' immolation in colonial India, enabling families to recapture the wealth that would have been transferred to widows (Kulkarni 2017), while equal inheritance rights over agricultural land granted to women in the 1980s and 1990s led to an increase in female feticide and child mortality (Bhalotra, Brulé, and Roy 2020).

Political institutions also shape gender norms in a way that can outlive them ([Tudor 2022](#)). The gender-equalizing policies of the former Soviet Union and its satellite states, such as the German Democratic Republic, have shaped social norms durably. Twenty years after German reunification, women in East Germany contribute an equal fraction of total household income, when their Western counterparts only contribute 20 percent of total household income ([Lippman, Georgieff, and Senik 2020](#)). Women who migrated from the former Soviet Union to Israel as infants are much more likely to major in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and math) to systematically avoid study fields leading to “pink collar” jobs, such as education and social work, compared to natives and other migrants. They also display a specific choice of work-life balance reflecting a greater commitment to paid work (Friedman-Sokuler and Senik 2020).

Searching for Gender in Historical Political Economy

As a field of inquiry, HPE finds itself in an exciting moment. Digitization efforts and computing power have made information about the past easier to access and analyze, and a renewed focus in the social sciences on long-term historical processes have created heightened interest in the field's discoveries. For decades, the mere fact of women's economic and political activity in history was not on the radar of most historians or social scientists ([Scott 1986](#)). What is actually a process of erasure—the systematic overlooking of women in historical archives, as well as the overlooking of women's economic activities—became a conclusion, namely, that women were simply not there in any meaningful way or did not engage in meaningful economic activity.¹⁸ More troubling still, when scholars did turn their sights to the study of gender, they were happy to substitute myths for fact. For example, the prominence of “man-the-hunter” myths throughout the twentieth century ([Cartmill 1993](#); [Reyes-García et al. 2020](#)) ignores the fact that gathered food has contributed more than three-quarters of the human diet's caloric intake. The focus on hunting, both a masculine and a masculinized activity, raises the question not so much of who hunted, but rather why so much of the focus of anthropological and ethnographic studies has been on the activity of hunting. As [Goodman et al. \(1985: 1200\)](#) put it, “Hunting is one of those activities which is susceptible through its symbolism to the projection of strongly marked gender roles.”

In closing we suggest that the study of gender in historical political economy has reached the stage where higher-level theorizing and a synthetic integration of disparate literatures are urgently needed. The “add women and stir” approach, which may have taken root because it is less threatening to intellectual hierarchies, will no longer suffice. Instead, theoretical concepts that have already transformed other fields—from the concept of intersectionality, to theories of masculinity and femininity, to the conceptualization of gender as a social construct—need to be

integrated into quantitative lines of inquiry. We therefore end with a call for a new theoretical paradigm to frame the historical political economy of gender. This new paradigm would move past the social scientific habit of conceptualizing the default economic agent as male ([Lundberg 2022a](#); [2022b](#)), would take seriously the origins of masculine cultural norms in social arrangements (Baranov et al. forthcoming), and would push more forcefully to show how the very categories of analysis that are imposed on the past are undermined by the gendered scaffolding on which they rest.

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¹ The theoretical mission echoes Joan [Scott’s \(1986\)](#) famous article “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” which argued that it is not enough to show that women were in the room when history happened (or that the stories of rooms women were in are also important), but instead to show what theories have *missed* by not treating gender as a category of analysis.

² Some economists argue against the reflexive assumption of the default economic agent as male (Lundberg 2022a; 2022b) and consider the role and origins of masculine cultural norms (Baranov et al. forthcoming). As Towns (2021) describes it, critical IR, a subfield of political science, has already taken up the mantle of studying gender, but has yet to produce a large historical literature.

³ There are longer histories of systematic aggregation of human data in China and Prussia, and scholars can locate parish records into the Middle Ages in some places, but this has not yet become widespread or available for large geographic areas.

⁴ See [Chambers \(2016, 78ff.\)](#) for a discussion of human capital theory, which conceives of individuals as similar to firms, and wherein “the rationality of the firm in microeconomic theory simply is rationality *tout court*” (79). In this tradition, Gary Becker is a key figure.

⁵ This typology is adapted from [Bateman and Teele \(2019\)](#).

⁶ See, too, [Giuliano \(2018\)](#) on marital relations, and dowry versus bride price in cultures where women participate in farming or not.

⁷ [BenYishay, Grosjean, and Vecci \(2017\)](#) link the prevalence of matrilineal inheritance and male specialization in fishing to small-scale variation in the quality of the coral reef among communities of the Solomon Islands.

⁸ The introduction of the bow is thought to be associated with a reduction of women’s involvement in hunting compared with spear-throwing, an easier-to-learn and less precise technology that required a larger number of less specialized hunters. Recent archaeological discoveries led to estimation of near-to-gender-equal participation in hunting among big-game hunting societies of the Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene Americas ([Haas et al. 2020](#)).

⁹ Historians have paved the way here. A classic text is [Tilly and Scott \(1987\)](#).

¹⁰ Though, as [Goldin \(1994\)](#) cautions, in the United States, nineteenth-century economic censuses often undercounted women’s economic activity, labeling women “homemakers” even when they were assistants in household trades, producing materials consumed by the household, etc. [Morgan \(2006\)](#) makes a similar point about cross-national data on women’s labor.

¹¹ The economic history of women’s employment has been more thoroughly studied in the United States than in Europe, though [Tilly and Scott \(1987\)](#), which compares France and England, and [Horrell and Humphries \(1995\)](#), which looks at women’s economic activity in England. In the Scandinavian countries, the “takeoff” to industrialization was later. There is

interesting work in this area, showing that relative increases in women's wages spurred the fertility transition in Sweden ([Schultz 1985](#)).

¹² [Eastin and Prakash \(2013\)](#) argue that the relationship is S-shaped, in the sense of a takeoff, followed by a plateau as negative feedback and backlash mount against women.

¹³ The findings that suffrage improved educational attainment in the United States are also robust, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds ([Kose, Kuka, and Shenhav 2021](#)).

¹⁴ With 1920 as the reference point, the extension of the franchise to women implies tariff rates would rise from 8.4 percent to 10.6 percent.

¹⁵ Immediately after a country introduced women's suffrage, spending on collective goods and transfers out of GDP increased by 0.6 to 0.8 percent relative to preexisting trends, with the long-run effect being 3.2 to 3.8 percent.

¹⁶ Educational achievement and attachment to the labor force have become more similar across genders, but gender wage gaps have persisted. Education and experience explained ten percentage points of the average gender wage gap in 1980, but less than three in 2010 ([Blau and Kahn 2017](#)), leaving a larger part of the wage gap unexplained.

¹⁷ See Dyson and Moore (1983) for an early contribution.

¹⁸ There are too many examples of erasure to list, but as an example, the outstanding efforts to categorize civic participation in temperance, unions, and the labor movement in late-nineteenth through mid-twentieth-century Sweden by [Andrae and Lundkvist \(1998\)](#) does not have a single reference to women's activity despite the fact that women were key campaigners for temperance in Sweden, and that major organizations like the Labor Organization kept separate tallies of men's and women's membership on the same pages from which these data were collected.