Social stratification and inequality

Open and closed systems of stratification, life chances, intersectionality, labelling and Marxist theories, how governments, welfare states and NGOs try to reduce inequality, and how migration, ecological issues and globalisation affect inequality between societies.

Social stratification is the way a society ranks people into layers (strata) according to wealth, power and status, like layers of rock. This chapter covers what the layers are, how they affect people's lives, what is done about inequality, and global inequality.

3.1 What is social stratification?

Open and closed societies

	Closed system	Open system
Position decided by	**ascribed status** (birth)	**achieved status** (effort and ability)
Social mobility	little or none	possible: people can move up or down
Example	the **caste system** in India: a person's caste, from birth, decides their occupation and who they can marry	**class system** in many modern societies
Ideal		**meritocracy**: rewards go to the people with talent and effort

A meritocracy rewards talent and hard work. Critics say it is partly a myth: people with wealthy, educated parents start with big advantages.

Key terms:

- **Poverty and wealth**: **absolute poverty** means lacking basic necessities (food, shelter); **relative poverty** means having much less than others in the same society.
- **Power**: the ability to get your own way, even against opposition.
- **Social mobility**: movement between layers: upward, downward, or across; within a lifetime or between generations.
- **Modern slavery**: forced labour, human trafficking and debt bondage that still exist today, showing extreme inequality.

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- **Caste system**: a closed system of hereditary groups, linked to the Hindu religion and strongest in India. Status is ascribed, with strict rules on marriage and occupation. It is illegal to discriminate on caste in India, but caste still affects people's lives.

Life chances

Life chances are a person's opportunities to gain things society values (education, a good job, health, housing, a long life). They are affected by **age, gender, ethnicity and social class**:

Area	Example of inequality
Education	middle-class pupils usually achieve higher grades
Employment	women often paid less (gender pay gap); some ethnic minorities face discrimination in hiring
Health	poorer people are more likely to suffer illness
Housing	the poor live in cheaper, more crowded and less safe housing
Life expectancy	people in richer areas live longer

Intersectionality means that these identities **overlap** and combine. A poor, elderly, ethnic-minority woman may face several disadvantages at once, which is more than adding them up.

Theories of inequality

Labelling theory (interactionist): people are given a **label** by others, and the label can shape their behaviour.

- **Stereotypes** lead to labels ("lazy", "troublemaker").
- A **master status** is a label that overrides all others in how people see you (such as "criminal" or "refugee").
- A **self-fulfilling prophecy** happens when a person **lives up to a label** that was put on them: a pupil labelled "failure" stops trying and then fails.
- **Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968)** found that pupils whose teachers were told they would do well made greater gains, which supports labelling.

Marxism (conflict): society is divided between the **bourgeoisie** (who own the means of production) and the **proletariat** (workers). Inequality is built into **capitalism**:

- **Exploitation**: workers produce more value than they are paid.

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- **Ideological control**: the ruling class spreads ideas (through school, media) that make inequality seem natural.
- **Poverty trap**: low pay and poor opportunities keep people poor.
- **Reserve army of labour**: unemployed people who can be hired cheaply, which keeps wages down and workers frightened of losing their jobs.

3.2 What attempts have been made to reduce social inequalities?

Government action and legislation

Measure	How it reduces inequality
Progressive taxation	richer people pay a **higher percentage** of income in tax
Redistribution through benefits	tax money is paid to people with less (unemployment, child and disability benefits)
Minimum wage	a legal minimum hourly pay
Equal opportunities laws	make discrimination (by sex, race, age, disability) illegal
Other measures	free school meals, subsidised housing, scholarships, quotas

Welfare states

A **welfare state** is a system in which the government protects its citizens' wellbeing. It may provide:

- **free or universal education**
- **unemployment benefits**
- **pensions** for the elderly
- **low-cost housing**
- **free healthcare**
- **universal basic income** (a regular payment to everyone, with no conditions; discussed and trialled in some places)

These improve life chances, especially for the poor, the sick and the old, but they cost a great deal and need high taxes.

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Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

NGOs are independent, non-profit organisations (such as the Red Cross, Oxfam, Edhi Foundation, Médecins Sans Frontières). Globally they work to **reduce poverty**, **provide medical assistance**, **promote business** (micro-loans, training) and **improve education**.

How successful have these attempts been?

View	Criticism
New Right	the welfare state creates an **underclass** and a **dependency culture**: people rely on benefits instead of working; it undermines the family (Charles Murray)
Culture of poverty	poor people develop a **way of life** (fatalism, living for today) that passes down generations and keeps them poor
Marxist	the welfare state does not remove inequality; it makes capitalism more bearable, keeping workers healthy and quiet, while the rich keep their wealth
Feminist	equality laws are not enforced enough, and the welfare state assumes women will provide unpaid care in the family; patriarchy remains
Criticisms of NGOs	depend on donations, may not tackle the causes of poverty, can create dependence, are not accountable to local people

3.3 How has globalisation affected inequalities between societies?

Migration

Immigration is moving **into** a country; **emigration** is moving **out of** one. Reasons:

- **Push factors** (make people leave): poverty, unemployment, war, persecution, natural disasters.
- **Pull factors** (attract people): jobs, higher wages, safety, education, family already there.

Effects on societies:

- **increased cultural diversity** (food, languages, festivals)
- **economic**: migrants fill labour shortages and send **remittances** home, but may put pressure on housing and services; the home country can lose skilled workers (**brain drain**)
- **negative perceptions**: migrants are often stereotyped and blamed for problems, which can lead to prejudice and discrimination

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Global ecological issues

- **Transnational companies (TNCs)** operate in many countries; they can bring jobs and investment but also **exploit cheap labour**, cause **pollution** and move production where regulations are weak.
- **Climate change** and **pollution** affect poorer countries most, though they cause least of the problem.
- **Urbanisation** (growth of cities) can bring jobs but also slums, overcrowding and pollution.

Explanations for global inequality

Explanation	Idea
Marxist	rich capitalist countries and TNCs **exploit** poor countries' labour and resources
Colonialism	European powers took resources and shaped economies for their own benefit, leaving a legacy of dependence and inequality
Feminist	**patriarchy** worldwide: women are paid less, own less land and have less education, so are more likely to be poor

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Describe two ways a government can reduce inequality. Progressive taxation: richer people pay a higher percentage of their income, and the money raised can be spent on public services. A minimum wage: a legal minimum hourly rate that stops employers paying very low wages and raises the incomes of the lowest paid.

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