

# Introduction

Certainly, the bathroom wars are a bizarrely outsize aspect of a serious subject.

Ruth Marcus, “Beyond the Bathroom Wars for Transgender Rights,” *Washington Post*, April 2015

On April 8, 2015, the Obama administration debuted a new, all-gender restroom in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building—the first of its kind within the White House complex. The innovative feature offered a physical counterpart to several other recent updates to policies governing restroom access in federal workplaces, all of which were intended to make the White House more inclusive for staff who might be uncomfortable with more traditional, gender-segregated restroom arrangements. As White House spokesman Jeff Tiller explained in his comments to the press that afternoon, the administration had previously undertaken measures to ensure that employees on the White House grounds were allowed “to use restrooms consistent with their gender identity.”<sup>1</sup> The new gender-neutral space was the next logical step toward inclusivity, as it would offer an additional option for White House guests and staff to use—an option that the president’s senior advisor Valerie Jarrett described in an op-ed for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender-themed magazine *The Advocate* as an “important step forward” in ensuring that everyone entering the Eisenhower Building would feel “safe and fully respected.”<sup>2</sup>

Outside of the federal government, parallel regulatory changes related to employment, gender identity, and restroom access had been unfolding

for many years at the local and state levels—and in spheres other than workplaces alone. In 1999, Iowa governor Tom Vilsack issued his own executive order prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation in state employment, marking the first appearance of the phrase “gender identity” in such a law. Even earlier, in 1993, the Minnesota legislature became the first in the United States to prohibit discrimination in employment, housing, credit, and public accommodations against individuals “having a self-image or identity not traditionally associated with one’s biological maleness or femaleness.”<sup>3</sup> And with respect to restrooms, landmark amendments to the District of Columbia’s 2006 Human Rights Act were among the first in the nation to grant individual citizens “the right to use gender-specific restrooms and other gender-specific facilities . . . consistent with their gender identity or expression” and further mandate that all “single-occupancy restroom facilities” throughout the city would be required to “use gender-neutral signage” moving forward.<sup>4</sup>

But given the Eisenhower Building’s location adjacent to the West Wing of the White House, its history of housing the Departments of State, War, and the Navy, and its current function as host to the majority of offices used by White House staff, the new all-gender restroom functioned as an especially meaningful harbinger of support for transgender rights in the United States. As Valerie Jarrett’s op-ed further explained, the architectural addition was merely one component of a more comprehensive project on the part of the president to “lead by example” and set the standard for the rest of the nation in expanding “the protections of anti-discrimination to apply to the LGBT community.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, *The Advocate* itself described the entrance of the Obama administration into the “national conversation about trans citizens’ access to bathrooms” as one of several “unprecedented” moves that were “affirming of trans citizens,” ranging from the appearance of the word *transgender* in the State of the Union address “for the first time ever” to the pioneering work on the part of the Department of Justice to expand federal protections against sex discrimination to include “antitrans discrimination.”<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the timing of the Obama administration’s announcement of the new all-gender restroom also served a symbolic function, as it coincided with the full activation of Executive Order 13672. Originally signed on

July 21, 2014, the order updated a small handful of presidential directives related to employment discrimination already on the books. First, it added gender identity to the purview of two other executive orders prohibiting discrimination within the federal workforce: those which already protected employees on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, and sexual orientation. Second, it added both sexual orientation and gender identity to a list of parallel protections against workplace discrimination for the specific benefit of federal government contractors. While the addition of gender identity to the order covering federal workers was put into practice effective immediately, the updates for federal contractors required the Labor Department and the Office of Management and Budget to draft and publish a rule for implementation—a process completed as of the all-gender restroom’s debut on April 8.

Yet the tenor of the national conversation about gender and restrooms across the United States in the early 2010s was nowhere near uniformly supportive. Instead, efforts to increase the profile of bathroom-related issues—and transgender rights more broadly—were often met with impassioned opposition. In his remarks to the National Religious Broadcasters Convention in 2015, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee infamously criticized recent legal interventions to ensure restroom access for transgender citizens, calling such efforts “inherently wrong,” “ridiculous,” and a “threat,” going so far as to quip that he wished he “would have found [his] feminine side” in high school in order to “shower with the girls.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in an op-ed following Governor Jerry Brown’s approval of a bill in 2013 that would allow each student enrolled in California public schools “to participate in sex-segregated school programs and activities . . . and use facilities consistent with his or her gender identity, irrespective of the gender listed on the pupil’s records,”<sup>8</sup> Assemblyman Tim Donnelly accused the new law of facilitating “privacy invasion” and “public humiliation” alike, arguing that “the same politicians who want to end discrimination have actually discriminated against the majority of people who are uncomfortable” with such provisions.<sup>9</sup>

In some states and municipalities, such apprehensions motivated lawmakers to introduce legislative counterproposals of their own, ones meant to increase the stringency of gendered prerequisites for accessing workplace and public restrooms rather than reduce or eliminate them. For

instance, in response to Miami-Dade County's addition of the categories "gender identity" and "gender expression" to their human rights ordinance in 2014, state representative Frank Artiles initiated a bill in the Florida House of Representatives for the sake of "public safety."<sup>10</sup> That bill would categorize "knowingly and willfully" entering a "single-sex public facility designated for or restricted to persons of the other sex" as a second-degree misdemeanor.<sup>11</sup> Several months later, state representative Debbie Riddle introduced a pair of even more distinctive proposals to the Texas House of Representatives. The first proposed criminalizing the act of entering a restroom labeled for a gender "that is not the same gender as the individual's gender," and the second aimed to define gender for the sake of access to public locker rooms, showers, and toilets at an unusually detailed level: as "the gender established at the individual's birth or the gender established by the individual's chromosomes."<sup>12</sup>

In fact, such bathroom battles had become so contentious that some political leaders championing transgender rights and activists working toward similar ends distanced their quest for equality from what one *Washington Post* opinion writer called a "frivolous and overheated" obsession with all things restroom-related.<sup>13</sup> When Councilman Tom Quirk introduced a bill in 2012 proposing the addition of gender identity and sexual orientation to Baltimore County's antidiscrimination statutes, he expressed frustration that opponents of his proposal focused on "everything except for what this bill is about." His goal, he emphatically clarified, was to enact "an anti-discrimination bill," "not a bathroom bill."<sup>14</sup> And as Chad Griffen, president of the lesbian and gay civil rights organization Human Rights Campaign, and Mara Kiesling, executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, emphasized in an op-ed of their own in 2015, the continued politicization of restrooms in debates about legal protections related to gender identity was a "real tragedy" that "took time and energy away" from combating more pressing aspects of "ignorance, rejection, and discrimination" directed toward transgender people throughout the United States.<sup>15</sup>

But *are* bathrooms truly a distraction from real social problems? Or might there be something more serious underlying the deluge of public attention they've recently received?

## WHY STUDY BATHROOMS?

As it turns out, public restrooms are perennial lightning rods for cultural conflict in the United States—and they have been for nearly two centuries. From the middle of the nineteenth century, when unprecedented population growth prompted bitter partisan battles over the necessity of the very first instances of public plumbing, through the first two decades of the twenty-first century, when debates like those I trace above took place, bathrooms have often been a nexus of political crossfire. Such a reality may seem odd at first blush. After all, bathrooms are spaces in which we routinely negotiate one of the basest, most persistently taboo aspects of the human experience: dealing with the effluvia produced at the margins of the body. But as anthropologist Mary Douglas argues in *Purity and Danger*, efforts to distance ourselves from that which is considered “unclean” are not an ingrained, universal human response to the presence of a hygienic breach. Instead, our beliefs about “dirty” things like excretion and “dirty” spaces like bathrooms do important cultural work: work aimed at bringing cohesion and clarity to a world—and a social system—that is, as Douglas puts it, “inherently untidy.”<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, when political disagreements erupt over public restrooms, what is ultimately at stake are beliefs about the moral order: what we, as a society, collectively value, collectively believe we owe one another, and collectively agree counts as upstanding social behavior. Bathrooms, in this sense, do much more than mediate what literally counts as clean and what literally counts as dirty. They are an important means through which individual citizens and social groups alike accomplish what cultural sociologists call *boundary work*: the separation of people, objects, spaces, and even actions into distinctive categories based on their perceived similarities and differences. Far from being taboo social spaces or an inconsequential dimension of our everyday lives, then, public restrooms serve several symbolic functions. Their availability implicitly suggests which bodies, identities, and communities are expected to be present in the public spaces in which they are installed. Obstacles to their entrances likewise signal which bodies, identities, and communities are not expected or welcome. And where they are separated into multiple spaces, each physically cordoned

from one or more others, they communicate which bodies, identities, and communities should not intermingle behind closed doors.

Restrooms are thus crucial sites through which categorical inequalities—that is, those based on group differences like race, disability, or social class—have long been maintained and magnified in the United States. Historians Patricia Cooper and Ruth Oldenziel, for instance, have documented how women of color entering American workplaces during World War II were not segregated from their white counterparts on shop floors. Rather, workplace bathrooms were the sites where such “cherished classifications” were continually enforced and affirmed.<sup>17</sup> More recently, in his reflections on doing ethnographic research in New York City around the turn of the twenty-first century, sociologist Mitch Duneier recounted his surprise at realizing that he—“an upper-middle-class white male”—was able to access restrooms in fast food establishments in Greenwich Village while his “poor and black” research subjects were systematically excluded from such spaces.<sup>18</sup> Even today, the National Council on Disability reports that laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 have yielded frustratingly “inconsistent” changes to restroom access and availability for people with disabilities—leaving it difficult for many to carry out the simplest of daily activities.<sup>19</sup>

Yet the social division most central to the design and construction of American public restrooms is, unquestionably, gender. As you likely experienced firsthand the last time you used a public toilet, gender differences abound in bathroom spaces. Men’s and women’s rooms are often located in separate hallways or opposite corners of a building—sometimes, even occupying space on different floors. They feature distinctive signs and symbols on their doors; they contain markedly different fixtures behind those doors. Norms of etiquette vary drastically between those two kinds of spaces, too, with expectations of silence and distance typical in the men’s room and norms of sociality more acceptable within the women’s. Such distinctions are so commonplace, so taken for granted, that we might be tempted to think of them as a logical response to inherent bodily and behavioral differences between women and men. But, just as Mary Douglas points out that disgust is less a universal human reflex meant to keep our bodies safe from harm and more an elaborate set of cultural constructions intended to protect our moral beliefs, those gender differences are, likewise, more social than biological.

Psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan describes such realities as “the laws of urinary segregation”: that is, the cultural means through which the basic human need to eliminate waste becomes a site of constructed gender difference that appears natural and inevitable.<sup>20</sup> And while we might be further tempted to dismiss Lacan’s remarks as a poststructuralist intellectual pretension, ample historical evidence reveals that gender separation in American public restrooms has never been universal or final. Many of the very first public toilets installed on urban street corners in the middle of the nineteenth century—built to discourage men from urinating in public and to accommodate women pursuing commerce and employment outside the home—were designed to serve users of all genders. Nearly a century later, before the rise of late-twentieth-century federal laws that marked restrooms as litigable nexuses of gender discrimination, ungendered restrooms were already commonplace in postwar factories and commercial establishments. And today, as the start of this introduction observes, a new wave of ungendered restrooms has emerged—as various municipalities, states, and even the federal government have begun to undo or rescind public policies requiring that only certain kinds of gendered people with certain kinds of gendered bodies be admitted to certain kinds of gendered restroom spaces.<sup>21</sup>

In short, the increased availability of “gender-neutral,” “gender-inclusive,” and “all-gender” restrooms in today’s colleges and universities, transit centers, shopping malls, restaurants, museums, libraries, and government offices like the Eisenhower Executive Office Building is far from evidence of a novel restroom revolution. Rather, the question of whether to segregate public restrooms by gender in the United States has been a surprisingly open one. And that openness has allowed behind-the-scenes organizational deliberations about the design and construction of public toileting spaces to be critical sites for working out what gender is—and what it means—in the first place.

#### WHY BATTLE BATHROOMS?

*Bathroom Battlegrounds* takes the most recent batch of those organizational deliberations as one of its departure points, exploring efforts over

the last twenty-five years to design and construct ungendered restrooms in a range of municipal, cultural, and educational organizations across the United States. I center the book on those recent transformations not just because of their timeliness but also because of their distinctive *institutionalization*. That is, only in recent years have there been sustained efforts on the part of individual citizens, bureaucratic entities, and social movements to encourage—or require—the addition of gender-neutral restrooms to buildings as a matter of formal policy.

However, before taking up the emergent issue of gender-inclusive restrooms, I first look backward in history to the book's other departure point: tracing the origins of today's dominant paradigm of gender separation. This is for two reasons. First, to make sense of the increasing imbrication of gender-neutral restrooms in present-day organizations, we first need to understand what, exactly, that new paradigm is striving to overcome. Second, by considering the history through which gendered restrooms became so thoroughly institutionalized and the recent institutionalization of ungendered alternatives in the same analysis, I offer a more varied corpus of restroom-related evidence than either a historical or a contemporary approach alone would yield. That variance, in turn, allows me to draw broader conclusions about where, when, how, and why organizational discourses about restroom design and construction concatenate, producing durable consequences for the social organization of gender.

To that end, the historical portion of *Bathroom Battlegrounds* compiles published scholarship, archival documents related to architectural design, and written opinions from the federal courts to trace the institutional history of gender separation in American public restrooms. As I will show, sweeping cultural, scientific, and technological advancements led to the rise of the indoor water closet between the middle of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth, and the installation of the very first public comfort stations for urban citizens soon followed. Yet the most pervasive adoption of such engineering marvels in nondomestic space did not unfold on city streets. Rather, it occurred among middle- and upper-class leisure establishments in major American cities, which themselves reflected the pervasive gender segregation of nineteenth-century social life. As the availability of public restrooms gradually spread to other commercial and civic spaces, that dominant model of separate men's and



women's restrooms persisted, making the influence of deep-seated cultural beliefs about gendered bodies only an oblique influence on the initial development of restroom gender segregation.

That indirect influence, however, has not kept gender politics from being a potent influence on restroom design, construction, and regulation across the United States. On the contrary, from the closing years of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, novel scientific claims about women's bodies and entrenched moral beliefs about sexual propriety led elected officials to enact the first laws mandating the separation of men's and women's restrooms in work, educational, and civic spaces. Then, as public health and architecture professionals sought legitimacy for their early-twentieth-century work to improve public plumbing, they drew upon appeals to scientific authority and social progress to cement gender separation as the public restroom status quo. By the second half of the twentieth century, courts of law added to that ideological infiltration, drawing on cultural assumptions about embodied gender difference, heterosexuality, and privacy to mandate that restrooms ought to be separate *and* equal for men and for women. Thus, through a series of interconnected institutional processes, a particular constellation of cultural ideologies about gender, sexuality, and social status seeped into building codes and design standards; into interlocking layers of local, state, and federal law; and perhaps most durably of all, into the physical composition of buildings.

The contemporary portion of this book then uses in-depth interviews with respondents from a wide range of municipal, cultural, and educational organizations to explore the effects of that history on the increasing popularity of ungendered restrooms in recent years. As I will show, the "bathroom battle" at hand for such organizations has rarely been the kind of polemical culture war between traditional and progressive values seen in the mass media over the last decade, including the journalistic snippets I quote in the preface to this introduction. Instead, the decision makers I interviewed tend to agree that supporting gender and sexual minorities, families with children or aging relatives of all genders, and people with disabilities by providing ungendered restroom spaces is a desirable, even obvious, choice. The problem, then, has not been ideology but inertia—that is, the tenacity of the gender-segregated architectural and legal infrastructure bequeathed to an organization from the past. Thus, while their ideal vision of restroom

arrangements might include at least one gender-neutral space, a complex web of institutional and material obstacles often stood between each respondent and their ability to quickly—or comprehensively—overcome absolute gender separation in their present-day restrooms.

To navigate that labyrinth, my respondents discovered that one resource above all others was key to engendering restroom-related change: the power of conversation. Whether they worked in a local public library, a nationally renowned museum, or a flagship state university, they recognized that connecting the reduction (or removal) of gender-separated restrooms to important organizational goals—such as promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion—would allow them to garner support for local restroom renovations and, by extension, to make the boons of gender-inclusive restrooms more widely known. But as my respondents worked to frame even the smallest of infrastructural updates as evidence of their organizations' progressive commitments, they did more than describe such changes as beneficial for the publics they serve. They also positioned ungendered restrooms as a valuable reputational advantage—one that could signal to their upper- and upper-middle-class patrons that their particular organization is sufficiently forward thinking, morally upstanding, and above all, status laden enough to be on the cutting edge of institutional innovation in the twenty-first century. Consequently, even as they ameliorate certain kinds of categorical inequality—by creating more utile public spaces for gender and sexual minorities, individuals with disabilities, postmodern families, and beyond—today's ungendered restrooms have become a surprising means of reinforcing multiple systems of cultural power and privilege.

Across the nearly two-hundred-year history of American public restrooms it documents, then, *Bathroom Battlegrounds* reveals how beliefs about gender difference have rarely been the most salient determinant of how organizations configure their restrooms—at least in isolation. While the organizations I study have negotiated gender ideologies in many ways, shapes, and forms, they have also traversed several other forms of cultural classification as they have done so. These include the physical boundaries built into architectural design and infrastructure, moral boundaries associated with sex and sexuality, and above all, social boundaries related to class and status. In fact, even when the organizations and individuals I study have striven to optimize bureaucratic efficiency, respond to evolving com-

munity values, or ensure access for as many users as possible, I find that they have consistently reinforced existing social hierarchies through their seemingly innocuous plumbing choices—making public restrooms neither as marginal nor as unimportant as they might seem.

Readers interested in the intellectual foundations of that overarching argument should continue reading through the next two sections of this introduction. They situate my research within a broader set of theoretical frameworks within the sociology of gender and the sociology of organizations. Readers who would prefer to dive right into the history of gender separation in restrooms or the recent rise of ungendered alternatives, however, should fast-forward to the final section of this introduction, “A Promise and a Plan,” for guidance on how to proceed through the chapters that follow.

#### A POST-GENDER SOCIETY?

In many respects, the early years of the twenty-first century might seem like a puzzling time for a sociological project like this to focus on gender. After all, popular accounts and social-scientific research alike suggest that the United States is rapidly evolving into a “post-gender” society—and in ways that go far beyond the wonderful world of washrooms. Over the course of the twentieth century, record numbers of women in the United States joined the full-time, paid American workforce; women’s wages from that paid work increased at a faster rate than did men’s wages; and young women came to outpace young men on a wide range of measures related to educational achievement—from reading skills in childhood to the level of rigor of high school coursework to their collective receipt of bachelor’s and master’s degrees.<sup>22</sup> Alongside such dramatic shifts, gender segregation in a variety of academic, institutional, and physical spheres has likewise eroded. In colleges and universities, for instance, coeducation grew into the dominant model of higher education, and in the paid workforce, gender integration has increased at all levels of employment.<sup>23</sup> Such trends have also continued into the early years of the twenty-first century. The Department of Defense began integrating women into combat positions and removed gender restrictions from all military positions in

the mid-2010s, and today, government agencies like the United States Agency for International Development now incorporate “gender analysis” into their strategic planning to identify when and how institutionalized gender segregation affects their outreach work around the globe.<sup>24</sup>

Yet sociologists of gender tend to emphasize the resilience of gender-related inequalities amid such progress toward a more egalitarian future. In the world of work, women remain unequally distributed across occupational categories and positions; female workers are penalized more harshly than their male counterparts when they take time away from work to care for children or other family members; and “care work”—that is, paid positions typically filled by women that involve teaching, counseling, health services, supervising children, or other forms of emotional labor—pays less than work in other fields, even when accounting for educational attainment and employment experience.<sup>25</sup> In education, men still dominate the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics; in fact, even where women have made substantial inroads in STEM, they have done so in areas such as the biological and chemical sciences rather than fields perceived to be more lucrative or math-intensive, such as computer science and physics.<sup>26</sup> And beyond those general trends, the physical separation of women and men persists in many settings, too—often producing novel gender inequalities, such as the awkward moment faced by presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in December 2015 when a lengthy “schlep” to the women’s restroom caused a delay in her return to the stage from a break for a televised Democratic debate.<sup>27</sup>

Sociological theory most often attributes such immobility to *gender ideologies*: that is, morally charged beliefs about what it means to be a man or a woman, what makes men and women different from one another, and what the consequences of those differences are—or ought to be. In fact, since feminist social science coalesced into a distinctive intellectual project in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the field’s central projects has been to conceptualize gender as a fundamentally cultural force. Pushing against the then-conventional understanding that gender differences were a simple consequence of embodied biological difference, scholars like anthropologist Gayle Rubin argued for the analytic separation of *sex* from *gender*, defining the former as “biological raw material” and the latter as “a set of” decidedly cultural “arrangements by which” that bodily

foundation “is shaped by human, social intervention.”<sup>28</sup> In the nascent sociology of gender, that paradigm shift manifested as research on the allocation of men and women to different social roles. Roles, such thinking went, carry with them expectations about how we should behave, what we should value, who we should aspire to become, and how we should experience our innermost thoughts and emotions.<sup>29</sup> Such insights thus laid critical intellectual groundwork for recognizing men’s and women’s different experiences—and differential levels of social status—within schools, labor markets, and the family as culturally constructed differences rather than biologically mandated ones.

In the years that followed, the cultural foundations of the gender order occupied an even brighter spotlight as sociologists began to theorize gender as, in the words of Candace West and Don Zimmerman, wholly “the product of social doings of some sort.”<sup>30</sup> Rather than describing gender as a coercive set of roles foisted upon unsuspecting individuals, gender scholars in the 1980s and 1990s began to advance an understanding of gender as an agentic, interactionally achieved process.<sup>31</sup> In other words, to return to West and Zimmerman’s language, gender became something that we “do” rather than something that we “are.” On the one hand, that approach marked a tremendous revolution in the sociology of gender: it launched a new understanding of gendered behavior as connected to local context, contingent on the active participation of individual social actors, and always subject to change. On the other hand, however, gender’s surprisingly fluid and flexible character did not make it infinitely open-ended. Whether sociologists emphasized the interactional risks of deviating from gendered expectations, the intersectional influence of race and class on gendered life outcomes, or the ubiquitous cultural valuation of masculinity over femininity, they consistently observed that gendered actions and interactions tended to reinforce the status quo of gender inequality—often in ways subtler (and therefore more insidious) than overt discrimination alone would produce.<sup>32</sup> Truly understanding gender, therefore, required equal attention to its everyday dimensions and its structural character alike.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, sociologists had thus firmly established *that* gender is a multilayered cultural phenomenon. They subsequently moved toward identifying *when* and *how* gender ideologies act

on people—and, conversely, how people might be able to change those ideologies and the institutions they sustained. For leading feminist theorists in the first decade of the twenty-first century, including Patricia Yancey Martin and Barbara Risman, this meant exhorting social scientists to attend more fully to the interplay among multiple layers of sociological analysis. The former wrote about gender’s “multiple features—ideology, practices, constraints, conflicts, [and] power” in order to “affirm its complexities and multifacetedness”; the latter issued reminders that gender is “deeply embedded as a basis for stratification not just in our personalities, our cultural rules, or institutions but in all these, and in complicated ways.”<sup>33</sup> Such calls have been met with a renaissance of “middle-range”<sup>34</sup> empirical research projects in recent years, which have sought to capture the unique nuances of gendered practices in a specific geographic locale or institutional setting while simultaneously offering a generalizable account of how gender works across such spatial or structural differences.<sup>35</sup> All in all, then, five decades of intellectual development have paved the way to an understanding of gender as never fixed, sometimes contradictory, and always evolving.

But as complex and multifaceted as that framework has become, sociological research on gender often remains limited by a much less complex and multifaceted framework for describing the meso level of analysis—that is, the level of *organizations*. Often, theorists framing gender as an “institution” or as a “structure” collapse social forces as diverse as media messaging, legal regulations, and organizational policies into one equivalent package—despite the reality that those forces are themselves mutually influential and sometimes beholden to one another in multiple respects.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, although middle-range empirical studies have come a long way from role theory’s presumption that workplaces and family structures are endlessly coercive, today’s gender scholars often treat gendered organizations as much less vibrant than the rainbow of gendered individuals and gendered interactions that unfold within them.<sup>37</sup> Now, of course, effective theory construction in the social sciences does, by definition, require the elision of enough nuance to reach a generally applicable abstraction.<sup>38</sup> And certainly, giving empirical primacy to on-the-ground gendered practice is a powerful analytic choice—because thick, attentive description of everyday social action can, in and of itself, reveal how

diverse and dynamic gender truly is.<sup>39</sup> Yet, without a full-fledged account of how formal organizations operate amid and among those practices, sociological theories of gender cannot fully explain when and how gender ideologies reinforce—and, at times, transform—the gender order.

#### TOWARD A RELATIONAL THEORY OF GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS

Of course, the simple observation that organizations matter is not a novel contribution to the sociology of gender. In fact, organizations have been a recurring motif in the fabric of the social-scientific study of gender for over forty years, especially for scholars seeking to understand the gendered organization of work. As far back as Rosabeth Moss Kanter's path-breaking *Men and Women of the Corporation*, originally published in 1977, sociologists have studied how the structure of an organization itself can beget certain forms of gendered behavior—so much so that bureaucratic policy and procedure can supersede psychological traits or socialized learning in determining how men and women act in the workplace.<sup>40</sup> That basic principle made an even more profound intellectual splash in 1990 with Joan Acker's pioneering article "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations." Challenging the notion that organizations themselves are gender-neutral entities, Acker argued that gendered assumptions—such as the implicit expectation that workers have no demands on their attention at home, that they think in ways that are unfailingly rational and calculating, and that they value the organization before all else—permeate contemporary bureaucracy.<sup>41</sup> And while the specifics of that "gendering" process vary across institutional fields and geographic boundaries, ample sociological evidence since then has exposed the continued imbrication of gender distinctions in routinized—and often unnoticed or invisible—aspects of everyday organizational functioning.<sup>42</sup>

Today, studies of the gendered organization continue to extend Kanter's and Acker's foundational work in a dazzling array of new directions. Some sociologists take an intersectional approach to the gendered organization, finding that the "ideal worker" imagined by organizational policies and procedures is not only male but also white, middle-to-upper class, and

heterosexual.<sup>43</sup> Others seek out the conditions necessary to engender meaningful institutional change, highlighting how, for instance, the mere presence of women in positions of managerial authority can help ameliorate gender-related inequalities throughout an organization.<sup>44</sup> And yet others have moved away from the most commonly studied type of formal organization in sociology, the workplace, and toward studying the processes through which gender and bureaucratic structures entwine to shape gendered identities and gendered practices beyond labor markets alone.<sup>45</sup> But whether they focus on work, medicine, law, or another social sphere altogether, such efforts almost always shine an analytic spotlight on the policies and practices that create (and re-create) the gender order *within* an organization. As such, the myriad cultural and social forces that operate *across* such bureaucratic entities—and the broader institutional fields of which they are a part—remain far less frequently accounted for within sociological takes on the gendered organization.

In contrast, for organizational theorists working outside the realm of gender, no organization is an island. Although Max Weber canonically theorized bureaucracy in the early twentieth century as a rational enterprise through which organizations independently strive to optimize their own efficiency,<sup>46</sup> multiple sociological developments since then have revealed the fundamental interdependence of organizations.<sup>47</sup> One such development, organizational ecology, contends that organizations influence one another in much the same way that a population of organisms within a shared ecosystem would. Variation in organizational form and behavior emerges (both by chance and by design), struggle ensues between those different organizational strategies, and certain strategies survive while others become extinct.<sup>48</sup> Another major thread, neo-institutional theory, attributes organizational behavior less to conflict over scarce resources and more to the construction of shared meaning within an organization's broader environment. For scholars leveraging that more cultural framework, shared meanings can emerge from common legal constraints, from common professional personnel, and from common uncertainties about how best to act—all of which induce comparable organizations to act and to structure themselves in ways that are extraordinarily homogeneous.<sup>49</sup> But whether organizational theorists emphasize competition or culture, their intellectual legacy has been a *relational*