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Gender norms and stereotypes: a survey of concepts, research and issues about change

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this paper

Since the first World Conference on Women in 1975 that ultimately led to the Beijing Declaration of 1995, there have been important gains for women and girls around the world. There have been advances in literacy, formal education, life expectancy, workforce participation, and access to some professions.

These decades have also seen new forms of misogyny, continued domestic violence, unabated rape, casualization of women's labour, and reassertions of masculine authority. Women are now more visible in politics, though distinctly a minority in policymaking levels of government. Women are still almost completely excluded from the top levels of transnational corporate management, religious authority, control of technoscience and military power.

In thinking about the norms and stereotypes that influence gender outcomes, therefore, we are dealing with a complex terrain and turbulent processes of change. Careful thinking and examination of evidence are necessary.

After noting the major policy documents that have raised issues about norms, this paper discusses the leading concepts in this field. It then considers evidence about how norms and stereotypes are materialized in everyday life, in five specific areas: media, education, employment, agriculture and public life. It then turns to evidence and analysis about how gender norms and stereotypes get reproduced or sustained by social processes. Finally it turns to the question of how gender norms and images change, and implications for strategies of change. The paper ends with an appendix on problems of method in studying gender norms transnationally.

1.2 Norms and stereotypes in UN documents on gender equality

The Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, identifies normative problems principally in two of its articles. Under Article 5 (a), parties agree to take measures:

To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.

In Article 10, concerned with education, clause (c) provides for:

The elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods.

Gender norms and stereotyping are not explicitly referenced in the 1995 Beijing Declaration. However, ‘stereotyping of women and inequality in women’s access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media’ are one of 12 ‘Critical Areas of Concern’ outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action.¹

Changing gender norms and challenging stereotypes is discussed in a number of policy areas identified in the Beijing Platform for Action. Educational contexts and materials are a key site for change. Article 72 outlines an objective to create educational environments that encourage full participation of women and men, girls and boys, alongside resources that promote non-stereotypes images of women and men. Elsewhere in the Platform, the issue of gender-based violence is recognized as something to tackle through education. States and responsible government agencies are called to take appropriate measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women, particularly in the field of education to modify practices based on stereotypes roles for men and women.² Government, the private sector and NGOs are also encouraged to design educational media and school programmes to raise awareness about non-stereotyped roles for men and women within the family and workplace.³

The media is also a major focus of efforts to change gender norms and stereotypes that foster inequality. States, the private sector and civil society organisations are all encouraged to raise awareness about the media’s responsibility to promote non-stereotypes images of women and men. Guidelines for content, and efforts to inform the public about the causes and effects of gender-based violence are key suggestions for change.⁴

Strategic objective J.2 is to ‘Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media’. The means of doing this outlined in points 243 and 244 include: encouraging media organizations to develop programs for action and codes of conduct; encourage gender-sensitive training for media professionals; encourage media to refrain from presenting women as inferior or as sexual objects (as opposed to presenting women as ‘creative human beings’); promote the idea that sexist stereotypes are gender discriminatory; take effective measures ‘including appropriate legislation against pornography and the projection of violence against women and children in the media.’ At another point, the Platform recommends increased participation of women in decision-making about media regulation.⁵

Gender bias and health policies and programmes that perpetuate gender stereotypes are also recognized as important.⁶ Governments, civil society, and the private sector are encouraged to ‘promote norms and practices that eliminate discrimination against women and encourage both women and men to take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behavior.’⁷

¹ (UN, 1995)

² Article 124. (k) Strategic Objective D. 1.

³ Article 180. (b) Strategic Objective F. 6.

⁴ Article 124. (j) Strategic Objective D.1.

⁵ Article 241. (d) Strategic Objective J.1.

⁶ Article 90 Strategic Objective B.6.

⁷ Article 107 (d) Strategic Objective C.2.

More recently in 2011, UN Women drew up a strategic plan.⁸ The Plan establishes the importance of normative change amongst a range of other crucial targets of the campaign for global gender equality. The strategic goals of the organization are to: a) increase women's leadership and political participation; b) increase economic empowerment and opportunities; c) prevent violence against women and girls; d) increase women's leadership in peace, security and humanitarian responses; e) strengthen the responsiveness of plans and budgets to gender equality at all levels; and f) create normative change.

The last goal in full is to create

... a comprehensive set of global norms, policies and standards on gender equality and women's empowerment is in place that is dynamic, responds to new and emerging issues, challenges and opportunities and provides a firm basis for action by Governments and other stakeholders at all levels.

These statements, over more than thirty years, show a continuing concern with the normative realm as a basis of gender inequality in a variety of fields, a rejection of stereotyped images and understandings of women and men, and a concern with promoting normative change towards equality. It is significant that these documents do not treat normative issues in isolation, but in the context of other dimensions of gender relations and the empowerment of women.

Policy documents are naturally concerned with promoting action rather than reflecting on concepts or reviewing research. Reflection is, however, required in the long run to make policy effective, and this paper hopes to clarify some of the problems, and show promising directions, for the policy realm just outlined.

2. Concepts

2.1 Gender

Though 'gender' remains an undefined term in most policy discussions of norms and stereotypes, it is important to consider its meaning before we examine gender norms and stereotypes. The common-sense classification of people into 'women' and 'men' is part of the meaning, but these terms do not float free. They imply a relation, and the nature of that relation has been extensively scrutinized over the last forty years.

The feminist researchers who launched these discussions several decades ago saw that gender relations involve social power. Some thinkers emphasised that power relations were enforced by violence.⁹ Others emphasised the social norms that define appropriate behavior for women and men. The term "sex role" (later, "gender role") came into widespread use for this idea.¹⁰ Boys and girls were thought to be socialized into restrictive roles as they grew up. The

⁸ (UNW, 2011)

⁹ (Saffioti, 1976, 2004)

¹⁰ (Chafetz, 1978)

pioneering Australian report *Girls, School and Society* from 1975 was a classic of this approach.¹¹

These analyses at first named only two categories, men and women, and assumed a gulf of difference between them. Several trends demanded a more complex view. There are important differences *within* the categories of “men” and “women”, especially differences of race, class, and sexuality. Psychological research found only minor differences between women and men as groups, apparently at odds with socioeconomic research that found major differences between women’s and men’s social situations.¹² In the 1990s the term “intersectionality” came into widespread use.¹³ In this concept, gender inequalities are seen as criss-crossing inequalities of class, race, sexuality, disability, age, etc., to create a grid of differing social situations.

During the 1980s and 1990s, what had been a minor discussion of the “male role” grew into an international research field. Social researchers found multiple forms of masculinity, and showed that gender hierarchies exist among men, as well as between men and women. From this time on, “gender studies” included studies of men and masculinities. A growing policy interest in men and boys was reflected in the 2004 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.¹⁴

The rise of post-structuralist ideas led to a view of gender as an identity, or subject position, defined within a normative social discourse that powerfully shapes the way individual people think about themselves. A particularly influential argument held that gender identities do not express an underlying essence (e.g. a biological condition) but are brought into existence by the very actions that exemplify gender.¹⁵ This implies that gender identities are inherently open to change, and in the aftermath the idea of an underlying “fluidity” of gender has become widespread in cultural studies.

Researchers in the social sciences, however, developed a view of gender as a multi-dimensional social structure.¹⁶ This approach brought economics, the state, and institutions to the centre of thinking about gender. Studies of organizations – corporations, armies, schools, health systems – generally showed permanence, not fluidity, in gender arrangements. At the same time, philosophers have re-emphasised the body, rather than discourse, as the point of reference for gender, and a new feminist materialism has been increasingly influential.¹⁷ These understandings of the nature of gender have mostly been developed in the global North. Stereotyped Northern views of ‘third world women’ have been powerfully criticized,¹⁸ and these critiques have been backed by impressive growth of gender research around the global South. This has changed the scope of understandings of gender. For instance, land

¹¹ (Australian Schools Commission, 1975)

¹² (Hyde, 2005)

¹³ (Crenshaw, 1991)

¹⁴ (Lang et al., 2008)

¹⁵ (Butler, 1999)

¹⁶ (Connell, 1987; Walby, 1997)

¹⁷ (Coole et al., 2010; Grosz, 1994)

¹⁸ (Mohanty, 1991; Moreton-Robinson, 2000)

rights and women's agricultural work are now recognized as key issues for gender analysis in contexts of economic development.¹⁹ Concepts such as the "coloniality of gender" – emphasising how modern gender patterns have been shaped by global imperialism and postcolonial world inequalities – are now under discussion.²⁰ Social movements among indigenous women, for instance women from Chiapas, have questioned the models of gender that come from the global North and from the experience of urban women. These interventions have shown the need for multiple approaches to gender, and at the same time the need for gender-informed questioning of tradition.²¹

This paper seeks to understand gender in the light of these advances in knowledge and practice. The paper treats gender as a structure of relations that organise individual and collective action. Through these relations, reproductive bodies (male and female) become part of social life, as the 'men' and 'women' of our everyday experience. Gender is multidimensional, as will be seen throughout this report. Gender relations are enacted in everyday life, often in very fine details of conduct and speech; and also form a large-scale structure that organizes economies, states, and communication.²² Gender is both symbolic and material; it is revealed in the uneven division of labour and resources between women and men, and in the stereotyped representations which ascribe difference in ability, desires, behaviour and traits to men and women.²³

2.2 Norms

To speak of "norms" is to enter the realm of meaning, interpretation and shared purpose in human life. We also speak of values, attitudes, preferences, rules, laws, beliefs, conventions, biases, assumptions, ideologies, traditions, customs, culture – the term 'norms' can refer to all these ideas. Generally speaking, norms specify what should or should not be done. Gender norms can be briefly defined as the beliefs and rules, in a given community or institution, about the proper behaviour of men and women.

However, a "norm" is often assumed to be what is *most common* in a particular community, rather than what is *most admired*. To the statistician, a norm is a measure of central tendency, an average or a mode, indicating what the largest number of people actually do. To the moralist, a norm is what people ideally ought to do. These may differ, so it is useful to distinguish norm-as-average from norm-as-ideal.

A norm as ideal may be a generalized exhortation, for instance: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself",²⁴ – one of whose corollaries is rejection of gender prejudice and gender-based violence. Norm as ideal may also be a formal law, which is an injunction, framed by the state, with penalties for non-fulfilment. The Universal Declaration of Human

¹⁹ (Agarwal, 1994, 2003a)

²⁰ (Bakare-Yusuf, 2004; Lugones, 2008; Oyéwùmí, 1997)

²¹ (Castillo, 2001)

²² (Connell, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987)

²³ (Agarwal, 1997)

²⁴ Mark xii, 31, in the Christian Bible. Jesus emphasises that this is one of the two greatest commandments.

Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women are in a zone somewhere between exhortation and law, but they are unquestionably statements of gender norms-as-ideals.

Another important distinction concerns where the norms are located. Attitudes, preferences, or values may reside in the consciousness of an individual. Economists who try to calculate preference schedules, or feed questionable definitions of utility into calculations of value, are treating norms this way. Reform programmes which encourage more gender-equal attitudes in a classroom of school children, or run media campaigns to persuade men against gender-based violence, are also understanding norms this way.

But rules, laws, customs and ideologies, though known to individuals, are more fundamentally properties of a community, society or organization, i.e. features of a collective life. Gender norms may be embedded in the promotion rules of a government department, in a television station's definition of what information counts as "news", or an advertising company's habitual imagery of fashionable women. The implicit gender norms of institutions are an important feature of modern gender orders (see section 3 below).

When examining research and practical experience, it soon becomes clear that norms are often a realm of debate, dissent and sometimes contradiction. Even with very broadly framed norms-as-ideals, it is rare for every member of a society to share the same beliefs. Even in an apparently homogeneous community, a norm-as-average may conceal a wide dispersion of behaviours. Many modern communities are far from homogeneous, as research on intersectionality and multiculturalism shows. At a deeper level of investigation, norms in the sense of individual beliefs are complex, often inconsistent, and sometimes contradictory. Emotions can contradict principles, attachments are ambivalent (to use the psychoanalytic term), and contradictory views can be held side by side.

Many discussions of reform treat gender norms and traditions as barriers to equality. That is, they treat norms only in their negative sense. But norms can also be positive, for instance stating values of equality, respect or nonviolence. We will call such norms *gender-equality norms*. These too may be individual or collective, ideal or average, and they often co-exist with norms of inequality. It is important that research should document gender-equality norms. In gender-reform practice, calling attention to such norms may be a very effective form of advocacy.

A very important point is that norms do change. There is abundant historical evidence for this, and it is true both of norm-as-average and norm-as-ideal. Even when a norm is expressed as an unchanging commandment (e.g. "Love thy neighbour as thyself"), specific interpretations of the principle are needed in the changing circumstances of history. Debates occur; the conditions producing norms change; the terms in which they are expressed change (see section 5 below). The policy documents cited in section 1.2, that urge normative change in favour of gender equality, are entirely justified in their expectation that change can happen.

Contemporary research on norms is abundant, but uneven in quality and varied in method. The complexity of the field makes this in many ways difficult to research, especially when an attempt is made to research gender norms cross-culturally or transnationally. Terms such as 'gender' do not translate exactly from one language to another. What is regarded as equitable may vary between cultures and social groups, and from one time to another. And the research methods themselves may embed limiting or problematic views of the issues.

This applies to the research methodology that has become very influential in the last two decades, the quantitative international survey. In Appendix 1, this report discusses the main problems of method in research on gender norms, with a focus on recent survey projects and their interpretation. The appendix argues that large-scale surveys yield a very limited understanding of gender norms and may exaggerate consensus within, and similarities between, different communities and countries – in ways that are unhelpful for policy. Accordingly this report, while using data from quantitative surveys, also embraces research using a variety of other methodologies.

2.3 Stereotypes

When women's studies/gender studies came into existence as a field of knowledge, one of the earliest and most productive areas of research was the study of gendered representations of women and men. It was quickly found that there were marked differences. For instance, researchers found school textbooks which presented History entirely, or almost entirely, as actions by men. Men were pictured as the rulers and inventors, the heroes and commanders. Women were present, if at all, in supporting roles as mothers and wives. Researchers found elementary textbooks with images of men in a wide range of interesting occupations, but images of women only in a few conventionally-feminized occupations: mothers, nurses and elementary-school teachers.

Researchers who turned their attention to the content of mass media found similarly divided content. Most "news" was focussed on the doings of men; women were implicitly defined as unimportant. When women were pictured in the media, it was often via an attractive but voiceless young woman treated as a sex object – the naked "Page 3 Girl" of a Murdoch tabloid newspaper in Britain being the most famous example. In television family comedies women were usually cast as housewives and mothers. In the course of time it was noticed that men too are mostly represented in simplified and stylized ways in mass media (see section 3.1 below).

By "gender stereotype" we mean a representation, imagery or classification of men, women, or gender relations, that presents a notably simplified, conventionalized, and selective picture of men's and women's lives. Stereotypes frequently become vehicles for norms of inequality – for instance, for a persistent devaluing of women, a celebration of masculine bodily power, or a belief that women and men should be confined to narrow and segregated social roles.

Though gender-equality norms are important, arguably there is no such thing as a gender-equality *stereotype*. Gender equality is not symmetrical with gender inequality, it is a qualitatively different social process. Stereotypes involve simplifications and selectivity that tell against the realities involved in gender equality. Stereotypes also, by fixing representations of gender in simplified, standardized patterns, work against the creativity and imagination required for change.

Stereotyping, however, is not the only form in which gender can be represented. As noted earlier, there has been a growth of gender research which has examined, not just individual images or texts, but whole discursive systems and people's relations with them. Imaginative practitioners in media, education and the arts have produced more complex and adequate representations of gender, as will be seen through this report.

The Baby Warrior

Coming out of Auckland International Airport, visitors to Aotearoa New Zealand in September 2014 were confronted with a startling image. On a large cylinder is displayed the brightly lit photograph of a blond baby boy, about a year and a half old, standing with legs apart, arms slightly spread, and leaning slightly forward as if about to charge at you. He is completely dressed in a rugby football uniform, including black top with red-and-white “V”. The poster is an advertisement for baby food, and has a large caption: **Growing Future Warriors**.

The design of the baby’s clothes mimics that of a uniform worn by the New Zealand Warriors, a professional Rugby League team. Rugby League is doubtless the second most violent football code in the world. An aura of sexual abuse of young women has surrounded the code in recent years. Ironically, *Once Were Warriors* is the title of a famous novel, turned into a widely seen film, about domestic violence and indigenous poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand.²⁵

Legitimate criticism of gender stereotypes, then, should not lead to any rejection of media, symbolic, educational or cultural systems. These are necessary parts of human life. They can be used in ways that support gender equality - and expand rather than constrict the sense of human possibility.

3. How norms and stereotypes are materialized in social life

A wealth of knowledge about gender norms and gendered representations has been produced by social researchers. Key areas of interest are the mass media, education, work and organizations, land and agriculture, and public life. The main examples given here are in-depth analyses, both quantitative and qualitative, that help identify the political, economic, and cultural dynamics that produce and at other times undo established gender norms and stereotypes.

3.1 In the mass media

‘Media’ refers to diverse forms of communication and entertainment. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television are the original forms of ‘mass media’ designed to reach large audiences. Forms of ‘new media’ circulating via the internet, and social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Sina Weibo (a popular Chinese microblog site), are increasingly influential.

The mass media reflect and often sustain gender norms and stereotypes over time. They can also be a means to produce positive change. There is evidence to suggest women are skilled users of digital technologies; though education, employment, and income are persistent barriers to access in the global South.²⁶ There are numerous studies of gender discourse and

²⁵ (Duff, 1990)

²⁶ (Hilbert, 2011)

imagery. The best ones examine both the gender within representation, and the gendered ways individuals and groups engage with media.

Gender differences are common in the images and performances circulating through advertising and entertainment industries. A striking pattern is women's relative absence from many genres. Amy Bleakely et al. found, in a study of the 15 top-grossing US films each year between 1950 and 2006, that women were consistently under-represented.²⁷ Only thirty-one percent of main characters in the sample of 855 films were women. The yearly average number of male main characters per movie was more than double the average number of female main characters. When women did appear, they were more likely to be involved in sexual content. The yearly average proportion of female main characters engaging in sexual behaviour was approximately two times greater than the proportion of male characters.

A large body of quantitative literature on gender representations in advertising has established similar patterns across the world. Hye-Jin Paek et al. examined 2,608 prime-time television commercials in Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, South Korea, Thailand, and the United States.²⁸ They found men are predominantly featured in advertising in all countries but South Korea. This study found that product type was the main predictor of gender for main character and voice-over. Neither a categorical definition of feminine / masculine traits portrayed, nor a measure of the country's 'gender development index' predicted outcomes. A similar content analysis of 'types' of masculinity represented in men's magazine advertising in Taiwan, China, and the US found similar patterns across these countries.²⁹ Both studies emphasised consumer culture as a determining factor behind gender representations.

Gender stereotypes and norms also appear in media treatment of social problems and public debate. Representations of gender-based violence are a case in point. María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba has analysed three film representations of femicide and the people living in the Mexican northern border city of Juárez. She shows that women are portrayed in stereotypical ways through film plots, dialogue, and images.³⁰ For instance, in the film *Pasion y Muerte*, sex workers are represented as the majority of a serial killer's victims, put at risk by their occupation. Stereotyped depiction of sex workers reflects longstanding 'blame the victim' discourse used by officials. Others have documented the strategy of victim blaming in the ongoing 'war of interpretation' over the causes of deaths in this city.³¹ The three films analysed by Córdoba focus on relations between police investigators and killers, and they glorify police responses to gender-based violence. Femicides become disputes between men over the bodies of women. The media can determine who holds authority on an issue in ways that enhance gender inequality.

The method used in content analysis of media requires thought. Studies using content analysis, underscore the relationship between consumer culture, media representation of sexual and violent behaviours with gender stereotypes and norms. However, neither

²⁷ (Bleakley, Jamieson & Romer, 2012)

²⁸ (Paek, Nelson & Vilela, 2011)

²⁹ (Tan et al., 2013)

³⁰ (Tabuenca Córdoba, 2010)

³¹ See (Wright, 2011)

descriptive statistics nor critique of narrative techniques tells us why gender stereotypes and norms recur over time, or what social relations and practices underpin them. We cannot take for granted that media representations reflect gender relations in practice. Statistical analyses linking gender representation in media content to aggregated factors such as advertising spending, and national gender indexes require particular caution (see Appendix for discussion of methods).

The Bechdel-Wallace Test

Discussion about ongoing gender inequality in films was popularised in a 1985 comic strip called *Dyke to Watch Out For* by US cartoonist Alison Bechdel. In a strip called “The Rule” an unnamed female character says that she only watches a movie if it fits these ‘basic requirements’³²:

1. It has to have at least two women in it,
2. who talk to each other,
3. about something besides a man.

The character in Bechdel’s comic wryly claimed that the last movie they'd seen was *Alien* (1978). As it turns out, a significant proportion of films fail this simple test. The fictitious rule has become the Bechdel-Wallace³³ Test, and has inspired a number of different applications and revisions in Northern media criticism. The polling aggregation website *FiveThirtyEight* analysed a sample of 1,794 movies released from 1970 to 2013. It found that only half had even one scene in which women talked to each other about something other than a man.³⁴ (The survey found that passing the test was better for business.)

Behind the camera, women are also under-represented. Between 2002 and 2012, only 4.4% of the top-grossing Hollywood films were directed by women.³⁵ There are no gender equality discussions visible in the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, but there are some elsewhere. Last year three Swedish cinemas started using the Bechdel-Wallace Test to determine whether a film should receive an A rating.

A growing body of research addresses the question of how media is received in social life. Online audiences are active agents in public debates about gender issues in news media for instance. Camille Nurka studied the responses of football fans to a highly publicised rape allegation made against six Australian professional NRL football players in 2009.³⁶ Nurka used textual analysis of comments made on conservative tabloid newspapers and social media. Online comments presented surprisingly uniform criticisms of the woman alleging rape, as well as criticisms of a woman reporter who interviewed one of the footballers. Nurka

³² <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94202522>

³³ Bechdel cites the idea as coming from her friend Liz Wallace.

³⁴ (Hickey, 2014)

³⁵ (Smith, Pieper & Choueiti, 2014)

³⁶ (Nurka, 2013)

argues shame is the main emotion circulating in fan discourse used to punish the woman who spoke out. Disgrace, not shame, was assigned to the footballers, leaving open possibility for their redemption. This analysis shows affective and moral dimensions to gender in the media that can only be understood with a focus on the experience of media consumption.

Ethnographies of media in everyday life give rich accounts of gender. An excellent example is Lila Abu-Lughod's *Dramas of Nationhood*.³⁷, which offers observation, interviews, images, print media, and vignettes from television serials. Popular television in the 1990s played a significant role in Egyptian nation building. Abu-Lughod pays particular attention to representations of gender relations at a time when Islamism and globalisation were changing the cultural and political landscape. The book documents the lives of the urban elite scriptwriters, directors, producers, actors and critics. Feminist writers participate in the production of television serials. Abu-Lughod argues there is maternalistic moral flavour to their work, for instance through the portrayal of characters such as a well-dressed doctor who supports women experiencing abuse. Heroic, educated, middle class characters are common in the serials.

Abu-Lughod also examines women's experience as media consumers, for instance watching dramas such as *Hilmiyya Nights*, a popular melodrama screened during Ramadan. The author watched television serials with women living in a poor rural village and with domestic workers in urban Cairo. They were most drawn to characters far removed from their own social experiences, such as flamboyant aristocratic women who transgressed marital and other gender norms. The two most popular figures were represented without Islamic attire (which was increasingly usual at the time), and both experienced dramatic downfalls in the story line. Abu-Lughod observes that the women watching 'seemed to take pleasure in these women's defiance of the moral system that keeps good women quiet.'³⁸

This study and others in media anthropology demonstrate that people are selective in their readings of the normative messages contained in television and other forms of popular culture.³⁹ They can enjoy watching characters that transgress gender norms, they can disagree with the politics represented, and selectively subscribe to the moral lessons conveyed. These conclusions are important for our understanding of the continuity of gender norms (see section 4 below).

3.2 In education

Education in general, and schools in particular, are paradoxical in terms of gender norms. They are among the most important sites of change in gender relations in recent generations. A massive worldwide growth in girls' participation in school, women's literacy, and women's access to advanced education, has occurred, both in global North and South. Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi and Valentine Moghadam⁴⁰ note this for the Middle East and North

³⁷ (Abu-Lughod, 2008)

³⁸ (Abu-Lughod, 2008: 236)

³⁹ (Dewey, 2008; Mankekar, 1999; Rofel, 2007)

⁴⁰ (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2005)

Africa, despite persisting gender gaps; while Madeleine Arnot, Miriam David and Gaby Weiner, in a comprehensive study of gender and education in England, remark that of all the inequalities in postwar education in that country, ‘gender has shown the most dramatic shift’.⁴¹

Yet education is often *defined* as the transmission of culture from one generation to the next, and is widely viewed as crucial to the reproduction of gender norms. Schools and colleges are strongly influenced by existing gender divisions and social assumptions about gender. For instance, in many countries men predominate in teaching computing, trades and natural science while women predominate in humanities fields and in early childhood education. The growth of educational access for girls and women has not been smooth. In some regions it has been halted by neoliberal economic restructuring, in some it has been contested by fundamentalist religious groups.

Our point of departure for understanding this paradoxical field is the excellent 2003 UNESCO report *Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality*.⁴² This report noted the strong global move towards numerical parity in schooling for girls and boys, especially in primary education. But it also argued that numerical parity was not the same as equality: equality was a much stronger concept, involving the content of education, the outcomes of education, and relations within educational institutions. Many forces were operating, in different situations, to hold girls back: social expectations about education and employment; family decision-making in which women’s interests were subordinated to men’s; girls’ household labour and care obligations, for instance in the HIV/AIDS pandemic; pregnancy, early marriage or rites of passage; armed conflict in society, gendered violence in schools; sexism in the curriculum; the cost, or inadequate supply, of schooling; and more.

Stereotypes and gender norms are at work in most of these processes. Sexist stereotypes in the curriculum have been documented for many years; we give two examples. Peter Freebody and Carolyn Baker studied 163 books used in introductory reading schemes in one Australian region from the 1960s to the 1980s.⁴³ These books were supposed to be teaching reading skills, but they were also teaching gender. The books depicted an insistently gendered world: adults were called ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’, not ‘parents’; children in the texts were given stereotypical names such as ‘Jane’ and ‘Peter’. The adjectives attached to male and female characters were different: boys were sad, kind, brave, naughty, while girls were young, dancing, pretty. Freebody and Baker speak of the ‘cuddle factor’ in the texts’ representations of girls and women. Homes were depicted in gender-stereotyped ways; so were the relations between boys and girls in the artificial conversations constructed in the texts.

Jackie F. K. Lee 2014 also studied school textbooks over time, comparing a popular series issued by a Hong Kong publisher in 1988 and 2005, before and after gender equity legislation.⁴⁴ A change towards more equal representation of men and women in the books

⁴¹ (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999: 30)

⁴² (UNESCO, 2003)

⁴³ (Freebody & Baker, 1987)

⁴⁴ (Lee, 2014)

did occur, which has also happened in other countries. But even in 2005, men were mentioned more often than women; men were shown in more diverse social and occupational roles, women in a narrower range; and men were normally mentioned before women, rather than women before men. Here too there was a strong occupational stereotyping, for instance all nurses mentioned in these books were women, all law enforcement personnel were men – ‘depictions’, Lee (2014: 369) quietly remarks, ‘that are out-of-step with present realities’.

Gender norms are materialized in schools in many ways. Schools and school systems are complex organizations characterized by an internal gender regime, i.e. an institutionalized set of arrangements that sort people and regulate their everyday behaviour in gender terms.⁴⁵ One of the most important of these arrangements is widespread gender segregation of school pupils. Sometimes this takes the form of separate schools for girls and boys, sometimes separate classes within the same school, sometimes separate spaces within classrooms and playgrounds. Though a trend towards co-education has occurred in many countries, partly because it is cheaper, there is also a counter-movement towards more gender segregation, especially in private schools for the affluent, and religious schools.

What segregated gender regimes do is institute a gender norm of absolute difference. Of all the many differences among children, gender is picked out and made the basis of a categorical separation in school life. This is strongly emphasised by requiring differences in dress, for instance school uniforms that put girls in skirts and boys in trousers. The educational paradox here is that girls and boys as groups (and women and men as groups) are in fact psychologically very similar, as a vast body of empirical research shows.⁴⁶ There are few differences of any educational significance in intellectual capacity, learning styles, or other psychological characteristics. But there is a widespread social stereotype that boys and girls have categorical differences in such traits. Institutional gender segregation both reflects, and supports, this stereotype.

Gender separation is reinforced by particular areas of the curriculum that are culturally ‘coded’ as masculine or feminine. Mathematics, physics, computing and engineering are widely coded masculine, while drama, art, literature and psychology are coded feminine. This is reflected in gender-unbalanced enrolments in upper secondary school and higher education. Vocational education is often gender-coded, with boys entering programmes for motor mechanics and building trades, girls entering programmes for hairdressing, nursing, etc.

Physical education and sport is another gender-coded area of the curriculum - in fact this is one of the most segregated areas of school life almost everywhere. Here the formal curriculum of the school merges into the informal social activity of the children. It is clear that the children are not passively receiving norms from the adult world. They are active in reproducing and making norms, and enforcing them among each other by ridicule. This process has been widely studied in ethnographic research on schools.⁴⁷ The active

⁴⁵ (Connell, 1996; Skelton, Francis & Smulyan, 2006)

⁴⁶ (Hyde, 2005)

⁴⁷ (Mac an Ghaill, 1994)

construction of gender norms creates informal gender hierarchies *within* each gender, defining hegemonic masculinities and desirable femininities among youth, and contrasting them with abjected or marginalized groups.

A recent ethnography by C. J. Pascoe in a racially diverse working class high school in the USA shows these processes in fine detail.⁴⁸ Gender norms can take on sexual meanings early on, and in this case the insult of being ‘a fag’ (i.e. effeminate homosexual) is a powerful informal disciplinary mechanism among the boys. It enforces a conservative model of masculinity, and affects the conduct of heterosexual as well as homosexual boys. But this insult does not have the same force among different groups. Pascoe observes that African-American boys did not use the term as often as boys from an Anglo-American background. They were more likely to tease each other for being white, than for being a fag.

Gendered games and sports

Here is Fengshu Liu’s memory of schooling in rural China, a country with a reputation for gender integration:

...throughout my primary and middle-school education, boys and girls had different games and activities to engage in, and we seldom played together. Boys typically played basketball (as football had not yet been introduced into Chinese rural schools at that time), climbing, wrestling and so on, while girls played hopscotch, skipping, battledore and shuttlecock, and other more quiet and less competitive games. One of the most unforgettable memories of my middle-school years in the early 1980s was that girls and boys in my class were hardly on greeting terms. Anyone who ventured to talk with anyone from the other sex would cause a *qihong* (roars of mocking laughter) from the boys.⁴⁹

Informal norm-making and norm-reproduction occurs across the informal life of the school, and in areas of the curriculum that are not necessarily gender-coded. For instance, in a close-focus study of sex education in a Botswana high school, Bagele Chilisa found a complex interplay between a formal curriculum based on ‘western’ abstinence-centred models, and a resistant youth culture that justified sexual activity but was full of myths about AIDS cures, contraception and abortion.⁵⁰ Classes saw an active assertion of dominance by the boys over the girls, drawing on Biblical texts as well as informal local culture. The active creation and renegotiation of gender norms and gender hierarchies among youth, in a context of cultural hybridity, social change and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, is powerfully shown in recent South African research on sexuality and schooling.⁵¹

⁴⁸ (Pascoe, 2007)

⁴⁹ (Liu, 2006: 428)

⁵⁰ (Chilisa, 2006)

⁵¹ (Morrell et al., 2009)

The fact that children and youth are not passively imprinted with gender norms, but are actively involved in exploring, producing and negotiating them, means that school life is also a site for change. A groundbreaking ethnography of gender in US elementary schools by Barrie Thorne called *Gender Play* showed how norms of gender difference are situational: they are created in some situations and ignored or overridden in others.⁵² Children in these co-educational schools shifted in and out of all-girl and all-boy groupings. Gender was sometimes emphasised, for instance when the teacher organized a class activity as a competition of boys vs. girls. Thorne called the social actions that emphasised gender difference ‘borderwork’, moments at which children become consolidated into ‘the boys’ and ‘the girls’. These moments can become occasions for asserting differential power (as in Chilisa’s study). But there were also moments of border-crossing, for instance when boys and girls joined each others’ games in the playground. And there were times when gender was de-emphasised, for instance in the common ‘chalk-and-talk’ approach to teaching when boys and girls are all placed in the undifferentiated position of ‘pupil’ and addressed in the same terms.

On a large scale, and over a long time, the work of feminist educators, and the demand of girls themselves for access to education, has shifted educational norm-making towards the principle of gender equality – as is made clear in the UNESCO report mentioned at the start of this section. This change has gained enough social credibility that individual schools and communities often continue gender-equity work locally even when conservative governments dismantle gender-equity programmes at national level.

Yet achieving this normative change has been a difficult task requiring many compromises. Sara Delamont, looking back at elite women’s education in the UK, notes how the price paid for setting up girls’ schools in the nineteenth century was super-conformity to public norms of femininity, expressed in rigid codes of uniform, conduct, chaperoning etc.⁵³

The more recent growth of mass education for girls has also involved compromises, especially with economic development agendas when male-dominated governments were persuaded that educating women was an important tool of modernization and growth.⁵⁴ Often the result was a change in gender-normative expectations of the *amount* of education, without changes in normative expectations about its *content*. The uneven process of change in gender norms is a fruitful source of social anxiety and conflict around education – from the ‘What About the Boys?’ controversy in the USA to Boko Haram in west Africa. We can expect these tensions will continue.

3.3 In work, employment practices and organizational life

Gender norms and stereotypes are often salient in the world of work. Divisions of labour often associate women’s work with normative definitions of women as caring, gentle, self-sacrificing and industrious, i.e. as good mothers. Women tend to be most often employed in

⁵² (Thorne, 1993: 65)

⁵³ (Delamont, 1989)

⁵⁴ (Unterhalter, 2007)

service industries, doing clerical work, cleaning, serving food, and in professions associated with caring e.g. teaching and nursing. In the global South, women have become a majority of industrial workers, prized because of their ‘nimble fingers’ and targeted by factory recruiters on the basis of their assumed passivity. And behind this world of paid work, women continue to do the majority of unpaid domestic and care labour. Meanwhile, men are over-represented in management, financial, legal, and technical workforces. Where women have broken through the ‘glass ceiling’ to participate in these roles, there have been mixed results.

Judy Wajcman’s study of women managers in high-technology firms found they were required to act like the men.⁵⁵ For instance, they had to work long hours, fight in office wars, put pressure on their subordinates, and focus on profit. Women rising into management had to reorganize their domestic lives so they, like men, could shed responsibilities for childcare, cooking and housework. Wajcman found no support for the assumption that women in management carry out a more caring, nurturant or humane approach to the job. In this instance, the ideal norm of women nurturers has been undermined.

Wajcman’s study supports Joan Acker’s influential argument that organisations are inherently, not accidentally, gendered.⁵⁶ This occurs through gendered divisions of labour (e.g. work allocated by managers), symbols and images that confirm or express gender divisions (e.g. dress), and interactions between men and women that enact dominance and subordination (e.g. frequent interruptions).

Workplace research increasingly shows the extent of unintentionally gendered practices.⁵⁷ Patricia Yancey Martin observes that the practice of gender at work is often unreflexive, that is, without awareness and intention toward a purpose. For instance Martin records a situation where a woman’s boss was prone to ‘solving problems’ for her by discussing them with his superior, not with her. This undermined her status in the organization and enacted the stereotype of ‘women in trouble’ in need of men to save them.⁵⁸

In their study of Italian corporations, Sylvia Gherardi and Barbara Poggio show that some women were arriving at a management level. However, when they did, a ‘dance’ of adjustment and compromise with established men played out.⁵⁹ Gender order was re-constituted through organization rituals, where people acknowledge their membership of the gender order. For instance, women enact attitudes and behaviors that put men at ease. Showing meekness, having a posture of humility, and refraining from competitive behavior can allow women to defend their space within organizations. For better or worse, observing gender norms has proven to be an integral part of women’s workforce participation at managerial levels.

Managerial masculinities have been an active field of research since the 1990s. In this time, researchers have tracked a great deal of change. Financialization of economies is one of the

⁵⁵ (Wajcman, 1999)

⁵⁶ (Acker, 1990)

⁵⁷ (Martin, 2006)

⁵⁸ (Martin, 2006: 263)

⁵⁹ (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001)

processes involved. An aggressive and competitive masculinity appears in studies of financial trading floors, though as Peter Levin notes, it is expressed in different ways depending on fluctuations in the pace of work.⁶⁰ During peak times of market activity value is placed on handling pressure, being aggressive, and physical strength. Levin observes that ostensibly gender-neutral definitions of worker competency on trading floors are in fact constructed in masculine and often sexualized terms. During slower times gender norms are more explicitly tied to sex and heterosexual imagery. Telling risqué jokes is done more often by men, and this works to objectify women, including those who participate in joke-telling.⁶¹

Below the managerial level, gender relations are more diverse, as corporations have assembled large and socially complex workforces. Worldwide reviews of research show that gender patterns are an integral part of the international economy. The dominant economic form of our period, the transnational corporation, must be understood as a gendered organization with a complex internal gender regime, linking transnational managerial masculinities with local gender-divided workforces.⁶²

Gender norms influence the recruitment of workers, the relations in workplaces, wage levels and career structures.⁶³ Racial hierarchies, sexualization, and class distinctions all affect the making of workplace masculinities and femininities. Women are more likely than men to be concentrated in the informal sectors of the global economy, where their work is precarious, worse paid, and often dangerous – yet this is assumed to be normal. Consequences were horribly shown in 2013 by the Rana Plaza clothing factory collapse in Bangladesh, with an official death toll of 1,219 and twice that number injured, the majority of whom were young women from poor rural areas. The broader context of this catastrophe is that poor women seeking work in Dhaka are faced with very limited options, mainly a choice between domestic labour or the ready-made garment factory.⁶⁴

The global garment industry has leveraged gender inequality and gender stereotypes to enlist rural women as low-cost workers in factories set up in export processing zones. Collins's book *Threads* is a multi-site ethnography of the garment industry that traces the relocation of the low-end fleece maker Tultex and the mid-range Liz Claiborne fashion brand.⁶⁵ She followed the relocation of manufacturing from Virginia USA to Aguascalientes in México. When asking managers about this decision, Collins saw gender stereotypes in action. Managers talked less about searching for cheaper factors in production, and more about the skills available. Their account rested on a stereotyped view of Mexican women with natural sewing skills. While women in the USA were supposed to have lost their sewing skills, Mexican women were assumed to have kept a commitment to household work. This stereotyped view created, in the eyes of the managers, an advantage in employing Mexican women. Sadly the working conditions of garment factories are bleak, and the struggle for change is difficult.

⁶⁰ (Levin, 2001)

⁶¹ (Levin, 2004)

⁶² (Elias, 2008)

⁶³ (Gottfried, 2013; Poster, 2002)

⁶⁴ (Karim, 2014)

⁶⁵ (Collins, 2009)

As work has changed, so has the makeup of labour organisations, now with historically high levels of women's membership. There have been difficult debates within unions about gender equality, even in Australia where both unionism and feminism have been strong. A persistent problem is resistance from men embedded in the hard-nosed masculine culture historically associated with labour politics.⁶⁶

In the garment industry

Nancy Plankey-Videla's ethnography *We Are in This Dance Together* is based on 9 months' observation, and a decade of interviews, with workers and management in a high-end suit factory in Moctezuma, central México.⁶⁷ It traces a major reorganisation in the factory from individual piecework to teamwork. The managers took this decision to solve problems of high labour turnover and inaccuracy in the work, and thus restore ailing profits; but the change opened new possibilities. The teamwork arrangements fostered a 'motherist' work culture, which allowed arrangements to accommodate women with childcare responsibilities. In this case the workers made use of local gender norms to create a *better* employment situation for women, a point relevant to thinking about change (section 5 below).

However more autonomy in the team work was accompanied by a higher degree of surveillance from management. Plankey-Videla details the women's struggle against management, in which the male-dominated union became a contested issue. Women members used local norms of masculinity to debate decisions of the union leadership - for instance they charged that the union officials who resisted the worker's call to strike were cowards, not proper men.

These studies of the world of work show in detail how gender norms are related to economic dynamics. For the most part, gender norms have legitimised the under-valuation and exploitation of women's labour from factories to the trading floors of global stock markets. But some counter-currents exist.

3.4 In agriculture and land use

Gender inequalities in agrarian society materialise within the household and in both formal and informal agricultural work. Gender norms underpin inheritance laws, authority over land use decisions, dynamics in the household, and practices in the agricultural marketplace. There is now a rich body of research on land and gender relations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Bina Agarwal's extensive work in South Asia has shed light on the complex dynamics behind rural women's poverty.⁶⁸ Agarwal argues that women and children's risk of

⁶⁶ (Franzway & Fonow, 2011)

⁶⁷ (Plankey-Videla, 2012)

⁶⁸ (Agarwal, 1994)

poverty depends on women's direct access to income and resources, and that a key dimension of gender inequality is inheritance customs and laws favouring men.⁶⁹

In Latin America, where capitalist agriculture is well developed, gender biases in land markets may now be as important as normative patterns in the family or the state, in determining the level of land ownership by women.⁷⁰ Deere and Leon's survey of Latin America traced a slight trend toward more gender-equal inheritance patterns, connected to rising literacy rates for women, migration patterns (increasing the likelihood of inheritance), and the decreasing reliance on agriculture for the support of peasant households.

Carmen Deere has tracked an increase in women's participation in agricultural wage work, where growth has been concentrated in the non-traditional agro-export sector - producing and packing fresh vegetables, fruits and flowers for Northern markets.⁷¹ This shift has been part of the neoliberal restructuring across Latin America. Taking up agricultural work is part of a strategy to diversify household livelihoods as economic crises, agricultural restructuring, and land shortages have undermined rural communities.

Gender norms are key features of ongoing gender inequality in agrarian societies. Agarwal's research shows their importance.⁷² Norms can define who participates in decision making, whether women should work outside the house, how food is allocated and so on. Norms can weaken women's bargaining position by restricting their access to public life and marketplaces, and through the ideological construction of women as dependents and men as breadwinners.

But Agarwal also shows that norms are the subject of extensive bargaining, in households and communities. A group's position in bargaining is influenced by 'their economic situation; the link between command over property and control over institutions that shape gender ideology; and group strength.'⁷³ Those with wealth and/or property can exercise influence over institutions that shape gender ideology, such as schools, religious organisations and media. For instance, a women's group in Bangladesh observed that elite village leaders define purdah practices that restrict women's access to legal, administrative and economic institutions. In this case, collective organising allowed women in the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee to challenge purdah as it is defined by elites. Solidarity and cooperation in joint income-generation has given women the confidence and capacity to do so.

The Beijing Platform for Action includes land rights for rural women, and a debate is now occurring about this as a strategic focus. Women's ownership of land is thought to be a basis of women's self-confidence and ability to access public health care and education. There is evidence that owning property is associated with a lower incidence of gender-based violence

⁶⁹ (Whitehead, 2001)

⁷⁰ (Deere & León, 2003)

⁷¹ (Deere, 2005)

⁷² (Agarwal, 1997)

⁷³ (Agarwal, 1997: 21)

within the home.⁷⁴ But questions have been raised about the potential of land ownership as a means for change. Land privatisation via government redistribution programs has often not worked well for women. Formerly-communal land has been placed in the hands of a relatively small number of male household members. In the poorest households, women's loss has exceeded men due to their greater dependence on communal resources. In such cases, a normative regime introduced by government has displaced older local norms, to women's disadvantage.

Studies of agrarian change in several parts of the global South paint similar pictures, with regional permutations. In Africa, land reforms instituting private property regimes see many women lose rights they formerly had, for instance use rights on previously communally shared plots.⁷⁵ Limited opportunities to buy land, and gender discrimination by local authorities, are significant reasons.⁷⁶ Where women have been able to gain land ownership, they have been challenged in accessing capital, technology and production inputs.⁷⁷ Land markets, which are also gendered institutions, are difficult for women to break into.⁷⁸ Rural women have not widely made explicit calls for land rights from rural women, perhaps seeing the risks of disrupting relations in the family as too high.⁷⁹

The process of campaigning for land rights, and ensuring equitable realization of reforms, is itself a struggle to change gender norms and practices, and will require shifts in power within the household, community, and state.⁸⁰ The campaign for women's land rights in Brazil illustrates this. Carmen Deere documents a decade of struggle for women seeking land rights in the wake of gender-blind agrarian reforms in Brazil.⁸¹ Gender equality in agrarian reforms was not on the agenda of state officials or unions at the time. Deere shows that normative change followed from sustained organising for women's participation within the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) across the 1990s. Gender equality norms and recognition of the importance of women's land rights has been internalised into the MST, to a significant, but uneven, degree.

The research on land and agricultural labour establishes the irreducible relation between gender norms and material conditions. Gender norms materialise amidst economic factors ranging from macroeconomic change, national policy, local customs, to the household. Given the complexity, it is not surprising the direction and means for change are themselves subjects of normative debate.

3.5 In government, policy and public life

⁷⁴ (Agarwal & Panda, 2007)

⁷⁵ (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003)

⁷⁶ (Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003: 79)

⁷⁷ (Whitehead, 2001)

⁷⁸ (Razavi, 2007)

⁷⁹ For example of critique and debate about land rights see (Agarwal, 2003b; Jackson, 2003, 2004)

⁸⁰ (Agarwal, 1994: 44)

⁸¹ (Deere, 2004)

As shown in section 3.2 above, *absences* in representation are a significant manifestation of gender norms. This is also very true for political worlds. It is common to see more men than women performing roles in public office. Statistics from the Inter-Parliamentary Union show that 78% of members of the world's parliaments are men in 2014. Among senior ministers the predominance of men is even higher.

The world average number of women in Parliaments has increased from 10% in 1995 to 21% in 2014.⁸² Higher proportions of women in parliament have been supposed to result from women's relatively high economic status alongside social norms supporting women's public participation. However, the picture is more complicated, and does change.⁸³ In the 1980s, the nations with the highest proportions of women in parliament were from Scandinavia and the Soviet bloc. From the 2000s, the pattern is more varied, with high levels of political representation among countries in Africa and Latin America in the mix.

Not much more than a century ago, the exclusion of women from political rights in liberal democratic societies was usual. Suffrage movements in Europe and settler-colonial nations secured voting rights for women, from the 1880s to the 1920s. They were addressing the contradiction between individuals rights proclaimed in Western nations and the gendered norms shaping social life.⁸⁴ The 1930s to 1980s saw the largest wave of suffrage acquisition, associated with decolonisation. Anti-colonial, nationalist, or revolutionary movements commonly mobilized women's support. The Chinese revolution is perhaps the best-known case: the famous Maoist slogan 'women hold up half the sky' was part of an attack on feudal norms that had enforced the subordination of women.⁸⁵ However, neither women's role in these movements, nor codification of their civil rights, guaranteed them an equal share of state power afterwards.

At the 1975 World Conference on Women there was widespread agreement that governments need specialized policy machinery for the advancement of women. Over two thirds of member states instituted gender equality reforms of one kind or another during the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985). In Australia, the officials responsible for gender reforms became colloquially known as 'femocrats'. Hester Eisenstein documented their work in her book *Inside Agitators*.⁸⁶ Eisenstein's interviews show gender reform initiatives often encountered resistance from men in political parties and the bureaucracy – and sometimes also from women.

Access to the state and its resources can involve harnessing existing gender ideologies for new political visions. A comparative study of Nigeria and Chile by Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika and Susan Franceschet points to the importance of specific gender ideologies in the success of 'state feminism'.⁸⁷ In Chile, women were prominent in campaigns against the Pinochet dictatorship. Feminists gained access to the top levels of state power during the

⁸² (IPU & UNW, 2014)

⁸³ (Jalalzai & Krook, 2010: 7)

⁸⁴ (Ramirez, Soysal & Shanahan, 1997)

⁸⁵ (Stacey, 1983)

⁸⁶ (Eisenstein, 1996)

⁸⁷ (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2002)

transition to democracy (the 2006 and 2013 elections of Michelle Bachelet are part of this legacy). They developed what Sonia Alvarez has called ‘politicized motherhood’.⁸⁸ But in Nigeria, though women were involved in the struggle for independence, and though feminist groups have persisted, the post-independence military regimes had no place for feminist ideas. Relatively ineffective women's organizations with few ties to grassroots have pursued a mild welfare agenda and a conservative view of women's place.

Greater participation in political life can coincide with the persistence of gender norms that disadvantage women, as shown by Farida Jalalzai and Mona Lena Krook in their transnational review of women in parliaments.⁸⁹ Gender norms underpin common sense understandings of politics, and the terms of political contestation and standards for evaluation tend to reflect masculine norms and values.⁹⁰ For instance, the practice of politics more often involves competition to define ‘winners and losers’ than it institutes collaborative relations. Participating as a Deputy or Member of Parliament involves a workload and culture very similar to masculinized management work in the corporate sector (see section 3.3 above).

Quotas for women in political positions are often regarded as a means to change gender norms. Farzani Bari’s study of women MPs in Pakistan illustrates the dynamics of change and continuity.⁹¹ In 2001 the Musharraf regime instituted quotas, mandating that 33 percent of seats in local government, and 17 percent of seats in both the national assembly and provincial assemblies, be reserved for women. However, these positions were not allocated by direct election. Rather, political parties designated a closed list of women who would be allocated seats proportional to election outcomes. Women chosen tend to belong to known political families, with no history of involvement in women’s rights struggles.

Detailed analysis of women’s participation in parliament showed that women MPs increased their intervention into parliamentary debates over time. The content of their interventions often focused on the social sector, particularly the education sector, and other public interest issues such as inflation, unemployment, rising prices of utilities, drug addiction, and financial support to the poor. Twelve of the 40 women parliamentarians Bari interviewed had submitted private members bills concerning gender issues. They tended to be calling for new laws rather than reform of existing ones. Most of these attempts were unsuccessful. Despite the limited legislative outcomes, Bari argues the experience allows women to gain political skills and confidence in public life, and perhaps increase the acceptability of women in public life. There was a substantial increase of women contesting seats in the 2008 election.

A key reason to pursue normative change vis-à-vis the state is that public policies have gender effects. The state regulates family life and gender relations, for instance by determining parental rights over children, allocating property within marriage, determining the possibility for divorce, and a host of other reproductive rights from access to abortion to

⁸⁸ (Alvarez, 1999)

⁸⁹ (Jalalzai & Krook, 2010)

⁹⁰ (Ballington & Karam, 2005)

⁹¹ (Bari, 2010)

IVF and surrogacy. As political and cultural attitudes about sex and parenthood shift, law and policy can be instruments of normative change or inertia.

Mala Htun carried out an instructive study of laws governing family life and gender relations between the 1960s and the 1990s in Argentina, Brazil and Chile.⁹² Gender equality reform can come about in unexpected ways, for instance it was the Brazilian military that legalized divorce, and Pinochet's government in Chile that gave married women full civil rights for the first time. Htun's broader argument is that democratisation does not guarantee positive change. While women's rights fluctuated under the dictatorships and with the transition to democracy, in no case were abortion rights improved.

Htun argues that these outcomes are shaped by the interplay of four normative traditions in Latin America: Roman Catholicism, socialism, liberalism, and feminism. These traditions have different models for women's and men's roles, reproduction and the family, and the appropriate use of state power. Over time, gender equality within the family has become a point of agreement among them. Opposition to legal abortion is a point of agreement between Catholic, liberal and socialist groups. Catholics remain divided from liberal, feminist and socialist traditions on divorce.

As in the world of work, gender norms are woven through the institutional systems of politics and public life, and gender stereotypes can be mobilized for political effects. Democratic political norms do not guarantee gender equality. More democratic polities, however, do have more points where pressure for normative change can develop.

A stereotype in politics: the Welfare Queen

Implicit gender norms and stereotypes can shape public policy, as shown by welfare debates in the global North. Ange-Marie Hancock's book *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* examines gender and racial stereotypes in this area⁹³, especially the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in the USA. This legislation instituted a normative distinction between deserving and undeserving welfare recipients. For instance, states were allowed to establish 'family caps' that prevent mothers on welfare from receiving additional benefits if they have another child. Hancock finds gender and racial stereotypes circulating in the public debate that led to this policy outcome, particularly hostile beliefs about poor African-American mothers. She argues that the public identity of the 'welfare queen' was generated through stereotyped and erroneous beliefs about race, class and gender. She criticises the 'politics of disgust' in this debate for hindering democratic participation of marginalised women.

4. How norms and stereotypes persist and are reproduced

⁹² (Htun, 2003)

⁹³ (Hancock, 2004)

There is a widespread view of how norms persist through time, which runs as follows. Gender norms represent the consensus of society about the definition of gender roles, embodying generally agreed social values. Children are ‘socialized’ into these values, by being taught their respective gender roles. Various ‘socializing agents’ – parents, peer groups, schools, mass media, etc. – perform this instruction, applying positive and negative sanctions for role performance. As they grow up, the children internalize the values and the role norms. They behave according to the role norms; and in their turn, they socialize the next generation into the norms. Thus the reproduction of norms across generations occurs, in a more or less automatic and conflict-free way.

This was the way the story was told, in sociology textbooks fifty years ago; and is still often told. But in the last half-century, researchers have found major difficulties in this ‘gender socialization’ model.

(1) This model assumes a strong consensus in society about values and role definitions, which is not found in practice. Even with measurement techniques that presume a simplified model of gender (see Appendix 1), research persistently finds differences *within* societies in gender-related attitudes and role definitions: differences between social classes, between rural and urban groups, between ethnic and religious groups, between generations, and notably, between women and men.⁹⁴ And even within such groups, there is frequently diversity of attitudes and values – often concealed by the unfortunate practice of reporting only an average value on a given measurement, without the measure of variation.

(2) This model assumes a passivity on the part of the socialized – the child learning the norms – which does not correspond to our developing knowledge of children (or adults) as learners. Children are far more agentic in learning than this model supposes; they are selective in perception, curious, often in conflict with adults, uneven in their acquisition of norms even when these are clearly articulated.⁹⁵ Careful close-focus case studies of schools, already mentioned in this report, show this in relation to gender learning.⁹⁶

(3) Attitude surveys of adults usually find that women as a group are *less* supportive of patriarchal opinion items than men as a group.⁹⁷ But ethnographic accounts of patriarchal communities routinely report that *more* pressure is put on girls than boys for conformity, obedience and submission to norms.⁹⁸ The ‘internalization’ seems to have failed.

(4) The socialization model presumes a one-dimensional account of normative transmission and gender development, a smooth path from not having the norm to having the norm. But human development is contradictory and often turbulent, at an emotional level, as the case studies of clinical psychology have long shown.⁹⁹ This turbulence is further evidenced by the persistent emergence, across many societies, of a tremendous variety of non-normative sexualities and gender enactments.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ For a sample of such studies from different parts of the world: (Barker et al., 2011; Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Fuller, 1997; Kane, 2000; Manganaro & Alozie, 2011)

⁹⁵ (Caneva, 2014; Eickelkamp, 2011; Haugen, 2010)

⁹⁶ (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Pascoe, 2007; Thorne, 1993)

⁹⁷ e.g. (Barker et al., 2011; Manganaro & Alozie, 2011; Sleggh & Kimonyo, 2010)

⁹⁸ e.g. (Ambreen & Mohyuddin, 2013)

⁹⁹ (Fausto-Sterling, 2012)

¹⁰⁰ For a few examples from different countries, see (Bauer, Hoenes & Woltersdorff, 2007;

With these and other difficulties in mind, the undoubted effort made by ‘socializing agents’ such as media and schools looks less like an automatic machine for the reproduction of norms or habitus, and more like multiple attempts to *impose* order on a highly uncertain and diverse social process of growth and learning by the younger generation. The persistence of unequal gender orders through time is a more complex matter than the old socialization model supposed. But that also means there are far more points where change may arise.

How does persistence occur, if not by simple normative socialization? A number of ways have already been indicated. There is, in the first place, the fact that norms are not just embedded in personal attitudes and conduct, but are also embedded in institutional arrangements (see sections 3.2 and 3.3 above). Gender segregation in schools, gender divisions of labour in the workplace, separation of home from workplace, different pay levels for men and women, differential legal ownership of land, all embed gender values, and all may be reproduced by routine institutional functioning, more or less independent of individual beliefs. Studies in Scandinavia, where there is a strong public culture of gender equality, show the persistence of gender divisions of labour, hierarchical inequality, and conventional understandings of masculinity and femininity, in the everyday life of organizations - more or less under-the-radar.¹⁰¹

More subtly, normative effects such as the absence of women’s voices from authoritative roles in mass media, or different ways of representing men and women in news broadcasts (see section 3.1 above), may simply appear to be good professional practice and are claimed not to be gender-loaded at all – just ‘good reporting’ - but are good practice within the unexamined framework of a gendered media institution.

No gender please – it’s an emergency!

The normative centrality of men and marginality of women can be reasserted by organizational routines even in the midst of crises. More women than men tend to die in major disasters such as tsunamis. But warning systems are designed and controlled by men, social controls on women’s movement affect safety, shelters are not designed for women’s needs, women are generally held responsible for children. Disaster services, including refugee camps, are largely controlled by men, and men rather than women get most of the disaster relief. A study by Fordham, Ariyabandu, Gopalan and Peterson makes these observations, and mentions a typical response by an official to requests for change: “Please don’t raise gender now – we’re in an emergency!”¹⁰²

Indeed, the regular functioning of institutions does not just reproduce old patterns, it reaches out into the future and may create *new* normative or representational patterns supporting gender inequality. To stay with the media, advertisers are in search of novelty and attention-

Bhaskaran, 2004; McLelland & Dasgupta, 2005; Nery, 2012)

¹⁰¹ (Gunnarsson, Andersson & Vänje, 2003)

¹⁰² (Fordham et al., 2006)

grabbing effects; in the last two decades there has been a striking growth of eroticized representations of women in mainstream advertising (including billboards) in Australia, like other affluent anglophone countries.¹⁰³ Add music videos, cosmetic surgery, the diet industry and celebrity journalism, and we seem to be in the presence of an emerging body-normativity for women that no-one has particularly intended but which amounts to a new stereotyping of women in terms of their sexual desirability to men.

In other situations, however, gender effects *are* intended. Suzanne Franzway's close-focus study of the experience of women activists in Australian trade unions shows that their attempts to change the thinking of a movement long controlled by men and focussed on men's concerns, are widely resisted by the men who benefit from the status quo, through practices that range from trivialization of women's concerns to outright sexual harassment.¹⁰⁴

Conscious resistance to normative change is widespread in gender orders around the world, though it is very uneven. Sometimes resistance takes the form of anti-feminist 'men's movements'.¹⁰⁵ More often it takes the form of religious, professional or corporate authority, where institutions controlled by gender-conservative men promulgate norms of inequality as part of their routine functioning. The role of the Catholic Church in opposing change in women's reproductive rights in South America is one well-known example,¹⁰⁶ the role of medical authorities in sustaining ideologies of gender difference and women's inferiority is another.¹⁰⁷ Even more often, resistance by men involves a mixture of formal and informal mechanisms like that described by Franzway – organizational exclusion of women, marginalization of women's concerns, harassment of activist women or non-normative men, declarations about male superiority. Such mixtures are found in many social sites, from schools,¹⁰⁸ to sports,¹⁰⁹ to parliaments¹¹⁰, to workplaces (see section 3.3 above), and more.

Though these practices are widespread, they are not universal. Some men are agents of change in gender norms; this will be documented in section 5 below. Many men have mixed feelings about change in the gender order; in many countries a majority of men express support for gender equality in principle, though they are less supportive of specific changes.

Therefore when change does happen, such as the arrival of some women in a profession or at management levels of an organization, the result may be a process of compromise – through which the main lines of the gender order are re-established. The 'dance' in Italian corporations described by Gherardi and Poggio (see section 3.3 above), in which the organizational gender regime is reconstituted in a slightly changed form, is a very recognizable situation. The women managers studied by Wajcman learn to 'manage like a

¹⁰³ (Reichert & Lambiase, 2006)

¹⁰⁴ (Franzway & Fonow, 2011)

¹⁰⁵ (Messner, 1997; Morrell, 2005)

¹⁰⁶ (Htun, 2003)

¹⁰⁷ (Davies, 2003; Pringle, 1998; Walker, 2005)

¹⁰⁸ (Morrell et al., 2009; Pascoe, 2007)

¹⁰⁹ (Messner, 2002)

¹¹⁰ (Bari, 2010)

man’, that is, adopt normative managerial practices and attitudes despite the pressure it puts on their lives as women.

Indeed such dances and bargaining occur when there is not much pressure for change. A striking ethnographic study studied the relations between salaried men (career-oriented male managers) and office ladies (women secretarial workers) in a very hierarchical workplace, a Japanese bank.¹¹¹ This study found a constant process of negotiations, favours and gifts, in which successful men learned to exercise restraint in the use of their power because they needed the services and support of the women, for their own advancement.

An even more striking organizational study shows how organizational negotiation may have retrogressive effects. Janne Tienari and colleagues conducted interviews with the top executives of a transnational finance corporation created by mergers between Scandinavian banks.¹¹² The executives came from countries with strong public norms of gender equality, including ideas of shared housework and child care. But the world of international finance is strongly masculinized and managers typically work long hours and travel extensively. Tienari and colleagues found that the senior executives of the merged bank, interviewed after the mergers, had adjusted to these other norms. They took management to be naturally men's business, and practiced a managerial masculinity that was competitive, mobile, and work-driven. These shifts seem to have undermined any commitment to Scandinavian norms of gender equality. The male executives distanced themselves from gender issues, portraying gender equality as a goal that came from ‘outside’, from the media or from shareholders.

Gender norms, inequality and sport

A notable example of the mixture of organizational routine and conscious practice in reproducing unequal gender norms is the ethnographic study of Volkswagen workers in México by Fernando Huerta Rojas.¹¹³ The workers mostly live in a housing estate provided by the company, and the social life of the community gives a prominent place to football – played by the men. It is a site of emotional intensity, pleasure, and bonding among the men. The sport becomes an initiation and rite of passage for young men, and a means of establishing prestige. This is strongly institutionalized in the form of social hierarchies, but is also embodied – bodily prowess and power become means of expressing gender symbolically. The prominence of the sport contributes to a social dichotomization of men and women in the community, and creates a normative focus on the men. Women are incorporated into the football arena in subordinate and supportive roles, not as players or decision-makers.

In thinking about the continuity of norms, finally, we should note the significance of persistence and reproduction for gender-equality norms. Kopano Ratele has made a powerful critique of the careless – though widespread - assumption that ‘traditional masculinity’ means

¹¹¹ (Ogasawara, 1998)

¹¹² (Tienari et al., 2005)

¹¹³ (Rojas, 1999)

only patriarchal masculinity.¹¹⁴ Non-patriarchal masculinities that support respectful and nonviolent relations with women, are one of the ways that gender-equality norms are realized; and as Ratele argues, non-patriarchal masculinities have traditions too. Gendered societies were not monolithic in the past; there are multiple currents in tradition, and there is perpetual re-interpretation of tradition anyway.

It is not hard to find evidence that expands Ratele's argument. Kathryn Robinson's examination of gender dynamics in Indonesia emphasises the highly varied *adat* or customs of the Indonesian archipelago, including matrilineal communities, women's industries, diverse women's organizations and agendas.¹¹⁵ Obioma Nnaemeka points to traditions in African communities that emphasise women's strength, where motherhood becomes a source of authority rather than subordination.¹¹⁶ This report mentioned earlier the significance of mobilizations by indigenous women (section 2.1 above). Marcia Langton, an indigenous intellectual in Australia, has shown how 'grandmothers' law', the traditional knowledge and authority of older women, was crucial to the survival of Aboriginal communities under the pressure of colonization in Australia.¹¹⁷

One of the reasons for the vehemence of patriarchal regimes is their attempt to define as age-old tradition what is actually historically recent – the breadwinner/housewife model of gender relations most notably.

5. How norms and stereotypes change

5.1 Through gender dynamics

The power of structures to shape social life often makes gender appear unchanging. However, gender arrangements are always altering, as human practice creates new situations. We demonstrated in sections 3 and 4 above that there are many tensions and incoherencies in the 'materialization' processes where gender norms and stereotypes are created, recreated and contested in lived experience.

It is common to think of change in gender as resulting from forces *external* to gender relations themselves: economic requirements, technology, modernization, democratisation, etc. We will examine some of these processes below; but before addressing them, it is very important to recognize that gender has *internal* dynamics of change. A gender order is not a thing, like a stone, that remains the same if left alone. It is a pattern of human relationships, necessarily being created and re-created by human practice, through time.

Recognizing gender as a structure of social relations helps us understand change in norms. Structures develop crisis tendencies, that is, internal contradictions that undermine current

¹¹⁴ (Ratele, 2013a)

¹¹⁵ (Robinson, 2009)

¹¹⁶ (Nnaemeka, 2005)

¹¹⁷ (Langton, 1997)

patterns, and force change in the structure itself.¹¹⁸ We can distinguish periods when pressures for change are only gradually building, from periods when they erupt into actual crisis and force rapid change. Sylvia Walby notes that there have been different ‘rounds’ of re-structuring in gender orders in Europe, and this is likely to be true elsewhere.¹¹⁹

Thinking in terms of structures of relationship also allows us to identify interests that can be mobilized for and against change. These are not simple issues, but they are important. Kopano Ratele calls attention to the rate of homicide victimization among young black men in South Africa, especially in urban poor communities.¹²⁰ Some forms of violence are not about dominating other men (or women) but appear in response to other men’s violence, including state and structural violence, or as a means of dealing with fear and insecurity. Fear was pervasive against the Apartheid regime, which (like colonialism in general) worked by violence directed mainly against indigenous men; and the fact that young black men still have much to fear is important in the construction of subordinated masculinities among them. That men have a long-term interest in change in gender norms has been argued many times by researchers who have called attention to the *costs* of existing dominant masculinities in terms of health, violence, education, and other threats to survival or wellbeing.¹²¹

It is important, then, that a pattern of gender relations can itself be the object of social practice. The study of a Japanese bank mentioned in section 4 illustrates how bargaining can occur within a gender regime, without changing its main outlines. Bina Agarwal’s research in South Asia (see section 3.4 above) shows how the demand to change discriminatory gender norms can become the subject of local negotiation at household and village level. This possibility is, in fact, the basis of many NGO strategies of gender change in development contexts (see section 5.4 below).

Norms themselves can be contradictory, and this can become part of a dynamic of gender change.

Contradictions in gender norms

A recent close-focus study by Cecilia Espinosa of an unemployed workers’ movement in Argentina shows how contradictory norms can generate change.¹²² The umbrella organization Popular Front ‘Dario Santillan’ (FPDS) brought together both women’s and men’s groups. Women and men had an equal normative place in FPDS’s struggle for social justice. But in practice the leadership was mostly men, and in accordance with wider social norms, women were assigned domestic roles within the organizations and in participants’ homes. However some of the *piqueteras* (women on picket lines) began to articulate gender issues – in the face of resistance and some violent confrontations – pointing to the contradiction with FPDS’s principles of equality. An *Espacio de Mujeres*, women’s space, was created, forcing change

¹¹⁸(Connell, 2009: 11)

¹¹⁹ (Walby, 1997)

¹²⁰ (Ratele, 2013b)

¹²¹ (Courtenay, 2000; Harrison, 1978)

¹²² (Espinosa, 2013)

within the organization. After a few years of pressure the FPDS declared itself anti-patriarchal in its basic goals.

5.2 Through economic dynamics

It is widely assumed that economic modernization in itself is liberating for women, drawing women into the paid workforce, producing more egalitarian norms and undermining stereotypes of women as nurturers and helpmeets. These views have often been associated with naive views of modernization (a notable example being Inglehart and Norris's 2003 *Rising Tide*), that ignore the complex debates about development, globalization and predatory economic relations at a global level.¹²³ These discussions rarely consider the fact that global economic processes, from colonization to globalization, are themselves gendered,¹²⁴ so there cannot be one-way causation.

A more sophisticated view is taken by Stephanie Seguino, who offers macro-level evidence that women's participation in national economies is correlated with later movements of public opinion in favour of gender equality.¹²⁵ The changes are far from uniform, and the data on 'norms' taken from the World Values Survey are subject to the methodological problems discussed in Appendix 1 below. Nevertheless a prima facie case is established that the changing economic position of women is one of the dynamics of normative change.

Level of women's workforce participation is only one of the economic processes that could lead to change in gender norms. Labour migration is another. Scholars of migration have long noted different gender norms and practices in countries of origin and countries of reception and the tensions that arise between first and second generations in migrant families, between the holding-to-tradition in migrant communities and gender changes in the home countries, etc.¹²⁶

Technological change and associated restructuring of industries may also generate change in gender norms. The historian Michael Roper has shown changes in models of managerial masculinity in British engineering firms, from a hands-on fatherly approach to the workforce to calculative, impersonal norms of behaviour, as restructuring transferred organizational power from engineers to accountants.¹²⁷ David Livingstone and Meg Luxton, in a classic study of Canadian steelworkers, show shifts (though no revolution) in the male breadwinner norm as women arrived in the workplace, and as the masculinized shop floor culture was eroded by technological and organizational change in the industry.¹²⁸

Economic change may also take the form of reorganization of whole economies. The most recent of such changes is the rise of neoliberalism, with its agenda of structural adjustment

¹²³ e.g. (Appelbaum & Robinson, 2005; Escobar, 1995; Mbeki, 2009)

¹²⁴ (Chow, 2003)

¹²⁵ (Seguino, 2007)

¹²⁶ e.g. (Bottomley, 1992)

¹²⁷ (Roper, 1994)

¹²⁸ (Livingstone & Luxton, 1989)

including privatisation, deregulation, comparative advantage, lowering taxes, cutting public services, and emphasising entrepreneurialism and individualism. There is extensive debate about the impact of these changes on gender relations and gender norms, with little consensus reached – partly because the effects are actually varied.¹²⁹

In circumstances where economic restructuring has demolished male-dominated heavy industry or public sector employment for men, families rely more on women's earnings and normative masculinities are called into question.¹³⁰ At the same time, with the rise of financialization and the expansion of transnational corporations, new gender hierarchies are created within corporations and non-egalitarian masculinities are constructed in expanded finance industries.¹³¹

We should also be aware that economic processes may result in quite opposite effects for different groups of women. This is strongly argued by Sonia Montecino in Chile, who explores the effects, on discourse and identity, of women coming into the public realm, including the economy.¹³² For many middle- and upper-class women, recent years have seen expanded opportunity in professional employment, and with this, new social identities. But since men in Chile have made few changes in their involvement in housework and child care, these women have only been able to realize these opportunities by employing working-class women as domestic workers. As Montecino puts it, the modernization of gender relations in one group is made possible by the perpetuation of archaic forms of feminine labour for another group.

Neoliberalism: unexpected consequences for gender norms

A fascinating oral-history study by Heidi Tinsman describes the export-oriented fruit industry created in Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship, when the turn to neoliberalism led to a search for international 'comparative advantage'.¹³³ The companies engaged in this business recruited rural women as workers, on a large scale. But the consequences were not as expected. Rural women's command of an income and ability to make shopping trips and purchasing decisions changed the balance of power with husbands. The segregated work groups created by the employers provided an alternative to domestic isolation, and led to new relationships among women. In both respects the process eroded the dictatorship's official patriarchal ideology, which defined women normatively as mothers. Tinsman argues that the processes bringing women into the workforce simultaneously involved new forms of exploitation *and* the erosion of male dominance. These contradictory dimensions to change created conditions for women's political agency and the emergence of gender equality as an ideal.

¹²⁹ (Braedley & Luxton, 2010; Marchand & Runyan, 2010; Seguino, 2007)

¹³⁰ (Gutmann & Viveros, 2005)

¹³¹ (Connell, 2010)

¹³² (Montecino, 2001)

¹³³ (Tinsman, 2000)

5.3 In processes of sociocultural change

Gender is only one of the relational structures of society, and gender dynamics are always in interplay with other processes of change. (This lies behind the recent emphasis on ‘intersectionality’ in sociology.) In South Africa, for instance, gender reform emerged as a dimension of the struggle against the authoritarian Apartheid regime, which was patriarchal as well as racist. Gender reform has been sought, since the early 1990s, as part of the ‘Transformation’ process intended to realize democracy.¹³⁴ An early success was the writing of a norm of gender equality into the new constitution, a move that would not have been possible without the success of the broad struggle to end Apartheid.

Mobilizations against authoritarian regimes in other parts of the world too have enabled reform in gender relations. In the transition to *Reformasi* in Indonesia, the Suharto dictatorship’s apparatuses, which had promoted a deeply subordinated place for women, were disrupted by grassroots women’s movements around economic crisis, a social outcry against the organized rape of ethnic Chinese women, and a multiplication of new women’s organizations.¹³⁵ These mobilizations won new legal ground on domestic violence and rape, though they soon faced attempts to re-domesticate women. Similarly, the struggles against military dictatorships in South America opened new terrain for gender reform – here too with mixed results, but achieving an important shift in the pattern of gender politics.

Such struggles are dramatic examples of broad sociocultural change, in which norms are contested in the public realm and stakes are high. Also of importance are slower-moving, less dramatic changes that may shift gender norms and contest stereotypes.

Perhaps the most discussed is the growth of formal education and literacy, one of the major goals of development and anti-poverty programmes for the last two generations. There appears to be a widespread pattern of more ‘liberal’ opinions, on gender-equality attitude scales, among people with more years of formal education. For instance the IMAGES survey, an international study focussing on men’s attitudes to gender issues, found this pattern among men in a number of countries.¹³⁶

We cannot conclude, however, that more schooling automatically produces progressive attitudes. Since school retention is strongly linked to social class, we may be looking here at the consequences of poverty and wealth. Or, and this is also quite possible, participation in education may be a consequence, rather than a cause, of belief systems that also validate a degree of gender equality. Teasing out such causal tangles is impossible with the blunt instrument of attitude surveys alone; cross-bearings from community studies, and historical studies of the interplay of gender and schooling systems, are also necessary. The curriculum of most school systems is far from a strong endorsement of gender equality, and as shown in section 3.2 above, schools often institutionalize gender hierarchies within themselves. Yet education does have the possibility of triggering change, and there are many ways that can happen.

¹³⁴ (Morrell, 2005)

¹³⁵ (Robinson, 2009)

¹³⁶ (Barker et al., 2011)

One of the complexities of normative change is that abstract principles may move in a given direction while concrete practices do not, or even move in another direction. The IMAGES report just mentioned reports that men are generally positive about gender equality, but also notes “the apparent contradictions in men’s responses that support gender equality in the abstract while resisting it in practice”.¹³⁷

Whether that is a contradiction, however, depends on how ‘the abstract’ is understood, and how links between general principles and concrete practices are made. Contemporary philosophies of language teach us that the meaning of terms is by no means fixed, being subject to deferral and negotiation. Questions of interpretation, of hermeneutics in the Christian tradition and *ijtihad* in Islamic tradition, may remain open. This is, indeed, the space where Christian feminism and Islamic feminism operate, questioning the interpretations offered by patriarchal authorities and finding religious bases for gender equality.¹³⁸

Contestation over gender norms, then, occurs in the realm of culture as well as practical politics. What effects it produces in gender relations is often difficult to tell. Feminist religious groups are small, in comparison with the weight of patriarchal religious authority; a one-teacher initiative is by definition local. These cases point to possibilities rather than widespread realities. But they do reveal the potential dynamism in social processes, which sometimes can be seen on a much larger scale.

One teacher’s work

Wasim Yousuf Bhat tells the illuminating story of a one-teacher initiative in a Kashmiri village, that began to change educational expectations for girls.¹³⁹ The energetic young teacher in question, Aijaz, is a devout Muslim, who wants an active practice focussed on contemporary problems. Despite some disapproval from community elders, he set up a learning centre in the local mosque. Using resources donated by local families, and cooperative learning among the children, the centre began to have impressive effects on children’s academic performance. As one parent said, ‘We saw English speaking children only on television but now our own children can speak the language.’ Aware of the benefits of English language learning, computer skills, and academic pathways, local parents began sending their daughters as well as their sons to the new centre. At the time of the report, half the centre’s sixty students were girls.

Nivedita Menon’s recent analysis of the meanings of ‘gender’ in Indian public life illustrates this.¹⁴⁰ She points to two broad, and contradictory, processes of cultural change. One is the destabilization and proliferation of gender meanings, through the impact of caste politics,

¹³⁷ (Barker et al., 2011: 60)

¹³⁸ For a well-known example see (Mernissi, 1987)

¹³⁹ (Bhat, 2007)

¹⁴⁰ (Menon, 2009)

debates on representation, and anti-normative politics from queer, *hijra*, sex-worker and lesbian perspectives. The other is the stabilization of gender as an official category in the world of NGOs, governance, and development frameworks, and in debates over sex-selective abortion. How these debates will resolve, one would hesitate to predict. What is very clear is the multiple possibilities of change that arise.

5.4 Through social movements and gender equality programmes

Long before Equal Opportunity or Anti-Discrimination laws were thought of, it was recognized that gender relations could be shaped by deliberate social action. Indeed, gender can be considered one of the most regulated areas of human life. Measures taken include marriage and adultery laws, incest prohibitions, dress codes, building design (men's and women's spaces), codes for religious ritual, rules about speech (how one addresses a person, who is allowed to speak to whom), controls over movement, norms for posture and length of hair, eating customs and dietary prohibitions, rules (and sometimes laws) about permissible occupations, definitions of citizenship, gendered property rights - and more.

The immense effort that societies have put into regulating gender is one of the strongest proofs that gender patterns are not a simple reflection of biological difference. Gender relations involve reproductive bodies, of course, in their encounter with historically dynamic social orders.¹⁴¹ Contemporary struggles for justice in gender relations involve a bringing to consciousness of what has been constant through human history – the possibility of change in the resulting social relations. We can see, from even this partial listing of the forms of regulation, that projects of conscious change face a complex, not a simple, normative domain.

It is not surprising, then, that projects of normative change around the world have been very diverse. At a micro level we have the kind of one-teacher initiative taken by Aijaz in Kashmir, described in section 5.3 above. The classroom has been the site for creative work on gender norms and stereotypes by many teachers in many countries. Bronwyn Davies in Australia, for instance, devised ingenious writing lessons in primary school in which children can themselves explore gender discourses and stereotypes, as they invent stories that play with identities and narratives.¹⁴² Still in the field of education, but involving institutional processes, is change in the gender imagery in school textbooks, of the kind documented by Lee in Hong Kong.

How effective are educational initiatives for normative change? There have been attempts at evaluation, using familiar types of attitude measurement before and after interventions. A recent example is Feyza Tantekin Erden's study in a teacher education programme in Turkey.¹⁴³ Gender role attitudes were assessed before and after a group of women students completed a course on gender equity in education, and compared with a control group who did not do the course. Scores were dramatically higher after the course for the enrollees, but not for the control group. Such research demonstrates that some kind of learning has taken

¹⁴¹ (Connell & Pearse, 2015)

¹⁴² (Davies, 1993)

¹⁴³ (Erden, 2009)

place, but is it normative learning? It could also be that the intervention has taught students what kinds of answers to opinion questions are desired by the managers of the intervention. The familiar problem of ‘social desirability’ in attitude measurement is only one of the difficulties affecting evaluation in this domain.

At a far remove from the single classroom is the kind of normative change attempted on gender issues by the Pakistani members of parliament interviewed by Farzani Bari (see section 3.5 above). Here a complex institutional apparatus was involved: Parliament itself, the political parties and their electoral machinery, the voters, the legislation. It is hardly surprising that most of these initiatives were unsuccessful and the pace of change is slow. There is international debate about what constitutes a ‘critical mass’ of women’s representation in legislatures needed before the organizational culture will shift substantially. But there is also a great deal of experience showing that normative reform through the institutions of government depends heavily on social demands and pressures from outside. In the case of gender equality measures, this mainly means pressure from mobilizations of women around questions of gender inequality.

That the pressure will mainly come from women reflects the fact that most gender orders in the world today, as in the past, privilege men in a variety of ways and disadvantage women. With all the variations in forms and levels of gender inequality, and acknowledging the costs of gender inequalities to large groups of men and the fact that some elite women share patriarchal privilege, this remains a basic fact about the social world. It is acknowledged in the very widespread pattern in attitude surveys, where women as a group show more support for change towards egalitarian gender principles, and men as a group show less.

But mass attitudes are not a mechanical consequence of gender inequality; they involve a social learning process on a societal scale, in which women’s mobilizations have a pedagogical effect beyond their immediate successes or failures. There is a very broad history of women’s activism through recent centuries, in the colonized and postcolonial world as well as in the global metropole, as noted in section 3.5 above. This history has been marginalized but is increasingly documented and recognized.¹⁴⁴ Lucia Sorbera for instance, describes the sustained history of women’s activism in Egypt, as part of the revolutionary movements of 1919, the 1950s, and the Arab Spring of 2011, as well as the specifically feminist organizing that produced the pioneering *Ittihad al-Nisa’i al-Misri* (Egyptian Feminist Union) in 1923.¹⁴⁵

Unfortunately, pedagogical effects on a societal scale can’t be assessed by experimental design with control groups and before-and-after measurements. It seems likely, however, that mobilizations such as the Egyptian struggles, and the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s in the global North, have been a vital factor in long-term shifts of public opinion towards gender equality norms. Some empirical support for this view is provided by oral history research, such as Chilla Bulbeck’s interviews with three generations of Australian

¹⁴⁴ (Desai, 2005; Robinson, 2009)

¹⁴⁵ (Sorbera, 2013)

women.¹⁴⁶ Social mobilizations do register in people's biographies and views of what is possible. Some theoretical support is offered by Sonia Montecino's argument, based on Latin American experience, that collective gender identities are formed in projects of change.¹⁴⁷ Mobilizations vary, according to the nature of the state and the struggles undertaken; Latin America has seen two kinds: feminist, which seek change in the division of labour, and maternalist or survival movements, which take the existing gender division of labour for granted.

A distinctive feature of contemporary gender struggles is the existence of pro-equality movements among men. These are rarely on the same scale as mobilizations of women, though they sometimes overlap, as in the 2012-13 outcry against very violent rapes in India. Some are small and informal, such as the group of men in Nkomazi, a rural area of South Africa, who set out to create a more respectful and gender-equal practice in their own families.¹⁴⁸ Others are more formally organized. A creative example is Men Against Violence and Abuse, founded in Mumbai in 1993 and involved in a range of campaigns and cultural work. One of their products is the book *Breaking the Moulds: Indian Men Look at Patriarchy Looking at Men*, with autobiographies and fiction written in a framework of nonviolence and commitment to gender equality.¹⁴⁹ Promundo in Brazil, founded in 1997, and Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa, established in 2006, are other well-known and active NGOs, both with international outreach. In recent years, the NGOs involved in gender-equality work among men have been linked in an global network, MenEngage, and have combined with national governments and UN agencies in anti-violence programmes on a substantial scale.

Again, the normative effects of this work are difficult to assess. Short-term evaluations have been undertaken and identify some changes resulting from programmes;¹⁵⁰ though what kind of change, and how long lasting, is difficult to say. As with women's movements, one of the most important effects may simply be one of presence. The simple existence of such groups declares the possibility that men do not have to be dominators, and gender relations can change.

5.5 Reflections on strategies for normative change

It is notable that in the UN documents calling for reforms towards gender equality (section 1.2 above), statements about gender norms and stereotypes frequently appear in the context of other matters: economic issues, violence, political representation, and so on. In this, the United Nations are well informed. The body of research on gender relations and inequalities, from which this report is compiled, fully confirms that norms are not a sharply separate sphere of gender relations. They can be analytically separated, for purposes of research and reflection; but in practice, in everyday life, norms and stereotypes are closely interwoven with patterns of material resources, power struggles, bodily processes, and emotions.

¹⁴⁶ (Bulbeck, 1997)

¹⁴⁷ (Montecino, 2001)

¹⁴⁸ (Sideris, 2005)

¹⁴⁹ (Ravindra et al., 2007)

¹⁵⁰ (Barker et al., 2000)

Normativity is not the underlying basis of gender relations, but neither is it an insignificant superstructure. It is a significant part of the weave of gendered social life. This is revealed in a fact emphasised through this report, the institutional embedding of many norms. They do not just exist as attitudes in individuals' heads, but are an aspect of organizational structures, criteria in transactions, and collective identities.

This is an important reason why norms can be difficult, and often slow, to change. But it also means that there are very many points in social life at which change can be undertaken. We do not have to wait for some genius to discover the fulcrum of history! Movement towards equality can be pursued, literally, wherever we are.

The research discussed in this report shows that gender norms do not form a simple, one-dimensional domain, of a kind that would make measurement easy and produce reliable recipes for reform. There are often multiple layers in normativity, for instance differences between abstract generalizations and concrete judgments, that produce effects such as endorsement of gender equality as a principle by many men who are nevertheless reluctant to endorse specific reform measures. There can be conflicting currents of belief and emotion. We have called attention to the presence of gender-equality norms as well as gender-inequality norms. Many social traditions exist in the world that support cooperation, tolerance and nonviolence, that can be mobilized in respect of gender justice.

Conflicting beliefs can be held within the same group or even the same person, the phenomenon that psychoanalysis has called 'ambivalence'. Variations of gender norms across social class, ethnicity, religious affiliation, rural/urban location, and other social divisions are frequent. And all such patterns may be re-shaped by large-scale economic change, colonization and decolonization, migration and neoliberal globalization.

The research further shows that norms are frequently contested, under debate and negotiation, in many sites. It is not the case that a smooth, irresistible process of socialization embeds gender norms in every head and guarantees transmission between generations. That may happen, and sometimes does; but often social authorities' attempts at regulation of gender relations meet resistance, avoidance, apparent compliance or occasional conformity. There may be only a loose fit between public normativity and everyday life. (This applies, of course, to gender-equality norms as well as gender-inequality norms.)

Though a sunny view of change often has to be taken in public documents, practical experience and the research evidence show many regressions in struggles for gender equality. In our discussion of organizational change we noted the 'dances' around the arrival of women in a masculine workplace that often result in the restoration of a slightly-adjusted status quo. There are re-inventions of sexism, as we have seen in recent commercial mass media. New intensities of gender-based violence, from femicide in central America to female foeticide in south Asia, have emerged. Political upheavals and social violence may result in regimes being installed that are more committed to gender segregation or male supremacy than the ones they replace. The fall of the Soviet Union, for instance, was the collapse of a regime with a longstanding public commitment to gender equality (though a practice often at odds with the rhetoric); the aftermath has seen some markedly gender-unequal regimes and public culture arising.

The historical terrain on which we now live shows the urgency of reform towards gender equality, but also shows the demanding criteria that strategies of change must meet. We need approaches that are adequate to the real world, in all its complexity and turbulence. Simple formulae will not do.

In the current work and struggle around gender norms, as shown in the research reviewed in this paper, three main strategies of deliberate change are visible.

The first might be called the ‘intervention’ model. This is familiar especially in the development field, in the work of NGOs such as Promundo, and governmental and intergovernmental agencies such as UNIFEM. The typical scenario is literally an intervention into a country, region, or community, sponsored by an organization or a consortium of organizations, with resources from outside the region such as aid funds or foundation grants, and professional expertise. These resources are usually supplied for a limited time only. Prior decisions will have been taken about the topic of the intervention (e.g. domestic violence, child care) and its general character. Its staff will usually be recruited locally and details will be negotiated with local authorities or communities. This may meet up with social movements in the region, who may indeed originate the proposals and seek grants.

Influenced by contemporary ‘audit society’¹⁵¹ there is often a concern with formally documenting the intervention and formally measuring its effects, both for purposes of accountability and to enter the discourse of ‘evidence-based’ policy. There is also a concern that interventions should be ‘scalable’, i.e. small-scale interventions, if considered successful within the time they are supported, can be reproduced on a larger scale. It is often an intention that the professionalism brought in from outside will be transferred to local activists, through experience or through a programme of ‘trainings’, leaving the issue in the hands of an upskilled local workforce.

The second approach might be called, borrowing a term from the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, the ‘untested feasibility’ model.¹⁵² A recent paper by Jorge Knijnik explains this idea and uses the term to describe the activist strategy of Juliana Cabral, a celebrated football player in Brasil who has campaigned for years to break down the stark gender inequality and exclusion in this sport.¹⁵³ Untested feasibility involves a realization by individuals and communities that they can go transformatively beyond their current experience of the world, to new and as yet untested possibilities. The concept applies well to the ‘supportive practices’ narrated in Radhika Chopra’s *Reframing Masculinities*, and in a different way to the work of reinterpretation by religious groups, to art activism, and some of the classroom approaches discussed earlier.¹⁵⁴

Its logic can be found in the recent discussion by Abhijit Das and Satish Singh of the group Men’s Action for Stopping Violence Against Women (MASVAW) in India.¹⁵⁵ Though this

¹⁵¹ (Power, 1999)

¹⁵² (Freire, 2000)

¹⁵³ (Knijnik, 2012)

¹⁵⁴ (Chopra, 2007)

¹⁵⁵ (Das & Singh, 2014)

work has been supported by grants, and it partly follows the ‘intervention’ model, it more strongly shows a collective-learning model in which a continued evolution of projects and approaches occurs, now spanning 12 years and continuing, with an emphasis on the emergence of local activists. The approach to knowledge in this work is closer to the ‘action research’ cycle familiar in education than it is to the audit process. Freire’s thinking, with its evocation of a utopian dimension in social action, suggests that such models must always be moving beyond the limits of auditing and evaluation. Das and Singh go so far as to propose a pragmatically-based but ambitious ‘theory of change for working with men to dismantle patriarchy’.

The third type of strategy might be called the ‘public sphere’ model. Trying to leverage the power of formal institutions and mass communication in contemporary societies, this moves away from the face-to-face relationships that are central to work like MASVAW’s. Struggles for gender-equality laws, attempts to change levels of representation in parliaments, campaigns against media sexism, ‘social marketing’ against domestic violence, are examples.

This approach recognizes that corporations, governments, aid agencies and NGOs, the institutional bases of the ‘intervention’ strategy, are far from gender-neutral themselves. The public realm is a major arena of gender inequalities and normative change must be attempted in this arena too. The intense debates over gender mainstreaming mentioned in section 3.5 illustrate the difficulties of deciding strategy in this realm, where effects are often long-term and indirect. Yet the sheer reach of institutions like mass media, governments and transnational corporations make them significant for normative change at a societal scale.

As there is no master determinant of gender relations, there is no master key to strategies of normative change. Pressure on multiple fronts is needed, and our survey of the terrain shows how many opportunities for creative work exist.

Appendix 1: Research methods and their problems, in studies of gender norms

As shown in Section 2 above, the problems and concepts in this field are complex, and there is a great need for clarity and understanding in policy discussions. There is, therefore, a great need to incorporate research findings. Research findings, however, are dependent on the research methods. There are considerable problems in the research methods currently used to study gender norms.

In particular, there are major problems about the large multi-country surveys that have become prominent in this field recently, such as the World Values Survey,¹⁵⁶ the IMAGES survey coordinated by Promundo and the International Centre for Research on Women,¹⁵⁷ and the recent World Bank report *On Norms and Agency*.¹⁵⁸ These are impressive, expensive projects that appear to give solid, objective information on gender processes across many countries. In fact they are less useful guides than they immediately appear.

In this appendix we review in turn the main methodologies in the current literature, outlining their problems and limitations; at the end, suggesting a strategy for the use of research evidence in gender equality policy discussions.

Opinion polls

The most familiar information about norms comes from sample surveys of public opinion. Such surveys are now carried out in most countries of the world by market research companies and media companies. They can be done by written questionnaire, face-to-face interview, telephone interview, or on-line. Researchers usually consider face-to-face interviewing to be the best, but this is expensive, so remote interviewing (CATI, computer-assisted telephone interviewing) is now more common. This means that only people with telephones will be included. Sample representativeness is often poor in market research, for the simple reason that high-quality samples are much more costly. Good quality national samples (usually based on multi-stage random sampling) are sometimes available.

The deeper problems about poll data concern the nature of the measurement that is attempted. In the usual format, the researcher offers a generalized statement on some issue, and asks the respondent to agree or disagree. For instance, from the IMAGES survey: “*The most important role for a woman is to take care of her family and home*” [Le rôle le plus important de la femme c’est de prendre soin de sa famille et sa maison]. In Mali, one of the countries participating, 81% of men in the sample were recorded as being in “total agreement” with this statement and only a small minority were opposed;¹⁵⁹ on the basis of such data, the researchers conclude that traditional norms do support gender inequality in Mali. Here are the reasons to be cautious about such data:

¹⁵⁶ (Inglehart & Norris, 2003)

¹⁵⁷ (Barker et al., 2011)

¹⁵⁸ (Boudet et al., 2012)

¹⁵⁹ (Slegh & Kimonyo, 2010)

1. The questions are put in a generalized, abstracted form that is remote from the way value-based choices are actually made in everyday life. Assent to the questions may mean nothing in terms of social practice.

2. Poll findings are usually interpreted by attributing ‘face validity’ to the item, i.e. assuming that its meaning is immediately obvious. But opinion-type items may be subject to strong ‘social desirability’ biases. People often respond to them in terms of what they think is the approved response (by a community, or by a researcher), rather than in terms of individual opinion. Such data will over-estimate social consensus.

3. The percentages responding ‘approve’, ‘disapprove’, etc., are markedly affected by the exact wording of the opinion item. Percentages can be raised or lowered by apparently small changes in wording. This is usually ignored by media discussions of poll data, but is such a strong feature of survey items that it was the basis of a whole scaling technique (known as Guttman scales).

4. Responses to individual opinion items are relatively ‘unreliable’ – that is to say, the same person is likely to give different answers on different occasions. Correlations with other variables will be weak. A likely reason for unreliability is that opinion poll items, which produce a question and answer in a matter of seconds, can tap only surface levels of consciousness.

Opinion poll items are a weak basis for drawing conclusions about norms. This is not to say studies such as IMAGES have no use. They can be very informative about the frequency and correlates of concrete gender *practices* – e.g. divisions of labour, or experiences of violence.

Attitude scales

The problem of unreliability in poll-type individual attitude items can be overcome by combining a number of items into a single measure of the attitude. The resulting attitude ‘scales’ range from three or four items upwards to thirty or forty, or even more.

Psychologists, political scientists and sociologists, in the USA especially, have been devising such measures for a long time. When Carole Beere compiled a *Handbook* of them, she found 235 scales of sex roles, sex role prescriptions, etc., already in existence in 1979!¹⁶⁰ New ones are still being produced, such as the Gender Equitable Men (GEM) scale in the IMAGES study.

The typical way gender norms, culture or traditions are operationalized in these studies is shown by Inglehart and Norris’s “Gender Equality Scale”, based on the World Values Survey. This consists of five poll-type statements (e.g. “*On the whole, men make better political leaders than women*”), to which all respondents are asked to agree or disagree. Answers to these five items tend to overlap (technically, they all load on the same principal component, and Cronbach’s *alpha* for this scale is .54). A combined score is then calculated (e.g. by adding up the number of ‘positive’ answers on the set of items) as the measure of each respondent’s commitment to gender equality. Averages for different social groups (e.g. different generations, different countries) can then be derived. More or less complex

¹⁶⁰ (Beere, 1979)

statistical analyses can be performed on the scores' relationships with other variables, by making certain mathematical assumptions about the attitude domain.

The rhetorical effect of attitude scaling is to produce an appearance of scientificity and objectivity – measurements to two decimal places, correlation coefficients, factor analyses, etc. Reasons to be cautious of such data are:

1. Problems 1 and 2 about opinion items are reproduced unchanged in attitude scales, which consist of a combination of opinion items. Problems 3 and 4 are partly overcome; but the items remain at the surface level of consciousness.

2. We know that gender relations are multidimensional (see sections 2 and 3 of this report). Gender norms may refer to variously to economic relations, power structures, emotional relations, institutional practices, and more. By focussing on the overlap in variance between items, indeed by choosing items for a scale to maximize the overlap (e.g. maximizing *alpha*), the attitude-scaling process collapses a complex structure into a single dimension of difference. A radical simplification of the domain of gender is produced.¹⁶¹

3. Since, in the making of a scale, items are selected on the basis of their intercorrelation, and combined scale scores are preferred because of their greater reliability, the element of contradiction in culture and attitudes is squeezed out methodologically. *Non-coherence* is treated as random noise, e.g. items that do not 'scale' are dropped from the measure. This is important, because contradiction is a likely source of change. Scale research tends systematically to exaggerate the coherence and stability of the attitude domain.

4. Reporting of scale studies generally focusses on comparisons of averages, rarely with the degree of *dispersion* of attitudes highlighted. For a classic example see the illustration of "Gender Equality Scale by nation", on p. 33 of Inglehart and Norris's book *Rising Tide*.¹⁶² (Text-books of methodology emphasise the importance of measures of variation such as standard deviations; but policy discussions rarely focus on this.) Here the research report creates an impression of community consensus, that may have no factual basis at all.

5. Because sample-survey methodology makes individuals the data points, the whole domain of institutional dynamics of gender – the role of law, land ownership, organizational practices, patterns of symbolization in media, etc. – is ignored. In this way too, the picture of gender norms is radically impoverished.

Like opinion polls, attitude scale studies on their own are a weak basis for understanding gender norms in society. They do have value for some research problems, especially for studying the inter-connection of (simplified dimensions of) attitude with other variables, such as generation and social class.

Focus groups

¹⁶¹ Sophisticated attitude studies, usually administered in university classes, *can* produce multi-factor attitude models, at the cost of very long questionnaires. This is not practicable in large-scale social surveys.

¹⁶² (Inglehart & Norris, 2003)

The 2012 World Bank report *On Norms and Agency* might seem to escape most of the problems of polls and scales, coming from a “qualitative” study. It has impressive size – 20 countries, nearly 500 focus group discussions and about 4000 people. The labour of assembling and interpreting this material was formidable and the report has many vivid quotations illustrating gender norms and women’s agency. The authors are struck by the ‘universality and resilience of the norms that underpin gender roles’ (p. 148), and are impressed by the way ‘traditions’ hamper women’s agency.

When we look more closely, however, serious doubts arise:

1. Multi-site ethnography is now a recognized and important research technique in social science. But the World Bank study was not an ethnography. It was accurately defined in the report as “a 20-country rapid qualitative assessment”. It mainly used the ‘focus group’ technique that has been developed by market research companies to produce quick-and-dirty studies for advertising campaigns. The focus groups, averaging about eight people, met for 2.5 to 3 hours each. This would (at best) be equivalent to 22 minutes’ individual interviewing of each participant - considerably *less* than the IMAGES interviews. So the claim of being a ‘qualitative’ study does not actually mean research in depth.

2. The study used World Bank organization and staff to assemble the project team and the focus groups. Considerable selectivity of the ‘sample’ can be presumed. Indeed it is characteristic of focus groups that we do not know who or what they represent. With a notable absence of reflexivity, the report gives no consideration to the World Bank’s own prominent role in structural adjustment and other interventions that have impacted gender relations in the countries involved. What comes out of research is greatly dependent on what goes in. In this case there is a strong injection of the World Bank’s own neoliberal view of the world.

3. An attempt was made to standardize the procedure by setting up an agenda for the focus groups, devising common stimuli and questions for discussion. In this way a standardized and implicitly global-North definition of gender issues was built in. For instance the participants were asked to discuss the qualities of a ‘good wife’. Apparently the researchers were not familiar with communities where very large numbers of women do not marry; or where being a good mother or even a good daughter is more important than being a good wife.

4. The data were processed through a type of qualitative-analysis computer programme (specifically *nVivo*) which usually has the effect of homogenizing large bodies of data. It is not surprising that the researchers were impressed by the ‘universality’ of the norms. With these methods, they could hardly have found anything else. Programmes such as *nVivo* index transcripts by keyword or theme. They make it easy to find illustrative but decontextualized quotations. Decontextualized quotations are indeed the mainstay of the *On Norms and Agency* report.

Focus groups were invented as a cheap method for market research. They easily produce quotations that can be cherry-picked to give an appearance of authenticity (much as scale studies give an appearance of scientificity). Focus groups should be left to the market researchers. They give no depth of understanding, reliability of measurement, nor clarity about the scope of conclusions. They do not yield solid understanding of gender norms.

Ethnographic studies

‘Qualitative research’ may mean quick focus-group projects, but may also refer to much more substantial studies of communities and institutions. Borrowing a term from anthropology, these are often called ‘ethnographies’. The method is widely used also in sociology, education research, development studies, political science and other fields. The basis of the method is close-focus observation of a particular social site – such as a village, a suburb, a school, an office, a factory - usually over a period of months and sometimes over many years. An individual researcher or small research team may be involved. Many examples are given in this report, especially in sections 3.2 and 3.3 above.

Ethnographic research typically produces a wealth of data about a particular site, and has the capacity to overcome the problems of shallowness, unreliability and abstraction in the methods just discussed. As a means of studying gender norms, ethnography has the virtue of studying norms concretely, in their actual application; and of studying norms in a rich context of social practices and institutions. Nevertheless, this methodology too has its limitations and problems. These cautions should be born in mind:

1. Ethnographic research is necessarily slow. It takes time to gain trust, to accumulate knowledge, to sort through complex observations, and to identify regularities. It is therefore costly; and usually small-scale. Problems constantly arise about how far conclusions established in one social site can be generalized to others. Traditionally comparisons have been done after the fact, in the library.

2. Historically, ‘ethnography’ developed as the method of social anthropology, in which researchers from Europe and North America went to live in ‘primitive’ communities and reported back about their ways of life. Anthropology was interwoven with colonial government. When ethnography was undertaken in sociology, it was typically the working class, the poor or ethnic minorities who were studied. Ethnography thus developed as a research technique built around the privileged outsider. This is also true of survey research, but the problem is little discussed there. It is discussed in ethnography, where post-colonial critiques have developed and questions of power, responsibility, and ownership of knowledge have been actively debated. From Aotearoa New Zealand, Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s notable book *Decolonizing Methodologies* presents this critique and offers paths forward for research with and by indigenous people.¹⁶³

3. Ethnographic methods in the social sciences generally presuppose social coherence. Their descriptions of gender norms focus on what is stable over time, and is seen across different situations. As Jane Bennett in South Africa points out about gender research in the postcolonial world, much is done in conditions where ‘relative chaos, gross economic disparities, displacement, uncertainty and surprise’ are the *usual* condition, not the exception¹⁶⁴ – partly because of the legacy of colonialism and postcolonial interventions by the global North. For understanding structural conflict, social disorder, or what Veena Das calls ‘critical events’,¹⁶⁵ ethnography may not be appropriate.

¹⁶³ (Smith, 2012)

¹⁶⁴ (Bennett, 2008: 7)

¹⁶⁵ (Das, 1995)

Multi-country studies

The costliness of large comparative projects is relevant. They are mainly funded by global-North agencies, such as the Rockefeller Foundation or aid funds from Northern governments. Such funding brings accountability regimes that instal Northern research models and European or North American understandings of gender and society. These can be embedded in the very measurement techniques used to identify gender attitudes or norms, as noted above. In quantitative comparative studies such as the World Values Survey, the gender orders of different regions are squeezed into a single model for the purposes of statistical comparison. This model naturally reflects the social experience of researchers in the global North who devised the original item pools and survey designs.

Averages for whole countries play a considerable role in the interpretations of such surveys offered to readers, and these interpretations circulate in the policy literature. This kind of comparison treats nations as methodologically separate social units – it is an example of the “methodological nationalism” that has been powerfully criticized by Ulrich Beck.¹⁶⁶ The abstract comparisons and rankings of nations ignore what we know about their historical and contemporary interconnection - through conquest, colonization, trade, investment and ownership, media influence, migration, and more. At its most toxic level, the result is the ‘league tables’ of gender equality which, regrettably, are produced by agencies such as UNDP. Much better ways of monitoring progress on gender equality have been produced, such as the ICC (index of achieved commitments) in Latin America.¹⁶⁷

In recent decades, a method of ‘multi-site ethnography’ has developed. This overcomes the isolation of classic ethnography by conducting simultaneous, partly standardized, studies in a number of different places, for instance in different countries. This is promising, and does not fall into the ‘league table’ trap. But it is slow, and even more expensive than single-site ethnography.

Conclusion

This discussion does not exhaust the field; gender norms and stereotypes are also investigated by media content analysis (see section 3.1 above), in life-history case studies, in historical documentary analysis, and more. The notes in this Appendix may however be enough to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of methods most often involved in policy debates.

Gender is not a simple subject to research, and our knowledge of gender norms and stereotypes is always likely to be imperfect and even fragmentary. This is not satisfying, if one expects that research will produce clear-cut policy solutions. But research rarely does that in *any* field.

If research is regarded as a source of *deeper understanding and clarification*, rather than a machine producing solutions, it can play an important role for gender equality policy. This

¹⁶⁶ (Beck, 2002)

¹⁶⁷ (Valdés, Muñoz & Donoso, 2003)

view of research is particularly appropriate to the ‘untested feasibility’ and ‘public sphere’ models of normative change (see section 5.5 above).

Understanding and clarification are most likely to be produced not by a single research methodology but by a rich *combination* of research methods, giving weight to the methods that produce the fullest understanding of complex social situations. Therefore we applaud multi-method studies such as the recent investigation of men’s involvement in child care from Jane Kato-Wallace, Gary Barker, Marci Eads and Ruti Levto¹⁶⁸.

The present report attempts to combine quantitative, ethnographic, life-history, media and institutional studies, with critical reflection on their limits, as bases for understanding gender norms and normative change.

¹⁶⁸ (Kato-Wallace et al., 2014)

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