

VIEWPOINT

MOVING TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

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(ORCID: 0000-0002-7944-6464)**ABSTRACT**

PURPOSE: This paper discusses the historical trajectory of gender equality, and elucidates key impediments related to culture, society, politics and the economy.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: The research looks at gender equality as a fundamental human right that all societies should seek. It examines the feminist movement's history in both developed and under-developed countries.

FINDINGS: The paper finds that gender equality has come a long way since the first women's movement. However, there are some impediments (cultural, functional, political) that are getting in the way of gender equality: there is still a long way to go to achieve true equality. This is not to say that nothing can be done. Each and every woman and girl can start this process individually and challenge traditional patriarchy in her own capacity and in her own way.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE OF THE PAPER: This paper is the first to discuss that advancing women's empowerment is fundamental for advancing education, protecting the well-being of girls and boys, promoting healthcare and advancing social values that are the backbone for decreasing violence and promoting peace and communication.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS: In research on gender equality, several research and practical limitations can affect the output. Methodologically, the hypothesis and the output are based on historical and prospective observational studies. Therefore, they are subject to biases that may have influenced the output. Furthermore, restricted demographic diversity might limit the generalisation of the results.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: Practically, the implementation of gender equality can face cultural and social constraints that differ from one social setting to another. Additionally, research is still needed on the topic of the evolution of gender equality in the long term.

KEYWORDS: *Women's Rights; Feminism; Equal Opportunity; Empowerment*

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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality has been a longstanding issue across societies worldwide. It has been an important topic since its inception in the 19th century and women's movements have been ongoing ever since. There is no specific definition for gender equality. Some definitions emphasise the social aspect, while others the professional perspective using equity as a common denominator. However, the most encompassing definition of gender equality is the one proposed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) around “expanding freedoms and improving overall quality of life so that equality is achieved without sacrificing gains for males and females” (USAID, 2012). Gender equality has many nuances, but the most encompassing one is “the measurable equal representation of women and men. Gender equality does not imply that women and men are equal but that they have equal value and should be accorded equal treatment”. Of course, equal treatment signifies that cultural and social factors are given equal weight for both men and women, which is not the case.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right that all societies should seek; however, they sometimes choose not to. Advancing women's empowerment is fundamental for advancing education, protecting the well-being of girls and boys, promoting healthcare and advancing social values. Those values are the backbone for decreasing violence and promoting peace and communication in societies. Therefore, gender equality is a prerequisite to achieving peaceful societies, with full human potential and sustainable development. Empowering women increases productivity and economic growth; therefore, gender equality is an essential component of social development and it is one of the indicators of the level of development in a country.

This paper describes the historical trajectory of gender equality, elucidates key impediments related to culture, society, politics and economy, and proposes some food for thought.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of feminism is filled with struggles and turning points that advanced the movement to reach its present state. The emergence of patriarchal systems in ancient civilisations, faced by the waves of feminist movements and legal advances, mark the history of gender equality.

Historically, societal structures in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, Rome and ancient Greece segregated men and women and defined them within specific and distinct roles; this strengthened patriarchal ties and the submergence of men at the expense of women. Women were identified as being child bearers doing house chores, while men were responsible for bringing food to the table and being the head of the family.

Feminist movements started to appear in the 1840s with the main goal being to break those patriarchal ties. The suffrage movement was a turning point in the history of gender equality. The

first movement appeared in New York; it then swept to Europe and Australia. Literature identifies four waves of feminist movements.

The first wave (1848-1920) advocated social, political and religious rights and focused on suffrage rights. The second wave (1963-1970s) expanded the scope of feminism to include social and economic rights. The third wave (1990s-2000) featured individualism and the right to express sexuality, as well as advocating against sexual harassment and intersectional feminism. The fourth wave (2000-present), which some people refer to as being a continuity of the third wave because it continued to advocate intersectionality, is concerned with the systems that affect or cause gender inequality.

Feminist waves swept the whole globe, not just in the Americas and Europe. Sudan and Egypt fought for women's rights in the early 20th century despite their conservative cultures. Feminist movements have come a long way in the social sphere, but not as much in political and professional representation. The history of gender equality is marked by struggles, achievements and ongoing challenges. Even though many improvements were made, inequalities persist; this requires additional efforts to be made.

Pressure from feminist movements created legislative and policy changes that were instrumental in promoting gender equality. Anti-discrimination laws, such as Title VII in the US and the Equality Act in the UK, prohibit discrimination based on gender in the workplace, education and public accommodation. On the same note, affirmative action policies seek to protect and provide preferential treatment for marginalised groups (Thornton, 2023).

IMPEDIMENTS TO GENDER EQUALITY

Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality. This is true not just in under-developed countries but also in developed countries, to varying degrees. The Social Institutions and Gender Index 2023 (SIGI) global report on gender discrimination concludes that the path towards equality remains rocky and bumpy (OECD, 2023a). There are cultural, social, political and economic impediments that are considered barriers to achieving gender equality.

CULTURAL IMPEDIMENTS

The culture in which we live undeniably affects the behaviour of both women and men. Those predisposed values relayed by parents and societal cues are at the heart of how we behave.

Girl child marriage still exists in force in some parts of the world. In Latin America and the Caribbean, child marriage rates have stagnated at 25% (OECD, 2023b), while such marriages are still increasing in sub-Saharan countries. In 2023, 33% of women from those countries were married

before reaching 18 years of age (OECD, 2023b). There are two main reasons related to girl child marriage: (1) the practice is closely related to avoiding social stigma, (2) it is related to the idea that marrying off early increases the chances of getting pregnant. The views that confine women to a reproductive machine have disastrous effects on women's health and well-being.

Across the globe, social norms and traditional views tend to assign responsibilities to both men and women. How men should behave, and how they are expected to behave to assert their masculinity is often the same coin of how women are expected to behave. While men bring food to the table, women are expected to give priority to the household chores and to raising children. Worldwide, 45% of the population thinks that when jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to them than women, and 35% of the population believes that when a woman earns more than her husband, it causes problems. At the same time, mirroring these norms of restrictive masculinities, 65% of the population believes that being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay, and 56% declare that when a mother works for pay, the children suffer (OECD, 2023b).

Women are raised on those traditional values and therefore absorb them subconsciously. They tend to mirror those values in their behaviour, leading to enforcing the *status quo* forming stagnant societies.

SOCIAL IMPEDIMENTS

Social practices are at the heart of gender inequalities and are defined as a set of formal and/or informal laws, norms and practices that govern behaviour in society and dictate what women and men are allowed to do, what they are expected to do, and what they actually do (OECD, 2023b). Those social practices are weighted towards men, therefore creating discrimination and discriminatory practices.

Discriminatory social norms are related to unequal power dynamics and discriminatory legal frameworks. The rigid social norms include the belief that men should be tough and women need nurturing. Discriminatory legal frameworks related to unequal opportunities provide both girls and boys with equal opportunities to go to school, achieve and learn. There are discriminatory laws in relation to civil rights, marriage and divorce.

Gender roles assigned to us, such as women are powerless and men are powerful, tend to worsen the gap between men and women. The fact that it is not socially acceptable in some societies for a woman to speak up for herself in public poses a barrier to women's access to decision making; this leads us to restrictive masculinities, biases and stereotypes. The unequal power dynamics make power closely associated with masculinity.

These discriminatory social gaps rest below the surface, reinforcing the *status quo*. The outcomes are related to gender gaps in STEM, limited agency, gender pay and labour gaps, and lack of political representation.

Therefore, focusing on social institutions and strengthening efforts to transform discriminatory social norms are essential to achieving gender equality as it is often foreseen as a bottleneck that prevents change from happening. However, this is occurring more in “open societies” than in “closed societies”. Equal gender representation in closed societies becomes disparate and then becomes the norm.

POLITICAL IMPEDIMENTS

The study of politics and women has always been concerned with patriarchy and women’s exclusion from political activity. Women are still under-represented in political institutions. This is true in under-developed countries as well as in developed countries but to varying degrees. According to the report issued by SIGI, parliaments will reach parity between women and men in 40 years. The political representation is improving, but slowly. This is mainly due to around 50% of the population believing that men make better political leaders than women; that number is shocking.

What can help is initiating laws to protect women from domestic violence, enacting civil rights laws for marriage and divorce, and anti-discrimination laws. We must develop and talk about gender transformative policies. This is important to advocate in under-developed countries more than in developed countries where traditional culture is a barrier to law and policy initiation. Exposing university students to gender courses in universities is an important step towards moulding flexible citizens in the future.

ECONOMIC IMPEDIMENTS

Women continue to be under-represented in both private and public positions of power. This is across the globe although to varying degrees. The percentage of women who are top leaders is far lower than men. South East Asia has the highest percentage of women top leaders across the globe, while the Americas have the highest percentage of women in managerial positions. In most countries, especially in under-developed countries, top positions that are traditionally held by men are rarely given to women. However, positions that are held by women can easily go to men without having this dogma. It seems as if the position can be either masculine or feminine. This is to add that women are paid less than men across the globe for the same position. This is highlighted by a report from CUPA-HR where pay disparities between men and women as faculty and staff were analysed. We should establish Higher Education Equal Pay Days for 2024. The results indicate that women in higher education are paid 82 cents on the dollar less than men (Burrell, 2024).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

There is no easy fix for the gender equality dilemma. It is a dilemma since there are many moving parts as well as many contradictory and situational factors.

It can be argued that change starts at the top and then it trickles to the bottom. However, it is hard to wait for change to happen at the top since, as we already discussed, decision-making, as well as politics and economics, is run by men across the globe. As discussed, change is happening but at a very slow pace. Women are half of the population around the world. Therefore, I do not believe that we have to wait for change but rather should initiate change from within. So, change can start within each and every person. Change starts within you and then it can move upward. Society is mostly shaped by women, so, if we teach our sons and daughters to be equal, those sons and daughters will grow up and will spread those values. We will have more probability of seeing change.

Change also happens through raising children based on social justice and what values are transmitted to them. For instance, boys must be taught to respect girls and to treat them as equals, and girls must be taught to stand up for themselves; we must encourage them when they do that. It is also important not to differentiate between girls and boys, especially when it comes to education. Girls are entitled to continue their higher education learning in the same way as boys. Parents, and especially mothers, should encourage them to do so. Education helps in setting life priorities and in choosing wisely. It is imperative to note that women need to stop spreading traditional values and start spreading modern values that are not in conflict with the essence of our believed values. Teaching children to be empathic about gender equality issues by reflecting on the self is a must.

And finally, the impact of the contemporary women's movement must not be forgotten in the fight towards gender equality. Since it began, the women's movement has generated important advances for women in almost every sphere of life. Brave women (and some men) challenged the *status quo* by calling attention to civil rights and social rights as well as bridging the gap of gender inequality in the workplace, education and elsewhere. They brought sexual harassment and domestic violence into the international consciousness. For gender inequality to continue to be reduced, it is essential that a strong women's movement continues to remind us of the sexism that still persists all over the world.

CONCLUSIONS

Since its inception, gender equality has come a long way and the way is still far from ending. Amidst cultural, social, political and economic impediments to equality of the sexes, exacerbated by wars and economic crises, the picture is not that bright. However, despair is not an option and brave men and women will have to continue the bumpy road of gender equality.

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BIOGRAPHY



Dr Hala Abou Arraj has 30 years of higher education expertise in the Middle East and the USA. She moved to Idaho State University in June 2022 as the Registrar. Dr Arraj was previously at the American University of Beirut in Beirut, Lebanon, where she filled many positions in higher education. She is currently the Vice President of International Education at the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO).