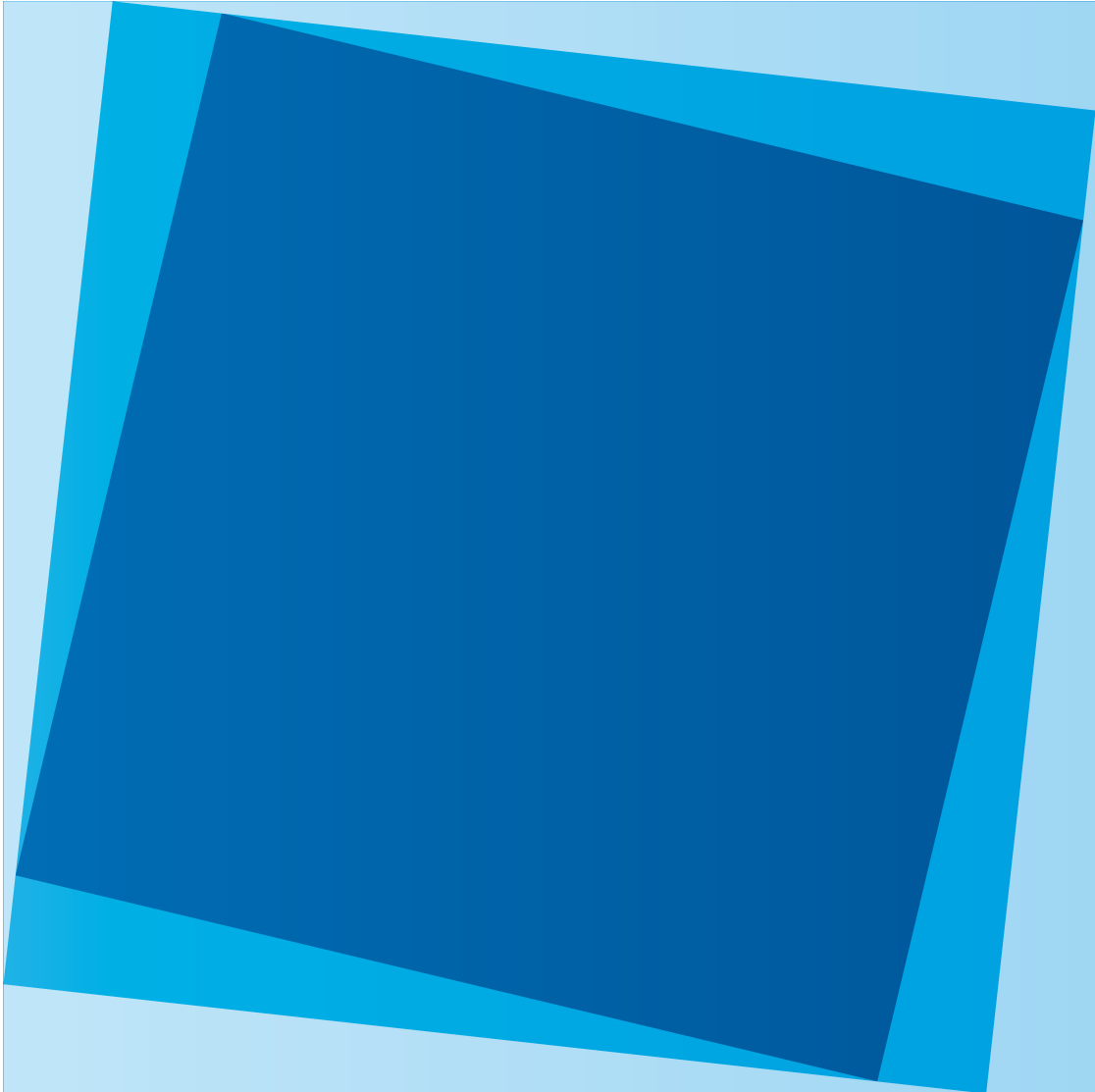


Towards a New Enlightenment? A Transcendent Decade



Gender Inequalities: “Past” Issues and Future Possibilities

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Recommended book: *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*, Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, 2015 (4th edition).

This article is concerned with the question of progress made on gender issues in a global context, specifically in terms of how far gender equality has been achieved, or not, in the past decade. It also reflects on how we might tackle one of the most pressing social, economic, and political issues of our times and effectively address this in the next decade and beyond. In so doing, it also considers the effects of political, social, and economic shifts on women's (but also men's) lives in both global and everyday contexts. In addition, how individuals and groups are resisting and challenging gender inequalities and attempting to intervene and correct the causes and consequences of gendered power imbalances will be discussed.

Introduction



To look at all areas of gendered life and inequality is beyond the scope of this piece. Therefore, I will discuss arguments that have been put forward that argue a case for the continuing existence of international gendered power relations in a number of specific areas: initially, education and violence. These arguments suggest that gendered inequality is visible in both public and private spheres, especially the economic, political, and social aspects, and provide evidence across some of the most pressing examples of gendered inequalities. The validity of the arguments that gender inequalities are still entrenched and persist over time, place, and culture will initially be compared to alternative claims that gendered power relations, and thus inequalities, are gradually being eroded. Moreover, given the current academic focus on the concept of intersectionality, that is, how the variables of class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, for example, intersect in relation to people's gendered experiences, this concept is included in discussion here. The case study of women's global activism will provide a framework to further discuss these issues and take up some of the questions that have been raised.

In addition, I will conclude with an argument that the study of inequality in relation to gendered identities, relations, and experiences must continue with, and further utilize, the relatively recent exploration of the study of men and masculinities if the theoretical analysis of gender is to be enriched, and inform the (still) much-needed focus on women's experiences alone. I also argue the view that in relation to the future academic study of gender, as well as people's everyday gendered experiences in a global context, that to set the agenda for a more equal future society, we need to link gender much more closely to other inequalities, such as ethnicity and sexuality. I also consider forging new links between the academy and recent forms of activism in an international context.

There are those who argue that gender inequalities around the world are getting less. Dorius and Firebaugh, in their 2010 study, investigated global trends in gender inequality. Using data to research developments in gender inequality in recent decades across areas including the economy, political representation, education, and mortality, they conclude that a decline in gender inequalities can be seen which spans diverse religious and cultural traditions. Despite the fact that population growth is slowing this decline, as population growth is more prevalent in countries where there is most evidence of gender inequality. However, even optimistic studies such as this admit that:

Optimism about the future of global gender equality must be cautious for two reasons. First is the obvious point that there is no guarantee that current trends will continue. Second, gender equality can be seen as a two-step process that can be summarized colloquially as 'first get in the club, then attain equality within the club.' Most of the indicators we examine here focus on attaining membership in the 'club'—enrolling in school, joining the economically active population, becoming a member of the national legislature. Gender parity on these indicators is only part of the story since, to cite one example, men and women are entering highly sex segregated labor markets, at least in industrialized countries (Charles and Grusky, 2004). (Dorius and Firebaugh, 2010: 1959).

There is overwhelming evidence that would refute this and other similar linear perspective accounts of progress in gender matters. The recent *World Inequality Report* (WIR2018; Avaredo et al., 2018) is a major systemic assessment of globalization outlining income and wealth inequality, and documents a steep rise in global economic inequality since the 1980s, and this is despite strong growth in many emerging economies. It is within this context that any

analysis of gendered inequalities must be placed. Of course, poor men, men of color, gay men, to name just some of the groups other than women, are affected by economic, racial, and sexual discrimination. But overall, it is women who bear the brunt of poverty, violence, and inequality in the workforce, for example. Indeed, on average, the world's women earn twenty-four percent less than men (UNWomen, 2015).



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Discussing her recent book (Campbell, 2014a), UK-based writer and journalist Beatrix Campbell (2014b) takes the stance that such liberal thinkers have an over optimistic view that the road to gender equality is now within sight. Conversely, she argues this is largely an illusion. She defines the current era as one of "neopatriarchy" where rape, sex trafficking, and the unwon fight for equal pay characterize societies. Earlier, in 2014c, she forcefully argued that in the first decade of this century, the actual conditions which she deems necessary to end inequalities between the sexes have, in fact, been extinguished:

In this perceived era of gender equality, there is a new articulation of male social power and privilege. There is no evolutionary trek toward equality, peace and prosperity. The new world order is neither neutral nor innocent about sexism: it modernises it. Masculinities and femininities are being made and remade as polarised species. (Campbell, 2014b, c: 4).

Certainly, there is much available evidence to support Campbell's view. As Boffey (2017) reports regarding the latest EU gender equality league table, there has only been slow progress in relation to gender equality across Europe in the years between 2005 and 2015. He notes that the overall score for gender equality (when a matrix of data is taken into account) only grew by four points, to 66.2 out of 100, with 100 signifying absolute gender equality. Further, he reports that:

The gender gap in employment in the EU is 'wide and persistent', the index report says, with the full-time equivalent employment rate of 40% for women and 56% for men. Income gaps have narrowed, but on average women still earn 20% less than men, and the average masks huge disparities across the EU. (Boffey, 2017: 6).

In addition, the data reveals that for every third man in the EU who does daily housework and food preparation, this contrasts to eight in ten women who undertake the same tasks. And in the private sphere, nearly every second working woman has at least an hour of work with childcare, or other caring duties, contrasted with around about a third of working men. As I go on to document, extensive evidence also exists for the persistence of gender inequality outside of the EU more globally, in and across both public and private spheres and across multiple sites. However, it is important to note that this evidence can be interpreted in different ways. By highlighting two key substantive areas of education and violence, which have



been sites of gendered inequality focused on over the last decade by policy makers, activists, and academic makers alike, it can be seen that discussion has ranged between a narrative of progress, to varying or lesser degrees, or a more pessimistic viewpoint. How to escape this often dichotomous position is something that needs our attention.

Education

In the last decade, the narrative of Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani activist for female education who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 for her brave resistance against the Taliban doctrine (which had effectively banned girls from attending school and thus the human right to an education) has become well known. In a sense, this example can be seen as symbolic of two tendencies within current thinking. One tends to either read Malala's heroic efforts as evidence that demonstrates the much-needed necessity of campaigns for girls' education, especially in countries where they are denied equal access as boys may have. Or, as Rahman (2014) argues, her iconic, global status afforded by the media, celebrities, and governments is actually very problematic, masking as it does the continued educational inequalities which have their roots in complex historical, geopolitical, and development aspects in an Internet age.

Certainly, it is undeniable that a number of factors still exist worldwide that prevent girls from access to schooling due to issues, for instance, of girls leaving education on becoming child brides in countries such as Zambia, the sexual harassment and violence girls face in countries like South Africa, and the impact of war on girls' education in places like Rwanda or the Sudan (Ringrose and Epstein, 2015). Clearly, these issues are complex and vary across time and geographical location, but, even in the Global North, gendered inequalities in education still endure.

One current example of this is the recent revelation that, in 2018, Tokyo Medical University marked down the test scores of young women applying to embark on a career in medicine, to ensure more men became doctors. The university had, apparently, systematically kept the ratio of female students to around a third. The reason given that the authorities were concerned with their ability to want to continue working after starting a family. Such examples reveal the sustained, and hidden, institutional sexism in education that both serves to exclude young women from reaching their full potential and eventually affects their future earning potential. It also reflects how continuing societal assumptions, based on stereotyped and biologically essentialist notions of gender, still have purchase across the world.

Violence

Another issue which has been highlighted by both scholars and activists is the enduring aspect of violence against women in its many manifestations. As Liz Kelly (2015) observes, every week there is a story in the media nationally, or internationally, featuring violence against women. Such violence includes Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), rape and assault, trafficking and honor-based violence, sexual violence in countries undergoing conflict, domestic violence, violence and the issues of migration, asylum seeking and the refugee crisis. The focus has also been on how the political responses to these diverse areas are gendered and impact on women's identity and relationships with others, as well as on the unreported, everyday acts of violence in both the Global South and the Global North. This is, however, a gender inequality



which has been much targeted by global activism to combat these diverse manifestations of violence and their unequal effects on women. In addition, in the last decade, there has been more of a recognition than hitherto that men, though in the majority of perpetrators of violence against women, in certain contexts and age groups also face violence, most notably from other men. A timely example of this is that currently, in South Africa, the highest cause of mortality among poor young black men is violence, including murder at the hands of other men, often linked to crime and gangster-related activities.

This more comprehensive approach to combating violence can be seen in the example of the existence of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, in 2016, which was then followed by Sixteen Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. What is particularly interesting in relation to this initiative was that the violence toward women was acknowledged and debated in the context of its impact on women, men, and children. Further, it was recognized that both women and men strive to help both victims and perpetrators, as well as challenge global violence in all its forms.

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In addition, academics are currently developing new methodologies to measure violence and make more visible the previously hidden extent of gender-based violence (Towers et al., 2017). It would have been unimaginable, even a decade ago, that in 2018 New Zealand would have passed legislation granting victims of domestic violence ten days' paid leave which will allow them to be able to leave their partners, protect themselves and their children, and seek out new housing.

New Forms of Women's Global Activism

The case study of women's global activism raises further interesting and crucial questions which the discussion so far has started to address. It allows a new focus on continued and structural gendered power relations, discrimination, institutional and structural inequalities, and the impact of this on everyday lives, but also affords a discussion of people's agency, optimism, and collaboration, as well as the increasing role of social media in activist campaigns and academic analysis.

Women have, over the past decade, for example, been involved in the far-reaching Middle East revolutions, protests in Delhi and elsewhere in India over widespread incidents of rape and sexual assault, and the much-documented women's movement protests in the US over Donald Trump's policies. As Nickie Charles (2015) notes, this resurgence of feminist action has partly been understood as the continuation of "third wave" feminism, with a history at least stretching back to the suffragettes in the UK and the Women's Liberation movement worldwide from the 1970s. Others, however, have viewed such renewed international activism as heralding a new era of protest, heralded by social media and its potential to make such protests for gender inequality truly global, in ways which were not possible before. In addition, many men of a younger generation have no hesitation in calling themselves feminists and



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A man walks through a group of women participating in the performance "Women in Black Acción" created by artists May Serrano and María Seco to protest against gender-based violence. November 19, 2015, Malaga, Spain



working with women on a range of issues and campaigns. The LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) movement has allowed traditional ideas of only two genders existing to be problematized by a reconceptualization of the concept of gender and claims to gender fluidity. Further, the increasing acceptance of transgendered people (though not in all parts of the world and not without much debate and controversy in terms of who is able to call themselves a woman or man, depending on the resulting arguments around the sex assigned at birth) has been a key and continuing issue over the last and future decade (see Jackson and Scott, 2017). Lastly, the emphasis placed on intersectionality and how gender links to other categories, such as race and ethnicity, age and class, informs current campaigns and continues to be a central concern of feminists and the women's movement.



Many men of a younger generation have no hesitation in calling themselves feminists and working with women on a range of issues and campaigns. The LGBTQ movement has allowed traditional ideas of only two genders existing to be problematized by a reconceptualization of the concept of gender and claims to gender fluidity

The #MeToo online campaign, which followed in the wake of the sexual misconduct campaigns against the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, in 2017, drew attention to the sexual assault and sexual harassment of women, initially in Hollywood and the entertainment business. As Lawton (2017) notes, on Facebook, the comments and reactions to the campaign totaled more than twelve million in twenty-four hours. Moreover, Alka Kurian (2018), in *The Conversation*, reflects on the #MeToo movement, arguing that current legal and moral interpretations of “consent” are no longer fit for purpose, especially for a younger generation of media-adept women and men, who are questioning traditional gender and sexual roles and identities. She further notes the global potential of social media and similar online campaigns:

In the early 21st century, millennial Indian women launched a radically new kind of feminist politics that had not been seen before. Inspired by a vocabulary of rights and modes of protest used by the youth across the world, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring, they initiated a series of social media campaigns against the culture of sexual violence. (Kurian, 2018: 4).

Such campaigns are not without their critics; for example, there are diverse views on what can, or cannot, be defined as sexual abuse, and the problem of establishing consent. Nor can it be assumed that such campaigns have the same affect globally. Japan, for example, has recently been highlighted as a place where girls and children are overrepresented in pornography, there is a rising sex crime rate, and the treatment of rape victims/survivors has been criticized. Evidence, some would argue, that such campaigns as the #MeToo movement cannot, by themselves, fully deal with structural inequalities and gendered power relations in capitalist societies. Some commentators also argue that online campaigning effectively takes the focus off the anticapitalism struggle. Moreover, even when global change is occurring, for instance, with Taiwan being poised to become the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, due to the efforts of the LGBTQ movement there, conservative groups, including



many Christian churches, are attempting to resist marriage equality, before the May 2019 deadline by which same-sex marriage will automatically become law.

Yet, to get even this far, Ting-Fang (2017, para 11) notes, on the efforts of Taiwanese activists, that: “This civil revolution is happening not only in the meeting rooms of the Legislative Yuan, but indeed, also on the streets and around the dinner table,” revealing the need for activists to engage with the public imagination in new ways and on diverse fronts.

Similarly, Utsa Mukherjee (2018) notes a watershed moment for India but also for the global queer rights movement, given the current move of the Supreme Court of India in decriminalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults. But also importantly points out that resistance to this law is as “old as the law itself,” and that the legal fight against such outdated colonial-era law started many decades ago as a protest against colonial marginalizing of “non-normative sexualities and gender expressions,” forcing such sexualities into Western categories and in the process criminalizing them. Such historical reflection reveals the need to acknowledge people’s experiences and protests in earlier decades, before the existence of social media and recent online campaigns, which can also reveal different priorities, as well as diverse ways of organizing.

Another example of how both activism and technology are changing peoples’ responses and ways of protesting against gender inequalities in its many forms is in relation to reproductive health, especially in respect of abortion rights:

Around Dublin, you might catch sight of a small sticker—on a lamp post, a wall, or inside the stall door of the women’s toilets—advertising ‘SAFE ABORTION WITH PILLS’ alongside a web address. The information on this sticker is technically illegal: it is advertising pills banned in Ireland and breaking Irish laws on the kind of information about abortion that can be legally distributed. The website advertised on this sticker will connect you with a global network of pro-choice volunteers who can advise you on how to access safe abortion pills, how to take them at home, and how to monitor your symptoms. (Calkin, 2018: 1).

In fact, the Republic of Ireland has now voted overwhelmingly to overturn the abortion ban in a referendum held in May 2018. Previously, abortion was only allowed when a woman’s life was at risk, though not in cases of incest, rape, or fatal fetal abnormality. Importantly, though, Calkin points out that forty percent of women globally reside in countries with highly restrictive abortion laws. Further, though only five countries ban abortion entirely, women worldwide face harsh restrictions and penalties when seeking an abortion. However, he contends that governments’ actions to control access to abortion is overall decreasing. A fact Calkin puts down to advanced communications and medical technology, but also, importantly, to cross-border transnational activists who seek to give alternate routes for women to access safe abortions.

If working across borders, the necessary existence of solidarity between genders, races, sexualities, classes, and ages of the actors involved in protesting and redressing gender equalities is essential for activists to be able to tackle increasingly complex and inter-related globalized issues. Pelin Dincer’s (2017) argument highlighting the question of women’s solidarity and working across differences is important to note when considering the effectiveness of international feminist movements, both theoretically and in activist terms. Her specific interest is the current fragmentation of the women’s movement in Turkey, and she uses as a metaphor for this the example of women marching there in protest against Donald Trump’s inauguration as US president. In so doing, she considers that some of the concerns that trans people and others had of such protests need to be voiced and heard. However, she



Demonstration at the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village—a landmark for the gay rights movement—organized on February 23, 2017, to call for the protection of transgender and gender non-conforming persons



concludes that we must work with and not against such differences, if protest on a global scale is to be politically effective. Therefore, to this end, we need both a macro awareness of changing political and economic contexts in tandem with a more micro analysis of diverse activist practices and movements.



Conclusion

Based on the above argument and evidence put forward, my concluding contention is that, in going forward, we can usefully focus on three aspects to continue to address the global issue of gendered inequality in innovative and more fruitful ways. These are: to further the contemporary debate and emphasis on intersectionality in relation to gender inequality; to highlight the increasing academic focus on masculinity and gender relations and its relation to feminism; and to rethink activism and its connection with the academy and others involved, especially in the light of technological advances. Simon Willis (2014) argues that: “Inequality is an urgent and complex problem. It is deeply entrenched in all areas of life. It is pervasively defended and supported, even by those who it damages. To my mind inequality is the main roadblock in our journey toward social justice, and we need an innovative approach to uprooting it that won’t produce the same negligible incremental change we’ve seen in recent years” (Willis, 2014: 1).

To address the global issue of gendered inequality in more innovative ways, it would be useful to further the contemporary debate and emphasis on intersectionality in relation to gender inequality and to highlight the increasing academic focus on masculinity and gender relations and its link to feminism

Further, he feels that to address the structural and institutional causes of inequality, one of the main factors for doing so is the recognition of many, interconnected inequalities, as well as having an openness to work with diverse kinds of partners in a variety of ways. In a similar vein, the LSE Commission on Gender, Inequality, and Power, in 2015, was chiefly concerned with examining persisting inequalities between women and men in the UK. A key question the report asked was just how interconnected are inequalities across different sites of social life. It is a positive sign that policy makers, academics, and activists are constantly thinking through the possibilities of an intersectional approach in different contexts, despite some of the complex issues this raises.

The study by feminists or pro-feminist men in universities across the world on men as gendered beings and the meaning and experience of masculinity is one of the most important intellectual developments over the last decade. The examples discussed here have revealed that men can be oppressors but also victims, as well as collaborators in feminist causes. A recognition of men’s economic, political, and social power, as well as the issues faced by poor men and those of diverse races and ethnicities, for instance, can aid in a comprehensive picture of gendered inequality interacting with race and class, to name but two other facets of inequality. Thus, a more relational perspective on gender and inequality, while keeping in mind that women still bear the brunt of economic and other disadvantages, is important to develop further.



Lastly, as I have been writing this piece, the disturbing news has surfaced that the Hungarian government proposes to ban Gender Studies at universities in the country, at the start of the 2019 academic year. This is ostensibly because it was argued that employers were expressing no interest in employing a dwindling number of graduates of the subject and so the field is not seen as an economically viable one. Critics of such unprecedented state intervention and censorship of academic matters in Hungary have argued that, in reality, the ban is due to opposition to the government's conservative ideologies and policies. Since then, protests have ensued both in the streets and online. Further, the international academic community has joined together to oppose such sanctions and defend academic freedom for the unobstructed study of gender and gender inequalities in all its forms. Ann Kaloski-Naylor (2017) reminds us:

We need wider visions of resistance, ways out of the to and fro of arguments which seem to move us closer to disaster. This is what thinkers can offer, as well as our bodies and our posters on the streets and our ideas and petitions on the net. ...alternative visions that don't just respond to and recycle the immediate... (Kaloski-Naylor, 2017: 7).

If we are unable to even *think* about gender issues, it is of increasing importance that academics, practitioners, and activists continue to find new ways of speaking to each other on the issue of gender inequality. In so doing, as I have argued, the boundaries between academia and academics, civic and political institutions, and those who construct knowledge "outside" of such institutions, including activists in everyday life, have, by necessity, to become more fissured and blurred (Robinson, 2017).

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