



THE ROLE OF GENDER EQUALITY AND THE WAYS OF GENERAL AMELIORATION OF THIS FIELD

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Abstract: Gender equality can be understood as part of the long-term historical struggle for equality and democracy. In this process, gender equality interventions are important tools in enhancing women's rights and participation, yet this striving for greater gender equality is by no means unproblematic, for example, as demonstrated by LGBTQI movements. There are many arguments for gender equality – feminist transformation, gender justice, gender difference, realization of individual and collective potential, and its fuller use – and many ways of framing gender equality. Within liberal reform feminism, gender equality involves realizing the potential of women and men equally within the current gender order. In resistance feminism, the gender order cannot be made equal through gender balance, as men's dominance is too strong. Rebellion feminists seek to take apart the gendered social order by multiplying genders or doing away with them. Gender policy operates differentially at organizational and occupational levels, and in public and private sectors, with extremely variable historical contexts. Major supranational bodies, such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the Council of Europe, have been prominent in promotion of gender equality. Various critiques of gender equality are outlined. Future challenges facing gender equality and gender equality policy are noted.

Key words: Discrimination, labour's force/workforce, gender pay gap, gender balance, gender parity, equal rights.

What is gender equality? The theory, concept, and politics of gender equality can be understood as part of the long-term historical struggle for equality and democracy, but with a focus on equality between and democracy among women and men, and genders more generally.

The reference to democracy is evident in the politics of equal political representation, though often seen in many societies and historical periods as applying only to adult males. Gender equality entails not only political representation and political leadership, for example, by parliamentary election,



but also rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation, decision-making, valuation of behaviors, aspirations and needs of women, men, and further genders, and freedom from violence. Thus, the elaboration of gender equality is closely aligned with the development of gendered citizenship, seen as inclusive of political and economic entitlements, access, and belonging and encompassing rights and obligations. In the light of the historical exclusions and marginalizations of women, full inclusion of women citizens requires addressing basic structures of gender inequality throughout societies, for example, questions of care, dependency, and interdependency in and across public and private spheres, and their interrelations.

In this process, or struggle, gender equality policies and interventions are important tools in enhancing women's rights and participation, yet that process of striving for greater gender equality is by no means unproblematic. Gender equality and gender equality policies can be short or long term, and be seen in terms of equal opportunities, equal treatment, differential or affirmative treatment (within current inequality), equity (fairness), or equal outcomes.

Movements, have expanded and made more complex theory and policy on gender equality. Gender equality is not only about women, or indeed men, but also about multiple genders and genderings, including such issues as same-sex or transgender marriage and family formation.

What are the main theories of and approaches to gender equality? There are many arguments for gender equality – feminist transformation, gender justice, gender difference, realization of individual and collective potential, fuller use of that potential – and many ways of framing gender equality, theoretically, politically, legally, empirically (Jahan 1995; Lombardo et al. 2009). Within the frame of liberal reform feminism, gender equality is a matter of realizing the potential of women and men equally, albeit within the current gender order. To quote Judith Lorber (2005, 13):

Gender reform feminists locate the source of gender inequality in women's and men's status in the social order, arguing that it is structural and not the outcome of personal attributes, individual choices, or unequal interpersonal relationships. ... An overall strategy for political action to reform the unequal gendered social structure is gender balance" (emphasis in original).

This is the dominant position in governmental and much nongovernmental organization and corporate gender equality policies. Such a program of change works towards the abolition of gender imbalance. This contrasts with resistance



feminism which argues “that the gender order cannot be made equal through gender balance because men’s dominance is too strong” (Lorber 2005, 14). In this view, gender equality per se is not a feasible aim; it may push women to emulate, even become like men, without challenging male domination. A more radical transformation is necessary, with women’s voices and perspectives reshaping the gender order more fundamentally, including the abolition of patriarchy. Rebellion feminists go further still, seeking to “take apart the gendered social order by multiplying genders or doing away with them entirely” (Lorber 2005, 12). This may appear to be the most radical conceptualization of gender (in)equality. The implications range from dismissal of “gender equality” as irrelevant to uncertainty and humility, on to renewed optimism of a “queer” future where gender is degendered, with the abolition of gender categories. Furthermore, these three broad feminisms, with their different implications for gender equality, are complicated by transnational change and transnational feminisms.

What gender equality policies and practices have been developed? Legislation, policy development, and positive measures operate differentially at organizational and occupational levels, and in public and private sectors. The historical context of these interventions is extremely variable across nation states. For example, Finland was the first country, in 1906, to give full political rights to all women, as part of the nation-building process and universal adult suffrage. Post-apartheid South Africa has a well-regarded progressive constitution, with a strong program of legal civil rights, but is still a very unequal society. “Equal national” citizenship is often far from non-gendered. Supposedly non-gendered citizenship can remain patriarchal in form, not least through the continuation of pre-nationalistic discourses and practices, sometimes around limited notions of “equality” or continuation of gender-based violence

There are various critiques of gender equality – some regressive, some progressive. One challenge is how to understand what equality might mean in practice: is it rational justification for similar or different treatment, avoidance of discrimination or positive duty to promote equality of opportunity and de facto equality? Also, what is at one time considered an appropriate approach to discrimination can shift over time. Another critique comes from concerns with intersectionality and multiple oppressions and discriminations, such as race and class, and the deconstruction of gender/sexual binaries. Such intersections are key in developing more comprehensive approaches to gender equality, both analytically and politically, and this project has been labelled Gender Equality+, as enshrined



in general EU directives on antidiscrimination. Transversal and transgender politics also emphasize equalizing life chances, not isolating gender from other oppressions (Spade 2011). Gender equality may feed the ideology of quality in Western liberal democracies whereby people are constructed as equal, yet are patently not, especially in gender power. It may allow the state to appear genderneutral while ignoring forces structuring (gender) inequality. Seen globally, narrow gender equality ideology may even reproduce a form of Western imperialism towards women in non-Western countries. However, while gender equality policies may seem limited.

To conclude, Respect both for human rights and respect for equality between women and men are founding values for the Union, as stated in the Treaty on European Union and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

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