

The Role Of Families In Combating Discrimination, Violence And Harmful Practices Against Women And Girls And In Creating Greater Gender Equality And Empowerment

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In many areas of the world, girls and young women continue to be disadvantaged, despite the spread of democratic and egalitarian ideals. The lives of millions of girls and women are characterized by a lack of gender equality with respect to economic, social, educational and employment opportunities. Particularly in parts of the developing world or global South, girls and women tend not to have access to resources, and they have limited decision-making abilities within the family, the household, and the community. This is primarily the case because gender inequality, i.e. the unequal relationship between men and women, remains embedded in cultural ideals and social relationships (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Kabeer, 2005; Trask, 2014).

The lack of gender equality makes girls and women vulnerable to increased discrimination, violence, trafficking and other harmful practices. Girls and women's lack of power to make decisions about their own lives, coupled with limited economic resources, makes their position in the global economy perilous at best. In many parts of the world, particularly low-income girls and women are overburdened with domestic chores, not given equal access to education, nutrition, health care and technology, and lack the self-confidence to speak up around boys and men (Plan, 2015). Around the globe, girls and women deal on a daily basis with violence, sexual coercion and the unwillingness of male partners to use contraception. The inability of girls and women to retain power over their bodies, tends to result in early pregnancies and heightens the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDS. A Western feminist discourse that stresses gender equality, and gender convergence with respect to socialization and educational and occupational opportunities, masks the realities faced especially by low-income girls and women, most often in many non-Western societies. A multitude of empirical studies and research findings illustrate however, that by targeting *families* through educational and economic initiatives, the social position of girls and women can be strengthened, and their vulnerability to discrimination, violence and other harmful practices can be reduced (Edgar, 2004; Plan, 2009; Trask, 2014).

Families remain the intrinsic unit within which to effect change, and protect and empower girls and women. While empirical research has demonstrated that education, employment and political participation are foundational for achieving gender equality, access to these resources is subject to culturally determined social relationships (Kabeer, 2005). In other words, for a girl or a woman to take advantage of educational opportunities, a job or civic and community involvement, she needs to be able to access them. Family relationships can either encourage or

constrain a girl's or a woman's ability to take advantage of opportunities that are provided through local, national or international initiatives. In many societal contexts around the world, fathers, brothers and husbands determine the life choices that girls and women are allowed to make. Thus, targeting boys and men and educating them about the worth of girls and women, and encouraging them to promote gender equality in their families, is critical (Connell, 2015). However, this crucial aspect of empowering girls and women within families, and the cultural determinants that influence these relationships are primarily ignored in the development and academic literature.

Currently, a primarily Western conceptualization of social life emphasizes directing social initiatives, programs and policies at individuals. That perspective obscures the continued global importance of families to individuals' lives. In many societies and among various ethnic and cultural groups, families function as a crucial protective mechanism for girls and women. The family group shields girls and women from the discrimination, oppression, and violence they may face in the larger society (Collins, 1991; Trask, 2010). It is thus, critical that gender targets and benchmarks also acknowledge the fundamental family dimensions that either constrain or advance gender equality and empowerment.

Globalization and Vulnerable Girls and Women

Globalization has introduced new opportunities for education, training and employment for a large number of girls and women in high and low-income countries. Particularly in industrialized societies, middle and upper-middle class women have benefited from gender ideologies that stress equality and empowerment, and policies that have expanded educational and employment opportunities. For instance, in the United States today, 71.3 percent of women are in the paid labor force and women make up over 60 percent of students in the university systems (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Statistics from European and other industrialized societies demonstrate similar trends (OECD, 2012).¹ However, these advantages have not filtered down to low-income women in the United States nor do developments in non-Western countries parallel the situation in industrialized countries.²

An important aspect of globalization has been the spread of a neoliberal ideology that stresses the primacy of markets in relation to states. As Barton (2004) explains, policies, and laws that focus on the centrality of the market in relation to individuals, families, communities and nations, enforce an agenda that does not highlight the structural and social barriers to women's equality and rights. On a most basic level, many of these very rules and laws are in opposition to the aspirations of gender transformations. In fact, they do not deal with the fundamental reality that women and men need to have equivalent access and control over resources, to decision-making, and to the benefits of their work. It is only in those contexts that gender equality becomes a reality.

¹ According to the OECD (2012), about 65% of women are in the paid labor force compared to 71% men.

² In a number of industrialized societies including the U.S., the labor participation of women is declining based on a variety of factors including global recession trends and lack of access to family friendly policies and high quality child care.

In many poor countries in Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, Structural Adjustment Policies and neoliberal agendas have severely limited social services and government based programs. Particularly low-income women in these countries have lost their jobs and been forced to find new means to support themselves (Ferris, 2007). Other areas of the world have been affected by globalization as well. For example, as manufacturing has become cheaper through competition from Asia, unemployment rates in the former countries of the Soviet Union have risen. These transformations have led to an increase in poverty among young girls and women and this has expanded their risk of being sexually exploited and trafficked. This is also referred to as the “the shadow side” of globalization (Penttinen, 2008).

The focus in the development literature and in global social policies on migration, public health, and crime, obscures the fact that there may be family and community factors that can lead to girls and women being exploited and subjected to harmful practices. For instance, in many low-income situations girls and women are bound up in webs of servitude in their home communities due to poverty and cultural norms. They lack power in their families vis-à-vis the boys and men (and even older women) in their lives, and this constrains their abilities to access educational opportunities and empowerment initiatives. It is important to note however, that families can also provide security for girls and women. A number of studies have shown that when girls and women, especially from rural areas, leave their families and move into urban areas, they are much more susceptible to exploitation, violence and trafficking due to a lack of social networks (Mabala, 2006; Lalor, 2008). Families can provide a protective social and economic environment that is virtually impossible to duplicate through any other institution (Plan, 2014).

The Primacy of Cultural Contexts

From a Western perspective, girls and women today have many educational and occupational opportunities. However, in other parts of the world, the mere fact of being female can have very different implications. Low-income and rural girls may be subjected to extreme gender inequities. They may receive inadequate nutrition and medicine in contrast to their brothers, and be denied access to education. They are passed from their fathers to their husbands with little if any control over their own lives and futures. For instance, in 2014, a young girl from Cameroon told an interviewer from Plan International that “The girls are like servants of boys and men. Their issues don’t really matter” (Plan, 2014, p. 11).³ Thus, any discussion about the roles, status, and empowerment of girls and women needs to take cultural contexts into account. In particular, in certain parts of the world, socialization to gender roles, child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and sexual and reproductive concerns, continue to severely curtail and harm girls and women’s current and future health and access to educational and economic opportunities.

Socialization to Gender Roles

Cross-culturally, socialization into gender roles has intended and unintended consequences specifically for girls: at times girls are “protected” in order to ensure their modesty and chastity

³ Plan conducted one of the largest surveys of its kind. They interviewed 7000 adolescents between the ages of 12-16 in 11 countries around the world about the issues that teens identify as central to their lives.

and at other times, they are intentionally treated differently due to cultural norms. However, the results of gender differentiation tend to be similar. As both sexes enter the period of puberty, the opportunities of girls become more constrained than those of boys in every sphere of their lives. Research indicates that as girls enter adolescence their mobility and free time decrease and their home responsibilities increase. Due to worries about chastity, the reputation of the family, or just the demands of the household, girls are kept within the domestic sphere with an increasing lack of movement (Mensch et al, 2003). For example, a survey of Egyptian girls between the ages of 16 to 19 indicated that 68 percent of girls were involved in domestic work in comparison to 26 percent of boys (Mensch et al., 2000). Girls are also often perceived as having lesser income-generating capabilities and may even reduce household finances due to the costs associated with their marriages (Hallman & Roca, 2007). Families often believe that investing greater resources in boys will serve them better as they believe that boys are a form of insurance for their old age.

Cultural differences in gender socialization may also be reflected in girls' personal development. From birth, girls are taught to be more submissive, modest, and have lower aspirations than boys. In many places they are raised to believe that their primary role is in the home and as a caretaker to a husband, children and often the elderly. Similar cultural patterns continue to exist in other parts of the world such as Latin America, Middle East, South and Southeast Asia and Africa and among immigrants from those regions to the industrialized world (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004).

The restrictions associated with being female limit girls' opportunities for training and education outside of the home, they constrain their friendship and networking abilities, and they lead to feelings of lesser self worth. Often, the values pertaining to gender norms are so deeply ingrained in communities and societies, that it is extremely difficult to address them just through programmatic initiatives conceived with a Western lens.

Child Marriage

According to a recent UNFPA (2012) report, approximately 142 million girls will be married off by 2020. Currently, approximately 15 million girls marry before the age of 18 every year, which equals about 41,000 girls marrying every day. Child marriage is most prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa. There are multiple disastrous effects associated with child marriage: it forces girls into adult roles before they are physically and psychologically prepared, girls are likely to experience early childbearing, girls are more likely to experience a lack of autonomy, and girls are often coerced into unwanted or unsafe sexual relations which put them at risk for sexual diseases including HIV/AIDS (UNFPA, 2012). Child marriage also leads girls and their families into a continuous cycle of poverty as girls become much less likely to access educational opportunities.⁴

⁴ These findings are all the more disturbing when juxtaposed with the fact that the global leading cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19 is complications from pregnancy and childbirth.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Approximately 125 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation despite a section in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which commits governments to “take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolish traditional practices prejudicial to the health of the child.” While female genital mutilation is a practice that is often understood as a cultural rite of passage for girls into adulthood, it is also associated with severe repercussions for girls including, severe bleeding, difficulty in childbirth and in some cases death (UNICEF, 2013). Despite a variety of transnational and United Nations initiatives to eliminate the practice of FGM, there are still countries where virtually all women have undergone this procedure. For instance, in Somalia 98 percent of women and in Guinea 96 percent of women have been subjected to female genital mutilation. (UNICEF, 2013).

HIV / AIDS

Globally, approximately 16 million women are living with HIV and according to the World Health Organization, HIV/AIDS is the primary cause of death in developing countries among women of reproductive age. In 2013, almost 60 percent of all new infections occurred among adolescent girls and women, with the highest percentage (58 percent) found among girls and women in Sub-Saharan Africa (UN Women, 2015).⁵

A primary factor that leads to girls and women acquiring HIV is power inequities in relationships which are associated with an increased risk in intimate partner violence. A longitudinal study conducted in South Africa illustrated that the differential in power relationships combined with gender based violence raised the possibility of acquiring HIV by 11.9 percent (Jewkes, 2010)). Girls and women are particularly at risk in places where they have fewer legal rights to divorce, to own and inherit property and to consent to medical treatment. Moreover, globally, only 21 percent of girls under the age of 19 have any knowledge of HIV (UNAIDS, 2013).

Why Gender Equality Reform Movements Have Not Achieved Gender Parity

Gender equality is now increasingly understood as a fundamental human right and global gender targets are increasingly incorporated into the political agendas of most countries around the world. Gender targets allow states to identify the scale and effectiveness of their programs, and to measure the variety of factors that are associated with gender inequality. Yet, despite such wide spread measures, gender equality has not been achieved in most societies. In 2013 the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) called on the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) to lead a global review of progress on gender equality. For this review the UNFPA surveyed 176 member states and seven territories. They found that goals do not translate into success: for instance, nine tenths of the countries had a commitment to ensuring equal access to sexual and reproductive health, and yet, less than one fourth reported achieving

⁵ There are significant regional differences in the proportion of women living with HIV as compared to men: The Middle East and North Africa – 39 percent; Latin America – 30 percent; Caribbean, 50 percent; South and South-East Asia, 38 percent; Eastern Europe and Central Asia 36 percent; Western and Central Europe and North America 22 percent (UN Women, 2015).

their targets (UNFPA, 2014). The most frequently cited obstacles to implementing policies were related to the low status of women and the limited empowerment and participation of women based on prevailing local customs, beliefs and practices. (p. 69).

The reasons underlying the failure to achieve gender equality are complex. Gender equality reform movements are often locally based, and operate unevenly even within the same society. Moreover, these initiatives tend to be created as a response to international pressure and are thus, patched together by ideologically diverse groups composed of NGOs, for-profits, and various government agencies. Also problematic is the fact that gender equality is often perceived in non-Western contexts as part of the neo-liberal economic package that forces countries to emulate Western style models of contemporary life. Thus, local responses that reject initiatives that empower girls and women are based on the assumption that they are part of a larger Western style of cultural domination (Freeman, 2001).

The Family as Foundational for Promoting Gender Equality and Empowerment

From a socio-historical and global perspective, families constitute a core feature in understanding social behavior in every society. Families are also an important part of the economic and political processes of each society. They are a central location where change can be effected that influences significant transformations in all other parts of society (Edgar, 2004; Trask, 2010).

The family is the intermediate group that connects individuals to the larger society including economic and political systems and policies. Other entities such as educational systems, political and religious organizations and other institutions have not replaced families despite their importance to the functioning of most communities. Families remain at the center of social life and continue to be the primary mechanism for coping with social, economic and political adversity and the socialization and education of children. In all societies families are the primary locale for the integration of individuals with society (Coontz, 2000; Edgar, 2004; Trask, 2010; Trask, 2014).

Despite the recognized importance of families by states, communities and individuals, a family perspective continues to be missing from academic and policy discourses on gender. Moreover, debates on families are widely divergent depending on whom one is focusing: women, men or children (Connell, 2005). This disconnect, leads to discourses, analyses, and policies that at times flow in conflicting directions. On the one hand, there are initiatives to “strengthen” families in order to ensure the safety and care for children, and on the other, families are often ignored in policy recommendations and initiatives that are thought to empower girls and women. Neither of these paths is universally productive nor functional. Instead, we need to acknowledge culture, context, stage of the life course, intergenerational relationships and individual circumstances in order to create supports for vulnerable children *and* women and men.

In order to end gender based violence and discrimination against girls and women, and to promote gender equality, strategies and initiatives need to be linked with a recognition and understanding of family life in specific cultural contexts (Trask, 2010). Moreover, initiatives for

girls and women cannot and should not target them in isolation. Girls and women are embedded in culturally specific familial relationships with the other members of their families: their brothers, fathers, husbands and other related men. Engaging boys and men is central to protecting girls and women from gender-based violence and ensuring that they have access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, and medicine.

Often ignored in gender-focused initiatives are the intergenerational relationships that girls and women are embedded in. The low status of girls in some regions and cultural contexts stands in contrast to the higher status of married women with children. This form of inequality is rarely recognized and yet, serves to curtail girls' economic and educational opportunities (Plan, 2009; Plan 2014; Plan, 2015; Trask, 2014).

A family perspective ensures that intergenerational relationships between women, as well as relationships of girls and women with boys and men will be incorporated into discourses, educational initiatives, and social policies. *It is important to note that policies need not target families specifically. Instead, policies and initiatives need to acknowledge and incorporate the understanding that families are the mechanism through which policies are enacted.* This approach ensures that a wide variety of development outcomes are met, including reducing poverty, improving health and nutrition, decreasing violence against girls and women, and alleviating other societal concerns.

While today there is recognition that individuals are raised and live in many family forms (two-parent, step-families, single-parent or lattice), families around the world continue to be the central mechanism for childhood socialization, social integration, and the centralization of resources. Families also supply social and cultural capital (Coontz, 2000; Edgar, 2004; Trask, 2010). Just as in the past, today family resources and family processes determine much of an individual's life chances, in as much as they either provide opportunities or provide constraints to the opportunities available for individuals. Gender equality and gender empowerment can only truly be achieved by incorporating an understanding of the cultural roles of family members and family processes, and the safety net that families can provide, into policy recommendations, programs and social initiatives.

Conclusion

Increasing gender equity and empowering girls and women, does not just depend on improving access to educational, occupational and health care choices. Instead, gender equality and gender empowerment need to be understood, recognized and promoted as human rights. These rights must be protected through legal frameworks and these need to be conceived as embedded in a constellation of social relationships, of which the family is primary.

“A human right is a claim on society that carries obligations for others to promote, protect, and respect that right” (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 310). Fundamentally, this is not an approach that encompasses a set of policy prescriptions. There is no one route or list of action items that can be advocated in order for societies to improve the lives of their most vulnerable members. Over time and contexts, situations and priorities shift. However, there must be general agreement on a

local and global level that the rights and concerns of the poorest and most vulnerable individuals must be taken into account. In much of the developing world, that group is primarily composed of girls and women. It is thus imperative that the human development approach that is advocated specifically by United Nations programs and conventions continue to be included into national and transnational agendas (Kabeer, 2001; Kabeer, 2005). The human development paradigm draws on the Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen's suggestion that development is about expanding people's choices, allowing them to realize their potential, and encouraging them to live lives that they value (Desai, 2010). Specifically Sen advocated targeting the relations of power that continue to limit girls' and women's options and agency, and negatively affect their health and well-being (1999).

Kabeer (2005) develops Sen's concept further and advocates that one way of thinking about power is through the ability to make choices. She states, "To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14). Increasing opportunities targeted at girls and women is one part of expanding choice. However, she goes on to explain that alternatives "must not only exist, they must also be seen to exist" (p. 15). As has been argued throughout this paper, in order to raise awareness about opportunities, and to encourage individual and collective agency among marginalized and vulnerable individuals (which globally are primarily girls and women), the other individuals with whom girls and women are embedded in social relationships need to be targeted as well. Thus, girls' and women's families, the unit that continues to play a critical role in every aspect of social life, need to be emphasized in this approach.

There is extensive documentation that educating girls and women and giving them the tools to ensure that they have a strong economic and social foundation, has positive societal implications: education leads to lower fertility levels, delayed age of marriage, better health for young women and their children, increased societal and political participation, and greater societal productivity (Desai, 2010; Plan, 2015). Specifically, education – formal education of girls and women, but also informal / formal education of boys and men - has been proven to expand options and reduce violence and harmful practices such as child marriage and adolescent pregnancy

A recent report by the Population Council highlights the fact that successful educational programs take a variety of approaches. Most do not just target females or males in isolation, but focus on girls and women, and boys and men within their families (Bruce, Haberland, Joyce, Roca & Sapiano, 2011). The report also points out that programs that are directed at females need to be focused on efforts that protect girls and women, while a focus on men needs to prioritize appropriate male behaviors. For instance, in certain contexts the greatest benefit to adolescent girls comes from programming aimed at their fathers in order to discourage them from marrying off their daughters at a very young age. Other programs focus on coercion and the often socially legitimized sexual preying of older men on young girls. Boys and men are taught that these are unacceptable behaviors that have long-term health implications for women and their communities. Parents are also taught that allowing their daughters to access an education increases their economic worth, expands their marriage choices, and decreases their risk to being exposed to violent behaviors (Kabeer, 2005; Desai, 2010; Trask, 2014).

A contemporary example from Kenya serves as an illustration of these new creative and successful initiatives. One particular program addressing HIV/AIDS has been extremely effective through its emphasis on mass media and community education, female mentoring, counseling, and testing. The curriculum is aimed specifically at married young women, and those who are in the process of getting married, by introducing them to the dangers of HIV/AIDS, family planning, safe motherhood and other related topics. There is also programming aimed at men. As one of various strategies, the program uses an activity known as Magnet Theater to teach local drama troupes about health concerns that come with early marriage, HIV, and issues around reproduction. Female mentors bring girls together on a weekly basis to discuss these topics, and to encourage them to pursue counseling and testing. Since its inception, approximately 20,500 males and 17,300 females have been contacted, and nearly 100,000 individuals have been reached through the mixture of mentors, religious leaders, radio spots, and the theater pieces (Ochieng & Erulkar, 2008). In particular, the theater pieces have influenced audiences through the demystification of how HIV/AIDS is spread and contracted, as well as through creating affinities between community members and the audiences. Many participants have reported changing their sexual behaviors after attending one of these plays (Ochieng & Erulkar, 2008).

The discussion above illustrates that it is by targeting *families* through initiatives, programming, and policies, girls and women can be simultaneously empowered and achieve increasing gender equality. In our academic and policy orientations, we need to move away from a Western psychologically oriented lens that focuses primarily on the individual in society, to an emphasis on the role of the family unit. An acknowledgement and incorporation of family relationships in specific cultural contexts is critical to achieving greater gender parity and allowing girls and women to have increased agency and choice. That said, however, virtually every report and empirical research finding indicates that it is poverty alleviation that remains as the single most important variable in improving the lives of all individuals and families.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Target campaigns about the equal worth of girls and boys to men and women in families. In many cultural contexts older women also perpetuate gender stereotypical behaviors that devalue the worth of girls and lead to discriminatory and violent behaviors against them. An approach that takes generational relationships into account is critical.
2. Encourage and adopt family focused practices that promote equal access for both girls and boys to high quality education, and ensure opportunities to successfully complete schooling, and to making educational choices.
3. Raise awareness among boys, girls, women, men, parents, and teachers about gender-stereotypical attitudes towards academic performance and the consequences of overall educational choices for future employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, career advancements and earnings.
4. Review and adapt early childhood, primary and secondary school curricula, teaching and school practices to eradicate gender discrimination and stereotyping.

5. Create educational, accessible multi-media campaigns (such as community theater, cartoons, music) about the worth of girls and women. Include in these campaigns educational units about harmful practices such as early marriage and risky sexual behaviors.
6. Mainstream the gender equality viewpoint in the design, development and evaluation of pertinent policies and budgets, for example by conducting systematic gender-impact assessments and producing appropriate data and evidence. Create a standard for future assessments as well as a compilation of best practices for governments and government agencies to use in creating local initiatives.⁶
7. Investigate what local gender focused programming is already in place and build on this by using feedback from women and men in that region. Increase the emphasis on cultural contexts in all initiatives, programs and policies and include as targets and as participants in design, marginalized groups such as rural girls and young married women.

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