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**From ‘MeToo’ to Boko Haram: A survey of levels  
and trends of gender inequality in the world**

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# **From 'MeToo' to Boko Haram: A survey of levels and trends of gender inequality in the world**

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July 2019

## **Abstract**

This survey argues that after decades of continuous progress in reducing gender inequality in developing and developed countries, since about 2000, there has been an unexpected stagnation and regress in many dimensions of gender inequality in many parts of the world. This is most visible in labor markets, but also visible across a range of dimensions of gender inequality. After documenting these developments, the paper suggests causes for this change before suggesting policies to tackle remaining gender inequalities more effectively.

keywords: gender inequality, health, education, labor markets, developing countries.

JEL Codes: J16, J71, O15.

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## 1. Introduction

Gender inequality in rights, education, health, labor market opportunities, and economic and political empowerment have been a pervasive feature across the world throughout most of recorded history. While levels of gender inequality differed greatly across regions, regimes, and historical episodes, there was no obvious secular trend in gender inequality prior to the 19th century. Starting in the 19th century in Europe and North America, however, gender inequality in many of these dimensions started to progressively fall.<sup>2</sup> As discussed by Doepke and Tertilt (2009), a first step was that single women were progressively granted economic rights such as the rights to hold property, sign contracts, etc.. In the course of the 19th century, these economic rights were progressively extended to married women and also crucially included the right to divorce. Political rights, including the right to vote, came much later, mostly in the early decades of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup> After World War II, remaining gaps in rights and education disappeared quickly in OECD countries (Hallward-Driemeier et al. 2013) and gender gaps in labor market opportunities and political empowerment started a long-term decline.

In the developing world, decolonization in the 1940s-1960s and associated new constitutions ensured that gender gaps in rights were smaller right from the start, ensuring for example female active and passive voting rights in nearly all developing countries from day 1. One could hope that other gaps, which were quite large in many developing countries, would similarly get smaller faster than in OECD countries, associated with their accelerated political and economic development.

This paper surveys levels and recent trends in gender inequality across the world. It argues that after decades of continuous progress in reducing gender inequality, since about 2000, there has been an unexpected stagnation and regress in many dimensions of gender inequality in both developed as well as well as developing countries. After documenting these developments, the paper suggests

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<sup>2</sup> There is a debate whether comparatively lower gender inequality in Europe helped promote the industrial revolution. See Lagerlöf (2003).

<sup>3</sup> See Doepke and Tertilt (2009) for a theory why men (who controlled political power) were willing to grant economic rights to women before they had any political rights.

causes for this change before suggesting policies to tackle remaining gender inequalities more effectively.

## **2. The 'end of history' for gender relations?**

When surveying the world from 1960 to about the early years of the new millennium, progress on reducing gender inequality was widespread, fast, steady, and seemingly irreversible. This was true in developed as well as developing countries.

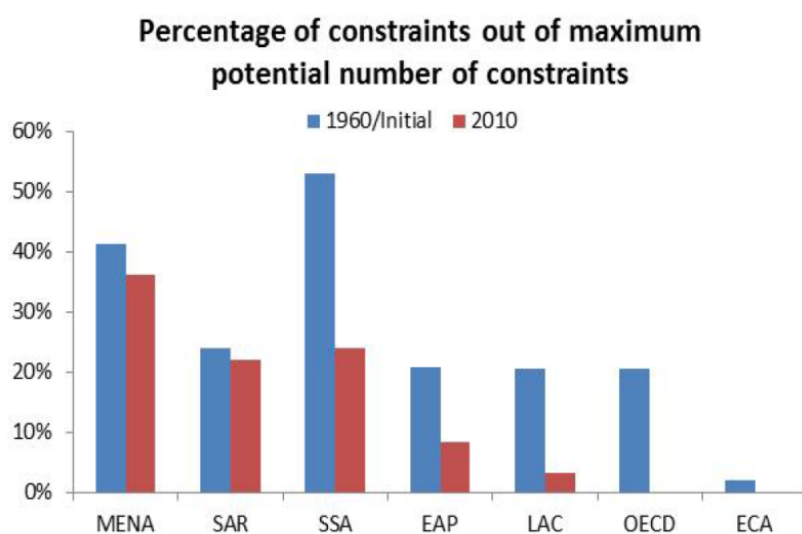
In OECD countries, remaining gender gaps in rights have largely disappeared, as shown in Figure 1 (World Bank 2019, Hallward-Driemeier et al. 2013). In education, as shown in Figures 2a and 2b, after achieving parity in primary and secondary education decades ago, women started to outnumber males at the tertiary level. And they generally score better on test scores (World Bank, 2011). In the labor market, women were rapidly reducing gaps in employment and pay (Juhn and McCue, 2017; Klasen, 2017a). And they gained political representation in parliaments and the executive (OECD, 2014).

Similarly, in Socialist countries, an ideological commitment to gender equality, combined with a need for women workers in Socialism's extensive growth model, led to even faster reductions in gender gaps in education, the labor market and political representation, ensuring that, for example, female labor force participation rates among prime age women (25-59) in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were the highest in the world in 1990 (Kornai, 1992; Klasen, 1993). When the Socialist regimes fell in the early 1990s, there was some regress on gender equality, including in labor markets but most visibly in political representation, suggesting for the first time that gains can also be reversed (Klasen, 1993). But the reversals were far from complete and it remains the case that the Socialist legacy is still visible today in higher female education and employment levels in former Socialist countries (Klasen, 2019).

In the developing world, gender gaps were also starting to fall. This was most visible and impressive in the field of education, where gender gaps in enrolment fell strongly at all levels. As shown in

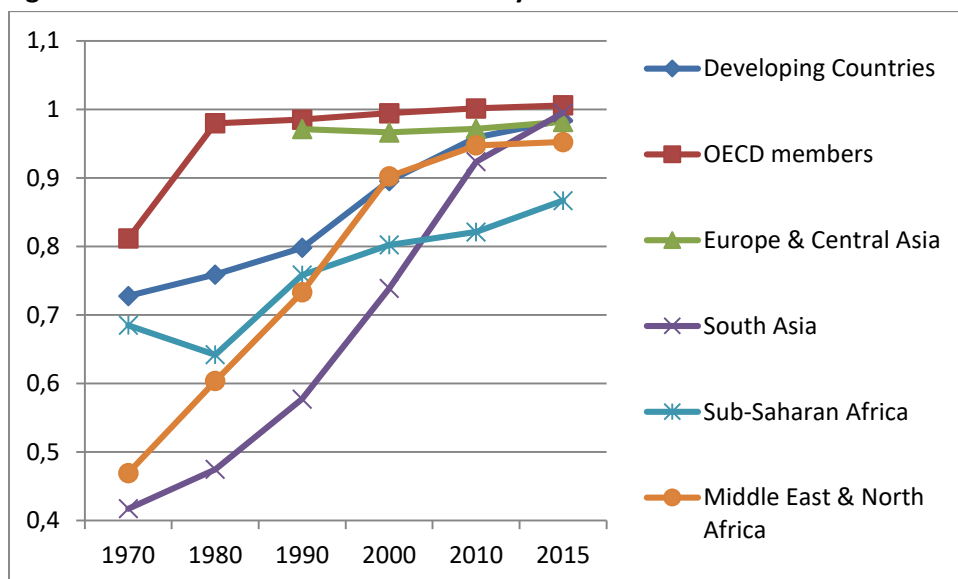
Figures 2a and b, gender gaps in secondary and tertiary enrolment disappeared, on average, entirely for developing countries. Particularly impressive was the rapid progress in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa where massive gaps disappeared over 40 years, while progress has been slower in Sub-Saharan Africa. The great progress has been achieved partly as a result of a push towards universal enrolments at the primary and secondary level, such as the 1990 Jomtien declaration on Education for All, where girls as the disadvantaged group benefited naturally more. It was further supported by specific goals, targets, and actions to tackle gender gaps, as enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) (Lenze et al. 2018) as well as strong support by the international donor community (Dreher et al. 2015).

**Figure 1: Constraints in Rights faced by Women, 1960-2010**

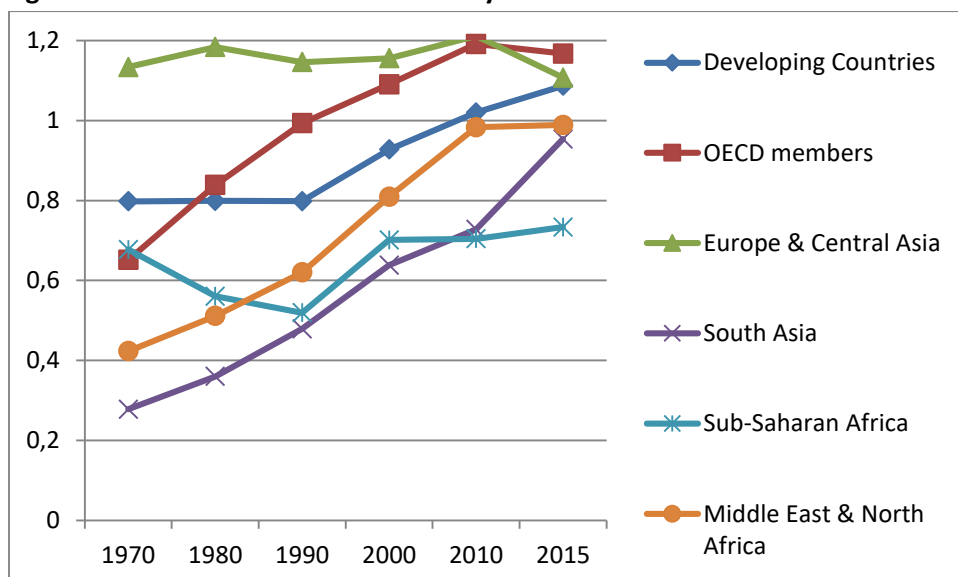


Source: Hallward-Driemeier et al. 2013

**Figure 2a: Female-Male Ratio of Secondary Enrolment**



**Figure 2b: Female-Male Ratio of Tertiary Enrolment**



Note: Developing countries are defined as being members of the World Bank's IBRD or IDA funding arms which includes nearly all non-OECD countries except some oil-rich Arab States (and Cuba and North Korea). In Europe & Central Asia and the Middle East & North Africa, only developing countries as defined above are included. OECD countries include Mexico and Turkey which contributes to the low female-male ratios in 1970 and 1980.

Source: World Development Indicators.

Similarly, as shown in Figure 1 there has been rapid progress in closing gender gaps in rights.

Progress has been universal, across all regions and dimensions, but some interesting heterogeneities are noteworthy (Hallward-Driemeier et al. 2013, World Bank, 2019). Nearly all constitutions now include an equality principle, and an increasing share mention gender explicitly in that principle. Nearly all countries grant property rights to unmarried women, while many more (but far from all) extend these rights to married women. And in fewer countries, women are restricted in their independent legal capacity. As a result, the formal legal restrictions women face has been falling

substantially across all regions, but many restrictions and unequal treatment remain in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa (World Bank, 2019). This pertains to formal statutory law. In many countries, however, customary law continues to be recognized, particularly in areas relating to the family, so that the reality of women's rights may look worse in societies where customary law plays an important role (Hallward-Driemeier et al. 2013).

Gender inequality in mortality, an issue that has not been an issue in developed countries since at least the early 20th century (Klasen, 1998; 2003), also appeared to be on the decline in the developing regions most affected by it, which were South Asia, China, and the Middle East and North Africa. As shown in Klasen and Wink (2002, 2003), the share of 'missing females' who had died as a result of gender inequality in mortality, fell from 7.9% around 1990 to 6.8% around 2000 in the regions most affected by it, with a decline recorded in all regions and countries except China. Particularly noteworthy was the rapid decline in the Middle East and North Africa, in Bangladesh, and in Sri Lanka, where the problem disappeared entirely .

With gender gaps in education, health, and rights falling, the expectation was that soon other gaps, e.g. in labor markets and the political sphere would similarly fall, as they had in OECD countries.

While progress may have been too slow for some, and gender gaps continued to be sizable, the direction of change seemed clear, and developing countries were just a few decades behind but sure to catch up. There were still some actors such as the Taliban in Afghanistan who fought actively against gender equality, but they were seen as a passing phenomenon, and in terminal decline.

Globalization was expected to accelerate progress towards gender equality. In rich countries it would promote structural change towards services where women traditionally dominate. In poor countries, it would promote labor-intensive export-oriented manufacturing, again offering employment opportunities and higher pay for the growing cohorts of more educated women (Horton, 1999; Standing, 1999; Seguino, 2000). Globalization would also promote competition, thereby helping to erode inefficient institutions such as taste-based gender discrimination in labor

markets in rich and poor countries (Oostendorp, 2009; Kis-Katos et al. 2018). More controversially, this heightened competition would also put a premium on workers that showed flexibility in terms of labor hours and conditions, and were willing to put up with lower wages. Women were seen to be more willing to work in such flexible and lower paid environments and thus were seen as the relative beneficiaries of this generally adverse development for workers in both developed as well as developing countries (Standing 1989, 1999).

A last indication of the confidence in the progress towards gender equality has been that progressive gender activism, particularly in developed economies, was moving on from fighting for economic and political equality between men and women to new challenges such as the rights of transgender people. While there are of course important inequalities that need to be tackled in this area, moving beyond the binary of males and females also implicitly questions activism for women that was precisely based on this binary category.

Similar to Fukuyama proclaiming the end of history when communism fell and the world would uniformly adjust to the Western economic and political system (Fukuyama, 1992), one could see the end of history regarding the struggle for gender equality just around the corner. Projecting trends forward, it appeared that the global march towards gender equality was unstoppable and women were going to be the winners of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Stagnation, regress, and backlash**

The last few years question this rosy picture of women's inexorable progress. In fact, one cannot be sure at all that steady progress towards gender equality will continue. Everywhere one looks, there are instances where progress has stalled, there was often less equality than had appeared, and there are experiences of real backlash.

Starting in the rich world, we learn that we are very far away from labor market equality. In the USA, for example, it appears that increases in female labor force participation rates have leveled off since about 2000 and remain substantially below those of males (Blau and Kahn, 2017; Goldin and

Mitchell, 2017). Moreover, new work on occupational and sectoral segregation has shown that it persists to a surprising degree in rich countries even as women reach parity in employment (World Bank, 2011, Borrowman and Klasen, 2019). Increases of women's participation has led to increasing female dominance in some sectors and occupations (esp. in services) often without breaking down occupational and sectoral barriers. As a result, the unexplained portion of the gender wage gap has proven to be remarkably persistent, linked to female-dominated sectors and occupations being paid less than equivalent male-dominated ones, and contributed to a slowing in the closing of the overall gender wage gap in many countries (Blau and Kahn, 2017; Weichselbäumer and Winter-Ebmer, 2005). Moreover, the wage gaps have remained high at the top of the distribution, pointing to glass ceiling effects, also related to continued female underrepresentation in top positions (Blau and Kahn, 2017).

Second, as women entered the labor force, there has been less of a reallocation of the care burden leading many women to have a double burden and/or sacrifice career prospects in the labor market to focus more on care for children and elderly. Women spend at least twice as much time (and in many countries 3-4 times as much time) on care work for children and elderly in OECD countries (OECD, 2010). The career interruptions and changed career trajectories associated with this care burden are among the most important and most persistent explanations of gender wage gaps of mothers versus fathers (OECD, 2018; Juhn and McCue, 2017).

Third, the #MeToo movement has shown, among other things, that at the workplace powerful men have been able to exploit their position to engage in sexual harassment (and worse) with impunity. Of course, it is also indicative of the changed times that the president of the United States takes pride in engaging in such abusive behavior, and seemingly gets away with it.

Lastly, while globalization did deliver the structural change from manufacturing to services and the demands for greater flexibility, both of which favored women, these relative gains came along with absolute job losses, falling participation and stagnating and falling wages for men, esp. less-skilled

men (Gottschalk and Danziger, 2005; Blau and Kahn, 2017). There is an on-going debate about the role of globalization versus other factors, particularly skill-biased technical change but also declining unionization, eroding minimum wages, and falling fiscal redistribution in eroding the incomes of less-skilled men. Many economists argue that skill-biased technical change was particularly important, esp. in the US and in the 1980s (Helpman, 2016; Burtless, 2007), while others see a greater role for globalization, esp. greater imports from China and other low-wage economies starting in the 1990s (Autor et al. 2013). Other see many factors at work simultaneously (Förster, 2016). Whatever the cause, the (modest) relative gains women were making in employment and pay came alongside absolute losses for many men, breeding resentment and backlash.

Looking towards the developing world, we see even more worrying developments. The Taliban, as strong as ever, have been joined by Islamic State, Boko Haram, and their supporters and sympathizers across the world in fighting even the most basic global consensus on gender equality, that girls have an equal right to basic education. Hundreds of schools for girls have been attacked and destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2005 (Khan and Seltzer, 2016), and attacks on girls' schools rose dramatically there as well as in Nigeria (Petkova et al. 2016). Girls have been abducted from schools by Boko Haram and married off in Nigeria, Yazidi women were enslaved, sold to IS fighters and routinely raped by their captors in Iraq (Jaff, 2018). This is different to women often being the inevitable victims of conflict and associated lawlessness, or even from conflicts where women were intentionally targeted for sexual violence as a way to demoralize an opponent (Krause, 2015). Here the targeting of women is part of the motivation of the conflict, and there is an ideological case made for depriving girls of schooling, as well as enslaving and raping non-believers (International Rescue Committee, 2017). While these groups thrive by exploiting other local grievances as well, leading a backlash against gender equality and re-imposing traditional gender roles, where women are subjugated to men, is an important motivating force (Dietrich and Carter, 2017; Brown 2018).

Elsewhere in the developing world, progress towards gender equality has only been steady and relatively rapid in the case of education where enrolment and completion gaps continued to fall (see Figure 2a and b).

Progress in reducing gender inequality in mortality has been more nuanced. While sex ratios and the associated share of missing females have continued to fall in the first decade of the 2000s in all regions and countries most seriously affected by the problem (Kahlert, 2014), this has to be set against four more worrying trends. First, some declines in sex ratios appear to be due to underenumeration of males in young adult cohorts who tend to be highly mobile and are therefore often not counted accurately. This, for example, has been found to be a problem in China's 2010 Census (Cai, 2013). Second, some of the reductions in gender bias in mortality is due to higher male mortality, rather than falling female mortality. An important issue here is the large gender difference in smoking rates and associated mortality in all developing regions affected by gender bias in mortality. In China in 2010, for example, 54% of adult males versus 2.6% of adult females smoke with associated lop-sided mortality rates from smoking-related diseases (Liu et al. 2017). Another issue is elevated male mortality due to civil conflict. Afghanistan's 'improvement' in the sex ratio is largely due to high male casualties in Afghanistan's decades of civil conflict (Kahlert, 2014). Third, even if sex ratios improve overall, they can worsen among children, pointing to rising problems of sex-selective abortions linked to son preference. In India, the overall sex ratio has declined from 1.077 in 1991 to 1.061 in 2011, while the sex ratio among 0-6 year olds increased from 1.058 to 1.089 in the same time period, largely linked to rising incidence of sex-selective abortions (Klasen and Wink, 2003; Census of India, 2014).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the sex ratio at birth has increased sharply in China since the 1980s and has stood at around 1.18 (instead of a normal 1.05) in the last 20 years, linked to sex-selective abortions in a context of strong son preference and the draconian one-child policy (Klasen and Wink, 2003; Cai, 2013). Lastly, gender bias in mortality has emerged in regions where it had been largely

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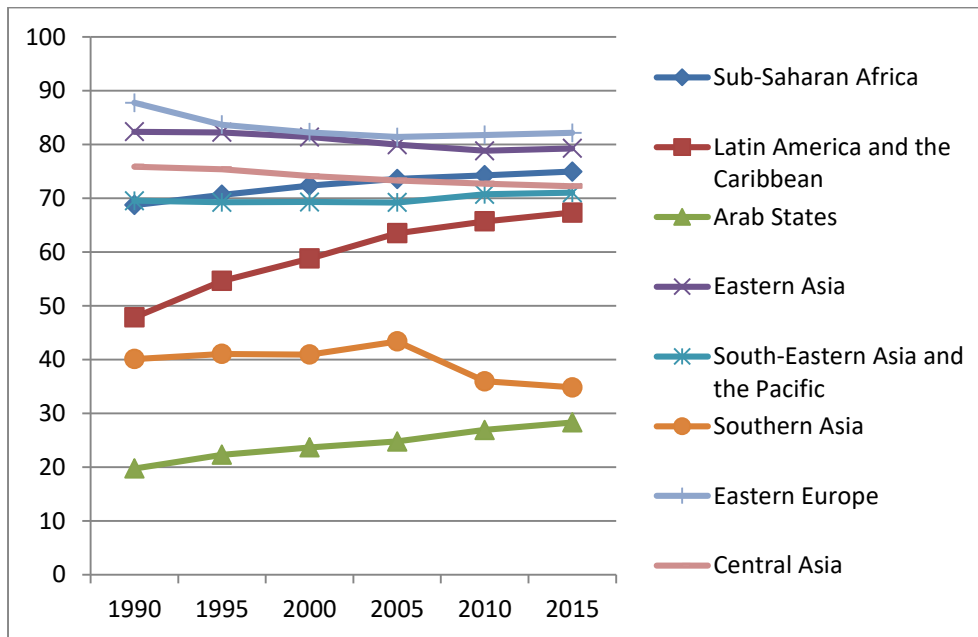
<sup>4</sup> There is a debate in the literature to what extent fertility decline versus increasing access to pre-natal sex determination using ultrasound machines has led to this deterioration. See Klasen (2008) and Jayachandran (2017).

absent before. In particular, gender bias in mortality has emerged in parts of Sub Saharan Africa among young adults, largely related to high female HIV infection rates and associated elevated mortality from AIDS (Klasen and Vollmer, 2018). Also, sex ratios at birth (linked to sex-selective abortions) have risen sharply in the South Caucasus region (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, see Mavisakalyan and Minasyan, 2018). In light of these trends, the impression of uniform progress in reducing gender bias in mortality is deeply misleading.

Similarly, progress in reducing gender inequality in labor markets has also been disappointing. Despite rapidly rising female education, and despite substantial and rapid fertility decline in most of the developing world, progress in reducing gender gaps in the labor market has been slow and heterogeneous across different regions (Klasen, 2019). In fact, with the exception of Latin America, progress in closing gender gaps in employment have stalled or gaps have even increased across the developing world. As shown in Figure 3, female labor force participation rates among prime age women (25-54) have stagnated or fallen in most developing regions. Of particular note is that despite massive advances in female education and rapid fertility decline, female labor force participation rates hardly increased in the past 2 decades in the Middle East and North Africa (from very low levels), and they actually fell in South Asia, driven particularly by falling female participation in India.

Careful analyses of the Indian case show several factors at work (Klasen and Pieters, 2015; Klasen, 2017b). First, as household incomes have improved, many poor and poorly educated women have left employment as their income was no longer urgently needed for survival. The jobs they left were often extremely poorly paid, with bad working conditions, so that it is likely they are better off leaving them. On the other hand, the number of more attractive jobs in manufacturing or education, health or public services was not growing as fast as the supply of educated women. And the social stigma against educated women working in jobs not deemed appropriate for them has kept many out of the labor force (Klasen and Pieters, 2015).

**Figure 3: Female labor force participation rate, age 25-54**



Source: ILOSTAT

Within South Asia, there are important differences. In Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the household constraints on female employment seem weaker than in India. Moreover, the strongly growing textile and garments sector in Bangladesh (and, to a lesser extent, Sri Lanka) has enabled educated women to work outside of white collar services, providing substantial economic opportunities. Conversely, in India, the lack of an export-oriented manufacturing sector, combined with falling female employment opportunities in agriculture, has led to a shrinkage of female employment opportunities and participation (Klasen and Pieters 2015; Klasen 2017).

Moving beyond the South Asian case, Klasen (2019) argues that trends in female labor force participation in developing countries more generally are heavily affected by how much women's labor force participation depends on their household's economic conditions, how jobs deemed appropriate for more educated women are growing relative to the supply of more educated women, whether growth strategies are promoting female employment, and to what extent women are able to break down occupational barriers within the sectors where women predominantly work.

More specifically, in Latin America it appears that a range of factors have been conducive to greater female participation. They include a female education expansion in post-secondary education

typically associated with high labor market attachment, continued fertility decline, increasing independence of women's labor market decision from family circumstances, and less of a female squeeze in few white collar services than elsewhere, due to a strongly growing service sector and a sizable manufacturing sector (in some countries) offering opportunities for women. The expanded access to labor-saving household technologies (and electricity) as well as more support for care facilities may have played a supporting role.

In East Asia, it appears that particularly a growth strategy depending heavily on female labor in manufacturing, strong female labor market attachment irrespective of household conditions (in China and Vietnam also due to the socialist legacy), and low fertility enabled a continued high female labor force participation. The recent decline from these high levels, driven largely by China, may be related to rising household incomes leading women to get out of undesirable jobs, an increasing care burden in a rapidly ageing society, and a fading of the socialist legacy.

In Sub Saharan Africa, agriculture is still the mainstay of total employment, and strong female involvement there leads to high participation rates. In addition, it appears that household conditions do not play a strong role in affecting female participation but also segregation into few sectors and occupations might constrain female participation in the non-agricultural sector, esp. in countries lacking a sizable manufacturing sector.

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the legacy of socialism that promoted female participation is slowly fading, with women facing increasing difficulties combining children with employment, leading to declines in female participation from high levels, esp. in Central Asia (see Klasen 1993; Klasen and Launov 2006).

In the Middle East and North Africa, a combination of a strong stigma for educated women against working outside of white collar services, remaining legal barriers to some types of female employment, and a stagnant or only slowly growing public health and education sectors has ensured that a strong education expansion as well as fertility decline has only had a rather modest impact on

female participation rates (World Bank 2004). This is particularly the case in resource-rich countries, but prevalent everywhere. In countries where export-oriented manufacturing and tourism play an important role (such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey), female employment opportunities and participation are somewhat greater.

Not only are the developments in female labor force participation disappointing. For working women, occupational and sectoral segregation remains pervasive, rising in more developing countries over the past 2 decades than falling (Borrowman and Klasen, 2019). Income growth, greater openness, and rising female education has not served to reduce this segregation (Borrowman and Klasen, 2019). As segregation has persisted, so have the associated (unexplained portion) of gender wage gaps.

Globalization has had a nuanced influence on women's economic opportunities in developing countries. Countries investing in export-oriented manufacturing, such as China, Indonesia, Vietnam, or Bangladesh, did create many employment opportunities for women (Seguino, 2000; Klasen, 2019). At the same time, a recent review by Kan and Klasen (2018) finds that the type of trade policy matters for women's economic opportunities. When trade policy promotes female-intensive sectors (as in Indonesia's experience), it can enhance their economic opportunities and promote their empowerment. But most experiences of trade liberalization studied in the review (South Africa, India, Brazil) led to job losses, esp. in manufacturing. These were sometimes larger for men than women (Brazil), and sometimes the reverse (South Africa). At times, these losses for men led women to engage in more distress employment to make ends meet (India).

Lastly, the care burden has remained as unequal as before (World Bank, 2011) and there has been little progress in combating domestic violence, although the topic was receiving increasing attention (World Bank, 2014).

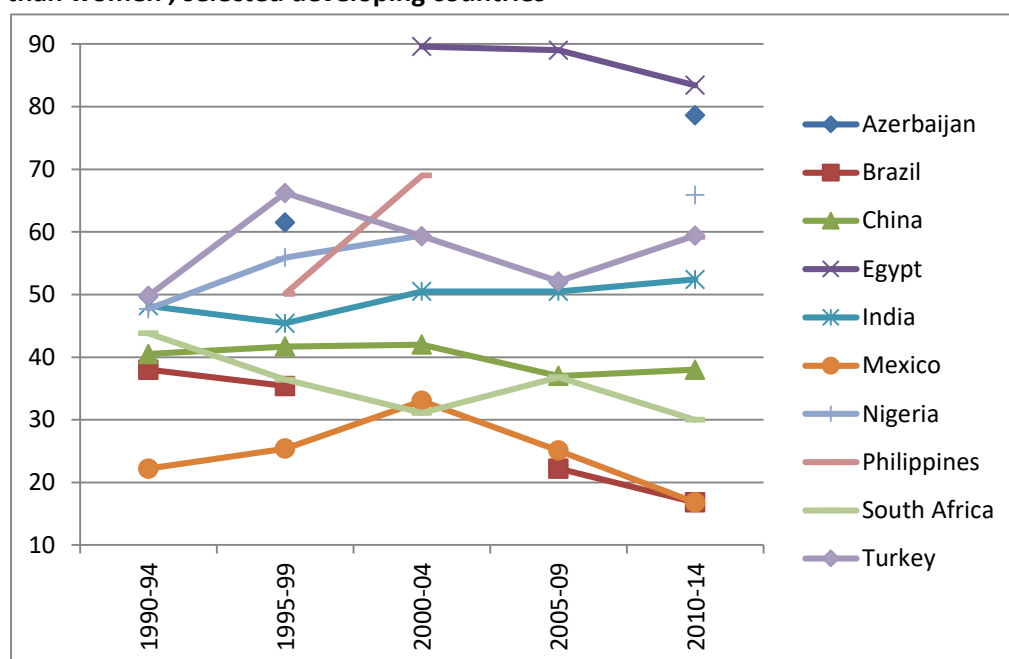
In short, rather than seeing a picture of continued uniform progress, we see a messy situation of some progress, some stagnation, some regress, depending on issue and region. What can explain this messy picture?

### **Possible reasons for stagnation and regress**

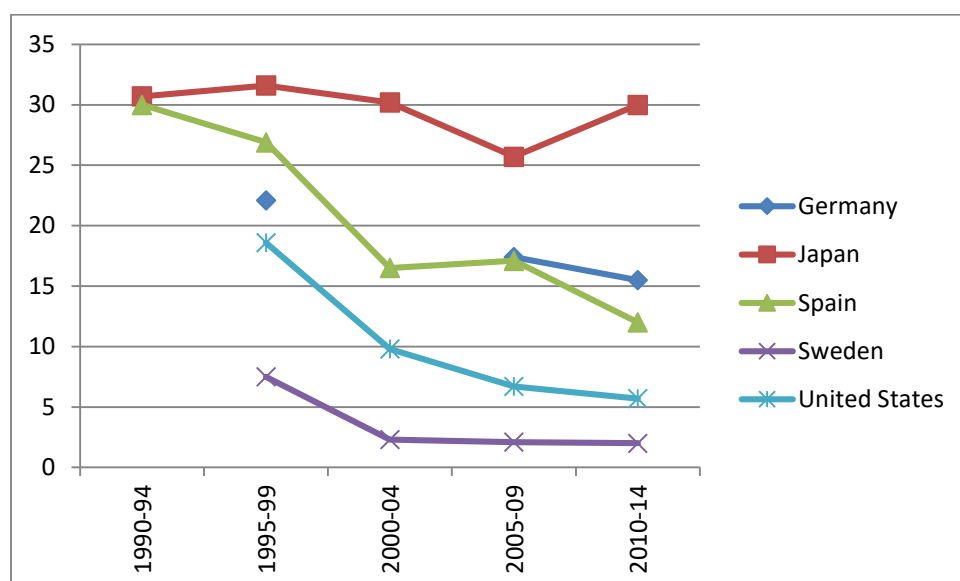
I argue that four factors play a role in explaining stagnation and regress. First, gender relations often touch on very core sets of values and norms that shape societies, particularly since they not only concern the public sphere, but also the private sphere. While these norms and values can and do change, there will often be a natural resistance to such change, particularly by those who see their culture threatened by such changes (Platteau et al. 2018). Economists have tended to underestimate the strength of these norms and beliefs, and have only recently begun to incorporate them into our analyses (Platteau and Peccoud, 2010; Platteau et al. 2018). The militant religiously-inspired movements such as Boko Haram or IS can be seen as just particularly extreme versions of this resistance.

Second, while research has shown that removing gender inequality in education and employment is a 'win-win' situation leading to higher female empowerment and improved overall economic performance (e.g. Cavalcanti and Tavares, 2016; Cuberes and Teignier, 2016; Klasen, 2018 Minasyan et al. 2019), this is not how it is often perceived by men. They can feel threatened in two ways. First, rising female employment can be seen as undermining their role as the main breadwinner for the family. And second, they can feel threatened by highly educated high-achieving female colleagues at work and/or wives that earn or know more than they do. Data from the World Values Survey bear this out. The share of respondents that agree with the statement 'when jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women' is quite high and has barely budged in many developing countries in the last 2 decades (see Figure 4a); only in Latin America, where female employment has expanded significantly, it has declined significantly. In OECD countries, it has been lower and declining, with the exception of Japan where the share is stuck at 30% (see Figure 4b).

**Figure 4a: Share agreeing with the statement 'when jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women', selected developing countries**



**Figure 4b: Share agreeing with the statement 'when jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women', selected OECD countries**



Note: Countries selected to represent regions and largest countries and based on availability of time series.

Source: World Values Survey.

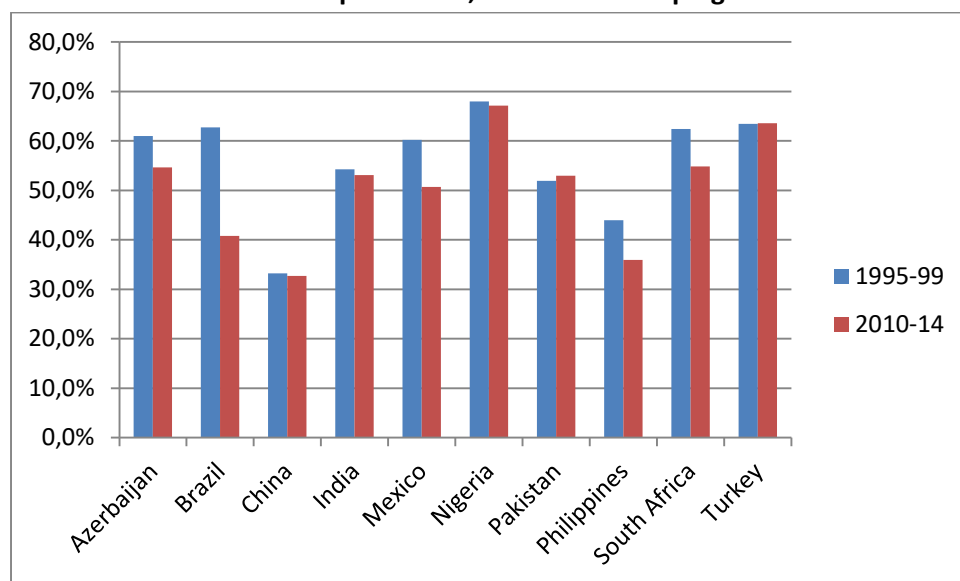
Similarly, in 31 (of 50) developing and transition countries included in the 2010-2014 wave, more than 30% of respondents agree that 'if a woman earns more money than her husband, it's almost certain to cause problems.' In most OECD countries this figure still hovers around 8-20%.

Interestingly, a higher share of men agree with this statement in places where agreement with the

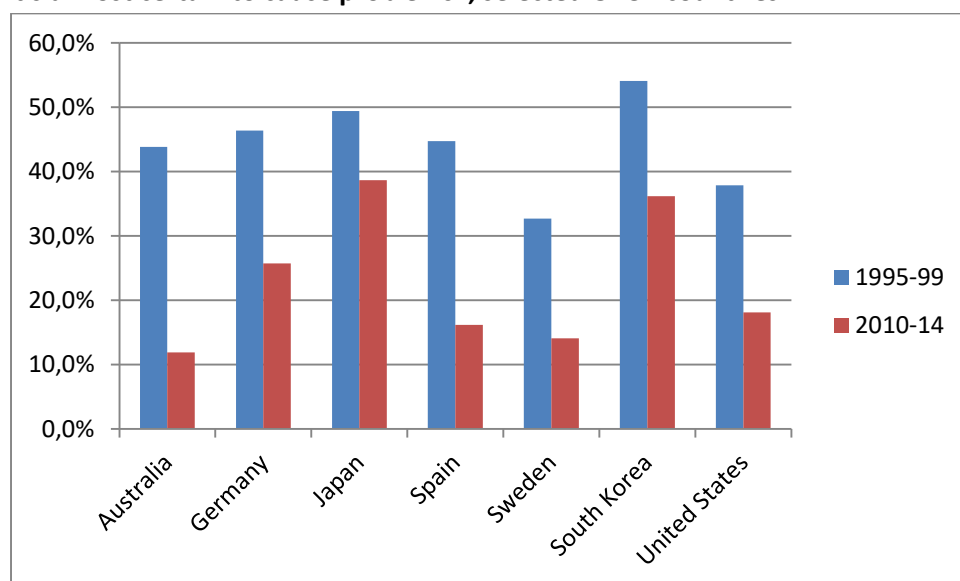
statement is generally high (e.g. India, Nigeria, Morocco, Pakistan, Zimbabwe) while in other countries there are no great differences between men and women, or men even agree to a lesser extent. The trends on this question, shown in Figures 5a and 5b, also suggest that uneasiness about female employment and earnings has remained very high in most developing countries, with some notable declines visible only in Latin America. In OECD countries, it has been lower and declining quite rapidly, with the exception of Japan and South Korea where the share remains above 30% (see Figure 5b). Given this general wariness about women taking 'men's positions' in the labor market and as primary earner, particularly in developing and Asian OECD countries, many try to resist these changes towards gender equality.

The threat to males associated with greater female employment or earnings can also contribute to the remarkable persistence of domestic violence, as suggested by so-called male backlash models (Lenze and Klasen, 2017). This is in contrast to bargaining models who would generally suggest that female employment and earnings increase women's bargaining power and should therefore reduce domestic violence. The empirical literature is divided on whether female employment and earnings promote or reduce domestic violence. For example, Bulte and Lensink (2019) find that higher female earnings promote domestic violence in Vietnam, Lenze and Klasen (2017) find no effect for Jordan, while Khan and Klasen (2018) find mixed results for 35 developing countries. But the absence of a clear negative effect of female employment and earnings on domestic violence suggests that the male backlash models appear to have some empirical relevance.

**Figure 5a: Share agreeing with the statement ' If a woman earns more money than her husband, it's almost certain to cause problems ', selected developing countries**



**Figure 5b: Share agreeing with the statement ' If a woman earns more money than her husband, it's almost certain to cause problems ', selected OECD countries**



Note: Countries selected to represent regions and largest countries and based on availability of time series. Since the 2010-14 includes a category neither/nor which was not available in 1995-99, and since both waves include don't know and no answer, the figures reported refer to the share agreeing with the statement among those who have taken a clear position (i.e. either agreed or disagreed).  
Source: World Values Survey.

Third, as discussed above, men have been doing badly economically in many countries. In many rich countries, the earnings of lower-educated males have stagnated for decades, and their employment prospects have dimmed. This has been related to globalization, structural change, and skill-biased technical change. It was amplified by declines in unionization and the reduction in redistributive effort by the state in many countries (Förster, 2016). Also in poor countries, as discussed above,

trade liberalization and structural adjustment programs led to job losses and wage declines for many men in formerly protected sectors. In this situation, it is no surprise that men see with frustration and envy that many women appear, at first sight, to have been doing relatively better as employees in non-traded service sectors such as health, education, or public service.

Lastly, maybe we are looking at some gender gaps in the wrong way. For example, the persistence of occupational and sectoral segregation by gender across the world may not only point to barriers women face, but may also reflect different objectives and interests. In fact, a recent study (Falk and Hermle, 2018) suggests that gender differences in preferences such as risk aversion, reciprocity, patience, and altruism are larger in richer and more gender-equal societies which may partly explain persistent segregation of women in rich countries in jobs and sectors that emphasize these traits.<sup>5</sup> Identifying the respective roles of barriers, including gender-specific socialization, versus preferences in delivering these segregation outcomes is clearly an urgent (and methodologically difficult) task.

Similarly, the analysis of labor force participation trends, particularly in developing countries, clearly suggest that employment is not an end in itself if it is a poorly paid job with terrible working conditions. Thus one should not bemoan women leaving those jobs when they can afford to. But of course it remains a concern if better job opportunities do not materialize for these women, or if they are unable to seize them due to restrictive social norms or care responsibilities. So instead of only tracking female labor force participation or employment rates, one should also look at quality of jobs, including earnings, other benefits and working conditions, as well as women's subjective assessment of them.

### **Policy Issues**

From this heterogeneous state of affairs and the suggested reasons explaining it, what can we learn for policies to promote gender equality? To each of the four reasons for this messy picture on the

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<sup>5</sup> They argue that in these societies, the provision of subsistence and basic rights increases the scope for gender-specific ambitions and desires.

state of gender relations, an associated policy message suggests itself. First, we need to better understand deep-seated norms and values shaping gender relations in particular contexts. This will often also suggest ways to promote gender equality that are not seen as frontal assaults on a particular culture or a way of life. As argued by Platteau et al. (2018), it may sometimes be better to either work on policies that raise women's economic opportunities or work on changing societal preferences surrounding a discriminatory social norm than trying to change the norm directly via changing statutory laws.

Second, promoting gender equality involves struggle and advocacy. Pointing to mutual benefits is not enough, and policies do not change in a vacuum. Thus there is an urgent need for the women's movement and other actors in both developing as well as developed economies to keep pushing for equality in rights, for equal pay for equivalent work, for equal access to all types of work, for policies to promote affordable childcare, for safe and secure workplaces and transport, for greater representation in politics and top economic management, and similar mundane bread-and butter issues.

Third, policies need to tackle the relative economic decline of less-educated men in many countries. While some, such as the current US administration, try to tackle this issue through protectionism, this is unlikely to be the right answer. Protectionism will not bring back the high-paying manufacturing and resource-based jobs lost in the past few decades in many rich countries. And globalization has generated many benefits for both richer and poorer countries that will be threatened by a return to protectionism. Instead what is needed are policies to specifically help those displaced by globalization and policies to reduce inequality. This includes education and training programs as well as tax-and transfer and social protection policies that actively fight the growing inequality in market incomes in many countries (Klasen et al. 2018).

Lastly, rather than focusing primarily on employment and occupational and sectoral segregation statistics, it might be better to focus, at least in the short term, on how to create attractive

employment opportunities for women and how to tackle the wage gaps resulting from occupational and sectoral segregation. A good place to start are growth and fiscal policies that promote female employment opportunities as well as policies pushing for higher wages in female-dominated sectors and occupations (Kan and Klasen, 2018; Klasen, 2019; Borrowman and Klasen, 2019). As many of these female-dominated sectors are in the public sector, the state has a particular responsibility and ability to boost wages there.

## **Conclusion**

Despite much progress in the past, this short survey has suggested that cannot be sure at all that the march towards gender equality will continue. As the instances of stagnation and regress since 2000 suggest, there are powerful forces at work that constrain progress and sometimes roll back achievements. Understanding the nature of these constraints is critical for the design of policies to further gender equality.

Of course, it is possible that this review may turn out to be too pessimistic and we may, at some future date, look back to this period of stagnation and regress as merely a temporary set-back on the secular trend towards gender equality. One factor in favor of such a potential development is that this period of stagnation and regress has already produced counter-movements that seek to accelerate progress towards gender equality again. For example, in the USA, the election of Trump and the policies he has pursued helped usher in the largest share of female representatives in Congress ever in the 2018 elections, many of whom explicitly are committed to policies to further gender equality. Similarly, issues such as stagnating female labor force participation, large gender pay gaps, and high levels of gender-base violence has spurred activism in many countries.

A second factor suggesting a more optimistic scenario is that policies to further gender equality are, by now, institutionally quite entrenched so that sheer institutional inertia might lead to a long-term path towards greater gender equality. For example, non-discrimination clauses and, in many

countries, affirmative policies, are legally enshrined, and governments, many large firms and international organizations, and the world community as a whole (in the form of the SDGs) have existing strategies and targets to further gender equality. Such laws and policies are generally more entrenched in developed countries, multinational companies, and international organizations so it is unclear how relevant this factor is in many developing countries. And of course reversals are still possible even for entrenched policies. Thus while such a more optimistic scenario is surely possible, this survey suggests that one should not take such a scenario for granted.

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