

BOOK REVIEW - *Gender Equality in a Global Perspective*, edited by Anders Örtenblad, Raili Marling and Snježana Vasiljević, 2017, Routledge Advances in Management and Business Studies Series, Routledge, 286 pages. Hardback, £110; eBook, £35.

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The outcome of an ambitious editorial project, *Gender Equality in a Global Perspective* is a timely and insightful contribution to the ongoing scholarly and policy debates about the implementation of international legislation on gender equality in a range of national contexts around the globe. The volume brings together specialists with a background in disciplines as diverse as law, economics, policy studies, sociology, anthropology, communication, humanities and gender studies, who have academic and practical expertise in gender-related issues and share a concern for the achievement of substantive equality for women. In ten comparative case studies, they explore the multifaceted aspects and challenges involved in applying “a universal (Western) concept of gender equality (GE), such as expressed in different international documents” (p. 3) in countries with distinct histories, cultures and traditions.

In the introduction, Snježana Vasiljević, Raili Marling and Anders Örtenblad give an overview of the main “feminist and legal questions of gender equality”, against the backdrop of changes brought about by “broader social developments in the 20th century” (p. 4). They consider the law and policy implications that have arisen from various feminist conceptualisations of the differences between men and women (in liberal feminism, cultural feminism, postmodern feminism), pointing to gains in securing equality, but also to limitations that translate into the continued discrimination of women. In order to overcome the white, Western-centred, essentialist approach to gender equality that transnational and intersectional feminists associate with “the

universalist language” of feminist thought (p. 8), the editors turn to Crenshaw’s concept of “intersectionality” (1989:7, qtd. in Vasiljević, Marling and Örtenblad). Within this frame, oppression and discrimination occur at the intersection of multiple identities and practices, having to do with sex, ethnicity, race, class, disability, etc. An important claim in the volume is that intersectionality has to be acknowledged and incorporated into gender equality legislation with a view to bettering the situation of women. Other obstacles to achieving substantive equality are posed by the different interpretations of the concept of equality itself and, a central focus in the book, by the gap between *de jure* equality for women, enshrined in international legislation, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the EU legal framework, and *de facto* equality.

Every chapter presents a comprehensive, critical study of the interpretation and enforcement of GE in nations very differently situated in terms of advancement in gender equality, each with its own history of feminist movements and with specificities (political, legal, everyday practices) that shape GE policies. The selection of the ten countries lays the ground for a truly global dimension and avoids a predominantly Western lens: Nigeria, Egypt, China, Australia, Uruguay, Mexico, the US, Serbia, Croatia and Estonia. The corpora analysed encompass official government documents, national and international legislation, data from surveys, interviews and social observation, media and textbooks, which allows the authors to correlate manifold views and understandings of the issue. As outlined in the introduction, the comparative studies take as a point of departure the definition of GE in CEDAW (ratified by all the countries discussed in the volume, except the US), and address, at a theoretical and empirical level, the underexplored “[i]ssues deriving from different definitions of GE, interpretations of international law, intersectionality and cultural differences” (p. 14). The comparison is structured along four main areas: the presence of GE in the legislation of the countries studied; the implementation of GE (formal status and/or practice, challenges, adaptation to local contexts); the possibility of achieving substantive GE; the impossibility of achieving substantive GE. The analyses are followed by useful, thoroughly informed recommendations for scholars and policy-makers.

Funmi Josephine Para-Mallam looks into the complexities derived from “the combined legacies of indigenous traditional, Islamic and colonial patriarchy” (p. 23) in Nigeria, which often hinder the accomplishment of substantive gender equality, despite ongoing policy and legal initiatives. Patriarchal ideology lies at the core of social, cultural, political and economic practices

and structures, being “a major root cause of anti-female discrimination and gender-based violence” (p. 33), and a major obstacle to the enforcement of gender equality policies, not least because its norms and values have been internalised by women themselves. Slow progress is being registered in some areas (economic development), but, overall, Nigerian women have reduced access to economic opportunities, education, health, and participation in the labour market, and, especially, political representation, an arena thoroughly dominated by men, who also extend their authority to the sphere of the home. Mara-Pallam’s recommendations stress the necessity of interrogating patriarchal ideology so as to legitimise the empowerment of women, and of initiating “gender dialogues” among various social and political actors in Nigeria.

In their case study on post-revolutionary Egypt, Mohamed Arafa and Ahmed El-Ashry show that the main factors impeding the achievement of substantive GE in Egypt are, first, a lack of political will, and, second, a widespread “misconception of Islamic norms and outdated beliefs and traditions” (p. 60). The latter has perpetuated “a male-dominated society”, where women have been kept in a state of inferiority, and is identified by the authors as “a core problem” (p. 60). While advances in education and health care have been made, and women are now benefitting from more political attention than in the past, a breakthrough is still expected in the areas of political representation, labour market insertion, quality of education, and the elimination of violence against women, a grave problem in Egypt. According to Arafa and El-Ashry, women’s situation can be improved if combined action is taken by national civil society organisations and international bodies, and if public communication campaigns are staged, but change ultimately depends on the state’s commitment to providing a framework for the enforcement of women’s rights.

The gender equality principle and rights legislation in China precede the country’s adoption of CEDAW (in 1980), being informed by ideologies that emerged during several eras, from “male feminism” at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century to the women’s movement during the Communist Revolution and to “state feminism” under the People’s Republic of China. After carefully mapping out this rich history, Yan Zhao discusses the possibility of enforcing “GE as expressed in CEDAW [...] in a politically communist yet economically market-oriented Chinese context” (p. 77). The focus of the article is the women’s insertion in the labour market. The existing gap between the legal provision of GE, on which China takes pride, and its implementation, originates, according to Zhao, in a “lagging behind” of the legal system (Zhang 2015:95, qtd. in

Zhao) and in the “subordination” of GE to “the goal of economic development” at a political level (p. 95). Other aspects to consider are the intersectionality between gender and the rural/urban divide as a source of social inequality or between gender and age, as well as the fact that women’s movements in China have been put in the service of other movements and policies, thus failing to gather strength for their own agenda.

The case study on Australia, co-authored by Archana Preeti Voola, Kara Beavis and Anuradha Mundkur, starts from the premise that, even though Australia ranks high in the Global Gender Gap Index, “Australian egalitarianism is mediated by race, ethnicity, postcode, migration status, sexual orientation, gender identity and whether a person lives with a disability” (p. 101), and gender equality is subject to “contestation” in terms of definitions and degrees of commitment to its implementation across Australian states. Taking CEDAW as a reference point, the chapter examines critically the legal and policy frameworks for gender equality provision, pointing to their shortcomings in areas such as labour force participation, violence against women, and women’s participation in politics. Important highlights are the analyses and reflections on the social inequalities that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, at the intersection of gender and race, but also other dimensions, such as disability. The authors’ recommendations emphasise the need for “structural and cultural shifts in work and care arrangements”, “increased funding of specialist women’s organizations” that deal with violence, and better “mechanisms to address multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by Australian women” (pp. 117-118).

As Alma Espino notes in the opening of her case study, Uruguay has had a strong women’s movement, guarantees formal equality, and boasts significant progress in GE policies. While no deeply entrenched cultural opposition to women’s equality exists, there is still scope for improvement both at the level of cultural perception and ideology, and in areas such as women’s participation in politics, where the greatest problems are registered, but also, to an extent, labour market participation, reproductive health, and violence against women. As gender equality is “an issue of power”, its full accomplishment, according to Espino, “requires educational efforts and the promotion of cultural changes” (p. 143), institutions that provide decision-makers with resources and appropriate instruments for policy implementation, the engagement of women in politics, and better coordination among institutions at a national level.

In Sonia M. Frías’s view, in Mexico, gender inequality has its origins in the patriarchal system upheld by “social structures that perpetuate men’s domination of women in all areas of

private and public life” (p. 152) and in the underlying ideology. The reproduction of gender inequality in this system, coupled with unawareness of women’s rights among the population, makes change slow and difficult, even though Mexico has signed international agreements and has set up a policy framework to tackle structural discrimination against women, which has led to some advancement. Mexican women are faced with underrepresentation (60 percent equality by comparison with men) in the economic sphere, persistent gender gaps in certain education areas, insufficient progress in political representation, and inadequate representation and protection in the legal sphere, with the exception of Mexico City. The recommendations Frías makes dwell upon the need to correlate gender equality achievements in the four spheres analysed, to make available appropriate frameworks and resources for policy implementation at federal and state levels, and to address “ideological gender inequality” (p. 170) in tandem with structural inequality.

Colleen E. Arendt and Patrice M. Buzzanell discuss gender equality in the US as “an activist movement” in three waves, and as an integral component of “diversity and inclusion as well as human rights initiatives” (p. 177) in recent years. Gender equality has registered a marked progress in education, despite some disparities between races and the underrepresentation of women in science and technology based disciplines. Not the same can be said about GE in the workforce, health care protection, and reproductive health policies. One of the factors to which Arendt and Buzzanell attribute the slow progress in the implementation of GE is the complex relationship between the federal and state legal structures, with the states often passing laws that prevent the proper enforcement of federal GE legislation, illustrated by the authors with examples about same-sex marriage and abortion. Another factor has to do with the “two dominant narratives and rhetorics”—“extreme individualism and American exceptionalism, and a framing of gender issues, like equality, as matters of choice instead of rights” (p. 188)—which successfully buttress the view that many aspects of gender equality are contingent upon individual merit and personal choice, within a frame of neoliberal ideology. In order for change to occur, important steps would be analysing the inconsistencies and setbacks in the process of GE implementation, deconstructing meritocracy, casting GE as a right, and legitimising the struggle against gender inequality as a struggle against multiple inequalities with structural and ideological roots.

The case studies on three Central and Eastern European states—Serbia, by Suzana Ignjatović and Aleksandar Bošković, Croatia, by Snježana Vasiljević, and Estonia, by Raili Marling—bring insights into the legacy of the former communist/ Soviet regimes and into its

transformation during the post-communist transition. The three countries are signatories of CEDAW and other international agreements, and also act under European Union legislation and policy frameworks for GE (Croatia and Estonia are EU member-states and Serbia is engaged in the process of EU accession). The communist ideology regarding women's rights is treated as contradictory, at best, in that it fostered public attitudes favourable to women's education and labour force participation that have extended into the post-communist period (in Serbia and in Estonia, and partially in Croatia, where a turn to tradition took place in the 1990s); on the other hand, such attitudes tend to be rather superficial. Communist ideology also persecuted feminism as a "bourgeois relic" (p. 248), and subsumed women's equality to the socialist approach to workers' rights, weakening the women's movement (in Estonia). All the authors mention the mixture of socialist-progressive and conservative stances on the women's role under communism, which have strengthened gender-based stereotypes and traditional understandings. As we have seen in the case of the other countries analysed in this volume, gender equality is formally provided, but, in practice, a lot of work needs to be done in areas such as the following: political representation; occupational segregation and unequal distribution of household work; the wage gap (the largest in the EU, in Estonia); insufficient consideration of intersectionality (for example, in the case of Roma and Muslim women in Serbia); the politicisation of abortion under pressure from the Catholic Church and conservative governments (in Croatia) and denied access to reproductive rights for certain categories (in Serbia); traditional views of gender roles (reinforced in media and textbooks in Serbia); domestic violence (in Serbia, where it remains a serious problem, and in Croatia); multiple discrimination. The implementation of GE policies is slowed down by ambivalent interpretations of concepts and definitions by various state and non-state actors in Serbia, an enthusiastic and uncritical embrace of market neoliberalism and consumer culture in Estonia, "soft changes" (p. 228) and "a misunderstanding of the recently adopted concepts and standards" (p. 238) in Croatia, and, importantly, a lack of political will and of awareness among the general public in all the three countries.

In an illuminating commentary chapter, Patrice M. Buzzanell reads the volume contributions through the lens of a "tensional approach", which entails "contestation of language, time and place, and struggles to achieve desired outcomes" (p. 265). "Tensions, contradictions and paradox" (p. 265) are deemed necessary in order to dismantle naturalised constructions within gender equality practices and policies, and thus cast light on those areas where improvement is still

needed, but no straightforward solutions present themselves. A similarly balanced view on the progress and the barriers in applying international GE legislation is advanced by Raili Marling, Snježana Vasiljević and Anders Örténblad in the conclusions. Even though all the countries studied have introduced provisions on GE under international laws, with notable developments in women's education, in practice women are still confronted with inequalities, inappropriate institutional structures to deal with them, the challenge of intersectionality, and non-engagement with the situation in the private sphere. The editors draw attention to the importance of scrutinising the adoption of GE in practice, in all its complexity, and of being sensitive to the differences between men and women and between women themselves, in various contexts. This calls for “more comparative work on gender equality”, in which “the universalist language of human rights” is “combined successfully with local sensitivity, without allowing the entrenched traditions to hinder women's rights” (p. 277-278).

Written with remarkable clarity, the book fills important gaps in the research on international legislation on gender equality: it offers a much needed comparative view of national contexts, everyday, lived practices, and aspects pertaining to multiple forms of discrimination; it provides relevant illustrations and in-depth, critical discussions of the process of achieving substantive equality for women through the implementation of international legislation; it makes recommendations for future courses of action and for new research undertakings. A solid academic contribution, a reliable instrument for decision-makers, and a learning tool for students in several fields, the volume also makes for a fascinating and accessible read for non-expert publics.

References:

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