

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction: Reversing The Gaze**

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#### **The Rationale for this Book**

This book is the product of an experiment. It brings together scholars with first hand knowledge and experience of developing/transition countries to reflect on approaches to gender equality in Norway and Sweden. The country experiences represented in the book are wide-ranging: Pakistan (Gazdar), Argentina (Jelin), Iran (Razavi), Hungary (Nagy), Mexico (Cos-Montiel), Nigeria (Akanji), South Africa (Hassim) and India (Subrahmanian; Arora-Jonsson). These are countries that have very little in common with the Nordic countries or indeed with each other. Nevertheless, the idea that there is value to be added, analytically and in policy terms, by a comparison between countries with very different historical trajectories, institutional configurations and resource constraints is not entirely new. After all, a great deal of development assistance has consisted of attempts to transfer the lessons from experiences of advanced industrialised countries to the “south” and, more recently, to the transition economies of Europe. These attempts have been largely guided by the work of researchers and consultants who were drawn mainly from the donor countries and hence tended to interpret the realities of developing countries from the perspectives provided by their own values and experiences.

The contributions to this book represent a departure from this tradition. They offer assessments of Nordic achievements on gender equality from the perspectives of those who have long-standing professional and personal experience in developing countries. For these authors, participating in the project that gave rise to this book offered a refreshing opportunity to “reverse the gaze”, to study what was achieved in two Nordic contexts from their own priorities and standpoints and to ask what can be learned from this comparison. Consequently, this book represents what they believe to be interesting or instructive about the Nordic experience rather than what different actors within the Nordic countries might consider to be the key issues. Some of the chapters draw out lessons in terms of what *could* be emulated from the Nordic experience, others focus on what should *not*. Still others focus on what was achieved in the Nordic context, how it was achieved and what stands in the way of equivalent progress in their own countries. A number of the authors have focused on earlier periods in the history of Norway and Sweden when they were at a stage closer to those that prevail in many developing countries today with a view to ascertaining how they overcame the constraints of the past to embark on the road to gender equality. Others focus on the contemporary period.

**“Contrasting” Comparisons: The Nature of the Analytical Challenge**

A great deal of the comparative work on gender equality in the OECD context has been carried out within typologies of social policy regimes. The existence of such typologies signal the differences in welfare approaches among the wealthy industrialised countries of the world and point to differences in their histories, institutional configurations as well as in dominant ideologies about the relationship between individual and the state as well about gender roles within the family. Feminists have criticized and reworked this framework to accommodate the different models of the breadwinner and caregiver that prevail in the OECD context. Some have used child benefit packages as their main criteria (Bradshaw et al. 1993), others have added positions in the labour market, social security and taxation systems (Lewis 1992, still others have focused on the position of lone mothers (Kilkey and Bradshaw; 1999; Hobson and Mieko, 1997). Their efforts suggest that countries are likely to be classified differently according to the criteria used (Lewis 1997).

However, even within this reworked version, the welfare regimes framework, taking for granted as it does that there is a discernible state commitment to welfare provision, is not particularly helpful in contexts where such a commitment cannot be taken for granted. And where markets remain partial and limited in their outreach, it is family, kinship and community that underpin the search for livelihood and security and provide the main source of norms and values that govern people's lives. The social organization of family, kinship and community, and the societal norms and values which these generate, may have as much, and more, influence in explaining variations in gender equality in these contexts than state policies or legislation, particularly since policies and legislation often fail to be upheld in practice, a theme that recurs in the contributions to this book.

Table 1 . Human Development Indicators

Country	GDP per capita (PPP, US\$)	HDI ranking (177 countries)	GDI ranking (136 countries)	GEM ranking <sup>1</sup> (75 countries)
Norway	38,454	1	1	1
Sweden	29,541	5	4	2
Hungary	16,814	35	30	41
Argentina	13,298	36	32	19
South Africa	11,192	121	92	18
Mexico	9,803	53	45	35
Iran	7,525	96	74	71
India	3,139	126	96	95
Pakistan	2,225	134	105	41
Nigeria	1,154	159	120	98

<sup>1</sup>GEM data for South Africa, India and Nigeria is from other sources, see below

Source: UNDP (2006) Human Development Report 2006, GDP-, HDI- and GDI data for all countries collected in 2004, GEM data for Norway, Sweden, Hungary, Argentina, Mexico, Iran and Pakistan collected in 2000- 2004; GEM data for South Africa and India

from UNDP (1999) Human Development Report 1999, data collected in 1995 for India and in 1998- 1999 for South Africa, 102 countries were ranked; GEM data for Nigeria from UNDP (1996) Human Development Report 1996, data collected in 1995, 104 countries were ranked.

Table 1 helps to illustrate some of the differences between the countries being compared in this book. It reports on per capita income along with a number of widely used indicators of social progress, including measures of gender equality developed by the UN. For the purposes of our analysis, Korpi's distinction between basic "inequalities" and "elite inequalities" is a useful one (Korpi, 2000). The first relate to the satisfaction of basic needs (mortality rates and life expectancy, health, literacy and primary education) while second relate to the extent to which professional women are held back by the glass ceiling, the percentage of women in cabinet and so on

The Human Development Index (HDI) focuses on overall achievements in basic health, education and economic activity. The Gender-related Development Index (GDI) measures how countries are doing in terms of some of the basic dimensions of gender equality: wages earned (with controls introduced for differences in national income levels), life expectancy and education levels attained. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) is a composite of gender inequalities in earnings (removing the controls for differences in national income levels in the GDI measure), in professional, managerial and technical occupations and in parliamentary representation. It thus addresses some of the "elite" inequalities referred to earlier. It also offers partial insight into the nature of socio-economic disparities in a country: countries which perform considerably better on

the GEM index than on the GDI are also likely to be countries in which elite women have made important gains in the public domain but with little progress on the basic inequalities that affect poorer women.

A comparison of how the different countries perform on these indicators suggests a number of points. First of all, they show a broad association between per capita GNP and GDI, suggesting that countries improve their basic gender equality achievements with increases in their per capita income. The poor performance of developing countries can thus partly be attributed to their low levels of income. Second, however, they suggest that income is only part of the story. A number of countries are ranked far lower in terms of the GDI measures than their levels of per capita income would warrant. Nor is this deviation from the expected ranking a function of levels of income. Iran, South Africa, India and Pakistan all fail to score a HDI or GDI rank commensurate with their per capita GDP ranking but Iran and South Africa with higher levels of per capita income report much larger deviations. Nigeria, with lower levels of per capita income, does not deviate from the rank commensurate with its per capita income.

And third, how countries are ranked in terms of gender equality changes, often considerably, when the focus shifts to the GEM measure. This is less true for the Nordic countries which perform as well on the GEM as they do on basic equality measures, suggesting that progress on equality is widespread in these societies. In other countries, the direction of the deviation between the two measures how they perform on second order relative to basic inequalities. Hungary performs better on basic equality measures

than on second order equality, a product perhaps of its very recent emergence from socialist-egalitarianism. While Iran is ranked much lower than some of the countries in the table, and of course, considerably lower than Sweden and Norway, its ranking on the GEM is not that different from its GDI rank. While Argentina and Mexico are ranked above Iran for both indicators, they both perform far better on their GEM ranking than their GDI, indicative of the high levels of income and social disparities in these countries. Pakistan too, at much lower ranks on both, performs better on the GEM index than on the GDI.

These shifts in how countries are ranked by different measures of gender equality mirror the differences in the ranking of countries within different typologies of welfare regimes. The problem with the welfare regime typologies, which focus largely on policy “inputs”, is finding the appropriate set of policy indicators that will create meaningful categories among countries in terms of their approaches to gender equality, given the complexity of women’s lives and their dual responsibilities within the home and marketplace. The problem with the UN gender equality measures, which focus on outcomes rather than policy inputs, is that it is possible for a country to perform well on certain indicators but poorly on others. This may reflect where the policy emphasis in a country is – there is a major push in developing countries on closing gender disparities in primary education for instance but less on addressing the causes of maternal mortality. It may also reflect the fact that, in highly stratified contexts, progress on the different dimension of gender equality varies across socio-economic groups.

Clearly measures like the GDI and GEM cannot capture all the multiple dimensions of gender equality, but they do serve to tell us that concerns about gender equality are likely to be different for countries at different levels of development. They are also for men and women in different socio-economic groups. The analytical challenge posed by the comparisons carried out in this book relate not only to different levels of development across which the comparisons are being carried out but also to the vastly different histories, social formation and value systems which are embodied in current gender equality outcomes. As Ellingsaeter points out in her comparison of Nordic countries:

Politics and institutions are crucial in understanding the structuring of gender relations in society, but politics and their gendered outcomes are embedded in complex processes. Nations constitute different “historical packages” or unique constellations of factors... Both the formation of policies and the actual outcomes are conditioned by such configurations, that is by the economic, institutional and cultural settings in which they are embedded... (1998:60).

If nations are seen to constitute different “historical packages” in the Nordic context to which her comments relate, the variations are likely to be even greater for “north-south” comparisons with which this book is concerned. Faced with this challenge, the authors in this book have eschewed attempts to fit their analysis around existing or new typological approaches. Instead they have taken as their organising framework the basic challenge of social reproduction common to all societies. This relates to how societies sustain, reproduce and transform themselves over time and encompasses both the micro-level

processes which sustain life and labour on a daily and generational basis as well as changes in the social relations of production and reproduction which govern these processes. The concerns with paid and unpaid work, marriage, parenthood and sexuality, literacy and education which feature in the following chapters, together with an analysis of the politics and policies which promote greater equality in relation to these concerns, reflect this underlying framework. In the rest of this introduction, we highlight some key themes highlighted by these chapters.

### **State-Society Relations and the Challenge of Social Reproduction**

The first of these relate to state society relations in some of the countries covered. It is clear from the analysis contained in the book that while the main strides in the construction of “women-friendly” regimes in Norway and Sweden were taken in the post-war period, certain preconditions were in place which allowed such strides to be taken. Both countries had small and, till recently, relatively homogenous populations and histories of the twentieth century that has been dominated by social democratic governments and active labour movements. They also had high levels of organization by women, in autonomous associations and within mainstream political parties and trade unions. These helped to create a national constituency for universalist policies, to socially embed values of equity and equality firmly within a shared cultural framework and provided a relatively hospitable environment for the struggle for gender equality.

This is in contrast to most the countries with which comparisons are being made. Most of the latter have histories of colonisation which left lasting legacies of inequality. Their

populations continue to be divided not only by class but also by social identity: ethnicity and indigeneity in Nigeria and Mexico, race in south Africa, caste, religion and language in India and Pakistan. In many of these contexts, these divisions have taken lethal forms. Ethnic differences have led to civil war in Nigeria and continue to fragment the experience of rights and citizenship; religion and caste divisions erupt into violence from time to time in the Indian subcontinent; race was the basis of state sponsored violence in South Africa. In Mexico, indigenous groups have taken up armed struggle in pursuit of rights and recognition while in Argentina, the indigenous population was all but wiped out by European immigrants who regarded it as “empty territory” to be settled by them. The demise of socialism in Eastern Europe has allowed the emergence of social inequalities which had been hitherto suppressed although Hungary has not featured in the forefront of the resulting conflicts.

A unified constituency for women’s advancement is clearly difficult to mobilise across such deep divisions. It is evident from the various contributions that barriers to such advancement have taken other forms as well. The extent of gender segregation of a society appears to be one important variable. Societies with a high degree of gender segregation, reflecting cultural norms of female seclusion within the domestic domain, tend to face a different set of barriers to gender equality to those where women are not confined to the domestic domain (Kabeer 2003). As the discussions in the book suggest, restrictions on their physical mobility curtails girls’ capacity to attend school in Pakistan, women’s capacity to take up paid work in the public domain in Iran (where the law requires husbands’ permission) and opportunities for paid work in India.

The nature of the social formations which give rise to these basic inequalities is touched on at different points in the book but the first three chapters, which take a historical perspective, deal most explicitly with the challenge of social reproduction in highly stratified contexts. Gazdar leads off with an analysis of the drive to universalise literacy in Sweden in the second half of the seventeenth century. He contrasts it with the failure of successive regimes in Pakistan to ensure the spread of literacy and the stark gender inequalities in basic education which persist in the country today.

His attempt to understand the factors behind these contrasting outcomes touch on a number of general themes which are relevant to later contributions. He comments on the capacity of the Swedish state to intervene in the lives of its citizens from a very early stage of the country's history to an extent that is unusual, not only from the perspective of Pakistan and some of the other countries discussed in the book but also from the perspective of other advanced industrialised countries. Public life was far less gender segregated from an early period of Sweden's history than it was – and continues to be – in Pakistan and the patriarchal household in Sweden enjoyed a far more limited “sovereignty”. The church and state, firmly linked by the seventeenth century, were able to regulate individual behaviour across the population to an extent unimaginable in the context of contemporary Pakistan where communities continue to be divided along “parochial” lines by kinship, caste and so on, managing their own affairs and regarding the state with considerable suspicion. The “social engineering state” of the twentieth century was therefore a continuity, not a departure, from the country's history.

The question of the distance between state and citizen is crucial here. As Gazdar points out, distances are likely to be seen as far larger in countries that are economically polarised and socially stratified as Pakistan is, compared to societies like those of Norway and Sweden which largely share language, culture and tradition. The state's ability to regulate public life – and private behaviour – of its citizens appears to be a function of this distance. In Argentina, Jelin also describes a context where the state is separated from large sections of the country's population by both the physical distance implied by the urban/ rural and centre/periphery distinction as well as the social distance of class and, to some extent, ethnicity. The failure of the ruling elites, closely aligned with the Church, to impose their views about family, sexuality and reproduction led to the co-existence of parallel models alongside each other: the family of the urban middle class based on Catholic norms about male authority, wifely obedience, indissoluble marriage bonds, on the one hand, and the free conjugal unions and illegitimate offspring which prevailed in the rural and frontier areas, on the other.

Despite the later democratisation of political life in Argentina, the Church continues to seek to hold back the forces of social change which are altering the choices available to women in their private lives. The persistent failures of the Argentine state to regulate the processes of social reproduction, its role as “laggard” rather than “leader” in relation to social change, is contrasted with the pro-active role played by the Swedish state in anticipating and helping to shape the direction of social change as far as fertility behaviour and women's labour force participation was concerned.

Religion as a conservative force also features centrally in Razavi's account of the Iranian situation, but she provides a sobering reminder that the enforced "unveiling" and secularisation of society in pursuit of the dream of modernisation by the Pahlavi regime was as disenfranchising for many poorer rural women as the enforced veiling and Islamisation after the Iranian revolution proved to be for more educated professional women. Behind the half-hearted nature of the reforms carried out by the Shah was the widespread acceptance of the community's legitimate prerogative to set the limits of individual moral behaviour, particularly in relation to the preservation of female "modesty". Nor did his pursuit of modernisation include more than token gestures in the direction of the democratisation of society.

The Islamic Republic was able to close some of this distance between state and society because it expressed both the political aspirations of a vast majority of the people of Iran, who were largely unified in their rejection of the previous regime, as well as offering a model of society which was closer to the beliefs and values of the majority of the people. This allowed it to effect some significant changes, including changes in the realm of gender relations, curtailing women's ability to hold public office and prescribing their behaviour and apparel in the public domain. At the same time, the Islamisation of public space and the call to protect the Revolution against the invasion by Iraq gave women from lower income households far greater possibilities for public participation than had been available to them in the previous regime.

Subrahmanian's analysis is also premised on questions about the distance between the state and citizens. It takes as its theme the criminalisation of the demand for commercial sex by Sweden – but not Norway – in response to the demands of its women's organisations. Sweden has sought to promote this approach in a variety of international forums and a number of countries have followed suit. However, as Subrahmanian argues, such a measure is likely to play out very differently in the contexts of Sweden and India. Sweden is characterised by one of the world's most supportive welfare states, one which provides support to women's dual responsibilities in family and market and is also a major source of employment for women through the social services. Regardless of the extent to which states *should* intervene in the choices made by individuals or determine what constitutes a meaningful choice, it could be argued that the Swedish state does so in the context of guaranteeing alternatives to sex work as a means of securing one's living.

The same cannot be said in India. While it has had a less interrupted history of democratic politics than the other developing countries included in this book and while the state has sought to promote some degree of social security for its citizens, its efforts have been both limited and uneven. The intersection of class, caste and gender inequalities serve to create extreme forms of marginalisation, with women from poorer groups cut off from both market and state provision in their search for security. For many of these women, the sex trade offers one of the few livelihood options on offer. Despite the social stigma associated with sex work, it allows them a means of supporting themselves and their families in working conditions that are sometimes less exploitative and humiliating than the menial forms of domestic service or abusive marriages that may

be their only alternatives. In a context where the state has not only failed to provide any kind of reliable safety net but has also perpetrated various forms of gender-based violence against women (custodial rape was one of the issues which galvanised feminist activism in recent decades), the criminalisation of sex workers or their clients offers little by way of improving the life prospects of these women. It may instead render them more vulnerable to predatory and corrupt police.

### **The Power of Discourse**

A second underlying theme running through some of the chapters in the book relates to discourse as an example of a “power” resource for subordinate groups within a society. The Nordic experience helps to focus attention on some of the mechanisms through which women as a section of the population lacking the institutionalised power of the working class – “the politics of numbers and voting strength” – were able to mobilise around demands for a more “woman friendly” state (Hobson and Lindholm 1997). The construction of discursive strategies which allowed these demands to resonate for women across class barriers also served to galvanize allies outside their immediate ranks and proved a critical factor in their successes.

In the Swedish context, the discursive strategies of feminists largely took a “gender neutral” form, linking women’s claims to the “master frames” (Snow and Benford 1992) of Swedish social democratic culture of solidarity, democracy and equality. Equality in the labour market was seen as the key to equality in other spheres, including great support for parenting responsibilities. In this, however, Sweden is probably an exception, even in

relation to other the European countries. As Kabeer's chapter points out, it is the focus of Norwegian feminists on gender difference, on the values of motherhood as the basis for women's claims, that finds more of an echo in developing country contexts. In the far more gender differentiated social relationships which prevail in many of these societies, with the practice of female seclusion characterising a number of them, gender difference has been a far more common basis for women's claims.

An assessment of these rather different strategies for advancing women's claims for resources and recognition in the Nordic context prompted reflections not only on what is gained but also what may be lost. Of all the countries discussed in this book, socialist Hungary probably came closest to the Swedish notion of equality based on equal participation in the labour market. However, as Nagy points out, socialist ideology constructed the male patterns of full-time, life long employment as the norm against which all citizens were required to perform, regardless of the fact that a significant percentage of women had additional child care responsibilities which men were not required to share. This was not a notion of equality that the mass of women had struggled but a "forced emancipation" imposed by an undemocratic state. Nagy contrasts the struggle of Hungarian women to combine their child care and work responsibilities with little or no help from the state with the combination of part time work, full protection and support for parenting responsibilities that have allowed women in the Nordic countries to move in and out of the labour market without facing the prospect of impoverishment. It is clear from her discussion that Swedish and Hungarian notions of equality based on labour force participation, while superficially similar, result in very

different labour market policies and patterns when feminists are able to play an active role in their interpretation.

While the Swedish focus on gender neutral strategies within a wider social-solidaristic discourse won feminists allies beyond their immediate ranks and explains the extent and nature of the advances they made, the silencing of difference also served to suppress attention to the gender specificities of the experiences of men and women. As both Arora-Jonsson and Subramanian suggest in their chapters, it appears to have left little space for the more conflictual aspects of gender relations – male violence against women, for instance, or the capacity for women to organize *as women* around their own interests. Also reflecting on the neutrality strategy, Jelin argues that as maternal and paternal roles have not become interchangeable in practice, “difference” needs to be factored into the logic of equality which is based on a relational rather than an individual perspective: “the tension between gender equality and the acknowledgement of difference can only be approached through the recognition of their embeddedness in systems of social relations”.

On the other hand, maternalism as a discursive strategy to promote women’s claims has its own limitations. This point is made by Razavi: “Although maternalist politics has had contradictory and different outcomes in different countries, this form of claims making shares an implicit acceptance that the rights women were claiming should come in return for certain pre-given responsibilities tied to traditionally-ascribed gender roles”. In Norway, for instance, maternalism was given a “radical” interpretation and feminist movements in the early decades of feminist activism used the politics of gender

difference and the value of motherhood to push for a series of measures which gave mothers a degree of economic independence through childcare allowances and the possibility of independent taxation. However, it also stood in the way of a unified resistance by women's groups to attempts by the Labour Party and the unions to curtail the rights of married women to employment. It also slowed down the provision of public childcare facilities in the Norwegian context until the wide-scale entry of women into the labour force led to changes in public policy on this front.

Along with an appreciation of the importance of discourse as a strategic resource, the Nordic experience is a reminder that the value of discourse as a mobilising or advocacy strategy does not occur in a vacuum. It is potent only when it has "narrative fidelity" that is, it strikes a responsive chord with myths, beliefs, folklore and so on that make up the existing culture (Snow and Benford 1992). In both Sweden and Norway, feminists developed their discursive strategies within the possibilities offered by prevailing cultural frameworks around identities of mother, worker and citizen. Where hegemonic frameworks do not incorporate norms and values which are conducive to arguments for gender equality, feminist struggles are that much harder and their gains likely to be that much more limited.

This is exemplified in the book by the contrasting ways in which familial metaphors were used in the Nordic and the Argentine contexts. One of the most powerful and enduring metaphors of Nordic social democracy was the idea of the caring state as "the People's home" where all would be cared for and there would be no deprived or privileged

members. The metaphor was intended to build support for social democratic parties beyond their immediate membership and to find neutral territory beyond class conflict. Its effect was to remove the symbolic barriers between public and private realms of citizenship (Hobson and Lindholm 1997). And while it had the potential to circumscribe women's influence within the home, in practice it was possible to use the promise of solidarity and equality to make claims around care, childrearing and unpaid domestic work: the domain of the home and family, normally defined as the domain of the "private" in liberal political thought, emerged as the basis for the welfare state.

However, Jelin's account of the Argentine case shows that in the absence of democratic institutions, the dissolution of the barriers between the public and private can be extremely dangerous, an intrusion into basic individual liberties. Here the military government that took power in 1976 promoted the idea of the family as the basis of the natural social order and of family values as the foundation of Argentine identity. In addition, the metaphor of the "Grand Argentine family" was used for the nation as a whole, with "the Father-State having inalienable rights over the moral and physical fate of its citizens". Here too, the distinction between public and private disappeared but what was on offer was a very different notion of state-as-family to that conveyed by the idea of People's Home. In the Argentine version, rebellious children and youth represented a potential threat to the nation-family and only "good" children-citizens were truly Argentine. The military regime looked toward parents to control and discipline rebellious children, running frequent TV advertisements asking, "Do you know where your child is now?". The Argentine case reminds us that while a great deal of feminist mobilisation

has been, and should be, around renegotiating the boundaries between public and private, the value of a “private” sphere has to be recognised as a critical precondition for individual freedom and a democratic society.

Familism as ideology lends itself to paternalist policies and politics based around the idea of the male breadwinner and patriarchal authority. It can equally give rise to maternalist discourses and strategies where claims are based on women’s motherhood and the special values, strengths and capacities this bestows on women. That the form taken by maternalist politics is contingent on the larger political context is also evident in the accounts of Iran and Argentina. In Iran, Islamist feminists have made imaginative use of religious discourse within the parameters permitted by a theocratic and patriarchal state to highlight the rights accorded to women by Islam both as mothers and wives in the domestic sphere as well as workers and political actors in the service of the Islamic state in the public sphere. They have succeeded in passing a law through Parliament which includes “wages for housework”, although poor follow-up and the failure to back it up with public funds makes it a symbolic rather than a substantive victory.

In Argentina, the centrality of the metaphor of the family in the discourse of the military dictatorship found a mirror image in its centrality in the discourse of the human rights opposition. The violations of human rights that the opposition denounced included crimes against families: kidnapping of people from their own homes to be tortured and “disappeared”. Children were kidnapped, as were pregnant young women, for purposes of adoption by military personnel. Women in search of their lost children became the

maternalist face of the human rights movement in Argentina, the Mothers of the Disappeared: their concerns for their own children merged with their concerns for all disappeared children.

Where an inhospitable political environment domestically curtails the discursive possibilities available to women's organizations, the global arena can be a source of alternatives. Indeed, "the global" appears to have become a strand in feminist politics in the later decades of the twentieth century across much of the world, including the Nordic countries. For the Nordic countries, their leading position in the UN league tables on gender equality has been a source of national pride, but as a number of Swedish feminists have noted, this has had the effect of contracting some of the space for critical reflections on the limits to what has been achieved. The demands by Iranian feminists for a greater role for women in the public and political domain has drawn strength from global feminist politics and global discourses of women's rights as promulgated through the UN World Conferences and International Conventions such as CEDAW. As Jelin notes, even the conservative military governments in Latin America were not untouched by new ideas circulating in the international arena in relation to legal rights, although they proved more willing to act on social than on political rights. In India, as Arora-Jonsson's chapter shows, international NGOs like Oxfam, have brought new ideas and values about gender equality into grassroots programmes in some of the poorest areas of India and found a ready audience among many of the women, and some of the men.

The emphasis in the Beijing Platform on “gender mainstreaming” and sex-disaggregated statistics has had an effect on most of the countries discussed in this book, including Sweden and Norway. The requirement to report on progress on gender provided an impetus to re-examining their gender policies in the Nordic countries. Sweden had already declared its adoption of the mainstreaming approach by the early nineties as a logical outcome of a longer process of self-examination. In Mexico, on the other hand, the setting up of the gender mainstreaming machinery came in response to the government’s search for international legitimacy rather than to the demands of the domestic women’s movements – although the latter had been making these demands for some time. There was consequently considerable political distance between grassroots women’s organizations and the machinery that was set up and little effort to set up mechanisms that would allow downward accountability.

However, the ability to draw on, and make discursive use, of alternative visions of family, work and politics in environments where constituencies for gender equality are still in the process of being formed – as Akanji describes in the context of sub-Saharan Africa – is hampered by lack of information and advocacy skills. The Nordic comparison points to the importance of research and data as well as of advocates with the educational skills and political experience to make use of the data to make their case. In Africa, and in most Third World countries, such basic information is absent as is the research capacity to collect it and the political will to fund it. Gender advocates in these countries must rely on scholars from outside and the consultancy studies funded by international donors to find the information they need – and such information is collected in response

to imperatives that they may not share. Akanji is calling for something that had formed a core strategy in feminist mobilization in the Nordic context: ‘to create an informed woman citizen who (understands) the policy debates and (can) influence the policy arena’ (Hobson and Lindholm, 1997:485).

### **Networks, Organisation and Women’s Agency**

Women coming together around shared concerns have been an important impetus behind struggles for gender equality in different regions of the world. The extent and form of these collectivities is discussed explicitly in a number of chapters in this book and forms an implicit thread in others. It is a central theme in Arora-Jonson’s contribution based on her fieldwork in rural areas of India and Sweden. She found very different “levels of comfort” among women seeking to organise as women. Within the highly gender segregated – and unequal – social relations of rural Orissa, there appeared to be a natural logic to the idea of women coming together as women. However, while the women were initially organized by a non-governmental development organization to address issues of access to forest resources, these new associative forms allowed them to gain the confidence to enter less familiar domains of public action. In rural Sweden, on the other hand, where gender equality had been fought for through the institutionalised presence of women within the trade unions, political parties and the media, the idea that women might want to organize autonomously appeared to generate a great deal of ambivalence, not only on the part of men, but also among the women themselves.

The history of Norwegian feminism was somewhat different where maternalist politics were used to demand women's right to be represented by women because of the common concerns of womanhood (Skjeie 1991). Not only did the idea of quotas for women in public life emerge earlier in Norway than Sweden, but there was a much stronger tradition of autonomous women's organisations. However, while the Nordic experience is often held up as an example of the successful use of quotas to increase women's representation, Hassim argues that there is no automatic relationship between women's electoral presence and progress on gender equality policies. The adoption of gender equality policies in the Nordic context reflected the longer process of constituency formation which lay behind the increased presence of women in public life. While quotas may help to "fast track" women's entry into the political domain in countries like South Africa and India, there is no automatic guarantee that this presence will translate into equally rapid progress on the policy front. The political inexperience of those who come into elected office purely through the quota route, the likelihood that they will not have any constituency to support them and to whom they are accountable, and their loyalties to the party that put them in office makes it unlikely that they will have the commitment or the confidence to push for transformative policies. Indeed, Hassim argues that while gender quotas may increase the numerical visibility of women in politics, egalitarian gender policies may find greater support from sympathetic and progressive male allies.

Cos-Montiel's account also deals with the limits of transplanting apparently progressive administrative solutions to a context where women have mobilised at the grassroots level but have not cohered as an effective political constituency. In contrast to the systematic

approach taken to gender mainstreaming in Sweden, he notes the piecemeal and half-hearted efforts evident in Mexico, where the setting up of a national machinery for women was a response to international imperatives. The failure to set up any bottom-up mechanisms that would allow grassroots women's groups to hold the government accountable for its performance merely reinforced the tendency of leadership of the women's machinery to see itself as beholden to the party leadership rather than answerable to the wider polity of women.

The range of contexts covered by this book helps both to illuminate the variety of different issues that make up women's concerns across the world – and the diversity of political stances they bring to them. In South Africa, women have mobilised within the larger struggle against the apartheid regime. In Argentina, they have evoked the image of the Mother who seeks her own “disappeared” child and all other disappeared children as a counter to the image of the state as repressive Father put forward by the military regime.

Feminists in Mexico and India share the idea of founding a women's political party with feminists in Sweden and Norway. And while women mobilised in Sweden as the “Support Stockings” to put pressure on parties to put more women in power, the organisation of women in “self-help groups” through the livelihoods programmes of government and non-government organisations in the Indian context have allowed women in some states in India to come together formally for the first time and explore their common interests (Arora-Jonsson). Subrahmanian describes the growing activism of

sex workers in India, among the most stigmatised of workers in the economy, and their forms of engagement with other civil society organizations in their struggle for rights and recognition, while Kabeer touches on the globalisation of workers' struggles with the globalisation of the economy. And while women have made relatively few gains in the labour market in Iran, Razavi notes that the spread of female education has helped to raise political awareness among the young generation of women. There is a greater willingness on the part of feminists with secular-socialist and Islamist politics in Iran to submerge some of their antagonisms in the face of the hardening gender politics of the state and to use women's journals as a forum for debating some of their differences.

The need to appreciate the implications of the diversity of ways in which women live their lives, formulate their priorities and attain political consciousness is exemplified by Subrahmanian's discussion of the Swedish decision to criminalise the demand for prostitution. She points out that the Swedish position is premised on a denial of any agency on the part of women who become sex workers, a position that is challenged in the Indian context by both researchers and activists. As Stark points out, the views put forward by Subrahmanian around the issue of prostitution are likely to be viewed as provocative and controversial by Swedish feminists.

However, the reaction of Swedish feminists also came as a surprise to many of the authors of this book. Certainly the views that Subrahmanian puts forward would not command a consensus among feminists within a huge and diverse country like India itself or in the women's movements in other countries but that is precisely the point. This is a

highly contested issue and the idea that it could command a consensus, even among those interested in women's rights, is difficult to imagine. In a telling aside in her discussion of feminist struggles in Bangladesh, for instance, Huq (2005) relates how the eviction of sex workers from long established brothels in urban Bangladesh drew a number of human rights and feminist organizations to their support. However, conflicting views about the nature of sex work itself meant that the alliance could only operate on the basis that this debate be postponed while the campaign was in force.

### **Lessons Learned....**

The objective in putting together this comparative project was to explore some of the lessons that might emerge from the comparisons. However, the sheer differences in the contexts represented by Nordic and developing countries made it difficult to draw out any easy lessons that could be acted on within the near future. The direct “policy transfer model” which has been a strong strand in donor thinking does not find much support in the chapters in this book.

Akanji's chapter is one of the exceptions. She notes the early commitment to the collection of sex – disaggregated data in Norway and Sweden in response to demands from gender advocates and the uses made of this data in advocacy efforts. She contrasts this to the situation in many African countries where a vicious cycle exists: the absence of such data weakens gender advocacy efforts which, in turn, fails to secure commitment to generate such data in the future. The other exception is the chapter by Nagy. The Hungarian government has begun to show interest in the promotion of part time work in

recent years as a possible solution to unemployment and the gender gap in labour force activity. She suggests that the Nordic experience may offer important lessons as to the enabling measures that would allow part time work to act as a positive force for gender equality rather than a trap for women: these include child care, parental leave arrangements and a greater focus on men's fatherhood roles.

Other chapters draw out more general lessons. Gazdar uses the history of the universalisation of literacy in Sweden to argue against the individualist demand and supply approach to educational provision of the World Bank, in favour of an approach which links the provision of education to a vision of the "imagined community" which informs the nation-building effort. A number of authors argue that administrative solutions to issues of gender inequality are unlikely to work without the additional effort necessary to link these solutions to a political constituency for gender equality. This is the gist of Hassim's discussion of political quotas in South Africa and Cos-Montiel's of gender mainstreaming machineries in Mexico. The contributions by Jelin and Razavi focus on the gap between state policy and ground level social realities. Their message reminds us that if formal policies on gender equality have failed to translate into concrete outcomes in the absence of any genuine commitment on the part of the state, attempts by the state to regulate family, sexuality and reproductive behaviour is likely to be equally futile if these policies do not speak to the reality of women's lives. Subrahmanian argues strongly against assuming that feminist politics around prostitution is context-independent. The decision to penalise the purchase of sexual services in a context where there is an effective welfare state is likely to play out very differently from contexts

where such a state is not only weak but also an object of some suspicion on the part of feminists.

More generally, however, as the concluding chapters by the two co-editors of the book suggest, the value of the book lies in the opportunity it provides for examining Nordic approaches to gender equality from a perspective other than one that is normally taken. For Stark, the fact that the concerns and priorities of the contributors to the book do not necessarily converge with the views of the Nordic gender research community provides an important lesson in the importance of standpoint in shaping the agenda and helps to challenge some taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes feminist priorities. By illuminating the magnitude of the challenges with which feminists have had to struggle in some other parts of the world, these contributions help to explain why questions of power came onto the feminist agenda far earlier in their struggles than they appear to have done in the Nordic countries.

For Stark, as one of the editors of the volume, another important point that comes of this project is the inward-turned nature of the Nordic debates. As she points out, important parts of debates among Nordic researchers are not available in English and appear to be targeted mainly at a Nordic audience. At the same time references to research from outside the Nordic countries, with a heavy bias toward research published in English, are common in Nordic researchers' work: "This asymmetry could be interpreted as an indication that Nordic gender research tend to choose themes from and for a Nordic research agenda rather than from research topics and angles of interest to researchers

from other parts of the world. A certain level of introversion could be perhaps be traced in disseminating strategies in parts of Nordic gender research”.

For Kabeer, the main lessons to be drawn from the Nordic experience lie in the strategies and processes which explained progress on gender equality policies rather than the policies themselves. And it is in the early years when Nordic feminists were struggling to counter the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender relations that there is most to be learned. Her contribution focuses on the role played by women’s collective action and discursive strategies in advancing gender equality in the Nordic context. While both elements are also important in developing countries, she notes the different forms they take and the challenges they encounter. She also draws attention to some of the remaining – as well as newly emerging – forms of inequality in the Nordic context, particularly in a period of growing cultural diversity as a result of immigration from non-European countries. She suggests that the introversion within the Nordic gender research community commented on by Stark may explain the “epistemological blind spot” in Nordic feminism, the failure to take on board the full implications of intersecting relationships of gender, class, ethnicity and religion. For a Nordic audience therefore a book about the struggle for gender equality in Norway and Sweden written from the standpoint of scholars from the South may contribute to the longer term project of creating a space within Nordic society for alternative perspectives and for listening to the diverse voices of “the other”.

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