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Gender Analysis and Women's Rights: A Critical Research Need

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Abstract

Gender used analytically as part of understanding social, behavior and economic relations is a tool that can advance theory and build our understanding of critical empirical relationships involved in some of the most important problems of our era. Gender is a social structure, interactional process and political discourse relevant across all dimensions of society, not limited to individual behavior and experiences, which is where prior research has concentrated. Rather than merely funding a special area of gender studies, SBE should challenge scholars in all its fields to take more cognizance of human diversity in their research, as the biomedical field has done, but also to reveal the importance of gender relations as a structural context for all people.

Women's rights globally have come into public awareness in recent years in ways we have not seen before, with both interesting and troubling consequences. Today women's rights are being variously depicted as critical to addressing problems of third world poverty; women's education is being described as an essential component in the fight against global terrorism; women politicians are seen by some as a key defense in the fight against government corruption; and gender equality, some argue, serves as the crucible in the clash of civilizations and fight against extremism and Islamic fundamentalism. While these are not new ideas, they have increasingly captured the popular imagination, influencing policy makers, foundations and even military strategists.

The foundations of research on gender in the social sciences have also grown, but still more as a specialty area focused on the obstacles and opportunities of individual women's lives and the differences between women and men as groups. Understanding how women's rights are actually connected in practice to the types of global issues mentioned above requires examining the collective and political elements of gender relations. There is a need for more research from the position of gender as a social structure, interactional process or political discourse that is relevant across all dimensions of society, not just for individuals.

The more conventional focus on gender as a property of persons falls short in two ways. On the one hand, this means that the forces behind such critical women's issues as sex trafficking, honor killings, female genital cutting, and mass rape are

poorly understood, often being reduced to superficial labels such as backwardness or ignorance rather than being analyzed in relation to the macro-social forces that structure the particularities of power, inequality and stereotyping in concrete contexts. Even labels such as “patriarchy,” commonly used in gender studies, only name a form of male power; they fail to unpack the processes that support it or transform it across time and place. On the other hand, the issues of globalization, environmental degradation, climate chaos, information technologies and other social, political and economic phenomena are usually approached as if they were not implicated in gender systems and the inequalities they generate. Although there is increasing research documenting the differential impact of these processes on men and women, there is a shortage of work that examines how gender itself becomes an active part of creating and addressing these transforming forces.

Encouraging research that incorporates gender as a relation of power and a structure organizing cultural knowledge and macro-social actions (what International Relations specialist V. Spike Peterson has termed “analytic gender”) would push an important frontier of knowledge forward in all the SBE disciplines. Using gender analytically is quite different than just encouraging the inclusion of women in scientific research or as subjects of social studies, although previous SBE research has played an important role in spurring these cross-program initiatives forward. The use of analytic gender as a tool for understanding social, economic and behavioral relations is a priority for several reasons.

First, the greater inclusion of gender at the macro level of international relations and economic structure challenges SBE to advance the reformulation of some of the most fundamental postulates of the disciplines it supports. When we look backward, we can easily see how the inclusion of attention to women has already moved the disciplines forward. For example, the study of stratification imagined as the transmission of social status from fathers to sons has been thoroughly reconfigured in past decades by attention to women. Theorizing women and men both as individuals with both work and family statuses also directs attention to the gendered structures organizing both together, as sociologist Jerry Jacobs has argued. More recently gender as an analytic tool has been used to discover the power of value-driven politics and of civil society, to identify the gender processes in the construction of status hierarchies (among both women and men, boys and girls), and to expose the gendered meanings of money in both how it is earned and how it is spent. Both Greta Krippner and Viviana Zelitzer have drawn attention to how markets are gendered, from stock exchanges to supermarkets. Nancy Folbre has challenged the implicit valuing of the provision of care in classic economics. Many scholars are exploring the potential of Amartya Sen’s capabilities theory for reframing these questions, but other theoretical directions remain to be explored.

Second, the greater inclusion of gender can never be successful if it is not done interactively with attention to other forms of power and inequality, since gender by its nature is omnipresent in human relations in every nation, class, race, age group, and other possible division one might imagine. Thus analytical gender as a tool is applicable universally and yet never universal in its workings. The language of “intersectionality” advanced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw calls attention to the entangled nature of all the processes of creating categories, empowering actions, structuring power and authority, and allocating resources with which the SBE disciplines are concerned. There is also a need to explore how gender as a relationship operates similarly or differently from class, race, age and physical ability

in general and in particular cases. For example, the crisis of Black masculinity is everywhere discussed, but without the necessary analysis of how gender, race and class are shaping statuses, opportunities, identities, and interpersonal relations for both women and men.

Third, the greater inclusion of gender as an analytic tool has already demonstrated its productive value over the past two decades in a plethora of research extending and re-thinking claims once considered only in relation to men or women, but not both together. Nonetheless, the impact of existing research has remained hemmed in by the assumption that analyzing gender is a special concern for women alone or is only really significant when areas touching upon family relations are being examined. But in the 21st century, this is an untenable limitation on research. Too many social problems – from AIDS to educational achievement deficits – are structured by gender to allow its analysis to remain a mere specialty area for the few. Health research has already come to emphasize inclusion of women in drug tests and paying attention to the diversity of human bodies. If SBE research were to incorporate gender analytically in many or most research designs, it would begin to discover the limits of generality of some of its claims and to reformulate an understanding of social structures that is both more multi-determined and more accurate.

The broader impacts of making analytical gender a priority funding area for research are already obvious. Whether the issue is community development, educational success, cultural traditions, interpersonal stereotyping, understandings and practices of democracy, or the intertwined nature of crime, corruption and violence in the global economy, there are important questions about gender to be answered.

Making analysis of gender a priority for SBE research would integrate gender into many different types of research and does not imply simply funding a specialty area called gender studies. We are not making a special plea for gender research narrowly defined, but rather, we are arguing that the work of all sorts of SBE proposals will be enhanced if NSF explicitly asks researchers to consider the gender dimensions of their problems analytically. We think it imperative to ask the gender question in all research that aims at understanding broad social processes. Such broad research would better insure that research and studies of differences between women and men are grounded analytically in considerations of the differences within each group and the similarities between them. It would also be a provocative and productive challenge for researchers to make their questions and answers take more cognizance of gender, both as human diversity and as a structural context for all people, regardless of their particular focus in local sites, institutions or processes.

In addition, we think that it is important for SBE research to include studies at the macro level that better analyze the gender relations of multiple societies in a comparative and historical framework. When gender relations are not studied as vital aspects of societies undergoing changes — whether toward an information economy or as part of an adaptation to climate — they are treated as constant, as if they stood or could stand outside the transformations going on in a gendered society. Leaving gender change out of the picture of social change leads to over-simplistic characterizations of gender relations as “traditional” or “modern” and puts these overbroad categories into a supposed conflict. Were gender relations included in studies of social change, it would be easier to see how they are constantly being transformed, be it in and through the overthrow of authoritarian regimes or the

spread of increasingly sophisticated virtual reality war games. Insofar as it sets gender into the background as a fixed element of culture, a static repository of older values, research will miss analyzing one of the most revolutionary transformations of the current moment. Globalization as a set of economic relations is pushing American social science to be more than the social study of American society, and attention to how gender is part of the structuring and restructuring of all societies in this process is an opportunity as well as a challenge of the present moment.

We do think that social science should be responsive to what women and men as citizens need to know about their world, but also to provide the essential, basic knowledge on which policy makers of all stripes can draw. Thus we urge considering how SBE, by emphasizing the power of gender analysis, could add important social science insights in diverse areas from climatology, e.g., the global warming effects of two billion women cooking on open fires that emit a toxic black carbon, to marketing trends, e.g., the greater demand for muscle cars in the US than Europe as a display of masculinity. Thinking about consumption, production, power, corruption and crime as gendered activities as much as sexuality and reproduction, opens many avenues for thinking creatively about social change as well as adaptation to the physical world.

Focused on the dynamics of norms creation, world polity theory has emphasized that the worldwide process of gradually redefining women as citizens began approximately 150 years ago with the emergence of organized demands for women's suffrage. It has proceeded apace through the inclusion of women as jurors, legislators and public authorities of all sorts as well as religious and scientific authorities. US scientific research has responded to this challenge, and NSF has played a significant role in bringing women in more as researchers in the STEM fields and in IT. The inclusion of women, however partial, has brought increased attention to gender as a relationship that calls for analysis. Its proven fruitfulness has already laid the groundwork for success. A serious commitment by SBE to asking researchers the question of the role that gender plays in the relationships they investigate will fertilize this area. The fruitfulness of this approach will be seen as the wider connections of gender outside the areas conventionally associated with women begin to be more fully explored and understood.

References

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