

GENDER POLICY CHALLENGES: DEFINITIONS, HISTORY AND GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICIES FOR BLACK, INDIGENOUS AND WOMEN OF THE PERIPHERY – AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR EUGENIA MCGILL

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Abstract

Eugenia McGill is a professor at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. She granted this interview to Esferas Journal addressing the topic of gender equality public policies and the importance of this field in academic research, in society and in the global context. Professor McGill discussed the need for society to understand what gender issues are, and how they result in inequalities and injustices in countries. The challenge is to build a global agenda to eradicate gender inequalities, especially among black, indigenous, and poor women around the world. In the transcription that follows, we chose to keep the oral aspects of the interview.

Professor McGill, what is a public policy on gender?

I think that there can be several different frames for trying to understand gender issues in politics, either at the national level or globally. One possible frame is the human rights frame. To see gender equality as a human rights issue.

Another possible frame is to see gender equality as an economical issue. I think we see that specially in the research and the analysis done by the International Monetary Fund, the development banks, such as the World Bank and private sector institutions like the World Economic Forum and such as some of the management consulting firms, such as McKinsey that have done some calculations about the economic benefits of gender equality. So, all those actors are operating mainly in the economical frame.

I think there is also another frame, which I would call public policy, good public policy. It can integrate both the rights and the economic dimensions, but I think specially for government policy makers it could be useful to think in gender equality as a good public policy outcome that is essential for a policy that is inclusive and sustainable. So, gender equality has economic benefit and gender inequality has economic costs.

What are the challenges to design public policies for gender equality?

There are many challenges that explains why we have so far to go. We have made progress but there is so much more to be done. I think one of the major challenges is to localize the issue and make sure that we understand what the gender issues are, in a place, in a particular setting. And it could be in a national setting like Brazil. In such a large country as Brazil, it is likely to be variation. And the gender issues that are most urgent will be different in the Afro-Brazilian community compared to other communities in Brazil, different in the large urban center compared to the rural areas, especially in your indigenous community. So, I think one of the challenges is to understand what location you are concerned about, and what are the particular needs and interests and priorities of women, but not just women, women and men and differences between women and men in those particular locations. It is one challenge to really understand the context.

And the second is to, then, imagine what is politically and socially

feasible. I think this is particularly relevant in the current political context in Brazil. Maybe it is possible to continue to make progress on gender equality in some issue areas, such as economic issues, at the national level. But if you have a government in place that is quite conservative on social issues and maybe it will not be easy to make progress on some of those social issues at the national levels, there is maybe more space to make progress in a state where there is a more open government, or at the community level. So, I think that the other change to be politically realistic about what is feasible, in particular political levels and in particular communities.

I guess the third challenge is to think about the coalitions that are going to be useful to make change happen, not just government and civil society, but to think about also private sector companies, the media, who are the possible allies in trying to move forward on a particular gender issue.

Mrs. McGill, in your answer you talked about this moment in Brazil. In this specific time, we have a political moment in which this government attacks gender policies. What can we do to raise awareness among government and civil society?

Well, I have to be very frank that I don't know the politics of Brazil to this... certainly, to this extent you do. I do most work in Asia, but there are variations in the governments and different attitudes toward gender issues. But I think one important step is to document the issue, to gather evidence, especially on issues that a government or other key actors may not necessarily accept. This is, for example, one way governments in Asia have been persuaded to pay attention to gender-based violence as a real issue affecting women. That's because so many well designed surveys have been done by independent researchers who have credibility and they have documented the prevalence of different forms of gender-based violence. And then when those results are publicized it becomes much more difficult for a government to ignore the issue and it makes much easier to publicize the issue through media, to build coalitions, to find allies, who are willing to advocate for greater attention to the issue and then help to implement change. So, I would say evidence gathering is a very important first step.

So interesting. Professor McGill, could you mention a country that, in your opinion, is delivering good gender policies?

I think many countries have made great advances, including Brazil. I think it depends on the snapshot we are taking, what point in time. I have also seen countries that have made greater progress with certain governments than others and over time they have made progress during certain periods when there was the right combination of actors. And then there may be a political change and there is a period when less progress can be made.

At this moment a couple of countries I would mention are Canada and Sweden. They currently have very progressive governments in place. They have actually been articulating a feminist foreign policy. So, they are not just trying to bring a gender lens to the work domestically but also to the work they are doing on the global stage. It does depend on the government in place, because, at least in Canada, in recent years, before the current government there was a more conservative government that didn't take that same view. So, just at this point in time those will be a couple of examples. And there are many, many other countries that have made great progress, but it is not linear and we all have to recognize that there are setbacks, that we are seeing right now, in both of our countries.

Yesterday, I talked about this question. In every economic crisis, we (women) are the first victims. How can we build stronger gender policies to prevent this?

That is a very good and very challenging question. Often the economic crisis bring about broader trends, sometimes even global impacts. But how to make sure that women are not disproportionately harmed by economic crisis and economic shock? I do think that is something we can address. One way is to recognize that women can be affected not just economically but also because of the important roles they play in households. And because of those social roles they often are absorbing much of the shock, because they are trying to continue to take care of their family's basic needs, which becomes even much more difficult specially for lower income groups, marginalized communities. One important issue is to make sure that any response to an economic crisis does not reinforce these gender inequalities.

For example, in the last financial crisis, the global economic crisis that resulted from the financial crisis in the housing markets in the United States and Europe, some of the economic stimulus plans that were put in place by governments disproportionately favored men in terms of employment. Often what was done is stimulus in construction, infrastructure. It is important when any government puts an economic stimulus package together to make sure that the benefit will be equally shared by men and women. And to make sure that the economic stimulus responds to some of these negative impacts on women specially in their roles in taking care of households. So, to make sure that there are some targeted assistants specially to female households and low-income households that have few resources to deal with these economic shocks.

Professor McGill, what do you consider the major milestones in international history in terms of public policies to promote gender equality?

I think I may have mentioned that in the Latin America and Caribbean region broadly there have been some very earlier international treatises on women politic rights. In fact, Latin America was ahead of the rest of the world in regional commitments to gender equality in politics. And I think it's even from the 1920's. As I recall, the first regional commission on women was from 1928 for Latin America. And I think the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is probably the first international document that includes a commitment to equality between men and women.

And then after that I would say the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), that was adopted in the 1970's and ratified in 1981, I believe. That is really a very important international document and most of the countries in the world, including Brazil, have signed on to its commitments and are supposed to report every few years on their progress in advancing women's rights in the convention.

And then there are the series of international conferences on women peace and security, the last one was in 1995, as you know, in Beijing, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is still a really important document, and I think a very helpful resource for anyone working to advance gender equality and women's rights. Even known it was written in 1995, which

seems like a long time ago, I am always impressed when I read it again to find how comprehensive and how timeless it is. It identifies, well, areas of concern so it is quite a comprehensive set of commitments, and Brazil and all of the other countries of the world who attended the conference committed to advance the goals of the Beijing's platform. So I think that it is still a critical document and a great resource for all of us when we are trying to develop an action plan or a strategy whether it is at a national level, or at a municipality level or at a provincial level. We can always go there and say "well, you as a government meet these goals and we are simply trying to advance these commitments you have made".

Then, there are also other areas: labor rights, so there is a number of international labor organization conventions that are very important for gender equality. We could talk more about that, and the core labor standards that are absorbed, the highlights of those including the four standards on equality and nondiscrimination and equal pay for equal work.

And in the area of peace and security, the Security Council Resolution on Women Peace and Security, starting with Resolution 1325, has been very important in trying to highlight the important role of women as peacemakers, as important participants in any type of peace negotiations, as well as in identifying the need to try to prevent gender gaze violence in conflict and in post-conflict. Those will be some of the key international commitments that I think are useful to keep in mind when we are looking at how to bring about changes in our own countries or communities.

Mrs. McGill, you told us about the Beijing event, organized by the United Nations. I would like to know about the role of the United Nations to build these policies on gender equality around the world. What do you think is the UN's role?

The United Nations have really been the form for all of these international commitments. So, the United Nations, specially through UN Women (the entity on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment), the central UN body is really advancing gender equality on behalf of UN and work with all the governments in all regions. And then the United Nations made a commitment to gender mainstreaming in all of its agencies and operations.

So, in 1997, just two years after the Beijing's conference, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which is one of the main decision-maker bodies of the UN, adopted a resolution supporting gender mainstreaming and that has really been the guideline for that plus the Beijing's document and CEDAW. Those are the main tools that the UN uses to try to advance gender equality and women's empowerment in all these operations.

And then I think the Sustainable Development Goals now reflect not just the United Nations commitment. And I should not mention the SDGs, because they are the most recent international commitment, the Sustainable Development Goals, including the goal on gender equality and women's empowerment, SDG 5. It was adopted by all of the member countries of the United Nations, and the SDGs were developed through a very broad participatory process, involving many civil society organizations and I know there were consultations in Brazil, consultations in Latin America, there were consultations in all of the other regions to try to also get input from people on the ground in countries around the world. So, the SDGs, I think, right now, are the main mechanism, a tool that the UN is using and working, and also other international organizations in advancing gender equality as part of a broader sustainable development agenda.

Mrs. McGill, please tell us about your career. Why did you decide to study, research and work on gender equality? What is your personal experience on this subject?

Well, I am a feminist. I was lucky to have a mother who had a very interesting career for her own, before she married my father and joined him in his business, and they worked together as partners. So, I always had aspirations to do something useful in my life. I started out as a teacher, a high school teacher, then I decided I wanted a professional degree and several skills as well, and I went to Law School. At that time I was very committed to gender equality and in taking advantage of the professional opportunities that were open to women in the 1980's, which is when I went to Law School.

And I was very grateful for the work that have been done by the generations of women before me in breaking down barriers, opening up opportunities for women in what have been a traditional male profession such as Law. When you look at the work of our US Supreme Court Justice in

Queensbury and others, they really made space for us. So, I have always felt it is important to give back and to make a contribution myself.

Originally it was through making contributions to organizations that were advancing in women's rights, whether if it is in reproductive health or other areas. And then, in a certain point when I had an opportunity to move to my work in international development, I thought that was an area where I could actually make more than a contribution to this emergent field of gender that was in development. So, I did research and investigated the work that other organizations were already doing to advance gender equality through their development assistances. And I decided this was the way I will use my Law background and my work in international development. And I began to work inside one of the development banks, the Asian Development Bank, working with sociologists, anthropologists, and other gender experts to support their work. Then I left ADB and started consulting, and began to become specialized in working with organizations and with governments to try to help them to advance their gender equalities goals. And most of my work has been in Asia, working with development organizations, like ADB, the United Nations, the US agencies for international development and women advocacies organizations, as well as governments in particular sectors or on issue areas.

At this point I have worked in many countries in Asia, usually on a team, or working for an organization to try to either help identify gender issues in a particular sector like health or financial inclusion or in infrastructure, where there are sometimes unintended consequences related, for example to the spread of HIV or trafficking surrounding constructions sides of large infrastructure projects. So, I worked looking at ways in different sectors or issue areas to promote gender equality and to also avoid unintended negative consequences, specially for women and girls, otherwise well intended development programs and projects.

Now I teach, for the last ten plus years, I've been teaching master's students at Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs and one of the courses I teach is on gender development. So, I am trying to share some of my experience and help a new generation of young development professionals to see more effectiveness in their own work, specially in trying to support gender equality efforts in whatever feeling they are moving into.

You have been very important to us since we have started to do this research on gender equality. It will be important to present your reflections to the Brazilian women that will read this Journal. Thank you a lot.