

# Rising Tide

*Gender Equality and Cultural Change  
around the World*

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## Introduction

### *Explaining the Rising Tide of Gender Equality*

During the late twentieth century, the issue of gender equality once again became a major issue on the global agenda. The UN Decade for Women, which ended in 1985, initiated the integration of women into development, triggering the formation of thousands of women's organizations and networking them across the world.<sup>1</sup> The trend accelerated during the following decade. In 1993, the Vienna World Conference proclaimed that women's rights were human rights; in 1994, the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development placed women's empowerment and health at the center of sustainable development programs. Two years later, the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women adopted a platform seeking to promote and protect the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all women.<sup>2</sup> Although there has been substantial progress toward gender equality in much of the world, great disparities persist, as systematic indicators demonstrate.<sup>3</sup>

In many places, most women's lives remain wretched. Afghanistan was among the most oppressive regimes, with women and girls living under an extreme version of Islamic law introduced by the Taliban. They were denied education, barred from the workplace, and unable to venture out in public without a male companion and the full head-to-toe covering of the *burqa*. They suffered from limited access to health care, including laws forbidding treatment of women by male doctors, and pervasive threats of domestic and state-legitimated violence.<sup>4</sup> Few regimes are so draconian, but women in many societies face endemic



and substantial gender gaps in the division of household responsibilities, limited access to educational opportunities and economic resources, as well as legal and political barriers to positions of political power. Indicators of well-being ranging from literacy and longevity to labor force participation, poverty rates, and child mortality and schooling all reveal persistent disparities between women and men.<sup>5</sup> Some societies have experienced a mixture of progress and regression, as new entrepreneurial opportunities arose for women following market liberalization in post-Communist Europe, along with weakened social safety nets for poorer families.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, other countries have achieved major gains in legal, economic, and political gender equality that are probably irreversible. Sweden exemplifies a society where women experience the highest level of parliamentary representation of any nation in the world, along with gender parity in secondary schooling and paid employment and extensive parental rights and childcare facilities.<sup>7</sup> Although such contrasts in women's lives around the globe are well established, the reasons for them are not. What explains the disparities between the leaders and laggards in gender equality?

### **Economic Growth and Human Development**

One approach common the 1960s and early 1970s emphasized economic growth as the most effective strategy for achieving human development and improvements in the living conditions and status of women. After World War II, optimism abounded that the world could be rebuilt to end poverty, injustice, and ignorance, improving women's lives as an inevitable part of development. Walt Rostow's influential book *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960) suggested that human progress was driven by a dialectic that could be accelerated.<sup>8</sup> The end of colonial rule in many parts of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean was seen as a major opportunity to promote prosperity and democracy in these societies. Greater affluence was expected to facilitate freedom from want and fear due to an expansion of health care and adequate nutrition, schools and housing, jobs and basic social protections, increasing the urban middle classes and laying the social foundations for the consolidation of democratic institutions and civic society. Growth was seen as the panacea that would lift all boats, and it was often

implicitly assumed that this included endemic problems of women's literacy and education, their poverty, low pay, and occupational segregation in the workforce, their care-giving responsibilities in the home and family, and their participation and representation in the political system. The hope that economic development will automatically benefit women in poorer societies continues to be voiced.<sup>9</sup> At its most simple, this proposition is often taken for granted as self-evident. After all, in the examples we have cited, Sweden is one of the richest societies in the world, with a per capita income of \$26,000 per year; the figure for Afghanistan is around \$800. Do these countries' striking differences in gender equality simply reflect their differing degrees of development?

But by the end of the twentieth century, the limitations of growth alone were clear. Numerous anomalies are obvious even to the casual observer. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, for instance, are about as rich as Sweden in per capita GDP, but women in these societies cannot stand for office or even vote, and they have narrowly restricted rights and opportunities outside the home. It is illegal for women to drive in Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East and North Africa have the lowest rates of female labor force participation in the world.<sup>10</sup> Conditions for women are more favorable in some poorer nations. In India, for example, although women's rights are also limited in many important ways, about 800,000 women serve in local government, with one-third of all local council seats reserved for them.<sup>11</sup> Broader experience confirms that gender equality in elected office continues to lag behind in the transitional "Asian tiger" nations, as well as in many high-growth states in Latin America.<sup>12</sup> Even in the most affluent societies around the world, such as the United States, France, and Japan, where women have made substantial gains in access to universities, company boardrooms, and the professions, there has been minimal progress for women in government – while in South Africa, by contrast, women comprise almost one-third of all parliamentarians, ranking this nation eleventh worldwide in the proportion of women in the lower house.<sup>13</sup> It has become apparent that problems of gender equality are more complex and intractable than the early developmental theorists assumed.<sup>14</sup> Growing affluence does tend to generate the expansion of literacy and schooling, the establishment of a social protection safety net, and the rise of white-collar jobs in the service sector, but this

process is not inevitable, nor does it necessarily automatically benefit women's lives.

### **The Role of the State: Human Rights, Legal Reforms, and Political Institutions**

During the 1980s and 1990s, recognizing the limitations of economic strategies alone, the international women's movement and official bodies such as the United Nations and European Union turned their attention increasingly toward the role of the state in reinforcing or alleviating institutional barriers to women's progress, and toward the need to establish political, social, and economic rights in order to secure gender equality through legal reform and the courts.<sup>15</sup> There was also a shift in the literature around this period, from focusing on the problems facing women's well-being toward emphasizing the active role of women's agency and voice in helping women to attain equal rights: to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights, to become literate, to participate in community decision making.<sup>16</sup> The independence and empowerment of women became understood as an integral part of the development process, so that women could articulate their own wants and needs.

In many countries legal rights for women remain limited; a comprehensive review of legislation in over 100 countries by Humana found that in the early 1990s women still lacked many basic rights, such as the right to own land, to manage property, to conduct business, and even to travel without spousal consent.<sup>17</sup> In much of sub-Saharan Africa, women have land rights through their husbands as long as the marriage endures, but lose this property when divorced or widowed. In Turkey, until a recent reform of the civil code, a wife needed her husband's consent to work outside the home; women were not entitled to sue for divorce, to claim alimony, or to retain their maiden names. In Egypt and Jordan, women need their husband's permission to travel. In Ireland, it remains illegal to have an abortion except in extremely limited circumstances (where the mother's life is in danger). In established democracies, women have had the legal franchise for many decades – since the 1920s in most Protestant countries, and since the 1950s in most Catholic ones. But in newer democracies, such as Namibia and South Africa, most women have only recently acquired voting rights.

And laws restricting women's rights to vote and to run for office persist in a handful of Middle Eastern countries, including Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>18</sup>

The United Nations has encouraged states to recognize women's rights, most importantly through the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and subsequently signed by 165 nation-states. This convention emphasizes the importance of women's equal participation with men in public life. The women's movement in many nations has emphasized the need for equal opportunity and affirmative action strategies through reforming institutional barriers, removing structural biases, and altering the rules of the game to get women into positions of elected office. A particularly effective means to do this has been the use of quotas in the selection of female parliamentary candidates – which has recently been adopted in many Western European, Asian, and Latin American countries – and the parity program adopted in France.<sup>19</sup> Policies designed to prevent sex discrimination, to secure equal pay, maternity, and reproductive rights, and to increase opportunities for women in the workforce and education have been adopted in many countries, and the role of the state is now widely understood to be central in actively consolidating and reinforcing gender equality.<sup>20</sup>

These strategies have secured concrete gains for women in many nations, particularly when government agencies or the courts have effectively implemented legal reforms and policy initiatives. Changing the “rules of the game” can have a dramatic impact on women's lives, accelerating progress and opening new opportunities. Yet at the same time there can be a substantial gap between the recognition of *de jure* formal rights and actual practice. Many governments have signed international conventions pledging themselves to support equal opportunity in political representation; and political leaders, official bodies, and administrative agencies have often declared themselves in favor of this principle, along with groups in civic society such as trade unions and parties. Yet in the world as a whole, women remain far from parity at the apex of power – as heads of state at the prime ministerial and presidential level, in the executive branch as ministers and as senior public officials, and in national parliaments.<sup>21</sup> In the same way, CEDAW recognizes the importance of equality in the paid labor force.

Yet although many governments have signed on to this principle, in practice women are disproportionately likely to have low-wage jobs because of persistent occupational segregation and wage discrimination by sex, as well as lack of child care for working mothers; and in most countries women in management and corporate boardrooms continue to encounter a glass ceiling.<sup>22</sup> Even in liberal countries such as Sweden and Norway, segregation in jobs typically held by women and men remains common. Statutory reform and formal recognition of women's rights in international bodies are symbolic gains, an important advance in itself, but they are seldom sufficient to effect substantial social change if the capacity or the political will to implement these reforms remains weak.

### **Cultural Barriers**

Economic growth and legal-institutional reforms are both important in any long-term comprehensive strategy to promote gender equality. But in addition, as this book will demonstrate, *culture matters*, and indeed it matters a lot.<sup>23</sup> Perceptions of the appropriate division of roles in the home and family, paid employment, and the political sphere are shaped by the predominant culture – the social norms, beliefs, and values existing in any society, which in turn rest on levels of societal modernization and religious traditions. ‘Gender’ refers to the socially constructed roles and learned behavior of women and men associated with the biological characteristics of females and males.<sup>24</sup> In many societies, rigid gender roles determine the rights, resources, and powers of women and men, notably the division of labor in the home and workplace. In others, men's and women's roles are more interchangeable, and innate biological differences lead to fewer social expectations. Where a culture of gender equality predominates, it provides a climate where *de jure* legal rights are more likely to be translated into *de facto* rights in practice; where institutional reforms are implemented in the workplace and public sphere; where women embrace expanded opportunities to attain literacy, education, and employment; and where the traditional roles of women and men are transformed within the household and family. Moreover, the critical importance of culture is that women as well as men adopt the predominant attitudes, values, and beliefs about the appropriate division of sex roles within any society.

Where traditional values prevail, women are not only limited by society in terms of the opportunities they seek, but also choose to limit themselves. Cultural change is not *sufficient* by itself for gender equality – a limitation not always sufficiently recognized by the consciousness-raising individualistic focus of the women’s movement of the 1960s. But we argue that cultural change is a *necessary* condition for gender equality: women first need to change themselves before they can hope to change society. In turn, cultural change lays the basis for the mass mobilization of women’s movements and broad support for public policies that reinforce, consolidate, and accelerate the process of gender equality.

At one level, there is nothing particularly new or startling about this claim. A mainstream tradition in sociology, anthropology, history, and social psychology has long theorized that there are great cross-cultural differences in beliefs about gender roles among societies around the globe, even among societies at similar levels of socioeconomic development – such as Sweden, Britain, and the United States, on one hand, and India, the Philippines, and Indonesia, on the other.<sup>25</sup> Feminist movements in many countries have long emphasized cultural differences in family and sex roles, and the critical importance of changing traditional patriarchal norms for transforming relationships between the sexes.<sup>26</sup> Most support for this thesis has come from qualitative evidence, often based on personal interviews, participant observation, and case studies. Comparative analysis of aggregate indicators has also revealed the substantial contrasts between the lives and roles of women and men worldwide. Nevertheless, systematic survey evidence monitoring cultural attitudes toward gender equality across many societies remains scattered and inconclusive, with most studies limited to a handful of affluent postindustrial societies and established democracies in Western Europe and North America.<sup>27</sup> While it is widely assumed that culture matters, it remains unclear *how much* it matters as compared to levels of societal development and legal-institutional structures; and we know even less about how these factors interact in the long-term process of value change. This book will demonstrate that cultural traditions are remarkably enduring in shaping men’s and women’s worldviews; nevertheless, glacial shifts are taking place that move systematically away from traditional values and toward more egalitarian sex roles. This shift is intimately related to the processes of societal modernization

and to generational replacement. Moreover, we will demonstrate that culture matters: where there are more egalitarian attitudes, these are systematically related to the actual conditions of women's and men's lives. We acknowledge that this is not a simple one-way direction of causality; rather, it is an interactive process, because changes in our lives affect our underlying attitudes and values. But we also demonstrate that cultural change is not an ad hoc and erratic process; rather, patterns of human development and societal modernization underpin attitudinal shifts. The broad direction of value change is predictable, although the pace is conditioned by the cultural legacy and institutional structure of any given society, as exemplified by the role of an Islamic heritage in the Middle East, the legacy of Communism in Central Europe, and the egalitarian tradition in Scandinavia.

To develop these arguments, this book examines evidence of a rising tide of support for gender equality in over seventy societies around the world. It then explores the causes of this cultural shift and its consequences for women's political power, including their civic engagement, support for the women's movement, and political representation. This introductory chapter first develops the core theoretical argument and outlines the research design, providing details about (1) the four waves of the World Values Survey / European Values Survey carried out from 1981 to 2001, (2) the comparative framework and societal classification used here, and (3) the time period used for trend analysis. The final section of the chapter outlines the book and summarizes the contents of subsequent chapters.

### **Societal Modernization and Cultural Change**

The revised version of modernization theory developed in this book hypothesizes that human development brings changed cultural attitudes toward gender equality in virtually any society that experiences the various forms of modernization linked with economic development. Modernization brings systematic, *predictable* changes in gender roles. The impact of modernization operates in two key phases:

1. Industrialization brings women into the paid workforce and dramatically reduces fertility rates. Women attain literacy and greater educational opportunities. Women are enfranchised

and begin to participate in representative government, but still have far less power than men.

2. The postindustrial phase brings a shift toward greater gender equality as women rise in management and the professions and gain political influence within elected and appointed bodies. Over half of the world has not yet entered this phase; only the more advanced industrial societies are currently moving on this trajectory.

These two phases correspond to two major dimensions of cross-cultural variation that will be described in more detail in the final chapter: (1) a transition from traditional to secular-rational values, and (2) a transition from survival to self-expression values. The decline of the traditional family is linked with the first dimension. The rise of gender equality is linked with the second. Cultural shifts in modern societies are not sufficient by themselves to guarantee women equality across all major dimensions of life; nevertheless, through underpinning structural reforms and women's rights, they greatly facilitate this process.

Modernization theories suggest that economic, cultural, and political changes go together in coherent ways, so that industrialization brings broadly similar trajectories even if situation-specific factors make it impossible to predict exactly what will happen in a given society. Certain changes become increasingly likely to occur, but the changes are probabilistic, not deterministic. Modernization theories originated in the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. These ideas were revived and popularized during the late 1950s and early 1960s by Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Lerner, Walt Rostow, and Karl Deutsch.<sup>28</sup> These writers argued that the shift from agrarian agriculture towards industrial production leads to growing prosperity, higher levels of education, and urbanization, which in turn lay the social foundations for democratic participation in the political system. Traditional societies are characterized by subsistence economies largely based on farming, fishing, extraction, and unskilled work, with low levels of literacy and education, predominately agrarian populations, minimum standards of living, and restricted social and geographic mobility. Citizens in agrarian societies are strongly rooted to local communities through ties of "blood and belonging," including those of kinship, family, ethnicity, and religion, as well as through



long-standing cultural bonds. The shift from traditional agrarian society toward industrialized society involves the move from agricultural production to manufacturing, from farms to factories, from peasants to workers. Social trends accompanying these developments, as shown in Table 1.1, include migration to metropolitan conurbations, the rise of the working class and urban bourgeoisie, rising living standards, the separation of church and state, increasing penetration of the mass media, the growth of Weberian bureaucratization and rational-legal authority in the state, the foundations of the early welfare state, and the spread of primary schooling. This phase occurred in the Industrial Revolution in Britain during the mid to late eighteenth century and spread throughout the Western world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The early developmental theorists emphasized a range of social trends that commonly accompany the process of industrialization, including changes in traditional sex roles, the family, and marriage.

During the early 1970s, Daniel Bell popularized the view that after a certain period of industrialization, a further distinct stage of development could be distinguished, as a nonlinear process, in the rise of postindustrial societies.<sup>29</sup> For Bell, the critical tipping point was reached when the majority of the workforce moved from manufacturing into the service sector, working as lawyers, bankers, financial analysts, technologists, scientists, and professionals employed in the knowledge industries. The now-familiar social and economic shifts characterizing postindustrial societies are listed in Table 1.1. They include the rise of a highly educated, skilled, and specialized workforce; population shifts from urban to suburban neighborhoods and greater geographic mobility, including immigration across national borders; rising living standards and growing leisure time; rapid scientific and technological innovation; the expansion and fragmentation of mass media channels, technologies, and markets; the growth of multilayered governance, with power shifting away from the nation-state toward global and local levels; market liberalization and the expansion of nonprofit social protection schemes; the erosion of the traditional nuclear family; and growing equality of sex roles within the home, family, and workforce.

There is a broad consensus that certain socioeconomic developments have been sweeping across many societies, although alternative

TABLE 1.1. *Typology of stages of societal modernization*

	From Agrarian to Industrial Societies	From Industrial to Postindustrial Societies
<i>Population</i>	The population shift from agrarian villages to metropolitan conurbations.	The diffusion from urban areas to suburban neighborhoods. Greater social geographic mobility, including immigration across national borders, generating the rise of more multicultural societies.
<i>Human capital</i>	Growing levels of education, literacy, and numeracy and the spread of basic schooling.	Rising levels of education, especially at secondary and university levels, generating increased levels of human capital and cognitive skills.
<i>Workforce</i>	The shift from extraction and agriculture toward manufacturing and processing.	The rise of the professional and managerial occupations in the private and public sectors and greater occupational specialization.
<i>Social status</i>	The rise of the working class and the urban bourgeoisie, and the decline of peasant society and traditional landed interests.	The move from ascribed occupational and social roles assigned at birth toward achieved status derived from formal educational qualifications and careers.
<i>Living conditions</i>	Growing standards of living, rising longevity and expanding leisure time.	Economic growth fueling an expanded middle class, rising living standards, improved longevity and health, and growing leisure time.
<i>Science and religion</i>	The industrial revolution in manufacturing production. Growing division of church and state. The diversification of religious sects and denominations.	Rapid technological and scientific innovation. The process of secularization weakening religious authority.

*(continued)*

TABLE I.1 (continued)

	From Agrarian to Industrial Societies	From Industrial to Postindustrial Societies
<i>Mass media</i>	The wider availability of mass-circulation newspapers and periodicals and, during the twentieth century, access to electronic mass media.	The shift in the mass media from mass broadcasting toward more specialized narrowcasting, with the fragmentation of media outlets across markets and technologies.
<i>Government</i>	The expansion of the franchise, the growth of Weberian bureaucratization and reliance on legal-rational authority in government.	The growth of multilayered governance at the global and local levels, as well as the expansion in the nonprofit sector.
<i>Social protection</i>	The development of the early foundations of the welfare state and the elements of social protection for illness, unemployment, and old age.	Market liberalization and the contraction of the state, displacing social protection increasingly to the nonprofit and private sectors.
<i>Family structures</i>	The shift from extended to nuclear families, the gradual reduction in the fertility rate.	The erosion of the nuclear family, the growth of nontraditional households, and changing patterns of marriage and divorce.
<i>Sex roles</i>	The entry of more women into the paid workforce.	Growing equality of sex roles in the division of labor within the home, family, and workplace, and the rise of women (especially married women) in the paid labor force.
<i>Cultural values</i>	Material security, traditional authority, and communal obligations.	Quality of life issues, self-expression, individualism, and postmaterialism.

interpretations dispute their exact nature and periodization and the appropriate weight to be given to different components. There remains considerable controversy, however, concerning the consequences of these changes, and in particular concerning the probable impact of the modernization process on gender equality. Why would we expect these changes in socioeconomic conditions to go hand in hand with cultural shifts? In a series of works, Inglehart has demonstrated how the evolution from agrarian to industrial to postindustrial societies brings about two coherent, predictable, and interrelated dimensions of change: (1) socioeconomic changes in the process of production, as Bell claimed; and (2) a transformation in societal cultures, including rising emphasis in postindustrial societies on the pursuit of quality-of-life values rather than material concerns.<sup>30</sup> We see economic, political, and cultural changes as evolving together in coherent trajectories, without claiming, as Marx did, that the changes in the processes of economic production drive the superstructure of value change, or that, conversely, cultural processes such as the rise of Protestantism cause the socioeconomic developments, as Weber argued. We view these causal processes as reciprocal.

People living near the subsistence level tend to be primarily concerned with the basic struggle for survival when facing the unpredictable risks of disease, illiteracy, malnutrition, infant mortality, ethnic conflict and civil war, unsafe drinking water, and the spread of AIDS/HIV. Women and children are among the most vulnerable populations in these societies, not only because they are high-risk populations but also because they are usually dependent on a male breadwinner. Of the world's 6 billion people, the World Bank estimates that 1.2 billion live on less than \$1 a day.<sup>31</sup> Global poverty fell substantially during the 1990s, mainly driven by high economic growth in some larger nations such as China and India, but extreme poverty in sub-Saharan Africa worsened. Levels of infant mortality have been reduced around the globe, but the problem remains substantial; in 1998, there were 105 deaths per 1,000 live births in societies with low human development.<sup>32</sup> Basic problems of survival are starkly illustrated by average life expectancy; in agrarian societies, on average people can expect to live for fifty-nine years, twenty years less than in postindustrial societies. Opportunities for social and geographic mobility are