A Study of Awareness and Attitudinal Behaviour of Gender Differences Towards Gender Equality

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Abstract

In this paper we describe a research project where the objective was to analyze attitudes toward gender equality among male and female. Gender equality is regarded to be one of the core factors of any democratic society and the facilitator of economic growth and societal well-being. Although Estonia is often pointed out as a success story of post-socialist transformation, we are anything but successful when comparing different gender equality indicators of Estonia and other European countries. The largest gender pay gap in the EU, both horizontal and vertical segregation in education and the labour market, and men's considerably lower life expectancy are just a few of the issues that mark the state of gender equality in Estonia. Education is often considered to be one of the key institutions that should be addressed in order to promote equal opportunities and mainstream gender equality. On the one hand, education and schools as institutions do not operate in a vacuum and are informed by the general tendencies, values and attitudes that are prevalent in the society. At the same time, education is a powerful tool for changing the societal attitudes and empowering the next generation. Therefore, it is important to mainstream gender equality in the curricula, school culture, teaching materials and methods in order to prevent the reproduction of gender stereotypes that influence the well-being and choices of pupils. Successful mainstreaming of gender equality, therefore, cannot be achieved without giving (future) teachers the necessary knowledge, tools and teaching methods to understand and tackle gender stereotypes and mainstream gender equality.

Keywords: *Attitudes, Gender Equality, Feminism, Machismo, Cultural Practices, University Students*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural practices are made up of "institutionalized norms for expression and participation, not only by the official culture, but also by other practices of popular culture" (Contreras, 2008, p. 7). In this sense, Aliaga (2015) proposes the existence of imaginary spaces of formation reinforced by social representations, understood as "a particular modality of knowledge, whose function is the production of behaviors and the communication between individuals"(Moscovici, 1979, p. 17) These are structured behaviors, attitudes, and forms of acting within society, and in the case of this study, the attitudes toward gender equality and inequality, as forms of social conditioning flowing from an androcentric, patriarchal mode of thinking. These practices have established cultural phenomena that constitute and condition "forms of ritual and social conduct learned and transmitted from one generation to another" (Madrazo, 2005, p. 122); i.e., each day is marked by different interpretations of reality. This situation is evident in the social relations that mark the appropriate behavior in a community, where "the subjects represent roles, and on the other hand, offer concepts and images of themselves which need certain references"(Castillo et al. 2003, p. 39). In the construction of different mental structures, similar emerging frameworks of intelligibility "are presented as a systematic configuration of properties that express differences objectively recorded in the conditions of existence in the form of systems of differential variations" (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 170), which generate in themselves unconscious attitudes, which are assumed to be natural and are legitimized by traditional forms of domination (Weber, 2006). In this sense, there are similar contributions to the ideas on gender from research in Ecuador, (Camacho, 2006; Quintana, 2008; Aguirre, 2012; Basque, 2014; Baquerizo, 2014; Calderon, 2015; Quiroz, 2015; Bueno, 2017), that allow us to observe how cultural identity from the traditions, beliefs, and customs, make up a framework of intelligibility that guides the daily lives of participants in society.

Worth mentioning also is that from the 1990s "gender studies introduced a relational approach according to which, we will only understand the experiences of men if these experiences are seen in relation to those of women and vice versa" (Martinez, 2005, p. 5). For this reason, it is necessary for us to contribute empirical evidence from psychological, sociological, and anthropological approaches in order to know the structure of these frameworks concerning gender equality that produce the young people in university training today (Mora & Pujal, 2016). This study deals with the category of gender as a "system of power that results from social conflict" (Barbieri, 1992, p. 152), which itself is part of the broader "historical and cultural social and symbolic construction of men and women on the basis of their sexual differences" (Hernandez, 2006, p. 1). These resulting norms remain in dispute so that tension frames their intelligibility, since the historical memory that has been naturalized and legitimized from their social and cultural backgrounds produces problems of conciliation among their personal, family, and work lives, causing some women to make a choice between family life and a professional career in the labour market" (Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Ramos, 2014, p. 723). Gender roles, understood as a social construction, push individuals towards an understanding of the group, thereby legitimizing "what is necessary to carry out the mediation of values, symbols, rules, and instrumental resources" (Herrera, 2000, p. 44) that are consolidated from the family, the school, the State and religion. For example, the Church, as "a guarantor of the system, not only has the ecclesiastical jurisdiction to prosecute its members, but also the power to judge if civilians have violated the ecclesiastical provisions" (Masferrer, 2013, p. 195). This is how cultural practices generate behaviors and form attitudes based on the environment in which people are involved, trying to "shape, form, or maintain men and women and their material conditions" with the aim of sustaining the established order (Castro et al., 1996, p. 35). Therefore to speak from the perspective of gender is an effort to generate changes in the respective specificities, functions, responsibilities, expectations and opportunities for men and women (Martinez, 2007), thereby enabling them to reread and reinterpret the forms of social influence that contribute to the change of "perception, judgment, modes of thinking or acting of an individual" (Suria, 2012, p. 44). By having knowledge of areas of agreement, dispute, and tension, we can develop proposals applicable to their contexts in regard to gender equality, and therefore allow us to understand that "speaking of gender means to separate the essential aspects that are attributed to people according to their anatomical sex (and all the meanings and practices that entails), whose process of construction has resulted in women being the less favoured participants in the social relations between men and women (Hernandez, 2006, p. 4)." Finally, it is important to mention that gender equality aims to develop relations characterized by equanimity between the sexes (Fernández-Saez et al., 2016), where what is sought is equal opportunities and autonomy in the various social scenarios of coexistence between men and women, in addition to contributing to reflections on the impact of the inequality which is evidenced (De Barbieri, 1993;Woodend & Devins, 2005; Hippisley-Cox et al., 2006; Mobarak & Söderfeldt, 2010; Keleher, 2013). Based on the previously described background, the question arises is their differences in the attitudes towards gender equality between male and female university students? To answer this question, our research team proposed a study based on a mixed approach in two phases. First, by using a quantitative approach, we sought to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the attitudes of university men and women toward gender equality. In a second phase, we analyzed the narratives that emerged in the discussions with the participants using qualitative methods.

2. GENDER INEQUALITY IN PREVIOUS GENERATIONS

In the Ecuadorian context, until not long ago, gender inequality was common for both men and women through practices that were rooted in culture through beliefs and traditions. This was affirmed by three of the women participants who stated that men of a generation ago should be handled as if they were Kings: "my uncle just goes and sits and everything happens the way he says he wants it to be, as if women were only there to meet his needs". A related theme was reported by two other participants: "To be like my mother-in-law is to have the minor role to make decisions, and it is as I say, that the man is their Holy King". Not only was the woman relegated to situations of servile behavior, but she was also relegated to the background in the managing of the home. The institutionalized system has been feeding mechanisms of domination that disadvantage women. For example, because he is the one who brought more to the economic development of their home, the man showed practices of psychological violence and refused to lose his power, as is evident from the roles and stereotypes which assign certain areas to males and females. As described by participant #1, his narrative illustrates this situation: "my mom was always earning more money than my father, and that was always what my dad called me ('mom')". Psychological violence has as one of its consequences humiliating and offending the victim, questioning the victim's value as a human being. As it can be inferred from the narrative, the one who receives the violence is the woman, only because by being the main source of supply of economic resources, she comes into dispute with the system of control of the man. This resource is affirmed and naturalized through cultural traditions that make a social order, where there are stereotypes and roles

that appoint the dominant function to the male and home care provider to the woman, which in many occasions may result in aggressiveness and justification of violent expressions.

3. AWARENESS OF THE PARADIGM SHIFT TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

Despite the existence and use of the historical mechanisms of oppression that have generated situations unfavorable to women, today a new social construction of what is meant by equality and equity for women and men is emerging. Change in cognitive structures stem from an awareness in the narrative that describes the awakening status of women into situations that may be contributing against these historical norms. It is relevant to mention that we have been able to identify in the narratives of men and women new social processes that attempt to contribute towards gender equality, despite the fact that male-centric, patriarchal structures still remain, new generations are meeting with greater opportunities to share their experiences and points of view, in addition to the accompaniment of public policies that, even though they are not brought into daily practice, are a legal support that accompanies the transformation processes against these entrenched social norms. For example, this narrative from a female participant: "I am able to make my own decisions; if I want to stay at home instead of going to church, I do. To be either in the care of the children or to serve a man, for me that won't work either, I'm not a person who is submissive to a man and who should keep the home and be caring for the children".

4. REACTION TO SEXUAL ORIENTATION

In this category we noted a narrative that invites respect and acceptance of other sexual orientations; however, this acceptance arises masked with comments of rejection; as in claiming the possibility of coexistence, provided that there is no direct interaction. For example, in the narrative of participant #3, we can interpret the meanings of the participants in terms of sexual orientation: "I respect them if they interact with lesbians, but not with me." As you can see, it is as though there is a discourse that invites acceptance and respect; however, in actual practice, not to honor it, as if there were a huge bridge between belief and behavior.

5. THE ROLE OF RELIGION, RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND INSTITUTIONS

There is a body of research that finds a connection between religion and traditional gender attitudes. Studies find various measures of religion to be significantly associated with differing attitudes toward gender roles: „Generally, religious individuals and couples are much more likely to support the idea that men are supposed to inhabit the public sphere while women are meant to take care of the domestic or private sphere" (Whitehead, 2012, p. 141). Similarly, a masculine image of God is significantly associated with a more conservative gender ideology (Whitehead, 2012). There is very limited research that looks at the role of religion and religious institutions in promoting issues of gender equality, and none of the literature surveyed focused on the role of the church as a key influencer. Various research on promoting awareness and behaviour change in relation to gender equality emphasize the importance of involving religious leaders in order to secure buy-in for programmes and their aims and to increase the reach of such initiatives.

The influence of religion

Sexual and reproductive health, including HIV/AIDS transmission, is frequently linked to issues of gender equality. The development of sexual ethics is seen as inseparable from broader gender relations (Becker, 2007). Becker (2007) finds that religion can be an important influence in the development of beliefs about HIV/AIDS, alongside other key factors such as indigenous cultural heritage and the political process. This has been the case for both Muslims and Christians in various parts of Africa. A study on young people in south-eastern Nigeria, the vast majority of whom are Christian, finds that churches provide powerful symbolic interpretations of contemporary Nigerian society. Young people commonly situate their understandings and explain their behaviours in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in terms of religion (which can either increase of decrease their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS). In some cases, young people believe that if they and their partner are both Christian and moral, their relationship is considered risk free. Behaviour that goes against religious moralities is perceived in terms of sins rather than as health risks. As such, intervention strategies will be severely limited if they ignore the extent to which religion, health, sexuality and morality intersect in people"s everyday lives. It is important that public health programmes learn how best to harness religious beliefs and institutions in order to prevent HIV/AIDS (Smith, 2004).

Religious leaders and teachings

A paper on the „Safe Age of Marriage‟ programme in Yemen highlights the importance of actively engaging religious leaders (Friej, 2010). They can be the main gatekeepers in rural communities and can contribute to acceptance of programmes and their aims. The „Safe Age of Marriage "programme was community-based and aimed to end child marriage (marriage before age of 18) and improve the poor health and social outcomes of young girls by changing entrenched social/gender norms about the value of the girl child and the importance of girls‟ education. The programme trained community educators to engage in outreach activities. Participants attended participatory training workshops that were interactive and challenged them to re-examine sociocultural and religious norms and practices related to child marriage. The workshops aimed to strengthen facilitation skills; expand knowledge on Islam‟s perspectives on child marriage, education and family planning; and increase awareness of the emotional/psychological consequence of child marriage. Each community educator was then responsible for holding a minimum of four awareness raising sessions per month, using a range of techniques, such as: discussions, role-plays, storytelling, poetry recitations, and debates. The sessions were held in schools, literacy classes, health centers, mosques and other social venues. Outcomes of the outreach interventions include (Friej, 2010):

• An 18% increase in awareness about the benefits of delaying marriage

• The postponing/prevention of 53 girl-child and 26 boy-child marriages

• Buy in by leaders: the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Amran asked all religious leaders to disseminate messages on the health and social consequences of child marriage in their Friday sermons

Faith-based organizations

Religious leaders and faith-based organizations' have often refrained from addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In some cases, denial, silence, and stigmatisation by faith-based organization's (FBOs) and religious leaders have hindered interventions aimed at reducing HIV transmission and the care of those with HIV/AIDS (Clarke et al., 2011). A study by Clarke et al. (2011) that looks at the role of FBOs in raising awareness of HIV/AIDS and changing behaviour finds that, similar to the reach of religious leaders noted above, FBOs can be effective in reaching isolated communities. The study focuses on the interventions adopted by a local Christian organisation in Papua, Indonesia and a regional Muslim network in Thailand. The credibility of FBOs within local communities, their constituency and access is integral to the dissemination of information and knowledge: „FBOs have a natural position of authority with communities, which is based on their links to religious belief systems. While secular agencies would spend considerable time building a reputation and level of trust with a community, by their very nature FBOs already have an advantage in this regard‟ (p. 13). It is important to acknowledge, however, that the natural authority of FBOs does not automatically result in individual behaviour change.

6. CONCLUSION

In the present study, we sought to analyze attitudes towards gender equality among university students through a mixed, two-phase approach for the research design, first quantitative and subsequently qualitative, which allowed for the measurement and research of beliefs, customs, and practices on gender equality. In the quantitative phase we observed that in dimensions related to sexual orientation, religious symbolism, partnership structure, scope of the private and public factors, and sexuality and personal freedom, women had a greater tendency towards gender equality compared with the scores obtained by males. These results are consistent with social representations that form the imaginary that were identified in the narratives of the qualitative phase, where it was clear that, for the reality in which they operate, men and women are attached to the male from a collective point of view, while in their private lives the feminine is seen as a neglected form of coexistence, submissive to the male and maintaining the hegemonic, androcentric order that predominates in Western societies. In this regard, the participation of women in public roles, for example, such as access to education, professional development, generation of economic resources, among others, has led to the transition of female identity, which implies that they are beginning to assume, with their new gender identity, forms of empowerment and conquests that often come into tension with the cultural practices that have been seen as the natural roles of men and women.

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