HIDDEN INEQUALITIES, VISIBLE OUTCOMES: A GENDER LENS

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In recent decades, the study of global inequalities has experienced a remarkable boom: economic, social and environmental inequalities have been the subject of a growing body of theoretical and empirical work, visible and influential throughout the world. The World Inequality Lab (WIL) and Sciences Po's Center for Research on Social Inequalities (CRIS) have joined forces for the first edition of the Global Inequality Research Award (or GiRA), which aims to recognize every two years researchers from all disciplines who have made a significant contribution to the understanding of global inequalities. GiRA seeks to acknowledge major scholarship in the field of global inequality understood in two key perspectives: first, the perspective of inequality research being done in all corners of the world; and second, the perspective of inequality as a complex object that needs light from all angles to be fully grasped, understood and eventually mitigated.

GiRA 2024

The 2024 GiRA Prize was jointly awarded to **Bina Agarwal** and **James K. Boyce** for their groundbreaking work in the field of social and environmental inequalities.

The scientific committee for this first GiRA Prize was made up of **Lucas Chancel** (Sciences Po/CNRS, CRIS and WIL, Paris School of Economics), **Éloi Laurent** (Sciences Po/OFCE, Stanford University), Thomas Piketty (EHESS and WIL, Paris School of Economics) and **Mirna Safi** (Sciences Po/CNRS, CRIS).

Hidden Inequalities, Visible Outcomes: A Gender Lens

Bina Agarwal

GiRA Lecture, March 19, 2025

Thomas Piketty presents Bina Agarwal with a Louvre replica of the earliest Mesopotamian School Tablet at the GiRA award ceremony in Paris.

It is a great honour to receive the inaugural Global Inequality Research Award. It was also a pleasant surprise when I was informed about it, since the field of inequality is peopled by so many excellent and well-known academics, especially economists. I was delighted of course to be selected and even more so to be a co-winner with Jim Boyce, a longstanding friend whose work both on the environment and earlier on Bangladesh I have learnt much from.

I warmly thank Eloi Laurent (Sciences Po) and Lucas Chancel (World Inequality Lab, Paris School of Economics) for so graciously hosting me in Paris, and Thomas Piketty (whose books I greatly admire) for his very kind words about my work.

I have been writing for long years about gender inequality, especially in relation to the ownership of private property, such as land, and the governance of common property resources, such as forests. My awareness of gender inequality, however, long precedes my research. I remember I was about five years old and visiting my maternal grandmother's village in Rajasthan (India). I noticed during our social calls to some of her neighbours that little boys were given extra milk and fruit but not little girls, even in well-off homes. Although, as a visitor, I was treated like a little boy in this respect, I found the practice strange and asked why girls were treated differently. I was told: "Because boys need more energy than girls". I was unconvinced, but years later, as a researcher, I framed this as a "perception bias" about gendered needs, a hidden inequality that had visible nutritional outcomes in the anthropometric indices of girls and boys.[1]

Discussions on visible economic inequality, especially of income and wealth, have a long history in development economics, going back at least to the 1950s. The early debates focused largely on the relationship between economic growth and economic inequality, but subsequent work on economic inequality embodies a wide range of writings on theory, measurement, and policy, with contributions by major academics such as Anthony Atkinson, Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, Branco Milanovich, and Thomas Piketty. Their focus, however, has not been especially on gender inequality, with the exception of Amartya Sen on some counts. More importantly, economists typically focus on *visible* inequalities, especially of income, and then examine factors which might explain these inequalities. I will reverse that order and start, instead, with *hidden* inequalities, and demonstrate how these impinge on visible outcomes from a gender lens. And I will examine these inequalities in diverse arenas such as property ownership, employment, and political representation.

Hidden inequalities

What are hidden inequalities? Consider three in particular: social norms, social perceptions, and the social legitimacy of claims.

Social norms

Douglass North, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1993, embeds social norms in his definition of institutions. He defines institutions as the rules of the game in a society, "the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction". According to him, these constraints can be formal, as in laws, or informal, as in social norms and conventions.[2] Social norms, in his schema, specify what an individual is prohibited from doing or allowed to do under specified conditions. This reduces uncertainty and transaction costs by establishing a stable structure for human interaction. In other words, for Douglass North social norms are informal rules with positive effects.[3]

But what if these rules and norms are deeply unequal and are devised largely by the powerful? And what if, in turn, such inequalities produce economic inefficiencies as well as injustices? For me, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's definition of "doxa" is closer to how I would define social norms, namely, that which is accepted as a natural part of the social order, something which is "undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny".[4] Much of what is claimed to be part of tradition would fall in this category. A particularly interesting aspect of Bourdieu's work is the idea that beyond "doxa" lies the "field of opinion, that which is explicitly questioned". He terms this as "the locus of confrontation of competing discourses". This is especially relevant to our discussion because it opens up the possibility of contesting social norms and changing them. Today, although social scientists, including economists, are beginning to recognize the importance of social norms in mediating outcomes, they are typically taken as given, whereas I would like to argue that social norms can be and need to be changed, if they unfairly disadvantage particular categories of people.

In a broad sense, norms define all aspects of our lives, operating in every sphere of activity, every day, such as whether we should eat with our hands or use a fork and knife; or which side of the road we should drive on. Most such social norms are gender neutral. But there are important social norms that favour some categories of people over others, such as men over women. Our interest here is in gendered social norms.

Norms dictate the gender division of labour within the home: for instance, housework and childcare are considered women's work. Norms also dictate a gender

division of labour outside the home: some jobs are considered more suitable for women, others for men, leading to a gender segregation of occupations. And norms often define the gender division of physical space: for instance, in conservative societies women tend to be restricted from going alone to places dominated by men, or from participating in some public forums or events.

A key category of norms relates to marriage: whom are you allowed to marry (close kin or strangers)? Where are you expected to reside after marriage (in your own village or in your husband's?). Some societies forbid close-kin marriages, others allow them. Most societies expect women to move to their husband's home after marriage, in rare cases it is the opposite. And then there are female seclusion norms which restrict women's public interactions and mobility and hence their livelihood options and life choices. Some of these gendered norms can draw legitimacy from culture, others from religious beliefs. In fact, it is often difficult to separate religious and cultural norms.

Basically, some norms can be *enabling*, others *disabling*. The disabling norms become serious constraints, especially for women. Although my discussion will focus on gendered norms, you could equally think about norms in relation to race, or caste, or another ascriptive characteristic linked to hierarchy and inequality.

Social perceptions

Unlike norms, social perceptions can be defined as viewpoints that are held by society about the contributions, needs, or abilities of a set of people based on their ascriptive characteristics such as gender, race, caste, or ethnicity, rather than their actual contributions, needs, or abilities. In turn, perceptions would justify who deserves what or who gets what.

For instance, social norms may define on what principles a family's resources are shared: contributions or needs. But allocations, in practice, can depend on biased perceptions about contributions and needs based on gender or race, rather than actual contributions and needs. A perception bias can lead to unequal outcomes. Women's perceived work contributions, for instance, may be lower than their actual contributions, and this can lead to lower wage rates for women than men, not because women are less capable but because of the employer's perception bias. Similarly, the perception bias I observed in my grandmother's village led to boys being seen as more in

need of nutritious food than girls. Like norms, however, perceptions may be subject to contestation and change.

Social legitimacy of claims

Let me now add a third hidden inequality – the social legitimacy of claims. Claims can be economic, social, or political. Economic claims can relate to jobs or property ownership and be mediated by notions of legitimacy. For instance, in many societies men are seen as the main breadwinners and hence as the legitimate claimants for jobs or property. Similarly, in social gatherings or in political institutions, the head of the household is normally seen as the legitimate representative of the family. Given that heads of households are typically men, they tend to be seen as the most legitimate representatives of household interests.

You may then ask: are these three hidden inequalities linked? The answer is that they can be linked in some degree but in large extent they are distinct. Biased perceptions, for example, can become institutionalized as social norms: if the social perception is that women are less productive than men (without actually measuring relative productivity) they will be paid less than men, and this wage gap can become a social norm. But perceptions would usually be only one among several factors affecting norms. Hence, notwithstanding some links between norms, perceptions and the legitimacy of claims, it is important to separate them analytically to really understand what is going on and find ways of reducing the gendered inequalities they embody.

Visible outcomes

Thus far I have discussed hidden inequalities in somewhat abstract terms. I will now take concrete examples of three *visible* gender inequalities and illustrate how the three hidden ones have shaped the visible outcomes. The first visible gender inequality I consider relates to private property ownership, especially immovable property like land. The second relates to gender inequality in employment and wages. And the third is the low representation of women in the governance of public institutions, be they legislatures, village councils, or informal community institutions for governing common property resources.

Gender gap in property ownership

Let us start with property ownership, especially land. The gender gap on this count is high globally. Consider the Global South. Estimates of the percentage of female landowners to total landowners range between 14-37% across four Asian countries; between 11-27% across five Latin American countries; and come to an average of 22% across ten African countries.[5] Overall, the *United Nations Gender Snapshot Report 2024* notes that women are less likely than men to own land in 40/46 countries with data.[6]

Why are these inequalities important? In my 1994 book, *A Field of One's Own,* I had argued that if women owned land in their own right and independent of male ownership it would lead to positive effects in terms of welfare, efficiency and empowerment.[7] Both in my book and subsequent research by scholars provide a vast body of empirical evidence globally on the welfare benefits of women's land ownership. For instance, assets owned by the mother are found to have significantly positive effects on child education, nutrition and health relative to only the father owning assets. Women are also found less at risk of poverty and destitution when owning even a small plot of land in case of marital breakdown. And owning immovable property such as land or a house significantly reduces women's risk of domestic violence.

On the latter, my research with a colleague, based on a 2001 primary survey of 500 randomly selected rural and urban households in Kerala (India), found that among ever-married women the incidence of physical spousal violence was 49% where the woman owned neither land or house, but was only 7% if she owned both, and 17% and 10% respectively if owning only land or only a house. The reduced risk of spousal violence was found even after controlling for a wide range of other factors, including spousal gaps in employment, education and age; the husband's alcohol abuse; and so on. The ownership of immovable property emerged as the most important protector for women. Notably too, employment did not provide the same protection unless the woman was employed in the formal sector. Women working in the informal sector still faced high levels of domestic violence, especially where they had a job and their husbands were unemployed. In contrast, a propertied woman was still protected even when her husband was propertyless.[8]

There are positive efficiency effects of women owning land as well. FAO's 2011 *State of Agriculture Report*, which reviewed studies globally, found that if women farmers had the same access as male farmers to resources — land and inputs — their yields could be 20-30% higher and a country's agricultural growth 2 to 4% greater.[9] Since then, many new studies, including mine, show that women farmers with access to the same inputs as male farmers are as productive,[10] and in some contexts more productive.

The empowerment effects of women owning immovable property are also found to be strong both by objective measures such as participation in household decision-making, freedom of mobility, etc., and by subjective measures such as a gain in self-confidence, as indicated by women's own voices. As an illustration, when women in Bihar (eastern India) received land in their own names for the first time, following the Bodhgaya peasant movement in the late 1970s, they said: "We had tongues but could not speak, we had feet but could not walk. Now that we have the land, we have the strength to speak and walk!"[11]

Hence, examined from a variety of angles, the evidence shows that women owning property would bring many welfare and efficiency benefits and further the cause of social justice and women's empowerment. The high level of continuing gender inequality in land and property means forfeiting these benefits, to the detriment of social and economic development.

This leads to the question: what are the barriers to bridging the gender gap? Legal inequalities could be one. Notably, though, even in countries which have gender parity in laws there is high inequality in practice. This is where the hidden inequalities we discussed come into play.

Consider India. In 2005, the Hindu Succession Act, which guides the inheritance of private property for most of the country's population, was amended to make it gender equal, giving daughters (married or unmarried) equal inheritance rights with sons in all paternal property, including agricultural land.[12] Legally this benefited around 83% of Indian women and girls who are covered by this Act. Yet, in practice, taking an all-India average, women own land in only 11.6% of rural landowning households. Regionally the states in south India do somewhat better, but even the highest figure in the south comes to only 28.8%.[13] This is in Kerala where about a third of the population is historically estimated to have been matrilineal.

Sustaining this persistent inequality are hidden barriers. Social norms, especially norms governing marriage – such as whom you can marry and where you live after marriage – are the biggest hurdles. The former defines social distance in marriage, and the latter defines physical distance. Typically, families are reluctant to give land to daughters on the argument that the land will go to her marital family if she marries out. Resistance is strongest in regions where social norms forbid women from marrying even distant relatives and within the village, dictating that women marry strangers living at long distances from their birth village. Resistance is somewhat less if norms allow marriage within the extended family, such as between cross-cousins, and/or within the village.

The second set of disabling norms relate to female seclusion practices. These could involve veiling, but more particularly they involve the gender segregation of public space, wherein women are restricted from going alone to places dominated by men, including agricultural marketplaces. This reduces women's mobility and their ability to manage property. We still find these norms in traditional rural societies, both in South Asia and many other parts of the globe.

I mapped these gendered norms across South Asia in *A Field of One's Own*, based on information culled from dozens of ethnographies.[14] I found that the regional variation in social norms relating to close-kin marriages and village endogamy (marriages allowed within the village) quite closely follow the regional pattern of women's legal rights in land pre-2005, as well as the regional pattern of women owning land currently. In northwest India, where Hindu women are forbidden from marrying anyone even remotely related to them or marry even a stranger in their birth village, the resistance to endowing daughters with land is greatest, and here the percentage of women landowners is the lowest. In south India, where even among Hindus cross-cousin and uncle-niece marriages are allowed, as is marriage within the birth village, resistance to endowing daughters with land is less, and the percentage of women landowners is higher. Although kin marriages are low in practice even in south India, the enabling social norms are helpful.

Overlaying marriage norms are female seclusion norms, which too are strict in northern India and weak or non-existent in south India. Female seclusion, as noted earlier, can involve veiling your face and/or the gender segregation of public space. This

again affects women's chances of inheriting land or being able to manage it. It needs mention that veiling is also practiced among Hindu communities in northern India, but the practice differs from that in Muslim communities. Among Hindus in north India, social norms require women only to veil before elders in their martial villages and not at all in their birth villages. More pernicious than veiling is the gender segregation of space which is found in both north and south India. So, if a woman farmer wants to hire farm labour to help in harvesting her crops, it is difficult for her to negotiate a male-dominated market space on her own, and she may need to depend on a male mediator to do so.

Next consider social perceptions. These too create gender biases in women's access to property. Let me give you some illustrative examples of the divergence between perception and reality in the South Asian context.

- A widespread social perception is that women don't need independent landed property since their fathers and husbands will look after them. The reality is that propertyless women can face precarity and poverty, especially with marital breakdown, as well as domestic violence.
- The social perception is that women's contributions to the household are less than men's, so they don't deserve immovable property to the same extent. The reality is that women carry double burdens of care work and typically unpaid work in family enterprises.
- The social perception is that women married at long distances cannot care for elderly parents so they don't deserve to be endowed with property. The reality is that women are often the main caregivers of elderly relatives.
- The social perception is that men are the main farmers and thus they deserve to inherit land while women are farm wives or farm helpers. The reality is that women are increasingly the *de facto* farmers as more men than women migrate for jobs to cities.
- The social perception is that giving women property will destroy the family. The reality is that women owning property reduces domestic violence and makes for happier and more stable families.

Gender biased perceptions, in turn, can have negative effects on women's access to landed property. They can lead to resistance to legal reform towards gender equality,

for example. In the 1940s, during India's constitutional assembly debates on a Bill that would give women greater rights in property than existed traditionally, there was strong resistance from conservative members of parliament. One said: "Are you going to enact a code that will facilitate the breaking up of our households?" Another added: "May God save us from … having an army of unmarried women". This was 1948. But in 1989, some 40 years later, similar views were expressed at a meeting on land reform in the Indian Planning Commission attended by two cabinet ministers and many high-level government officials. I was invited to make a presentation. After my presentation in which I argued in favour of land titles for women the then Minister of Agriculture said to me: "Are you suggesting that *women* should be given rights in land? What do women want? To break up the family?"[15] He missed the irony in his own remark which revealed that Indian families are so unequal that the moment women gain equality in property, they will walk out of the family.

The biases against women's claims have not diminished greatly even since then. For example, when I was researching Indian High Court judgments on women's property claims, the language of many judgements reflected continued gender bias.[16] A Karnataka High Court (in south India) noted that under Hindu law the father is expected to take care of the daughter till her marriage and her husband after her marriage. The High Court in Punjab and Haryana (in northwest India) strongly disapproved of a sister staking her claim to her property share against her own brother and denied the woman's claim. The most dramatic quote came from a judge in Delhi High Court who accused a woman seeking to claim her share in ancestral property as taking her "pound of flesh" (a familiar quote from Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*). Overall, of the 505 cases I analysed with a colleague for the period 2005-2020, 22% of the judges and counsels expressed either gender-biased views or gender-regressive language.

The third hidden gender inequality, namely the social legitimacy of claims, also comes into play here. Some of the arguments which are constantly used to highlight the social legitimacy of men's greater claims over family property are culture specific, others are general. An example of a culturally rooted argument is that sons in Hindu families have the first claim to family property since they light a parent's funeral pyre during the cremation ceremony. A more general argument across patrilineal cultures in both the

Global South and Global North is that sons carry the lineage and family name, as also highlighted by a recent book, *The Gender of Capital*, by two French sociologists.[17] Other, commonly-used arguments questioning the social legitimacy of women's property claims are that daughters belong to their marital families, or that daughters marry out so they cannot manage immovable property from a distance (although the rights of sons who migrate out for work are not questioned on this ground). Hence arguments justifying the gendered social legitimacy of property claims is an important hidden barrier over and above gendered social norms and gendered social perceptions.

Gender inequalities in labour markets

My second illustration comes from the labour market in which the distinction between formal and informal sector employment is important. In the Global North countries most people work in the formal sector, while in Global South, a large proportion of the workforce is in the informal sector which includes the self-employed (mostly in agriculture) and various jobs that are underpaid, precarious, and providing little social protection. A much larger proportion of women than men work in the informal sector of the Global South, especially in agriculture and, as noted, few own land, the most critical productive resource.

In the formal sector, women face segregated labour markets, interrupted careers, sticky floors, and glass ceilings. Segregated labour markets means that women are concentrated in certain kinds of jobs which tend to be less well paid and overcrowded. Interrupted careers occur when women leave their jobs temporarily for childcare. Sticky floors implies that women are less upwardly mobile and stuck in low paid jobs, and glass ceilings means they are less likely to get promotions to higher echelons or become top executives. Added to this are wage and earnings gaps in all the sectors, both in the Global South and Global North, including the OECD countries.[18]

Lower earnings and incomes and interrupted careers affect lifetime earnings and pension incomes. Even if you have a well-paid job to start with, once you interrupt your career you may not be hired back or get promoted. The more interruptions there are, the shorter will be your aggregate working life and the lower your pension income.

For instance, social norms typically require women to take care of children, so their careers are likely to be interrupted for childcare, even in the formal sector. In the

informal sector, women often end up multitasking by taking babies to their workplace – such as agricultural fields or construction sites. Moreover, in the Global South countries, care work can mean "extended" care, which can include collecting firewood from common land, gathering and carrying fodder, fetching water – tasks which can begin in childhood and carry on into old age. Firewood is still the principal source of cooking fuel in large parts of rural Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia; and water fetching is a daily task in countries where many villages still lack piped water in homes.

According to 2018 figures provided by the International Labour Organisation, globally women spend on average 265 minutes in care work and men spend 83. No country has equal gender sharing of unpaid care work, and between 1997 and 2012 (namely over 15 years) the gender gap in time spent on unpaid care work has decreased only by 7 minutes in the 23 countries which have time series data.[19]

Moreover, time use studies only cover time taken for a task, not the arduousness of the task, or of overlapping tasks, or of the negative effects of a given task. Cooking with firewood, for instance, leads to smoky kitchens and indoor air pollution, which in turn is linked to high morbidity and mortality among women and children. In India, women's risk of premature death, not just morbidity, is found to be 50% higher than men's from diseases relating to kitchen smoke,[20] and several thousand infants die annually due to exposure in smoky kitchens.[21]

Social perceptions similarly affect women's chances in the job market. Employer perceptions that women have lower abilities than men, even if as qualified, can reduce their chances of being hired or promoted. The perception that women will marry and drop out of work partly or wholly when they have children can again reduce women's chances of being hired. Often these perceptions are not based on the changing reality wherein, increasingly, many women are having only one child or no children. Recent figures show that 19% of women in the USA, 18% in the UK, and 15% in France have no children by the end of their childbearing period.[22]

There are also incorrect assumptions and perception biases about the relative efficiency of men and women performing a given task. Actual measurements can prove otherwise. When I was doing my doctoral dissertation many years ago, I found that in aggregating total labour used in farming, agricultural economists were counting female labour time as equivalent to half of male labour time in their studies, because, it was

argued, female labour is paid less than male labour and so it must be less productive. Hence a discriminatory practice in the labour market was translated into an incorrect assumption in academic studies. I did not agree with this assumption but needed evidence to bypass it. Then I came across a study by an Indian agricultural engineer who had tested potato digging equipment with men and women and found that by every measure (picking rate per labourer, hours taken for the same job, and potato yields per meter of the field), the women were several times more efficient than the men. In my dissertation I used this evidence to justify assuming that male and female labour time was at least equivalent.[23] This demonstrates not only that hidden inequalities, such as perception bias, affect labour market outcomes, but also that they infiltrate academic work.

Governance of public institutions

Let us now examine a third arena, that of gendered access to governance. In most countries today women constitute only a small percent of the members in Parliament, in state legislatures, in local bodies of governance, and in community institutions of governance. Globally, in 2024, by figures provided by Inter-Parliamentary Union Reports, only 26.9% of parliamentarians were women.[24] The gender gap is equally pronounced in state legislatures within countries, as in India. Only countries where a proportion of seats are reserved for women, do better, such as Rwanda.

Again, the situation is better in village councils mainly because of quotas and reservations. In South Asian countries, such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, for instance, a certain proportion of seats in village councils are reserved for women. In India, one-third of all village councillors have to be women, and one-third seats (randomly rotated) for heads of village councils are reserved for women. In informal community institutions of governance, such as institutions governing forests or water bodies, again, there is a poor representation of women, except where there are quotas for them.

Where there are a larger proportion of women in governance – whether you take state legislators, village councils, or community institutions – a growing literature shows that it brings a range of benefits. For instance, studies by economists with large samples show that if you have women legislators, annual GDP growth tends to be higher, village

infrastructure more developed, and institutional functioning less corrupt.[25] Similarly, a range of studies of village councils by well-known economists, especially Nobel Laureate Ester Duflo and her colleagues, find that female village council heads are more likely to make higher investments in public goods than male village council heads.[26]

And in my own work on community institutions of forest governance in India and Nepal, published in my book, *Gender and Green Governance*,[27] and several papers, I found that female attendance rates in meetings and women's likelihood of holding leadership positions was much higher when there was a critical mass of 25 to 33% women in the executive committees (ECs) of these institutions. Also, increasing women's presence in these committees had a significant positive impact on forest conservation outcomes.[28]

Globally, however, women's presence at all levels of governance remains low. Here again, conservative social norms relating to gender segregation of public space and restrictions on women's social mobility and public interaction play a negative role, as do male perceptions that women cannot contribute much to the meetings.

Can hidden inequalities be unveiled and tackled?

We thus have a challenge today: how do we contest and change gender-biased social norms, social perceptions, and the social legitimacy of claims?

For a start, it is important to assess which norms can be changed and which are likely to prove inflexible. Marriage norms which dictate whom you can or cannot marry are based on ideas of kinship and incest and are unlikely to change, but childcare and domestic work norms can be shifted over time to an extent. For instance, when European countries added parental leave and later non-substitutable paternity leave to existing maternity leave, fathers were found much more likely to contribute to childcare work.[29] More generally, in many countries, but especially in the Global North, fathers can often be seen with young children in public parks, and attitudes to sharing housework are becoming more progressive among professional men.[30] Although this by no means adds up to gender equality in care work it demonstrates the potential for change.

Female seclusion norms in the Global South, such as in South Asia, are also becoming less strict with urbanisation, female education, and the changing nature and

requirements of the job market. And quota policies which create a critical mass of women in a public institution can help erode such gender-biased social norms and perceptions, as can collective action by women themselves.

On the latter point, to begin with, the simple power of numbers helps. The earliest evidence came from Nordic countries, where a Danish sociologist, Drude Dahlerup, observed that when there were one-third women in Parliament, it changed the timing of meetings to accommodate women's constraints; the bills introduced better reflected women's concerns such as child care and the environment; and the language used in debates became more courteous.[31] My own research on community forestry institutions in India and Nepal, as noted, showed that women are much more likely to attend meetings, to express their views, and serve in leadership positions if they were present in a critical mass in the executive committees (ECs). I found that the critical mass ranged between 25-33% of the EC members.[32]

Beyond numbers is the power of groups if women act in their own interest. It is helpful here to distinguish between what I term gender-in-itself and gender-for-itself. I have adapted this from Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*,[33] where he talks about class-in-itself and class-for-itself. Gender-in-itself is a descriptive category (reflecting the power of numbers) and simply means a group of women with common interests. In contrast, gender-*for*-itself means a group of women consciously recognising their shared interests and acting together to propel change.

There is considerable evidence of both gender-in-itself and gender-for-itself enabling the challenging of social norms and perceptions. For instance, simply working in groups can help overcome social norms that restrict women's mobility. To illustrate, in the 1980s, in Bangladesh, the NGO BRAC began to promote women's employment by having them work in groups rather than individually. When the village clergy objected to women going out to work and breaking seclusion norms, the women were able to challenge this view.[34] Over time, the clergy and other villagers stopped talking ill of them. Forming a group and bringing in earnings helped, as did support from their spouses. In my current research on group farming in India, again, women have been pooling their resources to lease in land and cultivate it in groups. They have been able to effectively access input, credit and output markets. In Kerala (India) for instance, today there are 73,000 all-women group farms (each constituted of 4-6 women). Based on a detailed primary survey over a year,

I found that these group farms had significantly higher productivity and profits per hectare than individual family farms which were largely male managed.[35] In time, the women have also gained self-confidence and respect in the community and within the family as well as win in village council elections.[36]

Similarly, social perceptions can be changed by a demonstration effect. In India, for instance, initially when one-third seats were reserved for women in village councils and as heads of village councils, there was scepticism about their abilities. But once they had demonstrated that they were efficient and public minded, and people observed their performance directly, gender bias declined, [37] and women began to be elected even in unreserved constituencies in many areas.

A demonstration effect can also change ideas about the social legitimacy of claims, such as observing daughters taking care of elderly parents, or daughters lighting the funeral pyres of fathers in Hindu families, or female heads of households performing well economically.

In conclusion

Social norms, social perceptions, and the social legitimacy of claims are deeply gender unequal, and they constrain women in multiple ways, on a daily basis. These hidden inequalities have interactively led to adverse material outcomes, not only for women as individuals, but also for their families, communities and countries. Unveiling and recognizing these inequalities and taking measures to tackle them is therefore imperative, to reduce visible gender inequalities, be they of wealth, wages, employment options, or participation in the governance of public institutions. This would not only take us closer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals but could also transform the lives of millions of women and their families across the globe. Group approaches and collective action can provide an effective way forward.

Notes

[1] In fact, gender inequalities in dietary intake can be found in many cultures. Recent analysis suggests that in Europe it goes back some 10,000 years: see, Colleter, Rozenn, Klervia Jaouen, Dominique Garcia, Michael P Richards (2026). Dietary inequality marker reveals 10,000 years of gender and cultural disparity in Europe, *PANAS Nexus*, 5(4).

[2] North, Douglass C. (1991). Institutions, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 5(1): 97–112).

[3] See also, Arrow, K.J. (1974). *The Limits of Organization*. New York: W.W. Norton. He discusses "invisible institutions" of ethical and moral principles which can facilitate decision-making within organisations and so enhance efficiency.

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