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From #MeToo to Boko Haram: Some comments on the state of gender relations in the world

When surveying the world from 1960 to about the early years of the new millennium, progress on reducing gender inequality was widespread, fast, steady, and seemingly irreversible. In OECD countries, remaining gender gaps in rights and in education disappeared, and women were reducing gaps in employment, pay, and political power. Similarly, in Socialist countries, an ideological commitment to gender equality (plus a need for women workers) led to even faster reductions in gender gaps. When the Socialist regimes fell in the early 1990s, there was some regress on gender equality, including in labor markets but most visibly in political power, suggesting for the first time that gains can also be reversed. But the reversals were far from complete and it remains the case that the Socialist legacy is still visible today in higher female education and employment levels in former Socialist countries.

In the developing world, gender gaps were also starting to fall, most visibly in education, promoted by international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), international commitments such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs,) the actions of enlightened political leaders, and generous support by the international donor community. While progress may have been too slow for some, and gender gaps continued to be sizable, the direction of change seemed clear, and developing countries were just a few decades behind but sure to catch up. There were still some actors such as the Taliban in Afghanistan who fought actively against gender equality, but they were seen as a passing phenomenon, and in terminal decline.

Globalization was expected to accelerate progress towards gender equality. In rich countries it would promote structural change towards services where women traditionally dominate. In poor countries, it would promote labor-intensive export-oriented manufacturing, again offering employment opportunities for the growing cohorts of more educated women. Globalization would also promote competition, thereby helping to erode inefficient institutions such as gender discrimination in labor markets. More controversially, this competition would also put a premium on workers that showed flexibility in terms of labor hours and conditions, and were willing to put up with lower wages. Women were seen to be more willing to work in such flexible and lower paid environments.

A last indication of the confidence in the progress towards gender equality was that progressive gender activism was moving on from fighting for equality between men and women to new challenges such as the rights of transgender people. Similar to Fukuyama proclaiming the end of history when communism fell and the world would uniformly adjust to the Western economic and political system, one could see the end of history regarding the struggle for gender equality. In fact, in 2013 I myself had also been convinced that the global march towards gender equality was unstoppable when I proclaimed confidently that women were going to be the winners of the 21st century.

The last few years have shown that we cannot be sure at all that steady progress towards gender equality will continue. Everywhere we look, we see instances where progress has stalled, we learn that there was often less equality than had appeared, and we experience real backlash. Starting in the rich world, we learn that we are very far away from labor market equality. For one, new work on occupational and sectoral segregation has shown that it persists to a surprising degree even as women reach parity in employment. Increases of women's participation has led to increasing female dominance in some sectors and occupations (esp. in services) without breaking down occupational and sectoral barriers. As a result, the unexplained portion of the gender wage gap has proven to be remarkably persistent, linked to female-dominated sectors and occupations being paid less than equivalent male-dominated ones. Second, the #MeToo movement has shown, among other things, that at the workplace powerful men have been able to exploit their position to engage in sexual harassment (and worse) with impunity. Of course, it is also indicative of the changed times that the president of the United States takes pride in engaging in such abusive behavior, and seemingly gets away with it. Third, as women entered the labor force, there has been less of a reallocation of the care burden leading many women to have a double burden and/or sacrifice career prospects in the labor market to focus more on family matters. Lastly, while globalization did deliver the structural change and the demands for greater flexibility, both of which favored women, these relative gains came along with absolute losses for men of jobs in high-wage unionized manufacturing sectors, breeding resentment and backlash.

Looking towards the developing world, we see even more worrying developments. The Taliban, as strong as ever, have been joined by Islamic State, Boko Haram, and their supporters and sympathizers across the world in fighting even the most basic global consensus on gender equality, that educating girls is the right thing to do. Hundreds of schools for girls have been destroyed in Afghanistan and Pakistan, girls are abducted from schools and married off in Nigeria, Yazidi women were enslaved, sold to IS fighters and routinely raped by their captors in Iraq. This is different to women being the inevitable victims of conflict and associated lawlessness. Here women are specifically the target of attacks and there is an ideological case made for depriving girls of schooling, as well as enslaving and raping non-believers. While these groups thrive by exploiting other local grievances as well, leading a backlash against gender equality is an important motivating force.

Elsewhere in the developing world, progress towards gender equality has only been steady and relatively rapid in the case of education. Despite this advance, and despite substantial and rapid fertility decline in most of the developing world, progress in reducing gender gaps in the labor market has been slow and heterogeneous across different regions. With the exception of Latin America, gender gaps in employment have stalled or even increased across the developing world.

Of particular note it that despite massive advances in female education and rapid fertility decline, female labor force participation rates hardly increased in the past 2 decades in the Middle East and North Africa (from very low levels), and they actually fell in South Asia, driven particularly by falling female participation in India. Careful analyses of the Indian case show several factors at work. First, as household incomes have improved, many poor and poorly educated women have left employment as their income was no longer urgently needed for survival. The jobs they left were often extremely poorly paid, with bad working conditions, so that it is likely they are better off leaving them. On the other hand, the number of more attractive jobs in manufacturing or education, health or public services was not growing as fast as the supply of educated women. And the social

stigma against women working in jobs not deemed appropriate for them, also keep many out of the labor force. As occupational and sectoral segregation remains pervasive, so have gender wage gaps.

Globalization has had a nuanced influence on women's economic opportunities in developing countries. While countries investing in export-oriented manufacturing, such as China, Indonesia, Vietnam, or Bangladesh, did create many employment opportunities for women, trade liberalization often led to employment losses in manufacturing, with men often losing more jobs than women.

In addition, the care burden has remained as unequal as before and there has been little progress in combating domestic violence, although the topic was receiving increasing attention.

In short, rather than seeing a picture of uniform progress, we see a messy situation of some progress, some stagnation, some regress, depending on issue and region. What can explain this messy picture? I think four factors play a role. First, gender relations often touch on very core sets of values and norms that shape societies. While these norms and values can change, there will be a natural resistance to such change, particularly by those who see their culture threatened by such changes. We economists have tended to underestimate the strength of these norms and beliefs, and have only recently begun to incorporate them into our analyses. The militant religiously-inspired movements such as Boko Haram or IS are just extreme versions of this resistance. Second, while research has shown that removing gender inequality in education and employment is a 'win-win' situation, this is not how it is often perceived by men. They can feel threatened by high-achieving female colleagues at work, or wives that earn more than they do. As a result, many try to resist these changes towards gender equality. Third, men have been doing badly economically in many countries. In many rich countries, the earnings of lower-educated males have stagnated for decades, and their employment prospects have dimmed. This has been related to globalization, structural change, and skill-biased technical change. It was amplified by declines in unionization and the reduction in redistributive effort by the state in many countries. In this situation, it is no surprise that men see with frustration and envy that many women appear, at first sight, to have been doing relatively better as employees in health, education, or public service. Lastly, maybe we are looking at some gender gaps in the wrong way. For example, the persistence of occupational and sectoral segregation by gender across the world may not only point to barriers women face, but may also reflect different objectives and interests. Similarly, employment may not be an end in itself if it is a poorly paid job with terrible working conditions.

What can we learn for policies to promote gender equality? To each of the four reasons for this messy picture on the state of gender relations, an associated policy message suggests itself. First, we need to better understand deep-seated norms and values shaping gender relations in particular contexts. This will often also suggest ways to promote gender equality that are not seen as frontal assaults on a particular culture or a way of life. Second, promoting gender equality involves struggle and advocacy. Pointing to mutual benefits is not enough, and policies don't change in a vacuum. Thus there is an urgent need for the women's movement and other actors to keep pushing for equality in rights, for equal pay for equivalent work, for safe and secure workplaces and transport, for greater representation in politics and top economic management, and similar mundane bread-and butter issues. Third, policies need to tackle the relative economic decline of less-educated men in many countries. While some, such as the current US administration, try to tackle this issue through protectionism, this is not the right answer. Protectionism won't bring back the high-paying manufacturing and resource-based jobs lost in the past few decades in many rich countries. And

globalization has generated many benefits for both richer and poorer countries that will be threatened by a return to protectionism. Instead what is needed are policies to specifically help those displaced by globalization and policies to reduce inequality. This includes education and training programs as well as tax-and transfer policies that actively fight the growing inequality in market incomes in many countries. Lastly, rather than focusing primarily on employment and occupational and sectoral segregation statistics, it might be better to focus, at least in the short term, on how to create attractive employment opportunities for women and how to tackle the wage gaps resulting from occupational and sectoral segregation. A good place to start are growth and fiscal policies that promote female employment opportunities as well as policies pushing for higher wages in female-dominated sectors and occupations. As many of these female-dominated sectors are in the public sector, the state has a particular responsibility and ability to boost wages there.

To conclude, despite much progress in the past, we cannot be sure at all that the march towards gender equality will continue. In fact, much work remains to be done to make this happen.

Thank you very much for your attention and thank you again for making me a member of your academic community.