



Evolving patterns of gender inequality over time and across countries: new theoretical perspectives and an emerging research agenda

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The last century has seen significant gains in women's agency and status, declining gender gaps in labor force participation, education, and wages, and 'a rising tide' of increasingly gender egalitarian societies (Goldin, 2024; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Many expected this process to continue. Yet, unexpectedly, progress towards gender equality has started to stall in many countries (England, Levine, & Mishel, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2023). We can even observe a clear backlash against gender equality in some countries (Kuhar & Patternotte, 2017; UN-Women, 2025). The optimistic predictions of gender convergence as suggested by modernization theory have not materialized. Moreover, counterintuitively, the most gender egalitarian societies (e.g., Denmark and Sweden) have the highest level of gender segregation in jobs and educational fields, a phenomenon also known as the gender-equality paradox (Charles, 2011). In these countries, women are less likely to major in STEM and more likely to major in the humanities, with important consequences for the gender gap in wages (Bertrand, 2020; Blau & Kahn, 2017). These observations matter for the field of international business (IB), which has studied cross-country differences in gender equality and the implications for management practices across the world. Our theories in IB cannot explain the gender-equality paradox or the backlash against gender equality observed across countries. The good news is that new theorizing is emerging in sociology and political science, with tremendous opportunities for IB. The purpose of our editorial is to describe how

these insights can propel IB research, and to chart an exciting way forward.

A key reason our existing theoretical toolkit falls short of explaining these patterns is our tendency toward unidimensional theorizing. The dominant perspective that drives the study of gender equality across countries is centered around gender egalitarianism, i.e., hierarchical status-based differences that conceive of women as inferior to men (Emrich et al., 2004). In this view, gender is understood as a socially constructed multilevel system shaped by cultural beliefs that govern prescriptive and descriptive gender roles and expectations (Eagly, 1987; Ridgeway, 2011). Cultural gender beliefs also shape countries' formal institutional practices, such as whether women and men are treated equally before the law, or parental leave policies (Duflo, 2012; Jayachandran, 2015). Empirically, gender egalitarianism is often conceptualized as a unidimensional continuum on which countries can score low or high (Emrich et al., 2004).

In addition, our theorizing is not only largely unidimensional but also often implicitly deterministic because it builds on modernization theory. Modernization theory predicts that gender inequality recedes as countries grow richer and norms and values shift from traditional to secular and postmodern (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). The evolution of gender norms towards egalitarianism is assumed to be an inherent part of modernization (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Welzel, 2013). Societies are generally assumed to follow a commonly prescribed trajectory of progress that is viewed as almost inevitable. This theory has led to an optimistic prediction: In the long run, women and men will be treated equally and gender recedes as a defining status characteristic.

The unidimensional and deterministic nature of the gender egalitarianism perspective clearly does not align with the observed patterns of gender inequality across the world. New theorizing in sociology and political science highlights complementary aspects of cultural gender beliefs that have been overlooked in IB so far. Sociologists have advanced a

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complementary theoretical perspective focused on gender essentialism, i.e., the cultural belief that women and men are inherently different, which also shapes ascribed gender roles (Charles, 2011; Ridgeway, 2011). Similarly, political scientists have drawn attention to the contested nature of progress toward gender equality and theorize on the drivers of the backlash against it (Faludi, 1991; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). By adding these ideas to the established gender egalitarianism perspective, scholars are able to offer a more holistic explanation that may explain why the observed patterns, such as the gender-equality paradox and the gender-equality backlash, may not be that surprising after all. As we explain below, this offers ample scope to enrich the IB research agenda on cross-national differences in gender equality.

Multifaceted gender inequality: Gender inequality and gender essentialism

Gender gaps in access to opportunities differ widely across countries, and they are frequently studied through the lens of gender egalitarianism. This perspective emphasizes ‘vertical’, hierarchical, and status-based differences in gender roles (Emrich et al., 2004). Gender-egalitarian societies strive to minimize gender disparities in status, rights, and opportunities and reject notions of male primacy. In contrast, gender inequality societies assign a higher status to men over women. A large body of literature shows that gender egalitarianism matters: gender gaps in labor market participation, education, and promotions, as well as maternal mortality and gender-based violence are smaller in gender-egalitarian countries (Bertrand, 2020; Branisa, Klasen, & Ziegler, 2013; Dufo, 2012; Jayachandran, 2015).

IB scholars leverage the notion of gender egalitarianism by employing cross-cultural dimensions of gender egalitarianism (e.g., Emrich et al., 2004), formal institutional indicators (e.g., the Women, Business, and the Law database, Hyland, Djankov, & Goldberg, 2020), and indices of gender inequality across countries (UN, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). Countries score low or high on these dimensions, and these scores are used to explain management practices regarding gender across countries. For example, Parboteeah, Hoegl and Cullen (2008) show that gender egalitarianism reduces managers’ traditional gender role attitudes across countries, and Zhang (2020) documents that firms with gender diverse teams perform better when legal gender equality is high. Gender egalitarianism is the dominant theoretical lens used by IB scholars to study gender inequality.

Although clearly important, the focus on gender egalitarianism and ‘vertical’ status-based gender roles is not the only theoretical mechanism through which gender inequality arises. A fascinating adjacent stream of research in sociology

emphasizes ‘horizontal’ non-hierarchical forms of stratification based on gender, referred to as gender essentialism (Charles, 2011). Gender essentialist beliefs portray women and men as having ‘inherently’ different aptitudes and preferences, and these beliefs vary across countries (Bem, 1993; Ridgeway, 2011).¹ One prominent example of gender essentialist beliefs is that women are often viewed as having greater caregiving and communal aptitudes than men. These essentialist beliefs can also result in gendered outcomes, even in gender egalitarian societies that endorse equal rights for women and men (Charles, 2011). What is critical here is that societies can endorse equal rights and opportunities for women and men, and yet also come with an ‘equal-but-separate’ ideology based on gender essentialist beliefs.

This seemingly subtle difference between ‘vertical’ gender egalitarianism and ‘horizontal’ gender essentialism has important implications. Incorporating gender essentialism can help us explain why women and men sort into different educational fields and occupations in gender egalitarian countries. In fact, Sweden, although classified as a gender egalitarian country (UN, 2023), also scores high on essentialism (Charles, 2011), which may explain why educational and occupational gender segregation are among the highest in the world. Generally, gender gaps in preferences for STEM are largest in egalitarian countries, an empirical regularity that existing frameworks have struggled with. Gender essentialism can help us understand the perhaps surprising persistence of gendered segregation in developed and egalitarian societies (Levanon & Grusky, 2016). The gender-equality paradox is no longer a paradox once we incorporate gender essentialism. Similarly, existing frameworks have difficulty explaining the stalling of gender convergence (e.g., in wages or care work) but such patterns are better understood once the persistence of essentialist beliefs is factored in. These theoretical insights are relatively recent, as reflected in the fact that the World Bank released its first report on horizontal gender inequality only in 2023 (Carranza et al., 2023). Our point is this: adding the horizontal gender essentialism perspective to the vertical gender egalitarianism perspective is one promising way to theoretically deepen and phenomenologically expand IB research on gender equality across countries.

¹ We would note that this perspective is not reflective of reactionary socio-political movements emphasizing biologically rooted differences between women and men, but rather drawing attention to the socially constructed *perceptions* of ‘innate’ differences in attributes of women and men.



Persistence, stalling, and backlash

The evolution toward gender equality has also stalled—and in some instances even reversed—because backlash is brewing in many countries (Kuhar & Patternotte, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). For a long time, many scholars held deterministic views regarding the linear evolution of gender equality. In the long run, as countries grew richer and welfare levels increased, it was assumed that countries would eventually see gender gaps disappear (Jackson, 1998). Successive generations were thought to hold more and more postmodern and gender egalitarian beliefs (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Welzel, 2013). Yet this has not happened. In fact, the youngest generation in some countries, especially young men, exhibits more gender inequalitarian views than their parents (Mathisen, 2025; Schäfer, 2022; Financial Times, 2024). We observe a backlash against gender equality across the world in the form of cultural resistance and/or political mobilization (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011; Faludi, 1991). Contrary to the predictions of modernization theory, we see these backlashes in some of the most developed countries and amongst the youngest generation.

Political scientists have highlighted the dynamic and contested nature of gender equality (Anduiza & Rico, 2024; Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2022). The central construct to understand these dynamics is relative status deprivation, i.e., the subjective feeling of losing social standing. It is subjective, partly identity-based and partly economically motivated, and always in comparison to other groups. Relative status deprivation often leads to responses such as backlashes (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Two main explanations have been put forward for why individuals experience relative status deprivation: economic and cultural drivers. Both help us understand why and how gender equality is contested.

Economic drivers emphasize the importance of stalling upward social mobility and job displacement that affect some more than others. As a result of a shrinking industrial base, globalization, including import substitution and offshoring of manufacturing jobs, as well as technological changes, including automation, certain demographics are losing in absolute and/or relative terms (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011; Autor, Dorn, & Hanson, 2013). For example, in the U.S., one group that has experienced relative status deprivation is White men without college degrees (Case & Deaton, 2020). The erosion of manufacturing and mid-skill jobs has disrupted the traditional male breadwinner model, with displaced workers facing unemployment or lower-paying service work (Autor, Dorn, & Hanson, 2019). The associated real or perceived loss of economic status of some men coincides with women's

rising educational attainment and professional advancement. These developments result in growing pushback by (mostly) men and (some) women against gender equality (Barros & Santos Silva, 2025).

Cultural drivers include a spaghetti bowl of related yet distinct aspects, some of which tie in with the economic drivers sketched above. First, in many cultures, masculinity is closely tied to economic provision, dominance, and control over decision-making (Wood & Eagly, 2012). As women gain greater access to education, employment, and leadership positions, some men perceive this shift as a threat to their social status. Second, political and religious conservatives often position gender equality as a threat to traditional family values and social order, and leaders strategically wield these concerns to build political support (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This framing gains particular force in societies where nationalist movements mesh with religious conservatism, which allows leaders to cast feminist policies as attacks on cultural identity. Across countries, there are different shades of grey, with religious and nationalist sentiments playing larger or smaller roles, but the overall dynamics are similar.

The dynamic and contested nature of gender equality ties in with general patterns of shifting majority positions in society. Traditional majority groups, who long held dominant positions, push back when they find themselves becoming minorities in societies shaped by increasingly postmodern and gender egalitarian beliefs. Traditional gender roles often become a focal point for broader fears about social change and loss of status, especially among those who experience relative status deprivation, i.e., lose out culturally and/or economically. The cultural and economic drivers of backlash are related and often mutually reinforcing, yet also context-dependent and varying across countries.

IB has partially integrated these insights from political science on backlash in recent research on varieties of populism, corporate sociopolitical activism, and non-market strategy (Devinney & Hartwell, 2020; Minefee & Yue, 2025). Yet the underlying dynamics of backlash have not been connected to gender in IB. On the one hand, the study of gender equality in IB has not incorporated the dynamics of backlash. On the other hand, the critical role of gender for understanding varieties of populism across countries is underappreciated in IB. There are ample and important opportunities to integrate these insights from political science in IB to better understand the dynamic and contested nature of gender equality.

Gender equality research in international business

The topic of gender equality is of critical importance. It is part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG5) and often included in the 'grand challenges' agenda of



management research (Buckley, Doh, & Benischke, 2017; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). It matters because we know that gender equality creates a larger pool and a more efficient allocation of talent, which raises productivity levels and has positive welfare implications overall (Hsieh et al., 2019; Lee, 2024). Not surprisingly, gender equality is studied across many fields, including IB (e.g., Fitzsimmons, Özbilgin, Thomas, & Nkomo, 2023; Koveshnikov, Tienari, & Piekkari, 2019; van der Straaten et al., 2023). Our field is very well positioned to address questions of an interdisciplinary nature. IB also has a long and rich tradition of studying the role of cross-country differences in cultural beliefs and institutions. Yet to date, our existing toolkit falls short of explaining the phenomena we are interested in, and we may have blank spots in terms of phenomena we have overlooked.

Integrating the above insights offers ample scope to enrich IB theorizing. At minimum, we need to add the ‘horizontal’ notion of gender essentialism to the ‘vertical’ gender egalitarianism perspective, which has been the dominant perspective in IB so far. In addition, there is a need to integrate the dynamic and contested processes that help us understand the non-linear nature of the evolution of gender equality across countries. This raises several promising avenues for further research: For example, what is the relative contribution of vertical and horizontal gender segregation for explaining cross-country gender differences in wages, leadership, access to (venture) capital, and sorting patterns into specific jobs and industries? To what extent are the causal mechanisms that give rise to gender inequality the same across countries, and how do they intertwine? What are the processes that drive the non-linear and contested evolution of gender equality, and backlashes against it?

Answering these and related questions requires us to factor in countries’ unique historical imprints, socio-political dynamics, current institutions, and technological developments. For example, what are the roles of historical family structures and religious practices in present-day gender beliefs, and why are they salient in some countries and not in others? How do cultural norms, like tightness-looseness, relate to these patterns (Gelfand et al., 2011)? How has the evolution of the women’s movement, with its country-specific unique trajectories, shaped socio-political dynamics on gender equality (Weldon, 2002)? How do policies such as parental leave legislation and subsidized childcare affect gender gaps, and does the result of these interventions depend on gender egalitarianism and/or gender essentialism? Does the rise of global social media platforms lead to a convergence of global gender beliefs—or alternatively, increasingly fragmented and polarized worldviews on gender?

These evolving patterns of gender inequality across countries shape multinationals’ strategy and practices. What is unique to MNEs is their dual embeddedness in home and

host countries (Meyer, Mudambi, & Narula, 2011) and the associated challenges of transferring practices between headquarters and subsidiaries (Kostova & Roth, 2002; Leone et al., 2025). The contested nature of gender equality in host countries puts pressure on MNEs to be locally responsive while also adhering to home-country standards in a way that does not backfire (or vice versa). The risk that targeted host- or home-country policies regarding gender equality backfire in another location has likely gone up in recent years. There is an increasing scope for (il-)legitimacy spillovers across countries, and MNEs have to deal with those (Minefee & Yue, 2025). For example, Accenture’s bid for a Transport for London marketing contract was recently excluded after the consulting firm abandoned its DEI initiatives due to changing U.S. policies (The Telegraph, 2025). Large MNEs also have agency, and can drive the agenda on gender equality, thereby creating isomorphic pressures for other firms at home and even abroad (Fang, Xu, Xu, & Shams, 2023; Siegel, Pyun, & Cheon, 2019). Yet just like countries’ evolution toward gender equality is neither deterministic nor linear, so is the evolution of MNEs’ practices. MNEs strategize on gender equality depending on the socio-political climate and changes therein.

It is time for our field to step up and step in. IB scholars are well positioned to leverage the insights from our own field, sociology, and political science to advance interdisciplinary research on gender inequality across countries and within internationally operating firms. The study of gender equality is too important to be confined by disciplinary silos.

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