

## **Introduction to *Social Politics* special issue on *Legal regimes, women's work, and women's empowerment***

**Mala Htun, Francesca R. Jensenius, and Liv Tønnessen<sup>1</sup>**

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The second-wave feminist movement called attention to the endurance of discriminatory laws that deny women equal rights and opportunities. Since the 1970s, most countries around the world responded to feminist demands and reformed family law, labor law, reproductive rights, national constitutions, and the welfare state. Yet almost nowhere do women enjoy the same status, power, and opportunities as men, and differences among women along the lines of class, racial identity, and region are pronounced.

Why does the gap between women's legal and *de facto* status persist? Is there *any* connection between egalitarian laws and women's agency on the ground? Which groups of women have benefitted the most from the expansion of formal rights? What cultural practices and norms are most resistant to change? Are there unexpected, subtle or contradictory ways that legal change has shaped women's work and women's empowerment?

The five papers in this special issue analyze historical and cross-sectional observational data to explore connections between gender-related legal regimes, women's work, and women's empowerment. They identify key factors that intervene between legal provisions and the status of women on the ground. The papers demonstrate that context matters: wealth inequality, social norms, infrastructure, political regimes, and labor market characteristics shape the ways that discriminatory and emancipatory laws take hold—or not—in society.

The papers cast doubt on the ability of quick-fix interventions to empower women. Given the importance of contextual social structures and norms to women's lives, well-intentioned reforms and policies do not always produce their intended effects.

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The entrenched behaviors and cultural values of an unequal society are resilient. It may take a diversified strategy, or a long time, to change them.

Finally, this special issue identifies some of the groups excluded from big processes of economic growth and political change. As we see in the papers, upper-income women in Latin America take advantage of formal labor market opportunities by leaning on low-paid domestic labor. Low-income women, with fewer people and gadgets to lean on themselves, are less likely to see benefits of expanding economies. Meanwhile, women who work in urban Ethiopia, far from seeing their horizons expand toward greater interest and participation in politics, experience the opposite.

Collectively, the papers draw on a wide range of data and methodological tools. Tønnesen analyzes in-depth interviews with women wage earners from the middle and upper classes in Sudan. Htun, Jensenius, and Nelson-Nuñez, and Filgueira and Martínez Franzoni, rely on rich country-level data from international agencies such as the World Bank, OECD, ILO, and ECLAC. Finseraas and Skorge analyze Norwegian administrative and survey data. And Aalen, Kotsadam, and Villanger present findings from an original survey of women applying for jobs in the manufacturing industries in five industrial parks in Ethiopia.

Each of these empirical approaches offers us a fresh perspective, which ranges from the birds' eye view of cross-country observational data, the precision of register data covering the entire Norwegian population, and the personal narratives collected through interviews in Sudan and Ethiopia. They enable us to see what empowerment—and the lack thereof—looks and feels like from inside and outside, from the ground up and the top down.

Htun, Jensenius, and Nelson-Nuñez's paper frames the special issue by addressing the big picture of gender discriminatory laws and their connection to patterns of women's economic agency. They use cross-national data covering most countries in the world, to show that legal regimes affecting women are multi-dimensional, which implies that rights to basic legal capacity, workplace equality, and work-life balance do not always overlap. Though we might think that workplace equality is a bigger predictor of women's economic agency, in fact the basic legal capacities upheld in family law—such as property, inheritance, and guardianship rights—seem more consequential. In addition, their work shows that countries with similar legal regimes often have radically different outcomes. Legal change may be necessary but is far from sufficient to empower women. These findings point to the need for more precise, contextually-sensitive approaches exploring how legal regimes relate to women's lives in individual countries.

Focusing on Sudan, one of the world's "worst" cases for women's formal rights, Tønnesen's paper analyzes how educated women negotiate the legal restrictions codified in family laws. According to provisions of the 1991 Muslim family law, women must receive permission from male guardians to work outside the home.

The law names men the sole providers of the family, and women the sole caregivers. Through personal interviews with middle-and upper-income women around Khartoum, the paper reveals that when women work for wages—a permission husbands grant selectively, and usually only when women perform their domestic duties—they feel empowered. The law allows women to spend their wages only on themselves, for their own fulfillment and self-realization. For women of a certain class position, the male breadwinner model feels like a welcome liberation from the responsibility of providing for a family. The restrictive family law thus supplies a carrot to educated, urban women. They reap advantages from the status quo, which has potentially diluted pressure for change.

In their paper on Latin America's care regimes, Filgueira and Franzoni ask why the growth in women's labor market participation in Latin America has stalled, even as most laws reflect principles of equality. They show that class inequality drives differences in how women respond to labor market opportunities and imposes a ceiling on women's labor supply. Richer women have access to labor-saving technology and inexpensive domestic help, which enables them to work in the formal labor force. Poor women have neither, so they rely on family members or do not work for wages outside the home. Women's adaptive strategies follow this dichotomous pattern due to entrenched class inequalities, not just because sticky gender norms impede men's greater participation in care work. Labor market expansion thus generates greater inequality among women. Latin American experiences show that, in a context of deep social inequalities, formal equal rights empower some women to lean on the labor of others.

Finseraas and Skorge analyze the effects of the liberalization of reproductive rights. They focus on the low-dose birth control pill, widely held to be a game changing technology that paved the way for women's empowerment. Or did it? Norway legalized adult women's access to the pill in 1967, and teenagers' access in 1972. Using a creative empirical strategy to identify the effect of pill access on women's fertility and career-related choices, Finseraas and Skorge find that, though the pill produced a reduction in teenage pregnancy, it did not lead to later marriage, more education, higher wages, or more enduring employment. Mere availability of the pill does not imply that most women were able to get it, actually took it, or used it to control their reproductive cycles in order to work and study. Women's choices are informed not just by the availability of technology but by their resource endowments as well as social norms and pressures.

Aalen, Kotsadam, and Villanger consider whether women's work is overrated. After establishing that the liberalizing reform of Ethiopia's family law resulted in an expansion of women's labor market participation, they inquire into whether work increases women's political engagement. Like Tønnessen, their results challenge conventional wisdom about the relationship between women's work and their empowerment. Their survey finds that women who work for wages are no more likely to participate in political meetings, and less likely to be interested in politics, than unemployed women. Part of the explanation stems from the top-down

participation elicited by the authoritarian regime; another component stresses the low-skilled and exploitative nature of the work available to women. For the majority of the world's women, and especially those laboring on the bottom end of the socio-economic spectrum, wage work may not translate into greater bargaining leverage vis-à-vis patriarchal social norms. In fact, wage work may pose obstacles to feminist collective action, which is vital to raise awareness and contest women's subordination.