



## **Why Survey Research on Gendered Values is Key to Understanding Women's Empowerment**

**Amy C. Alexander**, University of Gothenburg

Values are deeply rooted beliefs. They drive and inform people's ideals about how to live, treat others, and be treated. Values are at the core of the moral systems people draw upon to understand the meaning of life and their role in societies. Thus, religion is a powerful tool of socialization – the process by which society teaches individuals their place in a community – because religion forms values and determines how people think about and interact with one another.

Because institutions shape values they also have a powerful impact on how people think about women. Research on the historical development of gender confirms that entrenched institutions often have had a stifling impact on empowerment of women and girls. Disparities in the distribution of resources, combined with gendered stereotypes, exacerbate gaps between women and men at every level – in every sphere of life from the family to the workplace to popular culture.

In my research, I explain the relevance of values and changes in values for women's empowerment. Traditionally, societies around the globe have ascribed various emotions, traits, and styles of reasoning based on gender, sorting women and men into different societal roles according to such ascribed differences. Such gendered systems privilege males and by doing so distort the opportunity structures through which people acquire resources and exercise power.

Although problematic societal structures are nearly universal, there are movements in many nations away from disempowering gender relations and towards arrangements more supportive of equal treatment of people and assessments of their capabilities without regard to sex differences. Women's empowerment drives such changes away from the legitimation of female exploitation and repression toward celebrating women's value and capabilities.

I make the case that society should use survey research to measure changes in values over time, as a way to help researchers, policymakers and practitioners create more equitable policies for women. In my work, I use responses collected from large public opinion projects – such as the European/World Values Surveys and global-regional surveys – to measure the effects of patriarchal social arrangements that privilege men over women in leadership roles and opportunities for success. The surveys I use ask questions about a range of relevant issues, including people's acceptance of equality in the household, education, the labor market, and political leadership.

### **Patriarchy and Female Disempowerment is a Global Problem**

Studying values and value change across the globe gives us insight into the limits and potential for human empowerment. Insight into a society's values allows practitioners to more effectively target policy initiatives. For example, more than 85,000 responses collected from the World Values Survey shows that less than one-fifth of respondents strongly disagree with claims that men make better political leaders and business executives than women. And just 30 percent of respondents strongly disagree with the statement that a boy has more right than a girl to gain a university education.

Various survey studies suggest that patriarchal values and gendered socialization are deeply pervasive. Only 65 percent of respondents said it is never justifiable for a man to beat his wife, and fewer than half believe women's rights are essential to democracy. As these findings indicate, a large percentage of the world's people place a low value on the equality and empowerment of women and girls.

Yet even though patriarchy holds sway across the globe, there is powerful evidence that institutions and laws make a meaningful difference in how women are treated in various countries. Countries like Sweden, where support for women's equality is high are, unsurprisingly, also places where women and men enjoy greater equality in resources and achievements. In contrast, women and girls fare much worse in countries like Yemen where patriarchal values remain strong. Data on values and value change are vital indicators for monitoring and developing strategies to improve the global status of women.

## **How Surveys Can Better Document Values and Practices Important for Women**

Survey data offer powerful insights to policymakers and practitioners around the globe, but available surveys have limits. Researchers can do much more to record values and attitudes about gender in various countries, to gain additional understandings of key issues such as:

- How power is negotiated within the household.
- The ways gendered socialization influences the traits people prefer in leaders.
- How people perceive the role of government in the lives of women and what government should and can do for women.
- The implications of cultures of masculinity for the disempowerment and exploitation of women in private and public life.
- The roots of perceived and actual disadvantages women face when seeking political and economic power.
- The scope and varieties of transnational and local activism in favor of women's empowerment.

Data are needed on all these values, perceptions, and social practices – to provide better evidence of variation across countries and regions and changes over time in women's situations. Scholars, policymakers, and practitioners should work together to improve the collection of data on vital areas that have been understudied by survey researchers so far. In turn, once richer and more nuanced data on gender hierarchies and changing possibilities for women are available, policymakers can and should harness such information as they formulate new policy initiatives aimed at improving the lives of women around the globe.

Read more in Amy Alexander, Catherine Bolzendahl, and Farida Jalalzai, *Measuring Women's Political Empowerment across the Globe: Strategies, Challenges and Future Research* (Palgrave, 2018).